The Popular and the Weird: 
H.P. Lovecraft and 
Twenty-First-Century Adaptation

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Introduction:
Adapting Lovecraft in Weird Times

Kerry Dodd and Chloé Germaine Buckley

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In 1974 Angela Carter declared “we live in gothic times” (133). It is perhaps more apposite these days to suggest that we live in weird times. This is not to say that the Weird (as a literary mode) has superseded the Gothic; rather it comprises a polymorphous outgrowing emanating from and intertwining with it. What does it mean to say we live in weird times? Perhaps it is a pervasive sense of unreality, or a reality that has been fractured. Certainly, the ecological moment is one of ontological shock as widespread extinction and the effects of climate change prompt pleas across the globe for governments to declare an emergency. Meanwhile, the stranger monsters and specters of the gothic mode, in particular the uncanny appendage of the tentacle, have proliferated across cultural media, especially in the West. In his essay on Supernatural Horror in Literature (1927), writer of weird tales, H. P. Lovecraft suggests that “[t]he appeal of the spectrally macabre is generally narrow because it demands from the reader a certain degree of imagination and a capacity for detachment from every-day life” (n.p.). Contrary to Lovecraft, we are surrounded by weird intrusions every day. These are not only to be found in playful and referential cephalopodic literary fiction, including Kraken (2010) by China Miéville, but in a wider range of fictions drawing on multiple cultural narratives, such as Nnedi Okorafor’s Binti series (2015-2018). In popular culture, the weird manifests in unlikely places. In the opening credits of the recent James Bond film, Spectre (2015), for example, the tentacular becomes emblematic for the unseen machinations of conglomerate control.

The attraction of the Weird seems then to be anything but “narrow,” and Lovecraft’s creations in particular have proved to be highly adaptable. The monstrous creation, Cthulhu, pervades the high street emblazoned on t-shirts, mugs, mouse-mats, and any other malleable object that can sustain its image. This very reflexivity of the Lovecraftian permeates a host of media, as the articles in this issue demonstrate, from film and television to video games and roleplaying games, comics, and graphic novels. The weird emerges at the fringes but also in the mainstream; it is mobilized by top-down media power for profit as well as grassroots, indie productions. In the podcast Welcome to Night Vale (2012-current), the dulcet tones of Cecil Baldwin reassures listeners that the great cosmic void awaits us all. It is this very popularity of the Weird, which attracts a self-conscious referentiality, to which this special issue is dedicated. The knowing deployment of a Lovecraftian aesthetic is a form of adaptation, which Julie Sanders defines as the “reinterpretation of established (canonical or perhaps just well-known) texts in new generic contexts or perhaps with relocations of an ‘original’ or source text’s cultural and/or temporal setting, which may or may not involve a generic shift” (Adaptation and Appropriation 27). This issue interrogates a variety of Lovecraftian and Weird adaptations. What do these remediations offer beyond pastiche or homage? Why has the Lovecraftian become such a “popular” contemporary medium and what does it portend for not only cultural and literary studies but wider ontological framings?

In Postmillenial Gothic: Comedy, Romance and the Rise of Happy Gothic (2017), Catherine Spooner suggests that the Gothic comes to permeate a person’s life and influences not only their media consumption, but their aesthetic outlook, the clothes they wear, and the values they hold. Certainly, the Weird, and particularly the Lovecraftian, seems to have followed a similar trend in its spread beyond the cult roots of the initial magazine run of Weird Tales (1922-1940) into mainstream appeal. As Xavier Aldana Reyes points out, Lovecraft owes much to his Gothic predecessors, and his oeuvre represents a sustained engagement with the Gothic as he adapted elements from Edgar Allan Poe, Ann Radcliffe, and Matthew Lewis to name a few (ix). Lovecraft did not deny the connection, despite his dismissal of “bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule” (n.p.). If the Weird develops from the Gothic perhaps it does so much like the nameless color central to “The Colour out of Space” (1927), which gestates and ruptures in an inexplicable and indescribable conjuring of a “real” that cannot quite be encapsulated. For the Weird and Lovecraftian is interested in all that is strange, eerie, and unusual, pushing anthropocentrism to its limits and scrutinizing perceived definitions of “reality.” As Benjamin Robertson suggests in None of this is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer (2018)—which is reviewed later in this issue—the Weird confronts the very notion of any conceivable “norm” until it is rather the subject’s perception that is brought into question. Such a framework seems uniquely positioned to engage with the ontological terror of our current ecological moment then, where the cracks are beginning to show in the corrosive “reality” that humanity took for granted. As Gerry Canavan and Andrew Hageman suggest, in a borrowing from Thomas Friedman’s “global weirding,” our climate has perceptively gotten “weird” (7). They argue that such terminology offers a “cognitive frame . . . to refocus our attention on the localities within the totality of the global,” to critically deploy the Weird as a frame to engage with contemporary eco-anxieties or the non-real in which “readers discover they’re entering zones of radical uncertainty: can this be real?” (8, 10, original emphasis). The Weird offers no solution to such uncertainty, but it does offer a means of engagement with it.

No doubt one of the current attractions of the Weird is its attempt to subvert anthropocentrism whose dangers are now so pressing.
Indeed, as “post-truth” enters popular usage and climate change deniers refuse to acknowledge scientific facts, there is a certain attraction to the Weird which not only undercuts anthropocentric outlooks but undoubtedly suggests that there is so much more than the human subject understands. While this may feel like a conceptual retreat or defeat (a term that Jonathan Garrad explores later in connection to Lovecraftian game adaptations), it encourages an awareness of the ramifications of an anthropocentric worldview, one reflected in the critical and commercial popularity of VanderMeer’s *Annihilation* (2014) and its Netflix adaptation (2018). And this is something that the Weird seemingly capitalizes upon, an estrangement, a detachment, or a revelation so paradigm-shattering that the paradigm itself is brought into question. Thus, the Weird manages to also worm its way into contemporary philosophical trends, including Speculative Realism, object-oriented ontology, and aspects of Eco-materialism, whose presence is felt and challenged within this special issue. The evocation of the Weird in these discourses, however, poses an issue. On the one hand, the Weird suggests the cosmic insignificance of humanity. On the other, its popularity and adaptation promotes a particular valorization of the Weird and the problematic elevation of H. P. Lovecraft himself.

Indeed, it has become a critical commonplace to declare the Weird, or sometimes just Lovecraft, as defining the postmillennial cultural moment. Recent examples include *The Age of Lovecraft* (eds. Carl H. Sederholm and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, 2016), which opens with the declaration of Lovecraft as a “twenty-first-century star,” and a special issue of *Textual Practice* (2017) that demonstrates how the status of the Weird has “profoundly changed” in the twenty-first century (Sederholm and Weinstock 1, Luckhurst 1041). While there is no doubt that the appeal of the Weird more generally, and so-called “Lovecraftian” fictions in particular, has increased in recent decades, what is interesting is the way this has occurred across cultural modes, generic boundaries, academic disciplines, media forms, and cultural hierarchies. Although early academic interventions in the Weird argued for its value very much within the terms of high culture and traditional conceptions of literary worth (see, e.g. S. T. Joshi’s *The Weird Tale* published in 1990), the Weird functions equally effectively as literary fiction or as “trash” culture commodity. More than this, it undermines such distinctions of taste and value, its presence in pop culture, geek culture, and the academy resisting both traditional discourses of cultural value and the “veiled elitism” of subcultural discourses (Thornton 5). Roger Luckhurst’s introduction to the recent issue of *Textual Practice* offers a useful insight into the recalcitrance of the Weird: it is a category that disorients, defies categorization and “by definition escapes . . . containment” (1042). Enmeshed in processes of adaptation since its inception, the Weird is paradigmatic of the horizontal, collaborative, and intertextual dynamics of cultural and literary production.

The easy proliferation of the Weird across boundaries points to a further tension in recent academic discussions, which praise processes of appropriation and hybridization while also heaping reverence on one or two writers. It is also important to resist such hyperbole and its implied positioning of Lovecraft as the voice of a culture, a figure outside of his time uniquely able to address “questions, anxieties and desires that have become increasingly insistent” (Weinstock and Sederholm 3). What many of the discussed adaptations reveal is a complex register of irreverence mingled with reverence, parody with homage, and naivety with cynicism. Such texts complicate attitudes of reverence that sometimes surface in contemporary critical commentaries and complicate readings that (if only implicitly) maintain the authority of an original author. Weinstock and Sederholm, for example, suggest one of the reasons for the transcension of Lovecraft is the “genealogical inheritance” one can trace in Horror writers such as Stephen King and Clive Barker, which in turn begets a large “family tree” of writers and directors. In contrast to this arboreal and hierarchical model, we identify a process whereby the authority of an “original” author is undercut and challenged by (re)appropriations, cannibalizations, and hybridizations in the manner of textual poaching described by Henry Jenkins (*Textual Poachers*). Chloé Germaine Buckley has elsewhere noted how the Weird in children’s fiction illustrate a model of reading suggested by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980): the reader makes a text their own through an act of re-appropriation (De Certeau, 166; Germaine Buckley 181). More recently, Clare Parody’s discussion of “adaptive dynamics” in media franchises reveals new processes for the proliferation of adaptations that are neither the result of top-down hierarchies nor entirely in the control of readers and fans, but are enmeshed in what Jenkins identifies as “convergence culture.” Moreover, transmedia adaptations of the Weird across literature, fiction, and games, do not simply function to keep the Weird “alive, giving it an afterlife it would never have had otherwise,” an analysis hailing from Linda Hutcheon’s work that is put to work by Sederholm and Weinstock (22). They are complex examples of inter- and meta-textual networks, of repetition with critical distance, an opportunity to (re)examine the cultural politics, philosophy, and affective potentials of the Weird in new situations. Although Benjamin Noys suggests that current levels of poplarity represents a “Lovecraft event,” it is crucial to challenge what innovation such adaptations offer; in particular how they can both avoid and deconstruct the overt racist and xenophobic values that lies at the heart of Lovecraft’s work.

It is to this aperture that we wish to dedicate this special issue of *Studies in Gothic Fiction*, a collation of articles and reviews that reflects the paradoxical recalcitrance and mutability of the Weird. It is not our intent to join the legions of charged critical discourse aimed at defining the Weird, New Weird, or the Lovecraftian, but rather to examine the wider narratives that emerge as a consequence of the popularization of such adaptations. In so doing, we query what comes next, what is the contemporary relevance of Lovecraftian studies, and what wider dialogues — with fields such as the Gothic — are catalyzed?

Kerry Dodd in “Narrative Archaeology: Excavating Object Encounter in Lovecraftian Video Games” explores the presence of objects within Lovecraftian video games, primarily reading his main example, *Bloodborne*, alongside and against the notion of object-oriented ontology. Focusing on the framing
of archaeological artefacts, Dodd highlights the textual narratives that are associated with objects—particularly through an anthropocentric lens that aims to “explain” the history of such an item to its observer—and how this formation crosses over into the video game format. Exploring what he terms “narrative archaeology,” Dodd highlights how Bloodborne encourages its player to read between object descriptions and pay reverence to their excavation of each item to understand its connection to wider structures. In so doing, he challenges the very attribution of anthropocentric narratives upon objects and suggests that Lovecraftian mediations counter the abstractionism of object-oriented ontology to focus on the importance of the encounter.

Jonathan Garrad, Chloé Germaine Buckley, and Laura Mitchell also discuss the importance of game media as a form of encounter in their articles, “Gamifying Fictions of Defeat: Adaptations of Lovecraft to Games Media” and “Weird Experience: Transformations of Space/Place in Lovecraftian LARP,” shifting focus from the digital to the analogue. In the former article, Garrad assesses adaptations of Lovecraft’s short stories into roleplaying games that develop ludic mechanics to manage success and defeat. His article identifies a difficult dichotomy between narrative hopelessness and ludic progress that affects both the commercial and critical success of Lovecraft adaptations. Germaine Buckley and Mitchell turn to the non-commercial world of live action roleplaying games (LARP), a form that exemplifies a bottom-up or “grassroots” approach to adaptation. They consider how the unique mode of LARP synthesizes with Lovecraftian and Gothic themes to create en-Weirded experiential encounters that undermine everyday experiences of space. Both articles emphasize the interactive element of adaptation and thus counter a sense of Lovecraft himself as a figure of authority. In ludic adaptations, unnerving, and innovative functions of the Weird emerge in interactive encounters.

Both Benjamin Noad and Valentino Paccossi explore the hybridization of Lovecraft stories with other franchises and transmedia narratives. In “‘His Madness held no affinity’: Reimagining Arkham Asylum,” Noad explores the presence of the madhouse and asylum in Lovecraft’s fiction alongside adaptations within the Batman franchise. By highlighting how Lovecraftian depictions of this space are usually devoid of prolonged definition, he demonstrates how twenty-first-century representations are meanwhile associated with notions of “criminality, monstrosity, and themes of imprisonment.” Noad demonstrates the potential for adaptation to challenge, deconstruct, and engage with problematic absences and presences in source material, arguing that a willful dismembering occurs within contemporary appropriations of Lovecraft’s setting. Meanwhile, Paccossi, in “Animating the Unnameable: The Depiction of Cthulhu in Animated Shows,” engages with the popularization of Cthulhu and how his repeated adaptation arguably represents a form of “naturalization” that undermines his very horrifying nature. Paccossi, building on Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s theory that the monster “always escapes,” highlights how Cthulhu still retains a sense of “otherness” that eludes normalization. Interrogating three animated television case-studies—The Real Ghostbusters (1986-1991), Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated (2010-2013), and South Park (1997-present)—Paccosi argues that Cthulhu is adopted by fan communities in a playful manner that permits satire, parody, or other comedic realizations that engage with and extend Cthulhu’s sense of “monstrousness.”

To conclude, our reviews section offers a varied and compelling exploration of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction and non-fiction. Claire Quigley reviews Xavier Aldana Reyes’s The Gothic Tales of H. P. Lovecraft (2018), which offers a pertinent reflection on the Gothic tradition from which the Lovecraftian and Weird format emerged. Next, Kyle Brett’s review of The Cthulhu Casebooks: Sherlock Holmes and the Miskatonic Monstrosities (2017) by James Lovegrove alongside Richard Mooney’s discussion of Winter Tide (2017) and Deep Roots (2018) by Ruthanna Emrys, engage with the adaptation of the Lovecraftian form and query whether there are any innovations within such fiction, or if this is purely mimetic repetition. Both demonstrate the importance of Lovecraftian adaptations to challenge and adapt the form, to push it in new directions rather than stagnating through imitation. Meanwhile, Jake Brewer delves into Benjamin Robertson’s None of this is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer (2018) to explore the notion of “fantastic materiality” in relation to the Weird. To close, Michael Wheatley explores the enduring potential of the short form for the Weird, offering a creative/critical reflection on the work of several vibrant authors in Normal Deviation: A Weird Fiction Anthology (2018), edited by Lyle Skains and DeAnn Bell.

Works Cited
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Kerry Dodd completed his PhD at Lancaster University, UK. His thesis, entitled “The Archaeological Weird: Excavating the Nonhuman,” examined the intersection between archaeology and Weird fiction. Focusing on the cultural production of the artefact encounter, his thesis explored how archaeological framings can offer a re-conceptualisation of object ontology through the Weird. He is currently working on a monograph that explores the representation of materiality and objects in archaeological fiction. Kerry also works more widely in the fields of: Science Fiction (particularly Cosmic Horror and Cyberpunk), the Gothic, and glitch aesthetics. Email: k.dodd@lancaster.ac.uk.

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Narrative Archaeology: Excavating Object Encounter in Lovecraftian Video Games

by Kerry Dodd

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Narrative Archaeology: Excavating Object Encounter in Lovecraftian Video Games

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Abstract
H. P. Lovecraft’s iconic Cosmic Horror tales frequently involve an encounter with a non-human incommensurability that strains human systems of representation. However, while current critical work often focuses on the materialistic disruption caused by such contact, there has been little focus on the objects within these stories. I argue that the representation of such items reflects upon the paradigms through which material worth is perceived and can consequently assist in further nuancing theoretical critiques of anthropocentric epistemology. Video games frequently place material assets to construct a certain frame of contact for the player. It is within Lovecraftian video game adaptations then that there lies the potential to re-conceptualise the study of object encounter and representation to reflect upon the urgency of challenging processes of non-human contact. This article explores the role of artefacts within Lovecraft’s fiction, the representation of materiality in a range of video game adaptations, and finally examines the process of “narrative archaeology” in Bloodborne, where the player must piece together micro narratives from textual descriptions to reveal the macro cosmic revelation. In so doing, I argue that Bloodborne helps to identify the critical potential of Lovecraftian adaptation for materialist critique through the framework of virtual encounters.

Keywords
Archaeology; Archaeogaming; Artifacts; Bloodborne; Narrative Archaeology; Object-orientated Ontology; Video Games

At the heart of H. P. Lovecraft’s tales is a curiosity towards what lies outside of conventional understanding, a desire to pull back the veil of secrets hidden in the dark corners of the Earth or beyond. For the narrator, this knowledge is invariably too much for the human mind to comprehend, driving them insane by the mere suggestion of what has been witnessed. In Lovecraft’s fiction, there is often a meeting with a form of cosmic materiality, where “matter” itself is suggested to be far stranger than human conceptualization accounts for and where it challenges the validity of ingrained or projected anthropocentric labels. These confrontations are formulated through an encounter with a non-human terror, one whose very inexplicability forces the human perceiver to confront an entity outside of any relational network that may provide taxonomical stability. Fundamentally, these encounters decentralize the position of the human within the wider universe, mocking the belief that every object or subject may be defined in proximity to our values. Extensive critical debate has already discussed the materiality of figures such as Cthulhu, which China Miéville perceives to “en-Weird ontology itself,” or which act as gateways for Speculative Realists—such as Graham Harman in Weird Realism (2012)—to consider an “object-orientated ontology” (Miéville 113). Yet, little attention has been paid to the process of encountering objects within Lovecraft’s tales and how such perspectives may offer new definitions of the non-human, while simultaneously reflecting upon our own material practices. Video games include a myriad of objects; whether these are interactable items or background objects, each moment is curated for player interaction and often aimed to elicit a specific reaction. This medium is, therefore, the perfect vehicle to challenge the very inscription and coding of material “identity,” to explore how the imagination and rendering of the contact process can afford new perspectives towards the non-human.

Lovecraft’s fiction often utilizes archaeological settings or tropes as a frame to excavate such destabilizing revelations. The structure of an intrepid explorer questing to previously lost or unknown locations, deciphering cryptic puzzles, and obtaining priceless artifacts is common across a myriad of archaeological media. Originating in Imperial Romance fiction, such as H. Rider Haggard’s She (1886), this inquiry is replete through both Gothic fiction—e.g. Bram Stoker’s The Jewel of Seven Stars (1903) and M. R. James’s “A Warning to the Curious” (1925)—and later popularized within more mainstream media: Indiana Jones in Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981), Lara Croft in Tomb Raider (1996), and Nathan Drake in Uncharted (2007). The format
resonates with Lovecraft, who noted James’s influence on his writing but inverts the archetypal relic as “reward” in favor of unearthing incomprehensible knowledge that threatens the stability of the subject (At the Mountains of Madness 168). Lovecraftian fiction alters the traditional archaeological-trope tale, trading the wonder of the priceless artifact for a different interpretation of subjective awe, one invested with a mixture of cosmic insignificance and ontological destabilization. In so doing, these tales offer an alternate lens to reflect upon the engagement with non-human identity, a powerful rumination on the formation of material labels and how conceptualizations of ontology outside of anthropocentric constraints require a moment of estrangement: the alienation from the object.

Video games are an especially ripe format in which the enduring interrogation of object identity offers new frames of encounter. Within this medium, items may have a variety of functions, whether this is to aid progression or only for aesthetic presentation. Lovecraftian themes have increasingly begun to emerge within more mainstream media, yet video game adaptations are often considered to be niche artifacts that garner a cult following rather than being huge commercial successes. In this article, I argue that these transpositions frequently deviate from the original Lovecraftian interrogation of non-human identity as portrayed through object utilization. While games such as Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth (2005) or Eternal Darkness (2002) are well recognized within Lovecraftian fandom and received critical praise, often they failed to break through to a mass market. However, the commercial success of Bloodborne (2015) disrupts this trend and itself represents a process that I term “narrative archaeology,” in which the player becomes the Weird explorer who must piece together dissociated knowledge or lore from object descriptions, arguably a more faithful adaptation or even development of this original ontological interrogation.

This article will outline the role of item identity in archaeological media, focusing initially on the elevation of artifacts, objects that are anthropocentrically designated as “valuable.” Through examining the presence, or indeed absence, of objects and their function within Lovecraft’s archaeological fiction, I outline how philosophical inquiries such as object-orientated ontology permit not only an appreciation of how materiality is conceptualized, but equally a reflection on contemporary practice. Applying this identification first to a range of Lovecraftian video game adaptations and subsequently a more extended analysis of Bloodborne, I expose how the excavation of object identity is transposed across media. By encoding the quest for knowledge within excavated items, through both functional use and their description, Bloodborne engages with the cosmic horror potential of the material while being simultaneously dependent upon the projection of object identity. I argue that the artifacts in Lovecraftian fiction instigate a material alienation, one that forces the subject to confront the processes involved within item labeling and offers the prospect of a more compelling and nonpartisan contact framework with the non-human.

The Prescription of Artifact Identity

Archaeological adventure quests are frequently driven by an explorer (re)discovering an ancient and “lost” location, which houses a mythical object of priceless value. These items are often removed from their original culture and context, appropriated, and re-housed in either museums or private collections. Yet, although Lara Croft in the Tomb Raider series may “play for sport” and Indiana Jones in Temple of Doom (1984) seeks “fortune and glory,” Lovecraftian explorers are drawn more by a curiosity towards epistemological revelation than material gain. The prescription of certain items as having artifactual status inscribes these objects as having a significant value, the subject’s perception thus differentiating them from other nearby commonplace examples. This separation and identification are core aspects of how artifacts are conceptualized. Eugenio Donato suggests that, “Archaeological origins are important in two ways: each archaeological artifact has to be an original artifact, and these original artifacts must in turn explain the ‘meaning’ of a subsequent larger history” (220). Provenance becomes crucial to the prescription of object labels. An item’s worth is predicated on a knowledge of what it fundamentally is; paradoxically, an object must be individual enough that it is deemed unique and thus valuable, while simultaneously identifiable in order to be situated in proximity to similar relics. These relational taxonomical networks, such as the museum, require that micro fragments may be arranged in a manner through which an observer may understand the macro whole—whether this is a society, culture, or historical moment. Artifactual identity itself is thus formed by the subject’s perception based on the knowledge of where the item originates, that it is sufficiently different to other examples, and conclusively that it may “speak” beyond itself. Such a forced imposition has evident issues, whether this is located in the contentious paradigms of acquisition or suggests that such a micro item may comprehensively replicate or narrate such a nuanced field. The prescription of artifactual identity has, however, become almost a subconscious process for the perceiving subject, influenced largely by its physical proximity to other items. Roger Luckhurst, discussing the relics excavated within Egypt in the nineteenth century, comments that “the materials dug out of the ground of Egypt became artifacts only within the frame of the museum” (145). Alluding to the various underground methods in which objects were smuggled out of the country, including mummies being re-branded as “bone-manure,” Luckhurst highlights how the performance of these
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The opening level of Tomb Raider and its re-make Tomb Raider: Anniversary (2007) introduces the player to Lara Croft, who is hired by Natla, the Chief Executive Office of a wealthy corporation, to locate a piece of an artifact: the scion. Even with little pre-requisite knowledge of what this relic looks like, its positioning within the game makes its artifactual status evident. Navigating various terrains, puzzles, and fierce-some monsters, the player slowly makes progress to the Tomb of Qualopec. At the end of this section, Lara finds a final elevated room with a stone pillar at its center. Resting atop this raised platform is evidently the artifact that both player and character are looking for: the first part of the scion. Although there are other items in the room (bricks and murals), the scion is the only interactable item and its central proximity designates its apparent value, even with little further explanation. Video games, however, are predicated on a structured or intentional layout, each object is an “asset” that developers have intentionally placed within a locale for an intended affect. The physical elevation of the artifact therefore imitates the trope that runs throughout archaeological media, mirroring its metaphorical hierarchy above other perceptively “mundane” items. Tomb Raider here draws upon encoded expectations within the player, the presentation of this object overtly designates it having an alternate value: it is neither scenery nor functional (such as ammo), but rather an artifact. However, beyond its inscription as an artifact, the scion at this point has no evident purpose. While the Atlanteans must have ostensibly fabricated the relic with specific intent, evidently this is a label rather than tacit designation as both identity and tool-mechanics are obfuscated from Lara. Such an interrogation queries how players utilize and recognize useful items within video games and how this may reflect upon wider real-life applications of “thing” identity; indeed, this appreciation of an individual object ontology is one which speaks to the Lovecraftian destabilization of anthropocentric behavior.

Lovecraftian Relics and Non-Human Ontology

Lovecraft’s fiction incorporates a multitude of archaeological settings, particularly referencing Ancient Egyptian history, which contains a dichotomy of architectural presence and seemingly ontological absence: ruins are left to “speak” for their absent architects. Yet, these tales deviate from the expectation of an archaeological adventure as the narrators often only discover knowledge too horrifying for the human mind to process. Although examples such as “The Temple” (1925), “The Nameless City” (1921), and “Under the Pyramids” (1924) all incorporate the exploration of a ruin, in each there is little reference to any form of artifact. “The Shadow out of Time” (1936) culminates with the narrator descending into an alien lost city, delving below the surface of the desert to locate a tome of knowledge which has been hinted at in their dreams. Within these stories there is little detail of the objects encountered, and indeed these derelict locations are only filled with debris—items inscribed as lacking value, or waste. It is worth noting that any truly alien civilization would potentially utilize objects in an alternate manner. Therefore, the lack of any particularly named items is arguably due to the narrator’s lack of comprehension. Such a preclusion originates within the lack of material labels, implying that any fabricated object, or tool, cannot be understood by its mechanics alone. The dismissal of these remnants proposes a layered form of object ontology, a paradigm that elucidates upon the chasm between object-use and material composition.

The aforementioned elevation of artifact status can be found in Lovecraft’s stories, particularly “The Haunter of the Dark” (1936). The tale is narrated by Robert Burke, whose fascination with the occult leads to his interest in an abandoned church in Providence, Rhode Island. Discovering that the church has remained derelict following rumours that it was occupied by a cult and an “evil” which had to be exorcized, Blake invariably feels the curiosity towards the unknown that marks the archaeological excavation. Breaking into the church, the narrator discovers that this vestige space is largely filled with broken remnants. Exploring its interior, he climbs to the highest steeple: “In the centre of the dust-laden floor rose a curiously angled stone pillar some four feet in height and two in average diameter, covered on each side with bizarre, crudely incised and wholly unrecognizable hieroglyphs” (H. P. Lovecraft Omnibus 3, 283). In a comparable manner to Tomb Raider, Blake discovers a pedestal elevating an item of evident value, distancing it from the other objects within the room. He finds that “On the pillar rested a metal box of peculiarly asymmetrical form,” a discovery that even without explanation designates the object and its contents as a form of artifact (283). In Tomb Raider and “The Haunter of the Dark,” the placement of the item itself inscribes them with a certain form of identity, even though both explorers have little knowledge of what they have actually found. Each ontologically-specific label is thus a projection upon the object. The user’s preclusion from the intended function (inscribed by the Atlanteans or here the Church of Starry Wisdom) reinforces a lack of tacit comprehension. This plurality of material identity suggests that such inscribed labels are evanescent as each of these spectral designations circumnavigate the “heart” of the item itself; fundamental material comprehension requires a more immutable and local dimension, thus inferring a deeper object ontological dimension.
Lovecraftian fiction has the potential to consider not only how non-human identity is conceived but how anthropocentrism informs, or indeed limits, such a conceptualization. Graham Harman’s theory of “object-orientated ontology” questions how a fundamental object identity and perspective would be represented, one which is not defined through a semiotic network of relations. Martin Heidegger first proposed that objects reside in a subconscious dormancy, which is only recognized by a human subject when they act in unusual ways. For example, the human subject only fully notices a door handle when it is broken, a transformation of its use-label. In Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects, Harman argues that “Heidegger’s account of equipment gives birth to an ontology of objects themselves,” proposing a tool-being which embodies an interrogation of ontology beyond anthropocentric perspectives (1). Both the scion and metal box are perceptively dormant until uncovered, yet through object-orientated ontology these items are, until this moment, outside of human-based systems of circulation or definition. Their existence beyond the human gaze does not preclude objects from their own agent practices, a concept elucidated by theorists such as Jane Bennett, who argues in Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things for conceptions of non-human vibrancy. Harman contends that “The true chasm in ontology lies not between humans and the world, but between objects and relations” (2). Within these settings, the artifact’s placement upon the pedestal demarcates a sense of value due to such a relationship, one perpetuated by taxonomical institutions. Inherently, at a fundamental level, within archaeological quests, there is no representative difference between the pedestal and the adorning item: the differentiating factor is their perceived material worth. Such designations resonate with an object-orientated focus that would see both items as intrinsically comparable if reduced to atomic compositions; yet, I argue such approaches frequently avoid engaging with the processes of encounter, how material labels reveal human paradigms of contact, and how video game item descriptions both compound and illuminate these mechanisms.

For both Tomb Raider and “Haunter of the Dark,” there is a suggested innateness to the item that operates beyond human projection. In the latter, Burke finds a Shining Trapezohedron, which conforms to Lovecraft’s peranchise for fervent descriptions of material dimensions, arguably an attempt to grapple with alien incommensurability: “The four-inch seeming sphere turned out to be a nearly black, red-striped polyhedron with many irregular flat surfaces; either a very remarkable crystal of some sort or an artificial object of carved and highly polished mineral matter” (Lovecraft Omnibus 3, 284). While foregrounding a sense of indescribability to his cosmic horrors, evidently the author utilizes physical assessment as a method to process the visual—a paradigm which resonates with Bloodborne’s item descriptions. In The Weird Tale, S. T. Joshi notes that the “specificity” of such passages outlines “something that goes beyond mere realism, although realism is at its foundation. Realism is not an end but a function in Lovecraft: it heightens the weird by contrast” (193). While certainly such an approach does challenge anthropocentric perspectives of materialism, I argue that Joshi—like Bennett and Harman—fails to engage comprehensively with processes of object labeling and how such methods elucidate upon human/artifact interaction. Burke comments at length upon the materiality of the object; recalling the aforementioned conceptualizations of artifact identity, his scrutiny is based on attempting to ascertain provenance and purpose rather than principally accessing its unique nature. The alien origin and inexplicable composition confound such scrutiny, however, as the relic inverts the archetypal archaeological gaze and rather stares back at the subject: “This stone, once exposed, exerted upon Blake an almost alarming fascination. He could scarcely tear his eyes from it, and as he looked at its glistening surfaces he almost fancied it was transparent, with half-formed worlds of wonder within” (Lovecraft Omnibus 3, 284). Rather than projecting upon the item, Burke is subsumed by its “unknowable” nature—an artifact without any reference point, it exists beyond the relational network of labeling as a chasm expands between the description and ontology of the object itself. This disruptive potential is somewhat elided by acting as a portal for the monstrous “haunter,” as Burke recognizes its function as a “gateway,” yet the apparent tacit nature of tool implementation is undermined as the perceiver may appreciate its output but cannot comprehend the obfuscated mechanics of the artifact itself.

Analyzing the Shining Trapezohedron offers a differentiation between objects with an overt anthropocentric function or purpose and those which are of purely aesthetic value, although arguably the latter is still a form of utilization. Ben de Bruyn argues that such a separation represents “an ‘aristocracy of objects’, not just in the sense that it represents items like crowns, seals and swords, but also in that it systematically distinguishes important objects from trivial ones” (88). Focusing on the commodification of antique items, particularly within Lovecraft’s “The Shadow over Innsmouth” (1936), de Bruyn suggests that objects become taxonomized depending on whether they are attributed with an aristocratic sense of historical weight. Archaeological relics invariably experience a similar process: a truly unique item lacks a reference point to judge its value. The narrator of “The Shadow over Innsmouth” visits a local museum to learn of the town’s history but is confounded by its inexplicable material heritage: “Even
Now I can hardly describe what I saw, though it was clearly enough a sort of tiara, as the description had said” (391-392). Here a gulf opens between the taxonomical label and the visual, elucidating upon the arbitrary bridge between the two. This interaction resonates with the upcoming video game object details, which seek to both “describe” the item’s physicality while explaining its place within a macro network. Lovecraft’s hesitating expression of the artifact resonates with Harman’s object-orientated ontology: “If an entity always holds something in reserve beyond any of its relations, and if this reserve cannot be located in any of these relations, then it must exist somewhere else” (230). Suggesting a fundamental dimension beyond labeling, Harman seeks to consider an object perspective, but such inferences are restricted by anthropocentric language. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock asserts in “Lovecraft’s Things: Sinister Souvenirs from Other Worlds” that “These are things that become more than things—things with depth, hidden qualities, and indeed life of a sort” (65). While such designations compellingly seek to escape anthropocentrism, Weinstock’s “enchantment” cannot quite avoid prescribing the human as the prime actant. Object labels invariably imply an implicit designation of status; whether this is tool, waste, or debris, they reveal human processes of encounter.

For Lovecraft, these objects are not purely of archaeological interest, defined in terms of aesthetic or economic value, but rather their confounding indescribability points towards the inability for human systems to approach such items. In Weird Realism, Harman scrutinizes Lovecraft’s tales and is correct to suggest that “No other writer is so perplexed by the gap between objects and the power of language to describe them, or between objects and the qualities they possess” (7). An object-orientated ontology suggests that this gulf may only be crossed by thinking outside of the human. This reimagined definition of object identity has elsewhere been adopted by theorists such as Timothy Morton, who coined the term “hyperobjects” as a paradigm to engage with non-local and trans-temporal phenomena of non-totalising concepts, for example global warming. Yet such approaches risk the conflation of materialism, and the material, as a reconsideration of object ontology, differs from an appreciation of the process of encountering materiality. These Lovecraftian artifacts themselves are not above scrutiny. Invariably, such paradigms still utilize the non-human as a very tool to paradoxically “understand,” unable to quite escape such materialist trappings. Poignantly, by the conclusion, the majority of these relics are lost; although the lack of physical evidence may undermine each narrative, this suggests that these are items that exist beyond human interaction, beyond our influence. Meanwhile, I argue that Lovecraft texts offer an exemplary medium through which to propose an alternate material interface, namely that artifacts reveal the processes through which humanity engages with the world external to themselves.

**Surviving the Horror within Lovecraftian Video Games**

The adaptation of Lovecraft’s stories to the video game format is inevitably a fraught process as the medium frequently, but not ubiquitously, incorporates material interaction, sustained narrative progression, and the suspense driven by a degree of challenge or difficulty. Yet, Lovecraft’s archaeological tales often follow quite a repetitive structure, involve little to no object utilization, and, most importantly, the encountered entities are too horrific to process or articulate. Multiple adaptations have attempted to bridge this gap by implementing a sanity mechanic through which the player or their avatar begin to experience hallucinogenic experiences that impair the ability to play the game through a mixture of visual, audio, or mechanical alterations. Eternal Darkness is the most famous example of this effect and includes the fake deletion of saved game files and the screen fading to black as if the television has been turned off, wrestling object agency away from the player. Sanity mechanics translate the psychological horror of confronting a Lovecraftian monster, but each game eventually faces the challenge of depicting, and even sometimes fighting, this unrepresentable entity, an object or “asset” within the system. Sanity effects are therefore an unreliable basis by which to analyze non-human identity. Instead, video game items offer a promising alternative by exposing how the narrative is presented or quite aptly unearthed.

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to offer a comprehensive interrogation of each Lovecraftian game and the items within, before predominantly focusing on Bloodborne, I will introduce two main genre categories: roguelike and survival horror. Roguelike is a sub-category of roleplaying games (RPGs) in which the player’s avatar will progress through a series of levels (often procedurally generated), collecting useful items along their way while avoiding traps or monsters. The eponymous Rogue (1980) is orientated around locating the “Amulet of Yendor,” which is aptly raised on a pedestal and delineates between items with functional use (deduced through trial and error or item description) and narratively inscribed objects, which offer little insight into their mechanics. Darkest Dungeon (2016) opens with the player inheriting their family’s estate, which has been abandoned following their ancestor’s excavation of its deeper floors that unearth the Eldritch horror within. The player must put together a band of adventurers to fight their way through to the “darkest dungeon” and destroy the Lovecraftian abomination at its center. These explorations are rewarded with items to upgrade the estate, to improve your roster of characters, and to generally make each expedition a
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The drive of roguelike games to find loot or treasure to spend on items to improve the player’s chances of progressing further seems to overlook the apparent dereliction of these vestige spaces. Darkest Dungeon’s objects are given little narrative attention beyond acting as a form of currency and expenditure, especially as each acquired artifact or trinket is given no background history or explanation of its own unique identity.

The roguelike format requires that there are objects of worth to be discovered, ones that are either of financial gain or practical applicability. When compared to Lovecraft’s stories, however, these are a particular deviation from the seemingly apparent absence of artifacts. Nowhere is this indeed more prominent than the novella At the Mountains of Madness (1936), in which a scientific expedition discovers an abandoned city atop the peaks of Antarctica. The chilling juxtaposition of material presence and ontological absence within the city is a recognizable Lovecraftian trait, yet it is a lack of archaeological objects that is especially prominent: “As I have said, all furniture and other moveables were absent; but the sculptures gave a clear idea of the strange devices which had once filled these tomb-like, echoing rooms” (56). Inverting the expectations of an archaeological quest, this derelict metropolis is curiously devoid of artifacts or other material evidence. As such, the explorers translate murals to trace a hypothetical history; devoid of any description, they force each object to essentially “narrate” itself—a cross material “reading” that will resonate with Bloodborne’s narrative archaeology. Roguelikes, such as Darkest Dungeon, forego such a connection as items simultaneously become commodified consumables with marketed value while equally being inherently disposable “things.” Such designations accentuate an ontological state of tool-being, where each object is merely a material appendage to the user with little recognition of its composition or how we encounter it outside a matrix of “use”.

Alternatively, many Lovecraftian video games fit into the vein of survival horror. In this genre, the player’s avatar must be more cunning, as they are often provided with a limited amount of resources and are required to wisely determine their most useful application. The scarcity of items, such as ammo, health-kits, and other beneficial consumables, necessitates that the player takes a stealthier approach and consequently drives the central feeling of suspense. In “Storytelling in Survival Horror Videogames,” Ewan Kirkland states that games within this genre: “elicit a story produced through game-play by requiring that certain narratively-loaded objects be picked up and correctly used, elaborate yet casually motivated series of tasks performed, or psychologically-resonant enemies defeated” (73). Items are, therefore, not only used to preserve the character and foster progression, but also encoded with a certain narrative resonance to suggest their applicability to the player. Although not chiefly a Lovecraftian video game, Arkane Studio’s remake of Prey (2017) encapsulates a perfect sense of the archetypical cosmic horror with humankind’s encounter with an alien species (the Typhon) and the suggestion that something sinister resides within the “black between the stars.” Within the game, the player must combat the alien threat to the space station Talos 1, utilizing any items they encounter upon their journey. Once again this often takes the form of ammo, health-kits, or other beneficial consumables; however, Prey also allows the player to recycle unwanted items into materials and fabricate new objects. Here, objects with no apparent function or practical use to the player may be turned into those which will aid their progress, eliding any form of nuanced object identity as demonstrated by the lack of detailed item descriptions. However, a particularly interesting element of Prey is that the first enemy the player encounters (a mimic) may replicate and hide as multiple mundane items to wait in ambush, renegotiating frames of encounter. Not only does this cause the player to be wary around objects that would conventionally be disregarded, but it equally deconstructs the differentiation between alien and object, two forms of non-human identity. As the player later gains the ability to likewise mimic certain commonplace objects, these items transform from being disposable to functional.

Purpose and utilization of objects is therefore a key component within Lovecraftian video games, one which is a questionable adaptation of the original archaeological expeditions. A final prominent example is Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth, an adventure style survival horror which acts as a loose adaptation of “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928), “The Shadow out of Time,” and “The Shadow over Innsmouth.” Following the investigation of private detective Jack Walters into a missing-persons case in Innsmouth, the game progressively expands from raiding a small cult outpost to culminating in fighting Mother Hydra. Although Dark Corners includes the standard consumables, it equally foregrounds what Kirkland discussed as “narratively-loaded objects.” While each object may have an accompanying description, these are often simplified and merely designate the item’s functional capacity. Whether
these are “A handle used for lifting trapdoors,” “A key to the town’s poorhouse,” or “A lever with ornamental decoration,” each item the player encounters is framed through its practical applicability, offering little explanation for their wider significance. For example, the player finds a shrine to Cthulhu which, after solving a simple puzzle, they acquire a red gem from atop a pedestal. Invoking the evident trope format, this item however is given little explanation other than: “A precious red gem.” Crucially, the player is forced to take the object to progress, with no suggestion of its importance or indeed that much later in the game it will be a vital component. Returning to Tomb Raider and “The Shadow out of Time,” evidently the emplacement of the red gem demarcates its artifactual status by evoking this archetypal process of encounter to differentiate it from the consumable objects. Arguably the lack of any definitive identity is due to the avatar being unable to comprehend its function, yet for the player this becomes a disposable item with little psychological resonance. Object identity within these Lovecraftian examples therefore seems to be relegated to truncated descriptions and considered only for their immediate practicality. For these video games, narrative is conveyed through more conventional means, whether this be cutscenes or journal fragments. I argue that while this style evidently has its own merits, it is largely divorced from the potential within Lovecraft’s tale to reframe and elucidate upon paradigms of material interfacing. Bloodborne however breaks this trend; by requiring the player to act as an excavator, this narrative archaeology necessitates a reading across object descriptions which re-frames and confronts moments of object encounter akin to Heidegger’s broken door-handle.

“Welcome Home, Good Hunter”: Excavating Bloodborne’s Narrative

Bloodborne is a rarity for the Lovecraftian genre. Reviewed as “the first true essential of this [console] generation” (Edge review included on back-cover of the case), this is clearly not a cult classic, but one which has captured mainstream and popular interest. The critical acclaim of Bloodborne is one which its developers, FromSoftware, were quick to capitalize upon; the release of a Game of the Year Edition in 2016 after multiple nominations, including winning the Joystick award, exemplifies the title’s self-conscious commercial success. Although standalone, the game follows on from the equally popular “Souls” series, typified by their trademark “challenging” difficulty level, unconventional narrative presentation, and obscure lore secrets. Rather than utilizing a Mediaevalesque Fantasy setting, with the opposition of light (fire) and dark, Bloodborne instead focuses on a Hunter who participates in the ritual hunt of Yharnam, slaying Gothicized beasts and later encountering Lovecraftian monstrosities. The director, Hidetaka Miyazaki, was acutely aware of staging this transition, who suggests that “Gothic horror is based more in the world of reality . . . And here, you have a world like that which is gradually being eroded away by Cthulhu-style horror” (538). Throughout the game, the player’s expanding cosmic awareness is recorded through an Insight mechanic, which reveals previously hidden entities (such as the Amygalas) or altering audio effects. Progressively the game moves away from Gothic to more Lovecraftian settings, trading gritty realism for more abstract and interrogative ontological formations. Objects themselves replicate this transformation, as they are not only presented through functional description but are utilized to present the macro narrative. I argue that the player is akin to an archaeologist who must delve into the depths, recovering eldritch artifacts, to literally reveal monstrosities previously invisible to the world. As the story is primarily conveyed through object description rather than more conventional methods, each item becomes a piece in a grand puzzle. The player must be therefore prepared to search out these items if they wish to discern the truth. Although this journey can be skipped, this will crucially limit the player’s comprehension of the world around their avatar.1

While video games often include protracted opening cutscenes to consolidate the player’s orientation in the world or universe, Bloodborne’s introduction offers little exposition and is indicative of the narrative experience. Standing as one of three narrative cutscenes, Bloodborne’s opening is also the only major instance of first-person perspective. Here, the player signs a contract to enter the dream world, or nightmare, receiving only a handful of narrative hints, namely that blood ministration is central to the city of Yharnam and the cryptic allusion to “Paleblood.” Bloodborne depends on the player’s inquisitiveness to drive them onwards, or alternatively drawing on their bloodlust to overcome the difficulty level. One of the earliest narrative clues is in fact an interactable note that the player finds in the clinic they awake in. This can be missed or avoided however, demonstrating that the plot is elusive even from the beginning. The directive to “Seek Paleblood to transcend the hunt” offers an objective to the player, without any hint as to what Paleblood signifies. Vitally, this concept is not even cleared up by the end of the game, it operates beyond human interaction whose inexplicable meaning aligns with the “reserve” of object-orientated ontology. Within Bloodborne there are few concrete answers, and instead the

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1 Bloodborne is presented in a non-linear manner and each player may have varying experiences of the narrative, depending on which routes they take and how interrogative they are. I am designating the player as having witnessed all three endings, defeated every boss, and obtained every unique item.
player is required to deduce their own interpretation of the gathered fragments. This initial note foregrounds that textual description is a key element to navigating the game’s secrets and is one which is primarily located in its loottable objects.  

**Bloodborne**’s narrative bestows each item with functional and narrative value. Although some players may choose to complete the game in the shortest method possible and prioritize the challenging gameplay, the Lovecraftian elements require inquisitiveness. As a result, this makes **Bloodborne** challenging to classify: styled as an action roleplay game, the general lack of dialogue makes it difficult to classify. As an archaeological explorer, the player can complete the game by beating a minimum of six bosses (thus avoiding large sections), and these encounters only gain “psychological-resonance” once an understanding of the lore is developed. Yet it is neither a roguelike game. Although a sense of trial and error is expected, **Bloodborne**’s objects and enemies are situated in exact locations for a certain narrative resonance within the player; items found on dead bodies often suggest who, or what, the entity may have been. Artifacts in **Bloodborne** thus act by shaping an alternate narrative, offering a method to decode the story for those who are willing to pursue it and restricting the comprehension of those who either avoid, or fail, to read the details. By emphasizing the importance of object location itself, **Bloodborne** forces an inquisitive player to consider the process of encountering materiality; rather than simply collecting items, they must act akin to an archaeological explorer. If a player is to achieve full comprehension, they cannot simply collect objects to be reviewed later, but must excavate objects in a manner that is attentive to their proximity to other game assets.  

Item descriptions are a major part of **Bloodborne** and emphasize my terming of this game as narrative archaeology. As not all items are intrinsic to the plot or mythos, the player has to explore and sift through their findings to discern historical events. Item utilization is equally important; for example, Shining Coins are described as “there are very few uses for spare change during the hunt, but these will serve as guides through the darkness.” Rather than functioning as the expected currency, these items lack any form of value. Instead they are literally throw-away objects which emit a golden light, either acting as a bread crumb trail or to test how deep a physical drop is. Exchanging their original identity as money to become waste, the object ontology is here shaped by its functional rather than symbolic or representative value. Andrew Reinhard in *Archaeogaming: An Introduction to Archaeology in and of Video Games* (2018) suggests that such practices resonate with the archaeology of garbage—or Garbology—in which narrativized objects reveal paradigms of encounter as: “Both the actual trash and stories, however are valuable to the archaeologist interested in how people deal with things, especially past the point of an item’s durability” (156). While most of **Bloodborne**’s items appear to be left-behind, evidently their position has been curated, having been intentionally placed there by the developers. Unsurprisingly then, the majority have some functional purpose, whether this is mechanical interaction or as narrative reliquary. While unable to quite escape the inscription of anthropocentric value upon the material, this does however re-frame interaction with objects, forcing the player to stop and consider the moment of encounter. Such formations offer new sites in which the mediation of object identity—such as garbage or waste—can be considered. Equally some act merely as a proof of achievement with no interactable use. The Yharnam Stone is bestowed upon the player for defeating an optional side boss and reads: “A sacred heirloom left by Yharnam, Pthumerian Queen. The Queen lies dead, but her horrific consciousness is only as sleep, and it stirs in unsettling motions” (**Bloodborne** n.p.). However, this item is gifted to the player, the reward for curiosity and perseverance. Rather than just an embodiment of achievement, the object is intended to expand the player’s comprehension of the nightmare, the hunt, and Pthumerians. Yet, such descriptions require an excavational process to fully understand the lore beneath. Though this casts the player as a taxonomical collector, in so doing it draws attention to the contact with material remains themselves.  

Narrative archaeology requires the reading of these micro fragments to composite a macro whole, encouraging the player to deduce this themselves rather than be presented with the definitive narrative. These items do not exist in isolation, indeed certain descriptions can be read together to deepen understanding. For example, the Lecture Theatre Key contains both a functional description—“Key to the Lecture Theatre in the Lecture Building”—and begins to explain the backstory of the location: “Today, the two-storey Lecture Building is adrift in the nightmare, but once it was a place of reflection, where scholars learned of history and archaeology” (**Bloodborne** n.p). The key primarily functions by permitting progression to a restricted area, yet its description is equally useful to a player delving into the lore—standing as one of the earliest examples of the diegetic scholarly interest in archaeology. This hint begins a chain of connected descriptions concerned with discovering “the eldritch Truth,” a term only fully understood by solving cryptic allusions that lead to optional areas of the game with their more overtly Lovecraftian bosses. Within the locked
Lecture Theatre room, the player can find the Augur of Ebrietas which emphatically states it is a: “Remnant of the eldritch Truth encountered at Byrgenwerth . . . The initial encounter marked the start on an inquiry into the cosmos from within the old labyrinth, and led to the establishment of the Choir” (Bloodborne n. p.). Although each player may experience these locations and thus items in various orders, understanding can only be gained by reading such descriptions alongside each other. Further, rather than being dissociated from their discovered location, items are frequently entwined with their origin, requiring a nuanced awareness of the environment.

The connections between Lovecraftian elements and archaeology within the game are further reinforced through the Chalice Dungeons. Acting as a side-quest for the player, these locations are built from the typical Dungeon crawling experience of traditional RPGs while serving as the labyrinths previously mentioned in the item descriptions. Aply, these areas are situated within the overarching plot by being geographically located below Yharnam—although the player must teleport to these spaces and cannot verify this. As the scholars of Byrgenwerth discovered the Great Ones blood in these ruins, the connection to historicity is reinforced as only through comprehending the past can the present be understood. In the Chalice Dungeons, the player is required to progress through the level, opening doors, discovering hidden treasure rooms, defeating bosses, and proceeding to deeper layers, mimicking an archaeological explorer. Turning to the importance of item descriptions, even the chalices themselves expand upon the lore. The first chalice a player would logically discover is the Pthumeru Chalice described as opening “the tomb of the gods” and instigating the unearthing of the Great Ones. The further depths are represented by the Central Pthumeru Chalice which continues the narration of the previous item: “The old labyrinth was carved out by the Pthumerians, superhuman beings that are said to have unlocked the wisdom of the eldritch Truth” (Bloodborne n. p.). It becomes clear, therefore, that these Dungeons convey a deeper understanding of Bloodborne’s world; while easily missed, they serve as a central component to the narrative. Finally, the Great Pthumeru Ihyll Chalice finishes off this description as “this reveals that while early Pthumerians were mere humble guardians of the slumbering Great Ones, their descendants felt entitled to name themselves a leader” (Bloodborne n. p.). These three items then, like the previous Lecture Theatre key, embody an extended narrative that requires reading all of them to reach the final understanding—one which is concluded with fighting the Yharnam Queen and acquiring the aforementioned Yharnam Stone.

Bloodborne’s narrative archaeology extends even up to its conclusion by incorporating three alternate endings. The first two are dictated by an either/or ultimatum; to achieve the third the player must decode cryptic clues to realize that they require three Third Umbilical Cord items before the final confrontation. The object’s vague and elusive final line alludes to this ending: “use to gain Insight and, so they say, eyes on the inside, although no one remembers what that truly entails” (Bloodborne n. p.). Throughout the game “eyes on the inside” refers to a deeper cosmic understanding of the world. With the help of other notes around the game and object narration, the player may deduce its non-described function. The very consumption of these items infers a recapitulation of anthropocentric values, but equally the obfuscation of this ending speaks to an incommensurable object-orientated ontology, or other designations of the non-human. To organically find this obscure conclusion and fight the secret Moon Presence boss—a Great One whose nightmarish entrapment fuels the hunts—the player must apply the narrative archaeological tools developed throughout. Although Bloodborne shies away from an implicit challenge towards materialist thought, its diegetic quest for an expanded awareness draws upon alternate paradigms through which to encounter the material. Indeed, even the ending itself, which depicts the player’s guide (the doll) picking up an infant Great One, offers little narrative affirmation. Full understanding may only be achieved by further reading. Bloodborne’s achievement trophy “Childhood’s Beginning,” which is unlocked after the fight, states “You became an infant Great One, lifting humanity into its next childhood.” Seemingly the player must be prepared to not only search out the secrets within the game, but also those outside of it—the trophy representing the final piece in the puzzle.

Bloodborne’s narrative archaeology offers new contact paradigms with materiality, transitioning from items with described applications to enigmatic fragments that the player must piece together into a macro comprehension. Each object develops a lasting sense of individuality. Indeed, the majority of armor encountered is largely for aesthetic or roleplay purposes to encourage a re-kindled reverence towards these meetings. Such a myriad of materials crucially become waste or artifacts depending on the player’s subjective process of encounter. Video game spaces thus offer an experimental ground to consider and experiment with innovative schemas that challenge contemporary materialist practice—a inquiry adopted by “archaeogamers” like Reinhard. Certainly, it is vital to consider a conceptualization of object identity beyond anthropocentric entrenchment, as proposed by Bennett, Harman, and Morton. This, however, is not enough. I argue that we must simultaneously consider the process of encounter itself, for progressive development depends not only on new definitions, but also on new modes of deploying.
self-aware contact. Lovecraftian texts offer the ripe potential of meeting objects and ontologies that challenge dominant schemas, of a confrontation that strains our very structures to represent such moments accurately. Bloodborne focuses in on such encounters, its narrative archaeology not only elucidates upon anthropocentric formations that force objects to perform their own historicity, but equally pays reverence to the very moment of contact itself.

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About the Author

Kerry Dodd completed his PhD at Lancaster University, UK. His thesis, entitled “The Archaeological Weird: Excavating the Non-human,” examined the intersection between archaeology and Weird fiction. Focusing on the cultural production of the artefact encounter, his thesis explored how archaeological framings can offer a re-conceptualisation of object ontology through the Weird. He is currently working on a monograph that explores the representation of materiality and objects in archaeological fiction. Kerry also works more widely in the fields of: Science Fiction (particularly Cosmic Horror and Cyberpunk), the Gothic, and glitch aesthetics.

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Abstract
Attempts to gamify Lovecraft encounter an essential dichotomy. They work with a body of fiction concerned with weakness in the face of infinity, adapted into interactive forms defined by the presence of a win condition. Aligning the win condition with the desired outcome, while still reflecting the hopelessness of Lovecraft’s fiction, has hitherto been a process of trial and error. In this article, I briefly outline the specific problems in adapting Lovecraft to interactive media that chiefly centers around Lovecraft’s protagonists (being figures of failure), drawing on two Lovecraft stories that have been particularly popular as ur-text for game adaptations and one that should: “The Call of Cthulhu,” “The Shadow Over Innsmouth,” and “The Dunwich Horror.” I then assess the Call of Cthulhu tabletop game, both editions of the Arkham Horror board game, and the Dark Corners of the Earth video game, through a critical lens which focuses on what constitutes “victory” on the game’s terms and aligns that constitution to the source material.

Keywords
Lovecraft; roleplaying games; video games; board games; adaptation; Joseph Campbell

H. P. Lovecraft’s mythos has expanded dramatically over the decades since its inception. A collection of short stories primarily written by one anachronistic amateur author from New England has become a cultural phenomenon, adapted into almost every medium the twenty-first century has to offer, including games. However, direct adaptations run into a particular difficulty that arises from Lovecraft himself; while the aesthetic can be adopted by games (2010’s Amnesia: the Dark Descent and 2015’s Bloodborne spring to mind), a specific adaptation of Lovecraft’s narratives and preoccupations often falls flat. This occurs for a simple reason. The organized systems of play which we call “games” demand a goal for players to achieve, a victory condition. Lovecraft’s fiction, meanwhile, is characterized by defeat. Lovecraft’s protagonists all too often fail to overcome the antagonistic elements confronting them, or find their success subverted by hidden truths and further revelations.

This article focuses on three direct adaptations of Lovecraft’s work into game media: the tabletop roleplaying game Call of Cthulhu, the board game Arkham Horror, and the computer game Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth. I begin by introducing the architecture of Lovecraft’s work, identifying the genre coordinates which attract gameable adaptations, and subsequently outline the specific problem of failure, defined in relation to Joseph Campbell’s monomythic framework of the hero’s journey expounded in The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949). Finally, I establish the challenges these fictions of “defeat” pose to game adaptation and explore how each of the three examples under analysis attempt to overcome those challenges. As well as highlighting specific barriers and pitfalls to the popular choice of adapting Lovecraft to other media, this research indicates the need for game developers to align their aesthetic and narrative constructions of “victory” and “defeat” with the expectations created by game mechanics.

The body of works, which Lovecraft himself called “Yog-sothothery” and August Derleth later described as “the Cthulhu Mythos”, share a repeated set of generic coordinates. These include key locations, monstrous entities and forbidden texts, as well as a recurring plot structure in which protagonists discover and attempt to survive contact with these entities and texts. At first glance, these coordinates adapt well to games. Firstly, the fictional “Lovecraft County” provides a series of locations for game scenarios; acquiring and using the grimoires is the focus of gameplay; the otherworldly entities and their followers are antagonistic forces obstructing the players; and the banishment of these entities is the condition that defines player victory. If, at the session’s end, Great Cthulhu continues to lie beneath the waves, not dead but dreaming: we win. It may be a hollow victory, in which Cthulhu and the cult live still, waiting for the stars to be right and the lid to be lifted on their resting place (or the game box), and the unrelenting indifference of the greater universe may...
be unchanged, but it is a temporary respite, survival for the time being.

Second is the source of mingled fear and fascination: the curiosity regarding that which lies outside ordinary human perceptions and experience. S. T. Joshi describes Lovecraft’s aim as a transference of fear from the everyday world to something beyond it, and places Lovecraft among the first writers working to externalize their own terrors into the cosmos at large. This concept is later identified by China Miéville as “ontological” terror: fear of the realistically, plausibly weird and alien (113). Thirdly, there is the past itself. Lovecraft’s plots are characterized by investigation of prior events, and the consequences of those investigations becoming intertwined with the further consequences of investigation. Sometimes the events are already happening, drawing in a protagonist who embodies a benevolent effort to uncover and resolve the situation and preserve the status quo. Sometimes the act of investigation itself stirs up some quiescent peril, and human curiosity becomes the catalyst for antagonistic forces within the narrative (possibly, even, an antagonistic force itself, breaking taboo surrounding that which mankind was not meant to know). In either of these stock forms, Lovecraftian Horror is historical, its primal terrors reflecting an uncertain present but located in a discoverable past. These second and third factors set the structure, tone and genre of both the author’s fiction and the interactive adaptations. The past must be investigated in order to resolve a frightening event, but doing so puts the investigator in danger of physical and psychological harm.

Finally comes the Lovecraftian protagonist. Not often named and typically a cerebral figure, he (Lovecraft wrote no female protagonists) is fascinated by the past and has a curious horror of both foreign people and the future. Psychologically fragile, he is frequently undone by the horrors he confronts. He is essentially Lovecraft writ large: an author-insertion persona. Understanding how and why he reacts to the mythos is the key to understanding its storytelling structure, and how player avatars struggle to replace him.

**Lovecraft’s Protagonists and Narratives of Failure**

L. Sprague de Camp writes at length of the ways in which Lovecraft’s family environment maladjusted him. To summarize: an overbearing upbringing, deliberate misgendering, intermittent schooling and a precocious intellect produced an adult Lovecraft who was hypochondriac, unable or unwilling to leave his New England home for protracted periods, disinterested in sex or romance, and challenged at best by financial matters. Many of Lovecraft’s protagonists share these characteristics. In particular, the things which frighten Lovecraft’s protagonists are drawn from Lovecraft’s own terrors. Lovecraft’s fiction betrays a general inability to adjust to the adult, modern, real world, on either personal or social terms. This failure expresses itself in the fates of his protagonists, many of whom die or go mad, failing to complete the basic arc of personal development through obstacles overcome, which is described by Joseph Campbell as the fundamental principle of narrative.

The Campbellian monomyth or “Hero’s Journey” begins with a protagonist who exists in the Ordinary World and receives a Call to Adventure. With the help of a Mentor figure, the hero crosses the First Threshold and enters the Supernatural World beyond, where the organizing principles with which the hero is familiar no longer apply. The hero travels along a Road of Trials, assisted by Allies and frequently losing their Mentor’s aid, before encountering the Ordeal, the greatest challenge of the journey. Overcoming this challenge leads to a reward or Boon, a metaphorical Death and Resurrection, and a return to the Ordinary World in which the boon can be applied. Considering “The Call of Cthulhu” story alongside Campbell’s monomyth suggests resonances and departures. Frequently the first story encountered by newcomers to Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu” almost completely encapsulates the essence of the mythos: the interconnections of stories through shared geography and cross-referenced elements; the importance of the past; and the scholarly and doomed protagonist. It appears as introductory fiction to the *Call of Cthulhu* game’s rulebook, as well as providing the game’s title. It is, in short, definitive.

The protagonist of Lovecraft’s short story “The Call of Cthulhu” is a young man with no prior knowledge of the mythos, who inherits the notes and case studies of his deceased great-uncle, fulfilling Campbell’s Call to Adventure trope. Such ignorance is a key device in Lovecraftian fiction; it allows the reader to journey into the mythos alongside the protagonist, making the same horrific discoveries, based on the same evidence. Early references to real works by Margaret Murray, James Frazer, and W. Scott-Elliot are only gradually replaced by Lovecraft’s invented texts, encounters with Cthulhu cultists, and discussions of their doctrines. Finally, there is the described encounter with Cthulhu himself, a vast, omnipotent horror to be evaded or defeated, echoing what Christopher Booker identifies as the simplest and most commonplace narrative Ordeal: “Overcoming the Monster.” In Booker’s terms, this narrative involves a: 

superhuman embodiment of evil power . . . always deadly, threatening destruction to those who cross its path or fall into its clutches. Often it is threatening an entire community of kingdom, even mankind and the world in general . . . So powerful is the presence of this figure, so great the threat which emanates from it, that the only thing that matters to us as we follow the story is that it should be killed and its dark power overthrown. (23)

Lovecraft’s tales, in general, offer a subversion of Booker’s archetypal monster and Campbell’s monomyth alike. In a movement away from the idea of the classical pure evil, which is definitively overcome by heroic deeds, Lovecraft posits a cosmic indifference which transcends our moral framework of good and evil, and which cannot be permanently vanquished. The hero does not return with the traditional Campbellian Boon of limitless bounty or eternal life but with a maddening knowledge of the truly transient and insubstantial nature of our wealth and existence. Vast, cosmic forces exist among us. Those who worship those forces will murder those who know too much; those who resist them can achieve only a temporary respite, until circumstances align and allow those forces to return.

Cthulhu is defeated in a suitably spectacular style, but not permanently: as Lovecraft reminds us, “that is not dead which
can eternal lie” (81). The young protagonist leaves us shaken, convinced that the Cthulhu cult will have him murdered as they have the others who learned too much. Furthermore, he is adamant that only death or madness are reasonable responses to learning what he has learned. A true return from the Campbellian supernatural world, the positive outcome or win framed by Campbell’s model of narrative is impossible, as the boon of knowledge cannot be applied constructively. Victory here is Pyrrhic at best. However, since he has had no direct contact with Cthulhu, and since he is quite reasonably concerned with an earthly threat, has the protagonist been truly tested or truly failed?

From a gameplay perspective, it is the direct encounter with the mythos which provides aesthetic spectacle. Where gameplay is concerned with conflict, generally combat, deferred or reported encounters are a subversion of the medium, or a missing of the point. It is thus ironic that the genre-defining roleplaying game should lean so heavily on “The Call of Cthulhu,” a story which reveals its events through frame narratives and keeps its protagonist and perspective at a safe distance from them. “The Call of Cthulhu” may be a perfect introduction to Lovecraftian storytelling, but with its deferral from sites of action and its hollow outcome that suggests a threat quiescent, not overcome, it does not feel immediately gameable.

“The Shadow Over Innsmouth” is almost as heavily adapted. In particular, it forms the bedrock of the video game Dark Corners of the Earth. It presents the reader with a story of fear and discovery and direct contact with enemies both within and without, which converts into a heavily scripted survival horror video game. Beginning with its Herald (a travel agent, who tells the anonymous protagonist of Innsmouth’s existence), “The Shadow over Innsmouth” progresses through a Campbellian monomythic pattern. The protagonist’s journey becomes more and more difficult: thanks to the barriers presented by circumstances, he is effectively Called to Adventure. Forced to visit Innsmouth first along the streets and then along an abandoned railway line, a literal incarnation of Campbell’s road, becoming more and more arduous until the final ordeal: a physical encounter with the horde of Deep Ones in which the protagonist sees them openly for the first time.

In order to fully complete the journey and the narrative, however, the protagonist must be symbolically reconciled with their parental figures. As the protagonist traces his own ancestry back to Innsmouth, he discovers himself to be of Deep One ancestry. The discovery prompts his degeneration into one of the hybrids: before long he has dreamed of meeting his Deep One ancestor, and upon waking in the morning his degeneration is effectively certain: “that morning in the mirror definitely told me I had acquired the Innsmouth look” (Lovecraft, “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” 462). The process of atonement with the ancestors and meeting the mother-goddess has allowed him to complete his transformation, but what this actually means is that he has willingly transformed into a monster. Innsmouth has become “marvel-shadowed” to him, and “in that lair of the Deep Ones [he] shall dwell amidst wonder and glory forever” (Lovecraft, “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” 463). On the terms Lovecraft has established, which frame the hybrids as creatures of horror and a fundamental threat to humanity, this is a perverse victory at best: a subversion of the Hero’s Journey. There are, of course, multiple ways to read this outcome. The protagonist’s reappraisal of his Deep One heritage is arguably the most progressive attitude taken by a Lovecraft protagonist to these matters of miscegenation which so preoccupy the author. From a game designer’s perspective, this drift away from stereotypical narratives and into an experience of becoming the monster certainly has an appeal and lies at the root of developments in the roleplaying medium during the 1990s and beyond. However, on Lovecraft’s own terms, this is an act of surrender to the dangerous Other: a defeat.

“The Dunwich Horror” offers a contrasting example in

1 As Robert Grosso notes in “Playing Roles: The Conflict with Combat,” the roleplaying game has a troubled relationship with combat, which is integral to its evolution and an almost universal presence in the mode’s major titles. Too much emphasis on combat returns the game in hand to classification as a “skirmish wargame,” the mode from which the roleplaying game emerged. A balance must be struck. More modern games introduce rules for “social combat,” or abstract “conflict” mechanics which move away from simulation of physically violent altercations.

which the protagonists permanently overcome their otherworldly opposition. Here, Professor Armitage and company travel from Arkham into deepest Lovecraft Country, making enquiries among the locals as they endeavor to track down the monster, which is revealed as the barely human progeny of a reclusive cultist family: a vast, blundering cosmic horror created to open the way for its parent entity. This being is utterly destroyed at the end of the narrative, the world is saved, and the status quo re-established: Armitage and his party descend from their final mountaintop confrontation with an applicable certainty regarding what has happened and how it has resolved. “The thing has gone forever,” says Armitage, “It has been split up into what it was originally made of, and can never exist again. It was an impossibility in a normal world” (Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror” 151-2). Even with the monster slain and equilibrium restored, however, the protagonists are “grave and quiet, and seemed shaken by memories and reflections even more terrible than those which had reduced the group of natives to a state of cowed quivering” (Lovecraft, “The Dunwich Horror” 152.). The world is undoubtedly saved, there is no explicit future threat from a re-emerging horror, as in “The Call of Cthulhu,” but at dramatic personal cost.

Such are the conditions under which Lovecraft’s protagonists succeed, accomplishing a hollow victory which leaves them traumatised shells of their former selves. They are far more likely to be transformed, driven insane, or simply killed in action. Such fates are entirely befitting the protagonists of cosmic horror stories, but they run counter to the ludic demands of the narrative game, as I shall now demonstrate.

Gamifying Fictions of Defeat
Writing on the difficulties of adapting the Gothic genre to video gaming, Tanya Kryzwinska claims 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 polarization between the generic vocabulary of games, where players are catalysts for redemption, and the inescapable sense of loss and entropy that characterizes Gothic. (75)

Similar issues exist in non-video games, and before proceeding to analyze the efforts made in specific modes or media, it is necessary to establish the particular issues games media present when attempting to characterize the Lovecraftian milieu.

For instance, pencil-and-paper roleplaying game design traditionally rests in the notion of a problem posed, a solution possible, and an implementation of that solution constituting victory. Tyler Rhoades troubles the concept of “winning” an RPG, pointing out the subjective nature of winning and the differing goals of play set by individual players: “Some will say that the only way to win an RPG is to have fun, or not die. Still others will argue that winning a campaign is how you win an RPG” (n.p.). However, many game materials, including the majority of published scenarios for Call of Cthulhu, do present a reward, expressed within the game’s mechanics and fictive reality, which cannot be attained unless a particular condition is met. These “victory conditions” are integral to the gamifying process as described by Juho Hamari, Jonna Koivisto, and Harri Sarsa, which acknowledges the need for some kind of distinction between a successful and unsuccessful engagement with the scenario presented by the game. However, as Kryzwinska notes, the codes of the Gothic genre demand that these engagements, these attempts to solve and complete and “win” the scenario, be incomplete or flawed in order to create that essential sense of loss and entropy (75).

A similar sense of loss and entropy characterizes Lovecraft’s fiction. For Lovecraft’s protagonists, victories are Pyrrhic (as in “The Dunwich Horror”), warped by a change in the protagonist’s perspective (as in “The Shadow over Innsmouth”), or hollow (as in “The Call of Cthulhu”). These hollow or partial victories are a problem for framing game narratives. In the roleplaying game, a scenario which cannot be “won” is a problem. By way of example, consider “The Tomb of Horrors,” the deadliest dungeon ever created for Advanced Dungeons and Dragons, which John Wick describes as “the worst adventure of all time . . . [it] nearly lost me every friend I had when I was twelve” (n.p). As Justin Alexander puts it, “the module just doesn’t play fair” (n.p). To avoid this dissatisfaction and resentment on the part of players, scenarios for Call of Cthulhu and its ilk have to strike a balance between the Lovecraftian hollow or partial victory and providing a game experience that “plays fair”.

A board game which cannot be played to clear resolution is equally unsatisfying, especially one with the four-to-six-hour suggested play time of Arkham Horror. Developed first by Chaosium and later by Fantasy Flight, Arkham Horror is notorious for its Byzantine game mechanics and convoluted resolutions. As I will demonstrate later, Arkham Horror successfully evokes a Lovecraftian “feel” or aesthetic experience, but at the price of clarity, accessibility and perhaps the sense of accomplishment. It is difficult to explore different outcomes for the game and, potentially, some players will find no clear resolution at all even if they play until the end. According to a GamePressure report, only around 30% of computer game titles are played to completion. However, if multiple endings exist there will be players who choose to replay the game in order to see the “bad” ending, the outcome of a failure at the final challenge. However, the very idea of getting the bad ending depends on the existence of a “good” ending, one in which the antagonist is definitively overcome and the status quo preserved.

A further obstacle exists within the Lovecraftian protagonist as a character. Bookish, solitary types who tend to fall in a swoon at times of crisis work well enough on the page, where there is some distance between us and them, but they make unconventional avatars for players. As a medium, roleplaying games generally center around the fantasy of oneself as an active agent in the game’s narrative, as per Eric Salen and Katie Zimmerman’s understanding, with a significantly greater tolerance for peril than one probably possesses. The shrinking violet may be an interesting character to perform, but to perform them adequately means excluding oneself from engaging with
the event that causes them to shrink: playing a role by refusing to play the game. Meanwhile, board games exist as a theater of rules where personality is largely secondary. Here, to be excluded from participation in game activity does not carry the theatrical, performative satisfaction of playing one’s chosen role to the hilt. It is simply not getting to play at all. By way of demonstration, consider how a specific moment in “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” might be read in game terms. Do players want to succeed (i.e. escape Innsmouth) entirely by their own efforts, because they successfully barricaded, navigated and concealed their way out of town, or by chance, because they blacked out in a ditch where the Deep Ones did not bother to check? The latter may be satisfying to read about, but as an experience it renders the character, and the player behind them, passive and the outcome arbitrary.

At this stage it could be argued that game narratives often impose such moments of weakness on us even when not trying for a Lovecraftian milieu. This is true, but it still represents an instance of what Clint Hocking refers to as ludonarrative dissonance, an instance of “railroading” in which the developer’s authored story conflicts with, imposes on and overwrites our emergent, experiential narrative of play. Often, players have taken on and survived worse, but now we black out because the story demands that we do. The opportunity for resistance and direction on our own terms, using the tools the game provides, is only advanced to us when convenient for the developer. Perhaps it is no surprise that the Lovecraftian has flourished within roleplaying, a mode where “failure, which is an integral part of any RPG, completely undermines the badass persona” (Rhoades n.p.) and protagonism has to function differently.

I shall now turn in more detail to some of the specific game adaptations mentioned above, which have a number of things in common. Roleplaying game development studio Chaosium has made its mark on the industry with Call of Cthulhu, in print since 1981 and still going strong on its seventh edition. Arkham Horror, by the same publisher originally but in the hands of Fantasy Flight since 2005, brought the mythos to board gaming. 2005 also saw the release of Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth, first in a planned trilogy of survival horror video games by Headfirst Productions. Each of these works have troubled development histories and economic performance, yet received critical acclaim for their approaches to adaptation.

Troubled development and poor market performance have affected all these developers in some measure. By 2005, Chaosium was almost bankrupt, struggling to keep up the regular pace of expansion required to sustain market interest; the sale of Arkham Horror to Fantasy Flight helped keep the company afloat, and the return of original developers Greg Stafford and Sandy Petersen created sufficient Kickstarter buzz to revive the RPG offering. Dark Corners of the Earth, meanwhile, spent six years under constant revision as its storyline grew and shrank, while a planned multiplayer system was abandoned. Developers Headfirst brought the game to market, but only just, and it would be their last release. However, all three of these games have received some degree of acclaim. Call of Cthulhu won awards from Origins and the Game Designer’s Guild on release and was inducted into the Origins Hall of Fame in 1995 (Chaosium, 2013). Arkham Horror, in its Fantasy Flight incarnation, has been nominated for Tric Trac and Golden Geek awards, and BoardGameGeek rates it an overall 7.3 out of 10 based on 31,000 ratings (as of September 2017). Dark Corners of the Earth, despite its troubled development history, received a special award from GameSpot as the “Most Surprisingly Good Game of 2005.”

These adaptations have also been praised specifically for their implementation of the source material, despite highlighted mechanical problems. Dark Corners had numerous bugs, dated graphics, and was often deemed frustrating to play thanks to its lack of a conventional HUD. Positive reviews of Arkham Horror frequently cite the challenge of learning, plus the time and space commitment involved, which Ben Kuchera observes is a factor even for experienced players. Call of Cthulhu is the definitive Lovecraftian roleplaying game, the source from which others invariably draw, but it is the perpetrator of a fundamental error in adapting Lovecraft for interactive, ludic media which has gone on to affect Lovecraftian gaming at large. This error simmers under the surface of even successful Lovecraft games, and may be responsible for the failure of Mythos, the collectible card game produced by Chaosium in the mid-1990s, following the Magic: The Gathering boom. Call of Cthulhu, Arkham Horror and Dark Corners of the Earth are all exercises in gamifying Lovecraftian fiction. To adequately serve and evoke Lovecraft they should arguably encourage player-protagonists to behave in ways which suit his milieu: that milieu is at odds with the clear and unambiguous victory conditions that exist at the bedrock of game design.

Call of Cthulhu: Lovecraft and the Tabletop RPG

Call of Cthulhu was the first genuine attempt at adapting Lovecraft’s stories into a roleplaying game medium. Previous attempts had treated Cthulhu, Yog-Sothoth and company as unusual monsters at the bottom of a dungeon, something to be recognized as from a story and slain through careful use of equipment, resources, environment and one’s lucky die. Often, Call of Cthulhu fails to completely distance itself from this straightforward “kill the monster, win the game” understanding of the RPG. While Call of Cthulhu does have a reputation as a game where you are doing well if you keep your character alive, indicating an attempt by players to embrace the Lovecraftian story and outcomes, the scenarios offered by the developers often incentivize and reward a conventional roleplaying game victory. To indicate the general trend, I will consider the scenarios presented in the Call of Cthulhu core rulebook (i.e. those most likely to form expectations upon first encountering the game) in print.

One such scenario, “The Haunting” has been included in the game since its first printing and Chaosium claims that more people have played this scenario than any other. Its coordinates lie in the traditional haunted house mode, and the mythos elements (notably the Liber Ivonis which appears in several Lovecraft stories) can be left out entirely. The plot is simple: Walter Corbitt, a deceased cultist in the mold of Lovecraft’s Ephraim Waite, is able to animate his body after death, vampirize or otherwise prey upon...
the current inhabitants of his house and drive away or slay those who learn his secret. The house’s new landlord wants him gone and has called in a group of player-character investigators with a connection to the paranormal to make it happen. The Conclusion and Rewards sections are telling: “If Corbitt is conquered and destroyed, each participating investigator gains 1d6 Sanity points” (Petersen, et al 224). To be Sane, in the game’s terms, is to be victorious. There is also a black gem which improves the spellcasting POW characteristic, a damaged Liber Ivonis, if the volume has been included; and finally, a cash fee and bonus from the landlord of the Corbitt household. These conditions are clearly tied to Booker’s “Overcoming the Monster” plot and its expected outcome, which itself is a form of Campbell’s Ordeal. The rewards comprise in-game currency, including experience to improve your character’s capability and the restoration of Sanity, a meter which tracks the psychologically corrosive impact of mythos entities and spellcasting. These rewards are tied to a particular resolution, characterising it as a victory. If you do not conquer and destroy Corbitt, there is no mechanical payoff.

Two other scenarios, “Edge of Darkness” and “The Madmen” are more conventionally Lovecraftian narratives, in which newspaper records are cross-referenced, journals uncovered, and an intrusive presence from another world thwarted. In both, the conclusion carries similar mechanized rewards: Sanity points are restored for banishing the intruder or lost if the creature remains at large when play concludes. Finally, “Dead Man Stomp” explores aspects of the 1920s setting outside Lovecraft’s preferred New England milieu: its scenario concerns jazz, racial tension, gangsters and a Nyarlathotep-supplied trumpet that raises the dead. “Dead Man Stomp” is akin to “The Haunting”; a viable Horror roleplaying scenario where the mythos is largely irrelevant to the proceedings, with varying sanity and cash rewards for preventing the cursed trumpet sounding before or after its owner’s death, and some character-focused moral consequences for interceding (or not) at particular points in the plot.

In each of these scenarios, the roleplaying game betrays its roots through the signaling of an outcome to which rewards are assigned and associating that with destroying or preventing a supernatural event. Participants are not encouraged to pursue the kind of ending which makes Lovecraft’s fiction what it is; if anything, they are directly encouraged to resist it. For the amount of archaeological tales Lovecraft writes so few actually have an artifact as the reward, yet players of Call of Cthulhu frequently end up retaining possession of the forbidden tomes and cursed objects they have encountered during the scenarios.

To serve the source material truly, mechanical incentives need to be attached to the appropriately Lovecraftian ending: going mad or dying needs to feel like the appropriate outcome to the game scenario. The game expectations need to be subverted. If the game rules do not condemn madness then madness becomes desirable; it is not desirable for Lovecraft’s protagonists, but paradoxically it needs to be so for imitators of his narrative mode. A first step toward doing this would be abandoning the campaign model the roleplaying game assumes as a default: the assumption that player’s characters are supposed to last beyond the confines of this scenario and be played again in an extended, continuous emergent narrative. If there is no next session in which to spend that in-game currency and allocate those experience points, such rewards become less powerful signifiers of victory. In fact, they become irrelevant and the game narrative becomes self-contained. The so-called one-shot, then, is more faithful to Lovecraft’s mode of discrete stories with the setting as a continuous element.

As another possibility, developers could change the mechanical significance of insanity or death. Drawing on the turn in videogame development toward death as a continuation and advancement of the game’s narrative state, most evident in titles such as Planescape: Torment, Pyre, Middle Earth: Shadow of Mordor, and the Dark Souls series, roleplaying games could repurpose these dead or mad characters as antagonistic or supporting agents for future stories, rather than removing them from play and insisting that players create a replacement. Finally, and more simply, games could simply acknowledge the dissonance between their mode and their inspiration by offering different degrees of compromise. Trail of Cthulhu, a 2008 successor to Call of Cthulhu, suggests two modes of play: “Purist,” in which death and insanity for player characters are almost inevitable, and “Pulp,” which is a more stock RPG approach where brave heroes battle the contents of the Necronomicon head on. This indicates a growing awareness that Lovecraft’s narrative architecture is seldom compatible with interactive media and their associated expectations, and is a good start toward closing the gap between reader-players’ expectations of the Lovecraftian mode and the tabletop roleplaying game.

Arkham Horror: Lovecraft and the Board Game

Arkham Horror, the board game which simulates a Lovecraftian “investigate and resist” scenario akin to “The Dunwich Horror” in structure if not in details, has appeared in two editions. The game’s evolution from one edition to the other represents a growth in understanding of the Lovecraftian mode, similar to that apparent between Call of Cthulhu and Trail of Cthulhu. The original 1987 Arkham Horror developed by Chaosium is a fairly conventional board game of the time, though with a collaborative win condition as opposed to pitting players against one another. Players have an investigator token which moves a random number of spaces, and an associated card for tracking Sanity and Strength. If an investigator loses all Sanity or Strength, they are ignored by the wandering monsters, and transported to the Sanitarium or Hospital spaces for treatment, which indicates a more Lovecraftian sense of the protagonist’s vulnerability. This temporary removal from play is more faithful to the Lovecraftian mode, less permanent than the die-and-reroll standard of roleplaying games, and more suitable to a board game mode. Board games are, after all, conventionally played to their conclusion in one sitting, and nobody wants to be “out” in the second hour and reduced to spectatorship for half the evening. The investigators’ game round is punctuated by a “Mythos Phase” in which procedurally generated “gates” and monsters may emerge. If thirteen gates open, all players lose; if all gates are closed (a risky process involving passing through them and overcoming three encounters, during which time a player’s
investigator may be removed from play and reset to their starting condition), all players win.

Again, the conventions of the board game format mean that a goal-based victory condition is inevitable. However, a board game has the luxury of greater distance between player and avatar or token. Compared to roleplaying characters, who are often fully personalized and fleshed out personae who take some time to generate mechanically in their own right, the pre-designed and mechanically simple characters of first-generation Arkham Horror are much less functional as vehicles for investment. As a result, it is more acceptable for bad things to happen to them; defeat is taken less personally, and so there is much more room for mechanics that amount to “pass out and go directly to jail,” especially if the player will be back in the game within minutes.

Meanwhile, 2005’s Arkham Horror is characterized by Fantasy Flight’s trademark abundance of tokens, cards, trackables and states. It also moves closer to the roleplaying game mode, providing a backstory for each investigator, purchasable items, weather conditions and a background “Terror level.” Robert Florence suggests that “its million moving parts [come] together to simulate a terrible alien intelligence” (n.p.). The fearsome complexity of this Arkham Horror creates something rather like playing Call of Cthulhu with Azathoth in the keeper’s chair. This complexity is absent from Lovecraft’s tales, which often rely on quite simple non-descriptions of the indescribability, unspeakability and unknowability of the entities witnessed, but it creates a corresponding feeling of being at the mercy of vast and powerful forces outside the experiencing individual’s comprehension. Graeme Kirkpatrick suggests that the feel, or the aesthetic experience, of play is how we activate the game, moving beyond its incoherent and scattered shards of meaning, and deepen our understanding of its true structure (22). To play Arkham Horror in its 2005 incarnation is to experience for a few hours the sensibility of being a Lovecraft protagonist; the ontological weird described by Miéville, in which every element encountered contributes to a vast and barely comprehensible relationship, outlining a lurking and meaningful “whole.”

The 2005 Arkham Horror’s more detailed setting and more developed characters indicate a step toward more fleshed-out protagonists and storytelling techniques. Perhaps this acknowledges that the abstraction of the pure board game lacks something in terms of Lovecraftian atmosphere. After all, the basic mechanics of Chaosium’s 1987 game would work just as well for Ghostbusters: four characters, closing gateways into a netherworld, with temporary outages from activity when a resource runs out. There is still a fundamental problem of victory, but as a form the board game skews closer to pure game than storytelling experience. As Florence puts it, 2005-era Arkham Horror’s merit is not in how well it plays or how well it serves the Lovecraftian theme itself, but “in how the game’s mechanics make the theme work . . . seeing the cogs and wheels turning, spitting out monsters, making you believe there must be some intelligence at work” (n.p.). There is an underlying structure at work, which can in theory be tracked and understood, but which depends on the relationships between mechanics more than on the mechanics themselves; again, an ontological horror. The directions for deploying and moving monsters are sufficiently sophisticated that the game seems to be playing the players, operating according to its own agency and sense of priorities that can be glimpsed by the players but never understood (albeit because they do not actually exist). Arkham Horror’s sheer difficulty means it preserves an appropriately Lovecraftian outcome of valiant effort, at appalling personal cost, with at best hollow success.

Dark Corners of the Earth: Lovecraft and the Video Game

Dark Corners of the Earth prefixes its title with Call of Cthulhu: leaning on the Chaosium RPG, the more structurally compromised attempt to gamify Lovecraft, and importing its approach and limitations into the digital medium. Dark Corners suffers from the same problem as Call of Cthulhu in its attempt to adapt Lovecraft to a game form which is not entirely suitable, specifically the first-person shooter. Dark Corners fuses Lovecraft’s “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” and “The Shadow Out Of Time” (drawing on “The Thing On The Doorstep” for one extended side quest). Protagonist Jack Walters is a private detective recovering from a period of amnesia inflicted on him by a cult called the Brotherhood of Yith. His investigations take him to scenic Innsmouth, where he must rescue a missing greengrocer from another cult and solve the mystery of exactly what he did between encountering the Brotherhood and being released from Arkham sanatorium several years later.

Mechanically, Dark Corners boasts an innovative take on first person gameplay. Instead of the head up display which would normally offer hints, track status effects and monitor health, ammunition, and other trackables, Dark Corners forces players to assess Jack’s health and mental state by interpreting realistic cues. Blurred vision, limping, shallow breathing, blood on his eyelids and suchlike all indicate something about the avatar’s status; ammunition has to be counted the old-fashioned way; the only clue the game engine offers is a faint glow around most (but not all) interactive items. De-mechanising Jack’s mental and physical health creates a suitable sense of vulnerability and imposed caution, as does the game’s general focus on stealthily avoiding cultists and Deep Ones rather than engaging them in combat. Combat is only occasionally forced (more a consequence of the game’s torturous design history than a sound development choice); however, Jack is much more hands-on in his approach to Innsmouth than the Lovecraftian cipher he replaces. The protagonist of “The Shadow over Innsmouth” makes his escape, reports the state of affairs to the authorities and is not involved in the dynamiting of Devil Reef. Jack, however, takes matters into his own hands. Particularly egregious examples involve shelling Great Old One, Dagon, with the guns of a naval destroyer and using a Yithian electrical gun to kill the Mother Hydra.

There comes a point where the player either has enough ammunition or enough accumulated skill at achieving stealth kills that avoiding combat is no longer worth the effort, and at that point the player is no longer at the mercy of unknowable forces. Defeat becomes a personal failure rather than a narrative inevitability, a characteristic of the medium to be expected. It cannot be
attributed to unknowable cosmic horrors, but to the limitations of the player’s own reflexes and mechanical accuracy. Extending those limitations through zones of proximal development (i.e. gradual, guided improvement through repeated, iterative attempts, a perspective on learning first framed by L. Vygotsky) is the hallmark of the computer game as a medium, but it also moves the experience further and further away from a smooth progression through the subverted Cambellian arc.

*Dark Corners* starts out as a credible attempt at hard-boiled Lovecraft noir, but eventually comes to treat the major entities of Lovecraft’s world in much the same way as early *Dungeons and Dragons*: a large pool of hit points, a set of attacks, and some signature weaknesses to be exploited. These are not cosmic horrors, created and deployed to outline and share the author’s fears. They are designed as boss fights, mechanical challenges that happen to occupy Lovecraft’s symbolic vocabulary, and lack the ontological aesthetic experience of *Arkham Horror*. As an adaptation, it is ultimately superficial: it does not *feel* like Lovecraft.

**Conclusion**

The three efforts to gamify Lovecraft explored herein encounter an essential dichotomy. On one hand they hold a body of fiction concerned with weakness in the face of infinity; in the other they hold a range of interactive forms which are defined by the presence of a win condition. Aligning the win condition with an outcome that is far from commonplace in gameplay territory. *Arkham Horror*, however, has succeeded, by creating the sense of draining, Pyrrhic victory experienced by the players. The game recreates the aesthetic experience of Lovecraft’s protagonists as best it can, allowing it to feel like Lovecraft.

**References**


### About the Author

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Weird Experience: Transformations of Space/Place in Lovecraftian LARP

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Abstract
This article takes an interdisciplinary approach to the study of live-action roleplaying games (LARP). Using techniques derived from organization studies, Gothic Studies, and speculative philosophy, we present autoethnographic reflections on playing and organizing live-action roleplaying games inspired by the stories of H. P. Lovecraft. We contend that such games construct and then destabilize an improvised “place” that reveals the underlying weirdness of material “space” underneath. “Space” is Weird in the sense intimated by the thematics of Lovecraftian fiction, which offers glimpses into a chaotic space that lies outside a seemingly-ordered human universe. This article gives several examples that point to the potential of “Lovecraftian” LARP to likewise produce momentary ontological shock and horror. If Weird fiction in its literary form aims at revealing (if only in fragments) an incomprehensible material reality that lies beyond human perception, LARP takes this further, allowing, if only for a moment, the constructed layers of everyday places to crumble and collapse, laying bare the invisible, everyday mechanics that make sense of the Weirdness of reality.

Keywords
Gothic Space; Space and Place; Performance; the Weird; speculative materialism; weird realism; fakery; roleplaying games; Gothic games.

Introduction: Experiences of LARP
This article takes an interdisciplinary approach to the study of live-action roleplaying games (LARP). Using techniques derived from organization studies, Gothic Studies, and speculative philosophy, we offer an auto-ethnographic account of the way that LARP adapts the genre of Weird fiction to transform material and abstract “spaces” into experienced “places” (Tuan 6). Live-action roleplaying games inspired by the Weird fiction of H. P. Lovecraft construct an improvised and temporary “place” in which a game narrative plays out. During the course of the game play, elements of the constructed “place” become unstable, revealing the underlying weirdness of material “space” underneath. That is, “Cthulhu Horror” LARP, as it is often called, transforms everyday places, such as youth hostels, scout huts, or holiday lets, into Weird and, often, terrifying spaces, eliciting feelings of ontological shock or horror from the players inhabiting them.

Live-action roleplay (LARP) is a recreational pursuit based upon the acting out of an improvised narrative, usually in the context of a particular setting or genre. It is a niche leisure occupation, typically organized by members of not-for-profit clubs and associations, where participants come together in a particular location for a limited time to act out an improvised costume drama with minimum direct guidance. These dramatics feature clear ludic (or game) elements that distinguish them from conventional theater. In LARP, groups of players are challenged to improvise resolutions to narrative crises developed by the organizers and facilitated by a crew of volunteers (known as “monsters” or “Non-Player-Characters”). The broad improvisational scope of LARP leaves players free to create their own stories and conflicts in addition to those planned by the organizers. Typically, a failure to resolve important crises results in a player’s character being removed from further autonomous gameplay. The players of “dead” characters, for example, may join the “monster” crew for the remainder of the game. There can be winners, and, most often in Lovecraftian-inspired LARP, losers.

We play and organize LARP in a variety of genres and settings. However, the focus of this paper is the genre of “Cthulhu Horror” LARP inspired by and set in a fictional world inaugurated by the stories of H. P. Lovecraft, which first appeared in American pulp magazines in the 1920s. From its inception, the “Lovecraftian” Weird has been open to fan adaptation and (re)appropriation. Lovecraft’s contemporaries borrowed aspects of his stories and he, in turn, referred to their fictions in his own work. The “Cthulhu mythos” is thus a collaborative fictional world, which has been expanding and metamorphosing ever since its appearance in Weird Tales. Contemporary and popular forms of Weird fiction appropriate Lovecraft’s mythos according to the model of reading suggested by Michel de Certeau in The Practice of Everyday Life, in which the reader is not passively molded by a text, but makes it their own through an act of re-appropriation (166). In the realms of fan and gaming cultures, this (re)appropriation of Lovecraft’s work has produced a distinct leisure activity in the form of roleplaying games.

The table-top roleplaying game, Call of Cthulhu was first published by Chaosium in 1981, with players quickly adapting the system and writing their own scenarios. A live version of the
rules, *Cthulhu Live*, appeared in 1997, with updates published by *Fantasy Flight Games*. This lineage of Lovecraftian-inspired fan-authored gaming culture accords with Henry Jenkins’s accounts of fan culture, which perceives fans and readers as “active producers and manipulators of meaning” (22). Following Jenkins’s account of the active role of the fan or reader, gamers tend to run and play their own “homebrew” version of Lovecraft’s mythos, using their own game rules. We have played with various amateur clubs and associations in the United Kingdom, all running their own distinct types of “Cthulhu Horror” LARP, including “Disturbing Events,” “The Dark Door,” and “Beyond the Threshold.” The groups have public websites and Facebook pages, where details of game rules can be found, but these are subject to regular changes as groups adapt and transform their game-play over time.

This paper uses our experiences of playing and organizing “Cthulhu Horror” games within this fan community to think about the way LARP as a social activity radically transforms gamers’ experiences of everyday places. Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams, and Arthur Bochner define autoethnography as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (n.p). Likewise, Adams, Stacy Jones, and Ellis describe autoethnography as a research methodology that “uses a researcher’s personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences” (1). Here, we combine narratives and recollections of our individual experiences of LARP to describe and analyze some of the ways the activity provides insights into the constructed nature of place. Moreover, though we rely upon writing, we also wish to highlight to readers that in this article we are crossing the metaphysical boundary between writing and lived experience. In bringing together these reflections, we aim to present an evocative narrative identifying the use and effects of such boundary crossing techniques in LARP. These techniques are extensions of techniques of organization applied to social interaction and narrative, which depend upon the dramatic framing of experience as part of a particular narrative; between play and serious life, collective imagination and competition which constitute participants as characters, game-players, or organizers. The experience of characters is managed by individuals but also by organizers through attempts to order space, and particularly in the disruption of expectations about that order.

To give a sense of our experience of “Cthulhu Horror” LARP, Chloé offers the following account of an incident that occurred at a game in 2009, called “The Sorrow of Huntingdon Hall” written by Lee Wilkinson and Jenny Wilkinson for “The Dark Door”:

Clawed, decaying fingers burst through the wall, crumbling the plaster into dust. Instinct takes over. I stumble, knocking into a chair, falling against someone. In my panic, I scramble, pushing this other body out of the way of my escape route. This is no longer a game.

(n. p.)

This dramatic description is Chloé’s personal recollection of the game, and includes an admission of a temporary conflation between character and player as part of the immediacy of the experience. Her character’s selfish attempt to escape an oncoming horde of monsters collapsed into the player’s desire to flee, to the detriment of others within the game. In that moment, Chloé scrambled to save herself. This collapse of decorum was prompted by a particularly ingenious construction of place. The game organizers had, unbeknownst to the players, constructed a fake plasterboard wall across one end of the room and painted it to match the other three walls. The venue for the game, Featherstone Castle in Northumberland, United Kingdom, had been used for games before, but even players with experience of the site failed to notice the inclusion of the fake wall and the subtly altered room layout. Thus, when the wall started to crumble during the in-game evening meal, and zombies appeared, both characters and their corresponding players were shocked.

This emotional response to events shared between character and player is known in the LARP world as “bleed” and represents not only shared bodily affect, but also a weakening of the “safe” boundaries and norms established by play’s “magic circle.” Instances of “bleed” also reveal that the experience of LARP is mediated through two overlapping realms in uneasy relation to one another: the “reality” of space and the sociality of “place.” However, there is a distance between the order and disorder produced by organizers, and the experience of the player-as-character. The photograph below (fig 1), gives a more prosaic illustration of the scene than the one described by Chloé. The wall looks more home-made than she remembers. The zombies do not pour out of the hole, either, but look as if they are struggling to remove the plasterboard. The fakery of the wall is evident, so how was it that the game elicited such a strong response in not only the characters seated at the dinner table, but also the players themselves? For a moment, the “frames” of experience (in this case, the frame that indicated to people that they were playing a game and that their lives were not really in peril) collapsed. This article explores that momentary collapse and accounts for it by showing how the narrative tropes of the Weird work alongside strategies that have long inhered in the Gothic tradition (namely, performance and fakery) to transform everyday “places” into ontologically strange “spaces.”

Image 1: Fig 1: Zombies “claw” their way through the fake wall in “The Sorrow of Huntingdon Hall.” Photo taken by organizers, Jenny and Lee Wilkinson

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1 The term “magic circle” is common in Game Studies to discuss the circumscribed nature of play. It originates in Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* where it denotes the suspension of the ‘ordinary’ world and its rules (12).
The experience Chloé describes is relatively rare, but the potential for such an extreme response during a game suggests that LARP interacts with place in transformative ways. Throughout this article, we will distinguish between “space” and “place.” According to Henri Lefebvre, all spaces are socially constructed (26). Lefebvre points to the constructed nature of space, with only “natural space” retreating from human appropriation, resistant and infinite in its depth (31). Our use of the word “space” is more akin to this abstract “natural” space identified by Lefebvre. Space is the rootless, fluid reality of material flows and disconnected objects. In contrast, “place” is constructed space, space given meaning, or, rather, what Lefebvre calls “appropriated” space (31). The distinction between “space” and “place” suggested by Yi-Fi Tuan also informs our use of these words. In Tuan’s critique of positivist approaches to Geography, he notes that space is abstract in that no meaning has yet been ascribed to it (6). Place, on the other hand, is “space” given meaning. “Place” is what becomes of “space” once material flows are stopped and objects have been appropriated by thought and constituted into social reality.

**Game Place/Weird Space**

For the purposes of this article, unconstructed “space,” which retreats from and resists appropriation by human thought and activity, might also be described as Weird in the sense of themes particular to Lovecraftian fiction. Frequently, Lovecraft’s narratives offer glimpses into a chaotic space that lies outside a seemingly-ordered human universe, descriptions of which offer ways of thinking about “space” in opposition to “place.” In Lovecraft’s “The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath” (1934), the character Randolph Carter describes “that amorphous blight of nethermost confusion which blasphemes and bubbles at the center of all infinity” (At the Mountains of Madness 149). This concept of space accords with some of the ideas explored by contemporary philosophy’s “speculative materialists” and “weird realists” such as Quentin Meillassoux and Graham Harman. Indeed, we associate “space” with what such thinkers designate the “Great Outdoors” of reality, which philosophy has traditionally located beyond the access of human perception. Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude* (2008), a key text in this new strand of philosophy, seeks to account for the materiality outside human perception so as to engage with the universe beyond what he characterizes as the impasse of Kantian “correlationism” (5). He exhorts philosophy to accept the facticity of a world outside human perception, offering ancestral “events” and substances dating back to before life on Earth as problems for correlationist thought (9). Yet, human dealings with such objects are necessarily speculative.

Weird fiction provides fertile grounds for these philosophical speculations, since it, too, combines speculation with materialism: Cthulhu is not a supernatural monster, but rather an aspect of material reality that is incomprehensible or inaccessible to human thought. Graham Harman’s writing on “weird realism” directly engages with Lovecraft’s fiction in its attempt to account for the world of objects outside human perception. This mode of philosophy follows in the steps of the Lovecraftian protagonist seeking knowledge beyond human understanding. One such seeker in Lovecraft’s short story, “From Beyond” (1934) asks: What do we know of the world and the universe about us? Our means of receiving impressions are absurdly few, and our notions of surrounding objects infinitely narrow. We see things only as we are constructed to see them, and can gain no idea of their absolute nature. (Dreams in the Witch House 24)

In Lovecraft’s story, the protagonist’s experiments into the space “beyond” reveal a sinister universe inhabited by predatory creatures existing alongside the everyday. Harman develops this Lovecraftian thesis: it is not that there is another realm beyond reality, but that reality is itself made up of “weird substances . . . rather than stiff blocks of simplistic physical matter” (Harman, “On the Horror of Phenomenology” 347). As Harman states elsewhere, reality is Weird because it “is incommensurable with any attempt to represent or measure it” (Weird Realism 51).

In contrast to this unmeasurable Weird reality—that we designate “space”—place is here understood as collectively made by human thought and interactive experience. Place is constructed out of the social processes and interpretive “frames” that govern interactions within space. In this sense, place constitutes a limited and performed aspect of space. According to both Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel, everyday social “performances” work hard to conceal the production of their contexts and being a member or participant in an interaction relies upon mastery of performance, a performance which is nonetheless identifiable and clearly evident when breached: in this case such performances constitute the production of place. Most interactions assume an unproblematic relationship between space and place and do not reveal the construction of place that is necessary in day-to-day life. In LARP, however, the construction of place is re-programmatized and foregrounded. Game place is constructed within, and layered over, an existing place that suggests its own set of social rules or performances. In some cases, elements of the existing “frame” may be incorporated into the game, or might be ignored altogether.

The preferred venues for LARP events are often chosen based on their correspondence to an ideal “place” suited to the narrative of the game. In *Who do you think you are?*, organized by the authors in 2009, the Georgian period features and antique furnishings of a house in North Wales provided an apt location for a “Cthulhu Horror” LARP set at the home of a wealthy gentleman in the 1920s. The isolation of the property, which was located on the fringes of Snowdonia, nicely simulated the isolation experienced by characters in Horror narratives. As well as considering physical aspects of the building, furnishing and location, game organizers design the social setting of a game to reinforce particular definitions of place. “God Rest Ye Merry,” organized by “Crooked House” in 2015, was a 1950s ghost-story LARP that dressed a rural Devon Victorian country house in Christmas decorations in order to conjure Dickensian ideals. In-game activities included carol-singing and harvesting a Christmas tree. Such activities inscribe meaning and expectations to locations to bring together symbolic expectations from both lived social “reality” and imagined narratives. In undertaking these activities, the collected social interactions of
participants appropriate the “space” of the venue into a “place” known, or at least comprehensible, to the characters being played. To facilitate this further, a game organizer will usually take the role of a native inhabitant, such as a housekeeper or servant. In *Who do you think you are?* the authors played household servants and used these roles to manage gameplay and to help characters situate themselves in the fictionalized place.

These are simple examples that begin to show a complex intersection of place-making and framing. However, these appropriations of space are not always unproblematic. As we will show, attempts to appropriate a real-world military museum located in an underground military bunker into a game where it served as a real-world military bunker brought its own set of issues, whereas, elsewhere an outdoor activity and education center in Gloucestershire served as a stately home purely on the basis of its architecture, with game organizers and players easily ignoring its contemporary function. In addition to these complexities regarding the use of existing place, games require a layered set of performances: players are simultaneously immersed in a narrative (as their characters) while also negotiating the rules of the game (as a player). The merging of multiple performative frames (those of players, of characters, and of “monsters” or game organizers) can undermine the work of “place-making,” exposing the Weird space that lies behind, “outside,” or, in Lovecraft’s words, “beyond.”

**Gaming “frames” and Ontological enWeirding**

In LARP, interactions between participants, place and space can be understood in terms of “framing,” a concept we borrow from Erving Goffman. Goffman uses the term “frame” to denote the basic principles of organization that govern events. They are the “schemata of interpretation” that render interactions meaningful (*Frame Analysis* 21). Usually, multiple frames exist simultaneously and social interactions involve shifting frames regularly (Goffman, *Frame Analysis* 24-25). As well as mobilizing the usual frames that govern social interactions, LARP requires participants to work together to establish a game “frame,” using appropriate cues and rules. For example, they respect the fact that there are “out of character” areas that they cannot enter during the game, or they obey “damage calls” that require them to pretend they have received an injury. Participants also work together to establish a narrative “frame,” writing characters, making and choosing appropriate costume for the game setting, picking up performances from other participants’ cues and improvising appropriately. LARP demands an interpretive flexibility in its requirement to “key” between multiple frames (Goffman, *Frame Analysis* 44-45). This flexible “keying” or shifting is what moulds space into meaningful ludic and narrative place. However, there are also moments of ambiguity that can destabilize the sense of place constructed in LARP.

Indeed, it is in the continual “keying” between fluid frames that LARP prompts an ontological experience of the Weird, or, an enWeirding of experience. In narrative terms, game organizers want the characters in the game to catch a glimpse of the Weird, of the chaotic numinous or cosmicism that exists beyond human-centred perceptions of reality. Alongside, or overlaying, this narrative enWeirding, the mechanics of LARP often constitute a sense of place in ways that also produce feelings of ontological uncertainty in the player. Sometimes, events will occur (such as the monsters breaking through the fake wall) that mean keying occurs without participants consciously acknowledging the alteration. In that moment, the frames collapse and experience is enWeirded to reveal the chaotic space underlying our construction of place.

The enWeirding we describe is particular to the activity of LARP within the genre of Weird fiction. In its literary form, the Weird aims to provoke ontological unease by positing the existence of indescribable alien monsters and overturning traditional histories of human civilization. The notion of “cosmic horror” associated with the Weird is, then, an ontological horror evoked through a horrifying realization of the insignificance of humanity within the cosmos. Lovecraft scholar, S. T. Joshi demarcates the Weird from other forms of Gothic and Horror fiction, claiming that Lovecraft’s “unprecedented union of horror and science fiction” aims to shatter our conception of the universe (190). Echoing Joshi, writer and critic China Miéville posits the Weird as “the narrative actualization of the Weird-as-novum, unprecedented, Event” (110). Miéville’s definition of the Weird also anticipates the interpretation of Lovecraft by speculative philosophers like Harman in its insistence that the genre aims at an affective ontological crisis. These stories suggest that what we experience of the world is incorrect. Neither “uncanny” nor “hauntological”:

the Weird is not the return of any repressed: though always described as ancient, and half-recalled by characters from spurious texts, this recruitment to invented cultural memory does not avail Weird monsters of Gothic’s strategy of revenance, but back-projects their radical unremembered alterity into history, to en-Weird ontology itself. (Miéville 113)

In Miéville’s account, the Weird rejects a Gothic, or uncanny, “return of the repressed” for an encounter with a world made radically strange.

Working with the Weird as a genre, the multiple and layered frames of LARP produce moments of revelatory enWeirding, though often not in the deliberate manner of Lovecraft’s stories. Rather, ambiguities and contradictions affecting participants’ experience emerge from the collaborative nature of the games, which operate using a complex set of (largely unspoken) arrangements. The ludic “frame” of LARP is distinct from that of table-top roleplaying games, board games, and video games because it demands immersive, haptic participation on multiple levels. Usually, players devise their characters in advance and arrive at the game location knowing something of the setting and concept. For example, they may have devised a character with the intention of attending the funeral of a family member, or, else, their character may be attending a private viewing of a special exhibition of archaeological finds. Game organizers generally keep any planned weird or horrifying occurrences secret until the game has begun, even though all players expect something will happen. That is what they have agreed to. The character attending
the funeral of their family member will be in for a very nasty shock when a group of robed-cultists infiltrate proceedings, but the player will be delighted. Game settings vary, with many groups choosing to recreate the 1920s settings of the original Lovecraft tales. However, we have played in and run Lovecraftian-inspired games set in Prohibition-era 1930s United States of America, a first world war military hospital in Scotland, an Essex military bunker during the Cold War, and a 1980s university archaeological dig in Yorkshire. As these scenarios suggest, live-action roleplaying necessitates that players adopt particular norms of behavior and dress required of the (often imagined) social and geographical setting of the game narrative, as well as depending upon players having knowledge of the rules. To facilitate compliance with the rules, games usually begin with an “out of character” brief, delivered by the organizers. This might include information about the rules of the game (such as how “sanity” or “hit” points are lost in game) or health and safety directions relating to the venue. Once the brief is finished, players enter “time in” and begin play as their characters. For the duration of the game after this point, they must respond to other players and to the game location in character. This lasts until “time out.” Usually games last between twenty-four and thirty-six hours, though this also varies. During this time, participants are immersed, mind and body, in the world of the game.

The aim of each game is different and they do not always involve clear win conditions. However, as in table-top roleplaying games, LARP is always set in a specific fictional narrative world over which the game organizers have control. Gary Alan Fine has argued that although such roleplaying worlds are not real, they are real to those who participate in them, emphasizing the performed nature of the activity (Fine 123). Whatever the distinct style or mythos choices made by each group, these games demand that participants shift interactive contexts between “normality,” “game,” and “Lovecraftian narrative” in a process that contributes to the overall enWeirding of place. Players, who pay to participate, interact with a backstage crew of “monsters” and non-player characters (“crew”) who undertake the majority of the logistical and operational functions (designing and running the game). Yet, both players and “crew” play a significant performative role in making the experience of the game, and of its world, real for the duration of the activity. Crew and players interact with one another using specific game cues (such as “time in” to mark the beginning); while more subject-specific cues will be employed to access the narrative (such as crew performing “servant” roles addressing player characters as “ma’am” or “sir”). These cues aim to promote an authentic experience of the narrative and the world of the game, but also draw attention to its status as both a performative activity and game.

The layered “frames” of LARP must be navigated simultaneously. Participants negotiate the game space as players before reinterpreting that same space as their character would. Other layers of interpretation could also be present. For example, they may have played a different game at the same site in the past and carry with them their experience of how that game transformed the space differently to the one they are currently immersed within. Venues tend to be used multiple times, so that an outdoor activity centre might suffice as a stately home in one game, but serve as a military hospital in another. The venue layout might also change for the purposes of the characters in the game: a door they used in that previous game may not “exist” in the current game. These interactive frames represent interpretations of space as both a place constituted by a narrative and a place constituted by the rules of the game. Immersion in the narrative encourages player participants to forget the interpretative work the game requires. Player participants must maintain the illusion of both game and narrative place simultaneously. In other words, they must behave as their characters would in that place as it is presented by the narrative, but they also behave as players, negotiating place as constructed by the game, employing interpretive flexibility.

The ludic (or, game-play) elements of “Cthulhu Horror” LARP also produce effects particular to the genre. These games offer fewer opportunities for a clearly triumphant outcome. Characters are unlikely to survive or, else, unlikely to survive with any shred of their characters’ sanity intact. The level of a character’s sanity is generally dictated by game rules, although many games allow for players to self-sabotage their progress if they feel it makes for a better narrative. As the game progresses, player characters encounter events or objects that result in a loss of sanity points. “The Dark Door” sanity rules operate via the device of an in-character matchbook, given to each player at the start of the game. Every time the character witnesses something sanity-shaking, they light a match. Game organizers may prompt this by sidling up to players to ask “for a light,” or, else, proactive players will “have a cigarette” to calm their nerves. Both mechanics maintain immersion in the narrative. As the matches dwindle, the character goes through sanity “barriers,” triggering effects such as temporary madness, and, later in the game, more damaging permanent effects. Characters in these games are not heroes. Often they have deep flaws connected to the game narrative. The Weird narrative frame thus dictates to the game frame and player participants seek the experience (however brief) of ontological horror felt by the typical Lovecraftian protagonist. Lovecraft famously offers his own description of this horror in the opening lines to the story, “The Call of Cthulhu” (1927), praising the “inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents” (The Haunter of the Dark, 47). This philosophy, which posits that any glimpse of outer chaos will lead to utter madness, permeates “Cthulhu Horror” live-action roleplaying games. Players sign up to take on the role of historian, antiquarian or scientist, someone who stumbles upon that “terrifying vista” Lovecraft describes. Unlike his hapless protagonists, however, the players actively seek to experience the radical alterity of the Weird universe: they enter the game with a desire to experience the game place as a Weird space.

Evoking these Weird effects, “Cthulhu Horror” LARP is different to other experiences of “performed” Gothic spaces, such as the scare attraction or the ghost walk. The place produced by the game is not a haunted house and its monsters are not ghosts or other kinds of “uncanny” revenants. For example, the “zombies” that Chloë described were not intended as manifestations of ghosts particular to the location where the game was taking place, Featherstone Castle, in Northumberland. Indeed, even the
term “zombies” is misleading, though often used as shorthand by organizers. Within the Weird narrative frame, the “zombies” were reanimated by some indescribable substance and intelligence, emanating from a portal that had opened up within the depths of the house. Physically, this portal was represented as a kind of gaping maw, built out of maché, card and latex, and placed in front of a wall from which monsters would emerge. Players understood that they ought to react to the sight of this portal with absolute terror since it represented something impossible, a threshold to the unknowable “outside.” Beyond this Weird narrative, Featherstone Castle is a notorious haunted house in England. It has a history of ghost sightings and associated folktales. However, players did not interact with this aspect of the location. Indeed, players did not express fear of encountering one of the infamous ghosts, so immersed were they in the narrative of the game. It was only when the place ceased to be Featherstone Castle and became “Huntingdon Hall,” and was thus incorporated into a Weird narrative about outer gods and a material reality lying beyond our own, that players experienced it as a terrifying space.

Thus, LARP often disconnects a place from its real history and, often, its geographical location. Yorkshire scout huts stand in as remote shacks in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, or the parkland of a Manor House on the Isle of Bute in Scotland, becomes the front lines of a battlefield in the First World War. If aspects of this real history of a site make it into the game narrative, they undergo radical transformation. Who do you think you are? incorporated a distorted history of Celtic Wales into its narrative. During the game, players researched the history of the building they were staying in, Llanfendigaid House near Tywyn in Snowdonia, discovering that the Celts in that area had been worshipping a fertility deity that was, in fact, a hitherto unknown “outer god” (Shub Niggurath), whose power had remained in the land and was behind the strange occurrences at the house. The knowledge their characters had (and, indeed, any “out-of-character” knowledge players may have also had) about Celtic folklore and history was rendered useless, since Celtic myth was revealed in the game to be merely a cover for a much more disturbing truth.

**Gothic Fakery and Performance**

Miéville’s definition of the Weird as ontological horror suggests a different generic and affective function for the Weird as opposed to Gothic. In this delineation Miéville echoes (albeit more generously) Lovecraft’s own insistence on the difference between his brand of “supernatural horror” and the “tedious, artificial and melodramatic” Gothic tales of earlier writers. Lovecraft expresses disdain for Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), widely regarded as the first Gothic novel, calling it “thoroughly unconvincing and mediocre” (*At the Mountains of Madness: The Definitive Edition* 113). However, we refute any easy delineation between the Weird and the Gothic, placing Lovecraft within a heterogeneous and ever-evolving Gothic tradition. Indeed, “Cthulhu Horror” LARP exemplifies the connection between Weird and Gothic, often blending elements of Lovecraft’s fiction with features from other forms of the Gothic. “Cthulhu Horror” LARP also shares some characteristics with performed Gothic spaces. Though different to the haunted house, ghost walk or scare attraction, LARP shares with these a lineage that traces back to the literary Gothic and to Walpole himself.

The origins of literary Gothic lie in architecture and the penchant for Neo-Gothic revival in late-eighteenth-century England. One important building in this style is also a performed place: Horace Walpole’s Strawberry Hill. Emma McEvoy notes that this “converted dairy” was one of the earliest examples of “Gothic Tourism” drawing visitors from across Europe. The building was central to *The Castle of Otranto* and existed in dialogue with it. McEvoy notes that Walpole’s Strawberry Hill embodied and performed aspects of the story; it was a “materialized house of fiction” (*Gothic Tourism* 44). Perhaps Lovecraft would be horrified to see his fiction blended with techniques developed by Walpole, but such is the nature (re)appropriation and “poaching” that shapes contemporary manifestations of Weird fiction. LARP is distinct from the examples of “Gothic Tourism” given by McEvoy, but its transformation of space draws on the strategies and techniques employed by Gothic’s earliest “performed” buildings. Strawberry Hill was “a dramatized building for which audience response and interaction were essential” (McEvoy, *Gothic Tourism* 18). Likewise, LARP constructs layered and place-specific performances that require interaction and collaboration from everyone involved. LARP is not a spectator sport. It relies on the closed nature of the social interaction to demarcate the “magic circle” of play and goes even further to maintain the narrative world inside this circle, with crew and organizers performing within the narrative (as in the housekeeper role) or hiding away behind doors marked as non-existent within the game.

From Horace Walpole’s lavishly constructed Strawberry Hill to commercial modern-day scare attractions like the Whitby “Dracula Experience,” theatricalized or “performative” Gothic places are constructed from fakery. McEvoy notes that fakery was central to Strawberry Hill: It “might have looked like a castle but there was very little that was solid about it. Strawberry’s crenulations were fashioned out of wood, its walls constructed from pasteboard” (*Gothic Tourism* 20). Elsewhere, McEvoy identifies a “wanton inauthenticity” in the construction of Dennis Severs’ House—a Gothic tourist attraction in Spitalfields, London (“Performance, Psychogeography and the Gothic” 198). In this performed space, market crates and plastic fruit sit alongside genuinely old artefacts from different periods in history. Similarly, LARP constructs game space by “set-dressing” venues with oddments collected at garage sales or online auctions, home-made props and a mixture of genuinely old items and obvious fakes. The plasterboard wall at Featherstone castle was a particularly ambitious example of the transformation of a location into a game place, but organizers sometimes go even further. In *God Rest Ye Merry* organizers bricked off part of a fireplace and used mobile projector units to project images onto flexible fabric. Blending new technologies with Victorian stage trickery, crew-members pushed their faces against the fabric to distort the image and create a multidimensional illusion. The difference in the ghost story
game, however, lay in the attempt to substitute reality for illusion as far as possible. In *God Rest Ye Merry* the bricked-up fireplace was almost too good to identify and certain player characters had to be given direction by the organizers in order to locate it. Thus, fakery often goes hand-in-hand with realistic artifice, destabilising participants’ experience of place to the extent that they cannot locate whether elements lie in or out of the game frame.

The often-blatant inauthenticity of LARP fakery produces a blurring and collapse of interpretive frames akin to the effects of early Gothic performance. McEvoy shows how Walpole’s Strawberry Hill deliberately blurred distinctions between different modes of art and between art and reality. Walking into one room is likened to passing through a frame into a painting (McEvoy, *Gothic Tourism* 88). Performed Gothic spaces use fakery and artifice to blur the lines between literary fiction and a real building and between architecture and painting. Both Dennis Severs’ House and Strawberry Hill mix artistic modes and historical periods to collapse frames of experience and interpretation, problematizing materiality in the process. McEvoy calls the effect of encountering disjunctions in Severs’ house “uncanny” (“Performance, Psychogeography and the Gothic” 186). However, we suggest a different reading of the collapse of frames in LARP games that moves away from the idea of revenance implied by the word “uncanny” towards a speculative reading that explores players’ encounter with the weirdness of material reality. Artifice is crucial to this experience. Faked props and set decorations evoke the narrative tropes and themes of the Weird, signalling their belonging to fictional world in which player characters expect moments of revelatory horror. These props also bring together and help to collapse multiple frames that construct the game space in a process enacted by participants when they interact with the objects.

There are different ways that the activity of LARP produces a blurring or collapse of frames leading to moments of weirdness and horror. For example, often narrative events or objects cannot be physically represented in the game. It is difficult to build a physical replica to, say, a portal to the “outer dimensions” revealing the swirling abyss of the cosmos. The organizers of “The Sorrow of Huntingdon Hall” built a portal, making it look as though it had grown out of the floor and walls of the castle. It looked frightening in the dark, lit by colored LEDs and surrounded by monsters. In the daylight, it was less impressive—quite obviously a construction of wood, foam, and **mâché**. This happens frequently in games and, often, organizers choose not to make a physical prop if they know that it will not live up to the “Weirdness” required. So, while some game objects have overt physicality—an occult tome bound in skin-like latex with aged and stained pages, for example—other events or objects may be described through narration. A game organizer will simply tell players what their character can see or experience. Yet, both the physical prop and the narrated event occupy the same reality within the narrative frame, and player characters must respond to each in the same way: they may cringe in revulsion, run away in terror, and lose “sanity” points accordingly. In other games, props are disturbingly effective and players do not need to feign or pretend fright: the sight of the monster costume prompts a genuine reaction. In these discrepancies in the use and effectiveness of physical props in horror-themed LARP games collapses and problematizes the difference between, and separation of, material embodiment and imagined reality.

![Image 2: Fig 2: Museum Displays at the ex-military bunker and an in-game prop.](Image 321x529 to 567x616)

Photographs by game organizer, David Garwood.

Player participants are not disturbed by the fakery of props and set-dressing in LARP in the same way as McEvoy describes the experience of Dennis Severs’s house. Fakery in games provokes complex responses because it simultaneously asks players to be immersed in the narrative frame while at the same time requiring that its status as a fake, as a game prop, is recognized by the player. This paradoxical effect of prop fakery can destabilize game locations, revealing the Weirdness of the spaces underneath. LARP requires players recognize that a game prop is a game prop, and not a native item belonging to the location, so as to negotiate the multiple frames elicited by the transformed game space. Game space thus becomes doubled and strange. Doubling has been present in Gothic forms of fakery since Strawberry Hill and the earliest Gothic novels. Just as LARP draws attention to the “propness” of props, Gothic draws attention to its surfaces, to the veil rather than the face underneath, for example, evoking a sense of “doubleness where singleness should be” (Kosofsky Sedgwick 13). This rather Gothic effect of the use of space in LARP can be illustrated by the use of props at a game held overnight at an ex-military bunker, Kelvendon Hatch, Essex, in 2014. The bunker was already full of items that looked fitting for the cold-war-era setting of the game (old computer equipment, typewriting machines, bulky radio machines etc.) but since the location doubled as a museum during the day, players were under strict instructions not to touch or interfere with any of the items native to the bunker. Consequently, props had to look even more “prop-like” than usual so that the players could differentiate between game props and museum exhibits (see Fig 2). At the same time, props had to appear genuine enough to achieve immersion in the narrative of the game. The “propness” of the props paradoxically allowed this immersion because they allowed players to key between frames without breaking immersion to ask a game organizer if they were allowed to touch something. Here, fakery became a signifier of narrative authenticity in a paradoxical blurring of game and narrative frames. However, in the process, the bunker became a doubled space, with game objects layered over “real” objects. These “real” items receded from the constructed game place into
the spectral background of the bunker. Players erased real material objects from the narrative frame, interacting with obviously fake items within a strangely emptied space.

The transformations enacted through the production of place can also result in discordant experiences for players. McEvoy notes that Walpole’s Strawberry House produced these effects for visitors because “the house and its decor performed as something other than itself” (McEvoy, Gothic Tourism 36). Like the game places we have been analysing, Strawberry Hill was “premised upon a radical degree of divorce between style and function” (McEvoy, Gothic Tourism 19). In other words, it looked like something that it was not. Moreover, Walpole’s transformation of this former dairy into a Gothic castle incorporated a range of periods and building functionality (McEvoy, Gothic Tourism 21). McEvoy notes that “Walpole was particularly fond of perceptual dissonance and enjoyed exploiting the tensions between what was and what one might expect” (Gothic Tourism 25). In LARP, players continually negotiate such tensions, especially when multiple interpretive frames are valid at the same time in a particular place. The fabric of a building used for a game can cause such ambiguities and tensions. Fig 3 is a photograph taken during a game, when a group of player characters prepared to enter a doorway, beyond which an unpleasant monster lurked. The priest character holds out his wooden cross in a futile attempt to repel the monster, while the others crowd behind him, frightened. On the wall next to them is a “reduce, reuse, recycle” poster belonging to the game venue, which was an outdoor education centre in Gloucestershire. The poster is a discontinuous material feature of the venue and does not exist within the game narrative. Of course, players are aware that all claims the game makes about the narrative place are counterfeit to a degree. They understand that financial constraints often mean they pretend an outdoor education centre is a stately home. This is an extreme version of McEvoy’s reading of Strawberry Hill, which performed as something other than itself in deliberate ways. Yet, despite the poster, players continue to have authentic experience of the place constructed within the game. Such disruptions as this poster can be experienced by players as irrelevant to their context. In this case, they eliminate the disruption from their interactive frame, just as players did with the inaccessible computers in the ex-military bunker. When we understand the experience of place as constituting a partial construction of space, such omissions are significant. Players have commitment to the representation of themselves as a performed self, both as a player in a game and a character in a narrative, but they have to reconcile these two things by negotiating a space that is both real and performed, both there and not there. What these performances reveal is the constructed nature of all place, not just the temporary place constructed for a game.

The transformation of space into game place creates moments of dissonance and ambiguity. During the course of a game, players may encounter a sign that says: “This Door Does Not Exist.” This sign is applied by game organizers to the game venue to inform players how their character ought to respond within the narrative. The room might be out of bounds to visitors at that venue, or else it may be where the game organizers are storing props or staging monsters. It might indicate a secret location that will only become visible at a future point in the game. The sign on the door indicates the fluidity required by participants to frame switch. Switching between frames in itself does not enWeirding, but the collapse of or simultaneous acceptance of incongruent frames can produce Weird effects. The “This Door Does Not Exist” sign could result in such an enWeirding. The sign indicates that the area beyond is not “in the game,” and so must be treated by players as if it were not there. But it begs some worrying questions for both player and character: What is behind the door? Is it simply a room where some props are being stored? Or, is this one of the entrance points through which monsters might enter the game? Should it be avoided? Perhaps it wouldn’t be a good idea to stand with one’s back to it? These are all thoughts we have experienced while playing in a LARP. Even though our characters must continue to behave as though the door does not exist, we—as the player—may begin to treat it with suspicion. Since the experience of place is embodied by the participant simultaneously as player and character, the terror elicited by the non-existing doorway that may produce a monster is felt by both in a momentary collapse of game and narrative frames. The full layout of a building is generally hidden from player-characters, with corridors and rooms closed off. The dimensions of its interior spaces are thus effectively enWeirded, as internal space is blanked or missed out as the player moves through the building. The participant may not be able to piece together an accurate internal map of the place they navigate as a player character. The layout of some venues remain a mystery to us, despite us having visited them more than once. This is a Gothic experience, akin to readers’ attempts to piece together the fragmentary layout of Wuthering Heights when reading Emily Brontë’s novel of the same name (1847). In Lovecraft’s short story, “The Dreams in the Witch House” (1933), the inconsistency of internal dimensions becomes the source of ontological horror when a room is revealed to have been bigger than it seemed. The concealed space built into a corner of the room turns out to be a threshold between worlds, opening out into vistas of Weird horror. When the zombies burst through the walls of that internal room in “Huntingdon Hall”/ Featherstone...
Castle, the player-characters’ response was immediate: both narrative and game frames collapsed into a single horrifying moment when the constructed place literally crumbled, revealing the weird dimensions of concealed space beyond.

Conclusion

This last example, which we have returned to throughout this article, highlights that frame collapse as opposed to frame switching constitutes an enWeirding of place: it is the simultaneous acceptance of carefully constructed frames that allow a player participant in a LARP to experience the Weirdness of space, however momentarily. After the game is over and the props and fake blood are tidied away, the place in which the game has happened is no longer Weird. Except, of course, when some of the props might be accidentally left behind. A few years ago, we left some latex “umbilical cords” belonging to a Lovecraftian monster lying around the woods at a Scout Camp in Bradford, West Yorkshire. We feel bad for the scout troop that finds those. Although it is funny to imagine the horror on some scout leader’s face, there is a serious point that can be made here about how the frame blurring and collapse elicited by “Cthulhu Horror” LARP might sometimes exceed the boundaries marked out for a game. In one game organized in South Devon in 2010, “Bête Noir,” specific player characters performed the role of an investigative film crew studying the haunting at a local manor house. At the start of the game, participants gathered in a (real world) local pub as their characters in the game and locals in the pub became interested in them. When asked what they were doing here for the weekend, the players maintained the narrative frame and answered the locals “in character.” Over the course of the evening, the players were then accosted by numerous individuals wanting to tell them of their own personal ghostly encounters in the area. Players found that their ability to role play with each other was compromised by the surge of interest local drinkers had in their narrative, which the locals did not know was a fictional narrative at all. The incident resulted in not only the collapse of frames for player-characters, in which real world social interactions became blurred with those of the game frame, but also highlighted for all participants the constructed “place-ness” of the local watering-hole. This demonstrated that the enWeirding of place can unpredictably spread, a form of Gothic contagion, from the boundaries within which it is placed, even affecting those who have not elected to be part of the game.

The complex interactions of frames employed to construct game place can result in a Weird experience for participants in live-action roleplaying games, bringing the experience of playing such games in line with the affective aims of Weird fiction, which is to elicit ontological horror. The blurring and/or collapse of these frames during a game is usually momentary and relatively contained, but there is always the potential for the weirdness to leak into the surrounding area and affect those outside the game. Throughout this article, we have argued that LARP draws on techniques particular to the Gothic mode, particularly as it has manifested in performed architecture, scare attractions and other interactive experiences that McEvoy denotes “Gothic Tourism.” However, LARP also use elements of Weird fiction to inform narrative and ludic frames, producing a different experience of place than other types of Gothic scare attractions. We have given several examples that point to the potential of LARP to produce momentary “ontological shock” by drawing attention to the weirdness that underlies everyday social interactions and the places they construct. If Weird fiction aims at revealing the incomprehensible reality that lies beyond human perception, LARP takes this further, allowing, if only for a moment, the constructed layers of everyday place to crumble and collapse. Games are Weird because they lay bare the usually invisible mechanics of everyday life that make sense of the weirdness of reality.

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“His Madness held no affinity”: Reimagining Arkham Asylum

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Abstract

The Gothic madhouse present in H. P. Lovecraft’s fiction is not a dimly lit padded cell situated in a former manor house. Rather, Lovecraft gives little description to his mental hospitals, which is curious given the many narrators who end up in such institutions. Twenty-first-century popular culture, on the other hand, enjoys a fascination with the madhouse as a physical space associated with criminality, monstrosity, and themes of imprisonment. Though the figures encountered within Batman’s Arkham may be inspired by the horror of Lovecraft’s Weird tales, it is striking that the solitary name of a fictional landscape proves so enduring beyond, and in addition to, the mythos of its original author. As a means of exposing the negative portrayals of mental illness inherent within twenty-first century reimagining’s of Arkham Asylum, namely its portrayal throughout the Batman media franchise, this article compares the depiction of asylums in two fictions by Lovecraft: “Beyond the Wall of Sleep” (1919), and “The Thing on the Doorstep” (1933) alongside Grant Morrison and Dave McKean’s Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth (1989), and Dan Slott’s serial Arkham Asylum: Living Hell (2004). I argue that a wilful misremembering of historical madhouse regimes occurs within modern and contemporary appropriations of Lovecraft’s asylum setting. Unlike the Batman comics, Lovecraft’s tales show the sinister and hidden machinations of the asylum without depicting it as a violent, haunted, or necessarily horrific space.

Keywords

Madhouse; Arkham Asylum; Gothic madness; H.P. Lovecraft; Batman

Arkham, the fictional North American city which is the setting for several of H. P. Lovecraft’s creative writings, has moved to another iconic territory of popular culture. In the media franchise of Batman and its various offshoots, such as the speculative fiction crime drama series Gotham (2014-Present), Arkham Island features a Gothic manor estate turned mental hospital. Here, the Elizabeth Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane becomes increasingly more grotesque as a portrayal of institutional confinement, often to a point of sinister parody. The figure of the Joker, for example, is a transgressive character who provokes questions about the interpretation of madness, and this idea is addressed in more detail below. The asylum in Lovecraft’s oeuvre demonstrates a kind of sanctuary, while in Batman it signifies monstrosity and disorder. In both fictional productions, there is a blurring in how the literary asylum is portrayed and, to an extent, misremembered as a historical site. To demonstrate this idea, this article contrasts two Batman texts with two of Lovecraft’s fictions featuring an asylum. These texts are Grant Morrison and Dave McKean’s Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth (1989); Dan Slott’s comic book serial Arkham Asylum: Living Hell (2004); Lovecraft’s “Beyond the Wall of Sleep” (1919), and “The Thing on the Doorstep” (1933). Although incorporating additional material such as Rocksteady Studio’s 2009 video game Batman: Arkham Asylum, this essay primarily looks to address representations of the asylum in print culture. This article will demonstrate how Lovecraft’s portrayal of the mental hospital seems muted in terms of its negative aesthetics without compromising the atmospheric effects of Horror – especially when Lovecraft depicts asylum abuse. On the other hand, the reverse holds true of the Batman texts that are discussed here. Through this comparison, I argue that a counter-memory of institutional oppression becomes evident by highlighting exploited portrayals of mental illness.

In the D. C. Comics, Inc. (D.C) representation of the secure ward, Arkham Asylum clearly negates the positive aesthetics that Fred Botting associates specifically with the Gothic mode: “[d]arkness—an absence of the light associated with sense, security and knowledge . . . disturbances of sanity and security . . . displays of uncontrolled passion” (5-6). Adhering to Botting’s notion of Gothic as the bookshelf’s psychotic nightlife, Arkham Asylum is the carnivalesque prison for Batman’s gallery of rogues. These characters’ psychopathologies are often accompanied by monstrous and horrific physical features. In the case of Killer Croc, for example, a genetic disease has transformed wrestler Waylon Jones into a reptilian giant with implied cannibalistic tendencies. Jones’s madness is externalized as his frightening appearance plays out late Victorian fantasies of degeneration: his bestial nature grows more violent and atavistic the more his disease progresses. In Living Hell (“Chapter 4: Tic Toc”), Killer Croc is depicted wearing chains, while in Rocksteady’s 2009 Arkham Asylum he wears an electric shock collar. Throughout Slott’s serial, Killer Croc represents a wild abhuman subject whose violent nature is.

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1 For examples of nineteenth-century ideas of degeneration see: Francis Galton’s Inquiries into the Human Faculty (1883); Charles Mercier’s Sanity and Insanity (1890); Cesare Lombroso’s The Man of Genius (1891); and Max Norden’s Degeneration (1895).
incompatible with law and order. As Kelly Hurley explains, “the abhuman subject is a not-quite human subject, characterized by its morphic variability, continually in danger of not-itself, becoming other” (4-5). Abhuman otherness is problematic because it makes the abuse carried out in a mental health facility seem permissible, and even justifiable. At one point, Croc is shot with a tranquilizer by the asylum superintendent who glibly announces that he has “never met a problem I couldn’t solve…with the right medication” (Slott n.p.). The brutality that is enacted upon those labeled by the institution as violent criminals invites the reader to spectate, judge, and complicate the notion of villainy in the Batman comics.

For example, in the same chapter of Living Hell, Asylum security staff member Aaron Cash is revealed to have had his hand bitten off by Croc during a previous altercation. One scene depicts Cash during his sick-leave in an untidy apartment. The asylum superintendent, Dr. Jeremiah Arkham, phones Cash to tell him that: “You can sit there and be a cripple…or return to a job where it’s socially acceptable to cripple others” (Slott n.p.). That a psychiatrist is portrayed giving explicit permission to enact abuse is troubling. Dr Arkham’s words suggest that not only is it permissible, or “socially acceptable,” to physically assault patients, it is also pleasurable. The negative aesthetics of Arkham Asylum do not just concern the hospital’s dark atmosphere and architecture; rather, they apply to, in Botting’s words, the “disturbances of sanity” observable in institutional practices themselves (5). In gothicizing the asylum, Living Hell draws attention to the ways that staff violence and medical malpractice are a predictable occurrence in modern and contemporary fictions about the institution. This is a troubling depiction of asylums that perpetuates old and anachronistic stereotypes. The serial also exposes how the allegedly sane medical attendants can act just as violently as their patients. As Erving Goffman comments: “[t]he stigmatised and the normal are part of each other; if one can prove vulnerable, it must be expected that the other can, too” (135). The inmates of Arkham Asylum are Othered by their proximity to confinement: they are abject figures of social exclusion, and as such, extreme measures to pacify their extreme behaviors appear justifiable. While asylum abuse is easy to point out in Batman, there is a certain parody observable in the fact that it appears excusable. Living Hell confronts its readers with the question of whose villainy is worse: the patients’ or the institution’s?

It is worth noting that other Batman texts have previously subverted the apportioning of blame in the portrayal of asylum abuse. In Frank Miller’s futuristic The Dark Knight Returns (1986), Arkham Asylum is renamed the “Arkham Home for the Emotionally Troubled,” suggesting a shift in social attitudes toward the mentally-ill. However, on closer reading, it is apparent that this perceptual shift is just as stigmatizing. A pop-psychologist featured in Miller’s graphic novel, Dr. Bartholemew Wolper, is introduced as the “[a]uthor of the best-selling Hey I’m Okay,” (Miller n.p.). Wolper appears on television interviews blaming “irresponsible media input” for anti-social behaviours (Miller n.p.). While Miller’s depiction of psychiatry is a pastiche of liberal reform agendas, the figure of Wolper mockingly reproves the notion of diminished responsibility. As Mark Fisher observes: There is a kind of machismo of demythologization in Miller[’s] . . . works. [Authors such as Miller pose] as unflinching observers who refuse to prettify the world so that it can be fitted into the supposedly simple ethical binaries of the superhero comic and the traditional crime novel. The ‘realism’ here is somehow underscored, rather than undercut, by [Miller’s] fixation on the luridly venal—even though the hyperbolic insistence on cruelty, betrayal and savagery . . . quickly becomes pantomimic.

The gritty neo-noir style of Miller’s Arkham is not so much a critique of normalizing strategies for mental illness as it is a reification of them. In suggesting that the asylum is a “Home for the Emotionally Troubled,” the “madness” contained there is silenced and relegated to a performativ abandonment of personal responsibility. Madness is distinct from notions of mental illness because it lacks any stable referents. As Brenda A. LeFrançois, Robert Menzies, and Geoffrey Reaume comment in their introduction to Mad Matters: A Critical Reader: “[o]nce a reviled term that signalled the worst kinds of bigotry and abuse, madness has come to represent a critical alternative to ‘mental illness’ or ‘disorder’ as a way of naming and responding to emotional, spiritual, and neuro-diversity” (10). There is a difference, then, between madness and mental illness; principally, madness is a transgressive state, not necessarily linked to psychopathology, but one that defies homogenous reason. Madness emerges in Batman as a matter of conduct, and in the Gothic and Horror more generally, madness is rarely the breakdown memoir; it is usually an unwanted presence determined mad by a madder society. This echoes how Michel Foucault has referred to madness as a form of social exclusion characterized by its difference to a supposedly superior reason. As Foucault explains, “madness is no longer the familiar strangeness of the world, but a spectacle well known to the observer from outside” (History of Madness 25). Throughout Batman, madness is used as a visual signifier for deviance; in the case of the Joker, for instance, madness is something that exceeds and transgresses the clinical diagnoses of the medical gaze. In Grant Morrison and Dave McKean’s Arkham Asylum: A Serious Place on Serious Earth (1989), The Clown Prince of Crime is described by his doctor as “a special case. Some of us feel he may even be beyond treatment. In fact, we’re not even sure if he can be properly described as insane” (Morrison and McKean). It is also explained that the Joker “can only cope with the chaotic barrage of input by going with the flow. That’s why some days he’s a mischievous clown, others a psychopathic killer. He has no real personality” (Morrison and McKean). Likewise, in Alan Moore’s The Killing Joke (1988), the Joker’s madness defies clinical and legal pathologies, demonstrating a lifestyle inaccessible to the gaze of reason; a sane response to an insane world. As the Joker himself comments: “my point is, I went crazy. When I saw what a black, awful joke the world was, I went crazy as a coot! I admit it! Why can’t you?” (Moore). The Joker’s radical usurpation of madness

2 Jeremiah Arkham is portrayed ambivalently throughout the Batman comics. The question of his own madness, for example, is brought into consideration in Batman: The Last Arkham (1996).
demonstrates a resistance towards capitalist society’s passive acceptance that mental illness is merely an inevitable fact of day-to-day existence. As Fisher argues, “the ‘mental health plague’ in capitalist societies would suggest that, instead of being the only social system that works, capitalism is inherently dysfunctional” (19). The Joker sees the truth of the world that is ignored by the majority of others, either deliberately or through ignorance. This idea comes to be realized in the fictional asylums of Lovecraft and Batman, respectively. The asylum in Batman is a site of abuse and makes use of exploited portrayals of mental illness. Madness, on the other hand, demonstrates radical alterity.

While Batman and Lovecraft’s fictions are disparate, taking place in very different fictional universes, the modern turn to gruesome and violent hospital spaces is striking as Lovecraft originally characterized his asylum as a sanctuary. This is a crucial difference in the cultural work of both D.C. and Lovecraft’s portrayal of the mental hospital. While the Arkham Hospital in the Batman franchise first appeared in 1974: “a New England hospital—a polite name for an asylum which houses the criminally insane” (O’Neil 7), the first named hospital in Lovecraft’s Arkham is the Arkham Sanitarium as depicted in “The Thing on the Doorstep” (1933), which this article will discuss later. S.T. Joshi has highlighted the prevalence of madness constituting one of Lovecraft’s primary Weird fiction tropes by pointing out that an “unusually large number of Lovecraft’s characters go mad at some point or other, and many others have madness imputed to them” (Weird Tale 212). Lovecraft’s use of unreliable narrators was partially inspired by Edgar Allan Poe, although Lovecraft’s are more notably distinct. As David Punter explains: “Lovecraft saw terror in a very different way from Poe. Where Poe refers back to the “life within”, Lovecraft is utterly devoid of psychological interest; his terrors are entirely those of the unintelligible outside” (38). Principally, this also relates to the materialist philosophy underpinning the cosmic horror that drives Lovecraft’s fiction, as Joshi argues:

Madhouses in Lovecraft are habitually places housing those who have glimpsed some truth about existence too horrible to bear. It is not necessarily the case that the inmates of asylums are actually mad, it is that a civilisation based upon rationalism is compelled to do away with those of its members who threaten its stability. (Weird Tale 213)

For Lovecraft, madness is always an empathetically reasonable response to the threat of impossible, incomprehensible, and unknown things from elsewhere; in Lovecraft’s sanatoriums, madness is demonstrated as a sane response to cosmic horror, rather than a form of criminal transgression.

Emerging criticism of Lovecraft’s work seems content to overlook the condition of madness and the figure of the madhouse. Apart from Joshi’s astute yet brief observation on the purpose of madhouses in Lovecraft’s fiction, the issue has not inspired any critical commentary that sufficiently analyzes what role madhouses may serve in the composition of Weird fiction more generally. It is tempting to note here the conjectural possibilities from the known biography of Lovecraft: his nervous breakdowns and his family’s own mental incarcerations – how might these events have informed his fiction? Though this article proposes to explore these contexts to a small extent, the primary focus here has more to do with how the author’s fictions portray the asylum. It is worth noting, however, that Lovecraft’s father had been incarcerated in Butler Hospital, Rhode Island, just before Lovecraft turned two. Contemporary opinion on the medical condition of his father is that it was a case of syphilis, though this had not passed on to his son and it is unclear when the infection began (Dreamer and a Visionary 32).

The Butler Hospital, Rhode Island, in which Lovecraft’s father would spend his final years, was founded by its benefactor Nicholas Brown in 1840 and started construction in 1844 after a General Assembly meeting. David A. Rochefort has described its architectural appearance:

No expense was spared in the construction of Butler Hospital or in procuring able leadership for its operation. The hospital was an E-shaped structure with various dormitory rooms and recreation areas. Its size was relatively small—108 beds—in keeping with one of the principal tenets of the philosophy of moral treatment. A lovely wooded area formed its surroundings and helped to isolate it from the community. (118)

The E-shaped structure, emphasis on moral treatment and recreation areas make the real-life historical hospital disparate from Batman’s Arkham Asylum, which is geared towards absolute confinement and operates on segregation and punishment systems. Furthermore, this isolation by a “lovely wooded area” makes it, to appropriate Lovecraft terminology, a sinister thing lurking on the doorstep of suburbia. However, as Rochefort goes on to explain, the living conditions for inpatients during the early twentieth-century were hardly ideal: “negative attitudes and beliefs gave rise to harsh treatment practices. Indeed, for the feebleminded this difficult time extended well into the 1920s” (122).

From Joshi’s study of the relevant medical records, it emerges that Winfield Scott Lovecraft was struck ill in April 1893 and forced to remain in Butler Hospital until his death in July 1898; Winfield was diagnosed with general paralysis and showed various symptoms of syphilis. Joshi concludes his report on these medical records by asking what Howard Philips Lovecraft would have made of this situation:

He was two years and eight months old when his father

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3 Lovecraft’s use of the word “sanitarium” as opposed to “sanitorium” (a health retreat for wounded soldiers) follows the medical practice of John Harvey Kellogg. In 1902, Kellogg rebuilt and repurposed the burned down Western Health Reform Institution and named it Black Creek Sanitarium, the first sanitarium to exist in Northern America. See for instance Kellogg’s The Battle Creek Sanitarium System: History, Organisation, Methods (1908).

4 See for instance Karl H. Sederholm and Jeffery Andrew Weinstock’s The Age of Lovecraft (2016). Aside from David Punter’s chapter on “Lovecraft: Suspicion, Pattern Recognition, Paranoia,” there is nothing that addresses madness or the madhouse.
was committed, and seven years and eleven months old when his father died . . . One matter of importance is whether Lovecraft ever saw his father in Butler Hospital. He never says explicitly that he did not, but his late statement that ‘I was never in a hospital till 1924’ certainly suggests that he himself believed (or claimed to others) that he never did so. Recently, there has been speculation that Lovecraft did indeed visit his father in the hospital; but there is absolutely no documentary evidence of this. (Dreamer and Visionary 15)

To examine how this contextual information emerges in Lovecraft’s early fiction, note that madness is triggered by cataclysmic interactions with the cosmic unknown. There is something particularly privileged about Lovecraft’s view of mental illness, privileged in the sense that it represents for Lovecraft an elite state of knowledge. Where the Batman comics might conflate mental illness with physical disfigurement, Lovecraft has a surprising, and no less problematic, idealized view of madness. While the author is known for his racist views and adherence to notions such as the late nineteenth-century idea of social “degeneration,” his fiction tends to sympathize with those who have become mad. Lovecraft’s “mad” characters undergo constant and endless suffering perhaps mirroring his own misanthropy, potential depression, and general despair at the world.5 By reading this impulse in Lovecraft’s asylums, and with some awareness of his family history, a sense of seclusion emerges; a haven for the Weird reader as much as for the Weird character.

For example, in “Beyond the Wall of Sleep” (1919), which first appeared in the October issue of amateur journal Pine Cones, and later found its way into Weird Tales in March 1938, a mundanely non-horrible asylum is portrayed, which helps to blur the process of identifying asylum abuse. Here, the narrator is an intern in an unnamed state psychiatric institution. The narrator, who partakes in astral projection dreams, views the dreaming process in contrast to Sigmund Freud’s idea of wish fulfillment, and expresses this in a dream-like way: “[f]rom my experience, I cannot doubt but that man, when lost to terrestrial consciousness, is indeed sojourning in another and incorporeal [sic] life of far different nature from the life we know” (Lovecraft, The Thing on the Doorstep and Other Weird Tales 11). At first, these meditations on astral travelling and lucid dreaming possibilities seem altogether innocent. In fact, the narrator clearly sees the dream much in the same way as the Romantic movement did: “[s]ometimes I believe that this less material life is our truer life, and that our vain presence on the terraqueous globe is itself the secondary or merely virtual phenomenon” (“Beyond the Wall of Sleep” 11). The psychiatric intern’s self-described “youthful reverie” seems a naïve and disrespectful admission to make in what is presumably a demanding work environment; also, despite his learned and passionate reflections, the dream meandering the narrator indulges in comes across as hallucinatory (11). There is a deliberately dream-like quality to the overall emotion evinced in the imagery and descriptions that Lovecraft provides in this story, the references to “virtual phenomenon,” for instance. It is partially the “dreaminess” that provides the Gothic mood here in an otherwise mundane hospital. Lovecraft experimented further with such types of writing, drawing heavily from the influences of Irish author Lord Dunsany, and in the case of this story, Jack London’s Before Adam (1906).6 But unlike his Dunsanian tales, “Beyond the Wall of Sleep” has far more in the way of Horror: it lulls the reader into a false sense of tranquil narration only to assert its cosmic terrors far more invasively.

The narrator’s curiosity is piqued with the arrival of a new patient, “who came to the institution in the vigilant custody of four state policemen, and who was described as a highly dangerous character,” even though the newcomer, Joe Slater, a native resident of the Catskill region, provides no immediate evidence suggesting his “perilous disposition” (“Beyond the Wall of Sleep” 12). It is, however, known to the asylum staff that Slater has killed one of his “countrymen” and has been declared legally insane (12). In a typically Lovecraftian style, the murdered victim was reduced to “an unrecognisable pulp-like thing” (13). (There is something of a certain irony that the term “pulp” connotes liquid mass as well as mass entertainment, and that it occurs so frequently in Lovecraft’s descriptions of human dismemberment is striking). From the court documents that the narrator has been able to view, he is able to provide a lurid description of the seemingly harmless Slater:

This man, a vagabond, hunter and trapper, had always been strange in the eyes of his primitive associates. He had habitually slept at night beyond the ordinary time, and upon waking would often talk of unknown things in a manner so bizarre as to inspire fear even in the hearts of an unimaginative populace. Not that his form of language was at all unusual, for he never spoke in the debased patois of his environment; but the tone and tenor of his utterances were of such mysterious wildness, that none might listen without apprehension. (12)

Drawn in by this hypnotic quality of Slater’s raving, the narrator appears obsessed with this new patient. Unlike other asylum doctors in the Gothic – Dr. John Seward from Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897) for instance – the narrator takes the time to listen to Slater’s personal history. He concludes that Slater’s knowledge of “unknown things” are not merely the result of “drinking much liquor” (13). The hospital seems, so far, clinical and objective in its treatment of patients.

However, the narrator is keen to examine Slater more fully, despite what his medical superiors tell him. The narrator even doubts the charge of insanity levied against Slater:

By degrees I commenced to feel an overwhelming wonder at the mad and fantastic conceptions of Joe Slater. The man himself was pitiable inferior in mentality and language alike; but his glowing, titanic visions, though described in a barbarous and disjointed jargon,  

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6 Cfr. Lovecraft’s Randolph Carter stories: “The Statement of Randolph Carter” (1919); “The Silver Key” (1926); The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath (1926-1927), and also the dream-like prose of “Nyarlathotep” (1920) among others.
were assuredly things which only a superior or even exceptional brain could conceive. (15)
Taking this at face value, it appears that the narrator feels pity for Slater. On a closer reading, however, it becomes apparent that this is not really pity or sympathy at all, but jealousy. In fact, the narrator betrays this in trying to demonstrate his concern for Slater’s mental wellbeing, as he observes that in “the pitiful personality who crept before me lay the disordered nucleus of something beyond my comprehension; something infinitely beyond the comprehension of my more experienced but less imaginative medical and scientific colleagues” (15). What the narrator appears to covet is Slater’s ability for lucid dreaming, and he is worryingly unperturbed to learn that Slater’s nightly wanderings often encounter “a certain deadly enemy, who seemed to be a being of visible yet ethereal structure, and who did not appear to be of human shape” (15). Here, the narrator betrays himself as a megalomaniac, keeping his study of Slater private from his medical colleagues: “the head of the institution had but lately warned me in his paternal way that I was overworking; that my mind needed a rest” (16). The horror, here, comes from going against the working of the functional site rather than emerging from the institution itself. In addition, the term “functional site” refers to Foucault’s description of enclosed physical spaces where people are observed and partitioned. As Foucault writes in Discipline and Punish, “particular places were defined to correspond not only to the need to supervise, to break dangerous communications, but to create a useful space” (143-144). In this sense, the asylum is a functional site because it attempts to regulate and control madness in a purpose-built enclosure. To refer this back to the fictional portrayal of the asylum in Batman and Lovecraft, the functional site complicates the treatment and regulation of mental illness by threatening to expose the true horrors of madness.

In “Beyond the Wall of Sleep,” madness is once again shown to affect the custodians of the medical establishment itself. Owing to the narrator’s long-held belief that “human thought consists basically of atomic or molecular motion, convertible into ether waves of radiant energy like heat, light, and electricity,” he is content to justify a return to some scientific experiments that he began during his college days: “a set of transmitting and receiving instruments somewhat similar to the cumbrous devices employed in wireless telegraphy at that crude, pre-radio period” (16). While it is still possible to read the narrator’s concern for his patient as admirable, especially as he wishes to understand the dream world they experience, his motives are less forgivable when realising that this medical intern is experimenting unsupervised upon a non-consenting patient: the attendant sees them as an object to be used and controlled. The story does not explicitly acknowledge this as being morally wrong in any way, and the narrator’s “intellectual curiosity” masks his tyranny. The narrator proudly recalls how:

in my intense desire to probe into the dream life of Joe Slater, I sought these instruments again; and spent several days in repairing them for action. When they were complete once more I missed no opportunity for their trial. At each outburst of Slater’s violence, I would fit the transmitter to his forehead and the receiver to my own; constantly making adjustments for various hypothetical wave-lengths of intellectual energy. (16)

In what appears to be a respectable psychiatric institution, one whose only use of a straitjacket is mentioned when Slater “burst forth into a frenzy,” the secret ill-treatment of patients goes on behind locked doors (14). Here, Lovecraft is focused on depicting the sinister and hidden machinations of the asylum rather than the more explicit violence of straitjackets and physical abuse.

In a brief but worrying disclaimer, the narrator confesses that, “[a]s I look back across the years I realise how unreal it seems; and sometimes half wonder if old Dr. Fenton was not right when he charged it all to my excited imagination” (16). As it turns out, Dr. Fenton has prescribed his young trainee “a nerve-powder and arranged for the half-year’s vacation” (16). Clearly, the narrator is in denial about the extent to which his actions are causing harm to others. It is especially difficult to calmly read his later assertion that “despite the excellent care he had received, Joe Slater was unmistakably dying . . . perhaps the turmoil in his brain had grown too acute for his rather sluggish physique” (17; emphasis added). Given the administration of the “radio” being placed against his head night after night, Slater’s death is predictable. Though the narrator’s experiments do afford him with some astral pathways and “the stupendous spectacle of ultimate beauty” he is later haunted by the spirit-possessed form of Slater who warns him of the coming galactical end of time, although Slater’s doppelgänger does, rather generously, refer to him as “my friend in the cosmos” (17, 19). “Beyond the Wall of Sleep” is a revealing story about asylum abuse, how it plays on notions of trust, and how things on the surface are not always as they appear. While the asylum as an institution provides sanctuary, the excessive ambition of individual practitioners is shown to be at fault. Unlike the Batman texts, it is madness and not the madhouse that appears horrific. It is equally telling that the medical authority of Dr. Fenton reclaims the hospital; trust in the institution is restored. This is a key difference between the events of Living Hell, where the head of Arkham Asylum encourages patient abuse.

Meanwhile, Lovecraft’s New England is haunted by its past just as Gothic writing is more generally. As Chris Baldick writes in the introduction to The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales (2009), one of the co-ordinates of the Gothic effect is the sense of being haunted by the past:

Some attraction to the imagined vitality of past ages is indeed always there in Gothic, but this appeal consists principally in the imaginative freedoms and symbolic possibilities of discarded folk beliefs, not in any faith actually attached to them. When Gothic fiction has employed the ghostly apparitions and omens of archaic lore . . . it has at the same time placed them under strong suspicion as part of a cruelly repressive and deluded past. There is often a kind of homeopathic principle at work here, in the way that Gothic writers have borrowed the fables and nightmares of a past age in order to repudiate their authority. (xiii-xiv)

To demonstrate this, it is worth singling out some of the criticism that deals with Lovecraft’s geography alongside his first named
The opening of “The Thing on the Doorstep” announces its location amidst the confession of a crime: “At first I shall be called a madman – madder than the man I shot in his cell at the Arkham Sanitarium” (341). In addition to the plethora of madness found in such a sentence, the asylum is merely there in passing. Edward Derby, a once bohemian arts student at Miskatonic, turns his scholarly pursuits towards the occult and marries Innsmouth resident Asenath Waite, “dark, smallish, and very good-looking except for overprotuberant eyes; but something in her expression alienated extremely sensitive people” (344). For those of Lovecraft’s readers who are familiar with “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” (1931), Asenath’s hometown should inspire a Lovecraftian geographical or architectural detail about the first of his madhouses that he names. Lovecraft’s asylums, in a way, remain unlocatable, outside of two worlds: his own, and the cosmic outside of his creations; madness seems excluded.

The latter does include the estimated location of Arkham Sanitarium. A recent attempt made by fans to map Lovecraft’s Arkham and to pinpoint particular story locations, and the results of these offer modern and contemporary readers of Lovecraft a visual aid to fictional geography: where elements of the real are interwoven with the Weird. Although Lovecraft made it clear that his hometown of Providence was his favourite of all New England towns, he made it equally clear that Marblehead, Massachusetts was a close second” (45). Marblehead is widely believed to be the setting of Kingsport in Lovecraft’s fiction, and southeast of this town lies Arkham. There have been recent attempts made by fans to map Lovecraft’s Arkham and to pinpoint particular story locations, and the results of these offer modern and contemporary readers of Lovecraft a visual aid to fictional geography: where elements of the real

are interwoven with the Weird. In the vast majority of these fan-designed maps, however, the Arkham Sanitarium is either surprisingly absent or situated outside the city. This may be a result of Lovecraft’s unwillingness to offer literary directions. In “The Thing on the Doorstep” (1933), published in Weird Tales on January 1937, Lovecraft painstakingly describes the history of Arkham, its various localities, the nearby Miskatonic University, and the dark roads to hideous Innsmouth. The Sanitarium, on the other hand, only appears when a character meets too many cosmic terrors. Lovecraft seems especially disinterested in providing any geographical or architectural detail about the first of his madhouses that he names. Lovecraft’s asylums, in a way, remain unlocatable, outside of two worlds: his own, and the cosmic outside of his creations; madness seems excluded.

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The patient rose to greet me, extending his hand with a polite smile; but I saw in an instant that he bore the strangely energised personality which had seemed so foreign to his own nature—the competent personality I had once vowed was the intruding soul of his wife. There was the same blazing vision—so like Asenath’s and old Ephraim’s—and the same firm mouth; and when he spoke I could sense the same grim, pervasive irony in his voice – the deep irony so redolent of potential evil. (360) The blurring of the recognizably human is often central in Lovecraft’s writing, and it is the more forcefully apparent in his accounts of psychic possession. What should be realized about his development of Arkham Sanitarium, however, and it is notable that this is his first named asylum, is that Arkham is haunted by its past; its figures, territories, and foreign invaders. Despite this, the authority of the hospital remains uncompromised: Arkham Sanitarium offers respite to the harrowing and haunting effects of Upton’s descent into madness.

Lovecraft’s madhouses remain places of sanctuary. They are not without the guilt of institutional abuse, nor are they safeguards against the admittance of monsters. But the madness contained in these hospitals is very unlike the madness found in the later Lovecraftian imaginary of twenty-first century popular culture. An in-progress game currently under development by the H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society is entitled “The Arkham Sanitarium Sanity Assessment” (ASSAK), which apparently, began “as an amusing little quiz on our old website, and . . . has grown into something insanely complicated with a board game, card game and more” (“Arkham Sanitarium Sanity Assessment Page 2017”). It will be interesting to see how this game, as its title implies, deals with the topic of psychiatric assessment. Meanwhile, alongside the intertextual relocation of Arkham is the accompaniment of a commodity culture that sells toys and playsets.
of the Batman-inspired Arkham Asylum. While, for example, no official Lego product for Lovecraft's cosmic horrors yet exists, (although plenty of unofficial ideas are available online), there have been several renditions of Lego Batman Arkham Asylum sets, usually for ages twelve and upward. The 2017 edition, inspired by the animated film Lego Batman (2017), is replete with model syringes, a security scanner, a Panopticon five-story lookout tower, and police car—there is an extent to which the inclusion of these tools reinforce stereotypical assumptions about the purpose of the asylum, and the relationship between staff and patient is introduced to children as a power dynamic, rather than a therapeutic one. Here, the rogues’ gallery mini-figures are adorned with orange jumpsuuits and belts, an accessory, which, in a real-life hospital, would constitute a literal risk. The playset clearly resembles a prison, a complaint that has been levied against the D. C. franchise’s portrayal of mental hospitals before, but it also reiterates the social stigma that mental illness is rooted in notions of criminality: there is a conflation between mental illness and criminal wrongdoing that implies madness as a prerequisite for villainy.8

There is a curious difference in the fictional portrayals of asylums that this essay has examined: on the one hand, Lovecraft’s sanitariums are places of sanctuary, even though they feature torture and monstrous transformations. On the other hand, the authority of these institutions is always inviolable. In the Batman texts, which demonstrate far more gruesome scenes of the secure ward, Arkham Asylum’s holding power is constantly undermined and stated unfavorably: the asylum is built and operates on corruption. While the patients of Arkham Asylum frequently escape or take over the institution (as in Rocksteady’s Arkham Asylum), the administrators are also implicated by grisly madness. In Living Hell, it is revealed that prior to becoming the manor house of Amadeus Arkham, it was an ancient institution called the “Gotham House of Madness and Ill Humors.” In this representation, occultist Jason Blood performs violent lobotomies on patients strapped to tables, stating that “our war on madness is fought in the head” (“Whole in the Head” n. p.). While the Batman stories are generally considered to take place in a speculative historical timeline, there is a slight anachronism here as these events of Living Hell allegedly take place in the pre-1900s. In actuality, leucotomy (lobotomy) was developed by Portuguese neurologist Egas Moniz in the 1930s, However, this satire is itself quite stigmatizing as it presumes a shared understanding that the asylum is an unpleasant place where bad things are likely to occur. While there are many debates surrounding the effectiveness of electroconvulsive therapy, not to mention the ethical aspects to this treatment, A Serious Place on Serious Earth perpetuates the gloominess of the secure ward to the detriment of wider philosophical engagement, which it otherwise achieves elsewhere in its portrayal of the Joker’s madness and even Batman’s.

The primary intertextual focus on Arkham Asylum in Batman appears to be linked to the idea of a “spooky” atmosphere, something not really apparent in Lovecraft’s Weird tales featuring the mental hospital. In Arkham Asylum: A Serious Place on Serious Earth, Morrison explains that:

The story’s themes were inspired by Lewis Carroll, quantum physics, Jung and Crowley, its visual style by surrealism, Eastern European creepiness, Cocteau, Artaud, Svankmajer, the Brothers Quay, etc. I wanted to approach Batman from the point of view of the dreamlike, emotional and irrational hemisphere, as a response to the very literal ‘realistic’ ‘left-brain’ treatment of superheroes which was in vogue at the time. (n. p.)

These hallucinatory dreamlike visuals are clearly observable in the text, while Crowley and Jung feature briefly as characters. Lovecraft, on the other hand, muted the atmosphere of his hospitals: his fictions are already replete enough with cosmic horrors. In his novella, The Case of Charles Dexter Ward (1927), for instance, he features “a private hospital for the insane near Providence, Rhode Island” (90). Yet, despite these almost non-existent descriptions of the hospital, Arkham Asylum in popular culture invokes the Batman version. Arguably, Lovecraft is misremembered in modern and contemporary reimaginings of the asylum. His hospitals, which lack significant description about their physical environment, are assumed to be grim and foreboding spaces as opposed to the sanctuary which keeps cosmic horrors at bay.

Part of the reason for this misremembering may be that the Batman comics and video games depict Arkham Asylum as based on the external appearance of Danvers State Hospital, Massachusetts, rather than the Butler-Hospital, Rhode Island. Danvers State Hospital is an iconic site in horror fiction, as it is the setting for the 2001 film Session 9, amongst other productions. Tellingly, Danvers (and not Arkham Sanitarium or another fictional hospital) is passingly mentioned by name in two of Lovecraft’s fictions. In “Pickman’s Model” (1926), the narrator explains how he “would listen for hours like a schoolboy to art theories and philosophical speculations wild enough to qualify him for the Danvers asylum” , associating madness as a kind of esoteric knowledge (80). Similarly, in “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” (1931), the narrator is informed of a citizen “who went crazy and is out at Danvers now” (274). These references to existing hospitals serve a purpose in Lovecraft’s writing. As Joshi explains, Lovecraft’s use of the real “heightens the weird by contrast” (The Weird Tale 193). It is telling that later fictional manifestations of Arkham Asylum are less focused on the real and instead concerned with a foreboding and haunting atmosphere of dark hospital spaces. This change likely reflects a growing cultural awareness of the Western history of mental health treatment and an increased public knowledge about specific psychopathologies. The fact that the asylum is shown to be an anarchistic prison throughout the Batman texts points to a lack of understanding,
or willful ignorance), in the accumulation of this knowledge: mental illness is not so easily understood, and the invocation of imagined care practices offers an alternative narrative to the uncertainty of accommodating difference and alterity. The willful misremembering of asylum memory that occurs throughout popular culture owes much to the gothicizing of real-life institutions. In reviewing these notions, the exploitation of mental illness and the social exclusion of “madness” can be more thoroughly understood and contextualized. In Lovecraft’s asylums, Horror is not immediately associated with the hospital space itself. Readers of Lovecraft’s Weird asylum are encouraged to hear and take seriously the warnings of his mad narrators; they are inclined to see past the limitations of madness and delight in the perils of researching forbidden ideas. This in itself is a problematic depiction of mental illness, as it gloses and trivializes the experience of going “mad.”

The Lovecraftian Arkham Asylum demonstrates little interest in the actual workings of such institutions. On the other hand, the Batman Arkham Asylum revels in the most abject occasions of institutional abuse. While both portrayals are potentially adding to the stigma surrounding discussions of mental illness, there is a wider question about why the legacy of Lovecraft’s Arkham Asylum retains such a haunting aura. Part of this is that the Batman texts appear to misread Lovecraft’s stories, forming the asylum in an absolute image that encompasses various tropes of the Weird. Alternatively, this misremembering of the source material adds to the appeal of Lovecraft in popular culture: the presence of Arkham Asylum makes us question what has really improved historically in the treatment and accommodation of mental illness.

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Animating the Unnameable: The Depiction of Cthulhu in Animated Shows

by Valentino Paccosi

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Abstract
The beginning of the twenty-first century has witnessed the rise in popularity of Cthulhu, the most well-known among H. P. Lovecraft’s creations. However, it seems that Cthulhu is undergoing a process of naturalization that is drastically reducing his “threat” level. His presence on items of merchandizing and in animated television shows appears to corroborate the theories of Fred Botting explaining how monsters are destined to be assimilated by the process of normalization. Building on Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s theory that the monster “always escapes,” this article demonstrates that Cthulhu partially escapes normalization. While Botting sees the re-readings of monsters as proof of their normalization, for Cohen this demonstrates how the monster maintains its otherness even in different contexts. With a close analysis of selected episodes from the animated television shows The Real Ghostbusters (1986-1991), Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated (2010-2013), and South Park (1997-present), I demonstrate how the apparent normalization of Cthulhu is a tool used by interpretive communities to produce a versatile and ready-to-use version of the monster. This specific version of Cthulhu has the function of making this unnameable monster easier to understand for the viewers and to use for the shows’ creators, without completely erasing the more complex aspects of Cthulhu’s monstrousness.

Keywords
Lovecraft; Cthulhu; animation; television shows; monstrousness; normalization

The monsters of H. P. Lovecraft’s fictions are the embodiment of the unnameable, that which cannot be described or even comprehended by our human minds as too distant from our perception of reality. Yet the beginning of the twenty-first century has witnessed the rise in popularity of Cthulhu, the most well-known of Lovecraft’s creations. Despite Cthulhu being an unnameable (but, paradoxically, not un-named) monster, his octopoid likeness has been reproduced over and over. Not only has Cthulhu appeared on T-shirts, mugs, vinyl figures and other pieces of merchandise, but he has become the face of Lovecraft’s fiction. Two of the most popular collections of Lovecraft’s works on the market, Necronomicon: The Best Weird Tales of H.P. Lovecraft (2008), edited by Stephen Jones, and The Complete Cthulhu Mythos Tales (2016), edited by S.T. Joshi, present Cthulhu on their cover. The monster has also appeared in many roleplaying and board games, where he is often represented by plastic figurines and has been taxonomized in rule books. He also briefly appears at the end of the 2018 video game Call of Cthulhu. Moreover, during the 2016 United States presidential elections Cthulhu acquired a political meaning, becoming a recurring meme: “Why vote for the lesser evil? Vote Cthulhu!.” The Twitter account “Cthulhu for America” is also very active and has a huge number of followers.

Despite Cthulhu’s popularity, filmmakers seem to be reticent about presenting the monster on the big screen. Cthulhu briefly appears as a stop-motion animated puppet at the end of The Call of Cthulhu (2005), an independent production adapting the novella of the same name into a silent film. However, no major film studio has portrayed Cthulhu on the screen, nor are there any plans to adapt Lovecraft’s “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928). Instead, the monster has been portrayed in several animated television shows. Animation holds an advantage over film when creating fantastic worlds and the depicting monsters, as these productions are less likely to face the same practical difficulties and restraints a film production may have. In this article I focus on the analysis of animated television shows from different decades and with different target audiences, taking into consideration selected episodes from the television shows The Real Ghostbusters (1986-1991), Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated (2010-2013) and South Park (1997-present).

It seems that Cthulhu, not unlike other famous monsters such as Dracula and Frankenstein’s Creature, is undergoing a process of naturalization that is drastically reducing his threat level. His presence on items of merchandising and in animated television shows appears to corroborate the theories of Fred Botting regarding the contemporary use of monsters. Botting focuses his
study on Frankenstein’s Creature and concludes that the monster is destined to be assimilated by the process of naturalization. Basing his study on Roland Barthes’s concepts of myth elaborated in the essay “Myth Today,” Botting affirms that “the threatening Other is incorporated within safe and recognizable limits” (Botting 193). The monster ceases to represent our fears and is re-introduced into parodic narratives that defuses the monster’s destructive power. The monster is then contained, and its monstrosity becomes a safe element that we can play with. In the words of Barthes: “The Other becomes a pure object, a spectacle, a clown. Relegated to the confines of humanity, he no longer threatens the security of the home” (Mythologies 180). The monster is emptied of all its threatening elements and becomes a character the public can laugh at. The examples presented by Botting regarding the normalization of the Creature confirm this theory: the film Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein (1948), together with countless television shows such as The Munsters (1964-1966) and The Addams Family (1964-1966), have significantly exploited the monster as a comedic element.

However, my aim is to demonstrate that Cthulhu partially escapes the normalization described by Botting, instead following some of the theses elaborated by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. What Cohen names “Thesis II: The Monster Always Escapes,” fits perfectly with Cthulhu. Cohen highlights how the monster, after bringing havoc, vanishes only to reappear later (4). Cthulhu resonates with this description as he is, from his first appearance, a recurring threat that, cyclically, awakens and avoids defeat going back to sleep underneath the sea. Moreover, Cohen points out how the monster returns carrying different meanings: “each time to be read against contemporary social movements or a specific, determining event” (5). While Botting sees the re-readings of the Creature as proof of its naturalization, for Cohen this demonstrates how the monster maintains its otherness even in different contexts. While the appearance of Cthulhu in animated television shows seem to confirm that the monster can fit into multiple categories, in this case that of a television show formula and genre, I will demonstrate how these texts instead reaffirm Cthulhu’s monstrosity.

Even more poignant for an unnameable monster like Cthulhu is Cohen’s “Thesis III: The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis,” which explains that the monster escapes as it refuses easy categorization (6). Monsters, Cohen comments, “are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration” (6). This thesis goes against any attempt at naturalizing the monstrous body, as such a process involves fitting the monster inside well-determined categories. Cthulhu can maintain his unnameable nature, despite being locked inside the limits of a television show, as this process is done by members of the interpretive community aware of his problematic nature. In so doing, the monster is stripped of his most problematic meanings and is simplified for a mainstream audience. Moreover, Cthulhu is often laughed at, becoming the focal point of various parodies. All the television shows taken into consideration in this article contain some degree of parody, another fundamental aspect that proves Cthulhu is being celebrated and not just normalized. Linda Hutcheon explains that the transgression of literary and social norms found in popular media are “legalized by authority,” as the agents behind the parody are people that care about the parodied material (81). The “authorities” in question for the discussed shows are the interpretive communities familiar with Cthulhu and Lovecraft’s fiction. Thus, the laugh directed at Cthulhu is not destructive, but celebratory, as it presents the monster in a positive way, without eliding his core elements. I demonstrate how the unnameable nature of Cthulhu is never totally absent from the discussed texts, as this characteristic is a distinguishing element that differentiates Cthulhu from other monsters.

A partial normalization of Cthulhu may be necessary to make the monster more accessible to a larger audience. This process has many elements in common with that suggested by Chloé Germaine Buckley regarding the production of Gothic texts aimed at children. The episodes of The Real Ghostbusters and Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated have the function of offering a less complex, but not too different, version of Cthulhu, thus offering to the young audience a basic knowledge of the monster (Germaine Buckley 157). This provides an invitation into the interpretive community, as the young viewers may be intrigued by the themes of said animated shows and, later on, read Lovecraft’s fictions and other Weird texts. Even South Park, despite being a show aimed at an adult audience, maintains some sort of faithfulness to the Lovecraftian texts, providing the necessary information about Cthulhu for those in the audience who are not familiar with the monster. Through a close analysis of the three aforementioned television shows I will demonstrate how the apparent normalization of Cthulhu is a tool used by interpretive communities to produce a versatile and ready-to-use version of the monster that still presents its key elements. This specific version of Cthulhu has the function of making this unnameable monster easier to understand for the viewers and to use for the shows’ creators, without completely erasing the more complex aspects of Cthulhu’s monstrosity.

The Origins of Cthulhu: “The Call of Cthulhu” and the Cthulhu Myths

Before looking at the animated television shows featuring Cthulhu, I will analyze the text where he appears for the first time: “The Call of Cthulhu.” In this short story, written by Lovecraft and published in 1928 in the magazine Weird Tales, the monster is presented as the Thing-That-Should-Not-Be: Cthulhu is the embodiment of the unnameable, that which cannot be understood nor described as it defies the general rules of nature. In “The Call of Cthulhu,” the monster is mostly described indirectly, as he is depicted in a bas-relief and as an idol. The description of the former reads:

If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing. A pulpy, tentacled head surmounted a grotesque and scaly body with rudimentary wings; but it was the general outline of the whole which made it most shockingly frightful.

(Lovecraft 357, emphasis in original)

This description is a typical example of Lovecraft’s style, which can be defined using the concept of the “writerly” expressed by...
Barthes in *S/Z*. For Barthes, a writerly text is one in which the text needs to be actively produced by the reader. Those texts ask the reader to “write” the text while reading it, filling the narrative gaps (*S/Z* 4). The description of Cthulhu’s bas-relief is a good example of Lovecraft’s writerly passages: while the text is presented as describing the appearance of the monster, it is the reader’s task to figure out the meaning of what the text is only suggesting. In this passage, as in many others in Lovecraft’s fiction, the narrator suffers a language failure when talking about the Thing-That-Should-Not-Be. As Cthulhu does not belong to our world and reality, human language does not have the means for describing the monster. Thus, the narrator is forced to produce fragmented and “writerly” descriptions which are to be decoded by the readers.

Halfway through the short story it is revealed that Cthulhu is one of the Old Ones, a race of beings who have a completely different conception of space and time. This description of Cthulhu as one of the Old Ones is another element that adds to the alien nature of the monster: not only is his appearance confusing and disorienting, but his existence also causes a radical destruction of any anthropocentric vision of the universe. Thus, Cthulhu is the Thing-That-Should-Not-Be not only regarding his physical appearance, but also his ontological existence, as he is the absolute negation of all that we as human beings know and experience. Therefore, when characters encounter Cthulhu they are incapable of rationally processing this traumatic event and very often experience a loss of sanity, which is often reproduced in the language used by Lovecraft in his texts.

On the other hand, the sequence describing the awakening of Cthulhu presents some elements which are partially at odds with the writerly appearance of Lovecraft’s monsters. Here the extra-dimensional creature, in this case Cthulhu, not only has a physical form, but the readers are also able to witness its rampage: After vigintillions of years great Cthulhu was loose again, and ravening for delight . . . Three men were swept up by the flabby claws before anybody turned . . . So only Briden and Johansen reached the boat, and pulled desperately for the Alert as the mountainous monstrosity flopped down the slimy stones and hesitated floundering at the edge of the water . . . the titan Thing from the stars slavered and gibbered like Polypheme cursing the fleeing ship of Odysseus. Then, bolder than the storied Cyclops, great Cthulhu slid greasily into the water and began to pursue with vast wave-raising strokes of cosmic potency. (Lovecraft 377)

It is almost impossible while reading these words to avoid thinking about other giant monsters such as Godzilla or King Kong rampaging through the cities and bringing havoc. Here Lovecraft loses the subtlety with which he described Cthulhu in the previous examples, as the sentence “Cthulhu was . . . ravening for delight” implies a personification of the feelings and actions of the monster. This sentence gives readers the impression that Cthulhu is moved by evil purposes, instead of being beyond the human ideas of good and evil. Moreover, the comparison with Polyphemus develops further the idea of the monster as an anthropomorphic figure, as the Cyclops is a giant man with one eye. Nevertheless, this simile not only reintroduces a mythic dimension to the figure of Cthulhu, but also provides another indirect description of the monster. Moreover, despite the physical nature of this description, the body of Cthulhu is never described. Instead, the monster’s rampage is narrated using verbs and adverbs describing his actions. Thus, despite this passage being a slight departure from Lovecraft’s description of The-Thing-That-Should-Not-Be, the writerly nature of Cthulhu is not completely lost.

Nevertheless, Cthulhu, despite being an unnameable horror, has a precise form and shape, a characteristic that only a small number of Lovecraft’s creatures possess. In the second chapter of “The Call of Cthulhu,” the idol representing the monster is described with a list of expressionistic adjectives: “It represented a monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers, a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws on hind and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind” (Lovecraft 362). Here the text presents a different strategy: the reader is given many detailed elements that, when put together, result in a figure that has a well-defined shape but is still profoundly alien. This kind of description is in line with what Graham Harman defines as “literary cubism,” which consist of describing a monster through the juxtaposition of minute details which are unrelated to each other (133). Moreover, this is not a direct representation of Cthulhu, but of his idol, which is just an image of the monster. Cthulhu is then quite unique among Lovecraft’s creatures, as he is writerly and unnameable, but at the same time has also a defined aspect. Cthulhu is the only truly recognizable monster in Lovecraft’s fiction, and this element has transformed him in a symbol of the author’s fiction and has given many interpretive communities a visually defined element to play with.

The second most influential reading of Cthulhu is a result of the fictions of August Derleth, a close friend of Lovecraft who, after his death, together with Donald Wandrei, founded Arkham House to publish Lovecraft’s works and his own. Derleth decided to use Cthulhu in his own short stories, even using the monster’s name in the titles of two of his most popular anthologies, *The Mask of Cthulhu* (1958) and *The Trail of Cthulhu* (1962). These anthologies, especially the latter, are extremely important regarding the development of the second reading of Cthulhu, the Extradimensional Evil. It would be inaccurate to say that Derleth is solely responsible for the development of this reading: he was a member of a very active interpretive community, composed of friends and disciples of Lovecraft that used elements of the author’s works in their own fictions. Nevertheless, without Derleth’s publications Lovecraft’s work would probably not be as popular as it is today. Moreover, Cthulhu would also be a very different kind of monster. In Derleth’s mythos cycle, the monster is the Extradimensional Evil: an otherness whose only goal is to regain his full strength and destroy our reality.

In the short essay titled “A Note on the Cthulhu Mythos,” published at the end of *The Trail of Cthulhu*, Derleth describes how at the centre of the mythos there is a battle of good versus evil which is very similar to that of the Christian religion (445). While Lovecraft’s creatures are totally alien and do not possess any human conception of good or evil, Derleth gets rid of this...
moral ambiguity and defines the monsters of his fictions as pure evil. Derleth’s fiction also takes one of the recurring tropes of Lovecraft’s fiction, the list of odd and unpronounceable names of reality-defying beings and turns it into another element which brings the mythos closer to epic narratives. As this list is repeated with little or no variations throughout Derleth’s fictions, and short descriptions such as “Great Cthulhu, the Water-Dweller; Yog-Sothoth, the All-in-One and One-in-All; Ithaqua, the Wind-waker” become something not dissimilar to the epiteths of the gods of the Iliad and Odyssey (240). Evidently, Derleth attempts to include Cthulhu and the other extradimensional beings created by Lovecraft within a mythical frame, to create a modern Weird epic. Consequently, Cthulhu himself becomes something very different from the Thing-That-Should-Not-Be. He is not something that belongs to our reality, but this Extradimensional Evil has now a well-defined agenda: the destruction of humankind. In “The Call of Cthulhu” Cthulhu’s goal is obscure and the destruction of humankind is totally incidental, as the monster is mostly described as being beyond any concept of morality. Instead, in Derleth’s The Trail of Cthulhu, Cthulhu is an evil god of destruction, his alien body being the only element differentiating him from the Greek and Norse gods, or from the Christian Satan.

Positioning Cthulhu, the most recognizable among the unnameable Lovecraftian creatures, as the focal point of this modern epic had the consequence of reducing the monster’s “writerly” qualities. Nevertheless, the most radical change in Derleth’s works is that the encounter with Cthulhu no longer causes a loss of sanity due to his unnameable nature. This change is very subtle and it is necessary to look at the endings of “The Call of Cthulhu” and “The Black Island,” which concludes the anthology The Trail of Cthulhu, in order to understand its importance. Both short stories have a very similar outcome: Cthulhu is temporarily destroyed and put back to sleep in R’lyeh, waiting for his final awakening. A closer look at how the protagonists of the two short stories act before and after their encounter with Cthulhu reveals a radical difference between the two texts. In “The Call of Cthulhu” the sailor Johansen is the only one to survive the sudden appearance of Cthulhu. Nevertheless, the narrator does not celebrate the man as a hero, but presents him as another victim, haunted by the pure horror of the encounter. Johansen’s mind is compromised by the sight of Cthulhu and the narrator suggests that his death, which happened mysteriously after his return, may have been a relief. In Derleth’s “The Black Island” the protagonists are actively looking for the island of R’lyeh and they perfectly know how to deal with Cthulhu: they carefully plan ahead their mission, placing explosives on the island and, in the end, they even manage to destroy the monster with an atomic bomb. The awakening of the creature, despite being a frightening event, does not impede their actions, nor have any deep consequence on their psyche. These characters, opposite to the ones in Lovecraft’s fictions, seem to be able to endure the sight of extra-dimensional beings. This is because Derleth’s Cthulhu and the other Ancient Ones, while being adapted into an epic narrative, have partially lost their function as reality-defying creatures. All the changes employed by Derleth in his mythos not only have transformed Lovecraft’s lore into a sort of Horror/Fantasy epic but have also changed the horror they depict into that of absolute evil, which is very similar to that of Christian religion. The horror of Lovecraft’s fictions is instead that of what cannot be comprehended, and it is completely devoid of any moral connotation. Thus, while the Extradimensional Evil of the mythos can be battled by the good heroes, the Thing-That-Should-Not-Be of Lovecraft’s fictions not only cannot be stopped, but it cannot even be faced as radically alien for humankind.

Cthulhu in animated television shows: the normalization of a monster?

Derleth’s Cthulhu Mythos had the important role of easing Cthulhu into popular fiction, but also started a further transformation in the life cycle of the monster. With Derleth, Cthulhu becomes the Extradimensional Evil, a malevolent god from another dimension. However, from the 1980s onward, Cthulhu becomes less and less unnameable. This process accelerates from the beginning of the twenty-first century, thanks to his appearance in popular media such as cartoons, graphic novels, and roleplaying games. Cthulhu is currently not nearly as universally recognizable as, for example, the Universal Studio monsters and his audience is still a relatively niche one. Nevertheless, Cthulhu has acquired a well-defined appearance and attributes in popular culture, slowly becoming the Octopoid Monster. Cthulhu’s unnameable shape has instead crystallized in that of a bipedal dragon with an octopus head surrounded by writhing tentacles. The Octopoid Monster tends to have a solid and material body that can interact with our world, making Cthulhu a giant monster that happens to come from a sunken city in the remoteness of the ocean. Moreover, opposite to the previous reading, which saw Cthulhu as the Extradimensional Evil, the Octopoid Monster is, by default, neutral. With this adjective I want to highlight how the monster can now be evil (and most of the time is) but also cynical, majestic, benevolent, or even goofy.

The transformation of Cthulhu into the Octopoid Monster suggests a progressive normalization of the monster as proposed by Botting. However, through the analysis of selected episodes of The Real Ghostbusters (1986-1991), Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated (2010-2013), and South Park (1997-present) featuring Cthulhu, I will demonstrate that Cthulhu cannot be completely normalized. Despite being partially emptied of his monstrousness, Cthulhu is a monster that always escapes and continues to subtly escape any categorization, as Cohen proposes in his study.

Before proceeding with the analysis of the animated television shows it is necessary to highlight the difference among the target audiences of said shows. The Real Ghostbusters, even though it continues the adventures of the characters from the PG-rated film Ghostbusters (1984), is aimed at a young audience. It was originally broadcast on the United States channel ABC, usually together with other children-friendly shows. Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated was broadcast on Cartoon Network and it is again a show targeting a young audience. However, as the series is a reboot of the 1969 cartoon Scooby-Doo, Where
Are You?, the adult audience already familiar with the franchise may be drawn to the new show for nostalgic reasons. South Park, is instead specifically targeting an adult audience, as with all the other animated television shows broadcast on Comedy Central. Moreover, even the show’s humorous opening disclaimer addresses the adult nature of its content: “The following program contains coarse language and due to its content it should not be viewed by anyone.”

**Case Study 1: The Real Ghostbusters**

The “The Collect Call of Cathulu” [sic] episode of the television show The Real Ghostbusters, broadcast in 1987, is one of the first animated television shows to feature Lovecraft’s monster. The 1980s was a decade in which a few films inspired by Lovecraft’s fictions were released in cinemas: among those, Re-Animator (1985), From Beyond (1986), and The Unnamable (1988). While none of these films depict Cthulhu, the animated show The Real Ghostbusters decided to use Cthulhu as the focal point of an episode.

Cthulhu’s appearance in the episode is quite faithful to that of the idol described in Lovecraft’s “The Call of Cthulhu,” despite having more tentacles attached to his body and being purplish instead of the more conventional green. While Lovecraft is never mentioned, many elements of his fictions, such as the Necronomicon—the book of forbidden lore and the monstrous Shoggoth—are featured in the episode; moreover, a few characters are named after Lovecraftian authors such as Derleth and Clark Ashton Smith, so that the whole episode becomes a homage to Lovecraft and the mythos.

Peter Venkman, one of the Ghostbusters, describes Cthulhu in one of his humorous remarks to his colleagues: “Anything that looks like Godzilla wearing an octopus hat shouldn’t be hard to find.” At first this description seems to only ridicule Cthulhu, transforming him into a travesty of another iconic monster. However, this humorous description is interesting as it uses a well-known monster, Godzilla, to introduce the more obscure Cthulhu. In 1987, when “The Call of Cathulu” was broadcast, Godzilla was a famous monster among Western viewers. Not only had many films depicting the giant lizard been exported from Japan, but the American animation studio Hanna-Barbera had produced the animated show Godzilla (1978-1980). In the animated series the monster was visually similar to the film counterpart. However, in the cartoon Godzilla fights against other monsters to save humankind. This is not dissimilar to the monster’s role in films: while in Godzilla (1954) the giant lizard is a serious threat for the city of Tokyo, in Destroy All Monsters (1968) Godzilla is already fighting other monsters to save humanity. The association of Cthulhu to Godzilla then partially normalizes the former, transforming it into a well-recognizable and mostly-friendly giant monster. However, this does not mean that in The Real Ghostbusters’ episode Cthulhu does not constitute a threat.

Although Cthulhu’s appearance in The Real Ghostbusters does not have the same reality-shattering effect it has in Lovecraft’s short story, there are some elements of the episode that suggest Cthulhu is still far from being read as the Octopoid Monster. The Ghostbusters’ standard procedure for dealing with ghostly creatures is to weaken them with the rays of their proton packs, then push them into a ghost trap which contains them for an unlimited period of time. However, the Ghostbusters are not capable of capturing Cthulhu like the other monsters of the show, as their proton packs are not strong enough to entrap the monster. Instead, they must wait for the chance of a lightning bolt to strike Cthulhu, then hit him with their rays. The Ghostbusters manage to do so, but they do not get to trap the monster: Cthulhu melts in a pile of goo, which then ascends to the darkened sky, disappearing. This unusual procedure makes Cthulhu stand out among the creatures fought by the Ghostbusters: despite being dealt with in the usual twenty-minute time frame of an episode, Cthulhu cannot be trapped and secured forever and, as in Lovecraft’s “The Call of Cthulhu,” he is only temporarily stopped and not completely defeated. As Cohen notices, “the monster always escapes” (4). It is necessary to point out that even Godzilla, the monster Cthulhu is compared to in this episode, is a monster that always escapes. The giant lizard may have been partially normalized but, as Cthulhu, is never defeated and is ready to re-emerge from the depth of the ocean, not unlike Lovecraft’s octopoid monster.

In this text, Cthulhu resists a complete normalization as the monster maintains a level of otherness. This Cthulhu cannot be the Thing-That-Should-Not-Be as he has lost his “writerly” element. However, in “The Collect Call of Cathulu,” the monster’s reading is closer to that of the Extradimensional Evil than that of the Octopoid Monster, as it is strongly influenced by the elements of Derleth’s Cthulhu Mythos. The episode becomes a tale of the mythos adapted for a children’s show, capable of presenting some unique elements for its young viewers, without deviating too much from the reassuring formula of the show. Germaine Buckley explains how the animated films Frankenweenie (2012) and ParaNorman (2012) heavily reference previous texts; however, the audience’s enjoyment of the films is not based on their knowledge of said “canonical” texts. Instead, the two animated films teach viewers about Gothic tropes and promote genre literacy (Germaine Buckley 157). “The Collect Call of Cathulu” does the same for the Lovecraftian and Cthulhu: it unassumingly introduces the monster into the formula of the animated television show without damaging it, while giving the audience important information about Cthulhu. The episode shows how the grimoire called the Necronomicon is used to awaken Cthulhu; the monster emerges from the sea as in Lovecraft’s tale and even defies some rules of the television shows (Cthulhu cannot be hit by the proton packs nor trapped by ghost traps). All these elements do not alienate the young viewers’ attention, as the episode is in line with the other The Real Ghostbusters’ episodes. Nevertheless, “The Collect Call of Cathulu” introduces Cthulhu and his key elements to a new audience, without destroying Cthulhu’s unnameable nature. Cthulhu becomes undoubtedly the monster of the week in the television show, but the references to the mythos scattered through the episode make Cthulhu stand aside from the other monsters faced by the Ghostbusters. Cthulhu may be enclosed into a television show, but he nevertheless manages to escape unlike
In 2010 Cthulhu was featured in the *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated* episode titled “The Shrieking Madness,” in which the literary creation of the fictional author H. P. Hatecraft, a monster called Char Gar Gothakon, is terrorizing a university campus. The name of the fictional author is an obvious reference to Lovecraft and the monster to Cthulhu. Moreover, the epithet of the Cthulhu-like creature is “the beast that hath no name,” a nod to Lovecraft’s short story “The Unnamable” and to the “writerly” nature of the author’s monster. From the very start, the episode makes fun of Lovecraft and his fans: Hatecraft is an eccentric writer who lives isolated in a mansion, surrounded by paintings of Octopoid Monsters, and the protagonists soon point out how Char Gar Gothakon cannot be the beast with no name as it clearly has one. The monster has a humanoid form, looking like a wizard wearing a long robe with a tentacular face. The monster is also very similar to an Illithid or Mind Flayer, a creature from the roleplaying game *Dungeons & Dragons* that was clearly inspired by Cthulhu. The monster briefly appears through the episode, terrorizing students and, at the end of the episode, he even tries to kill Hatecraft. However, the protagonists manage to stop Char Gar Gothakon and, in the conventional *Scooby-Doo* formula, it is revealed that the monster is just a man in a costume. At a first glance, the representation of Cthulhu in this episode of *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated* seems to be the most normalizing of the readings: the monster is reduced to a costume of an Octopoid Monster. Moreover, the motivation for the “culprit” to wear the costume and attack Hatecraft was that the author had publicly distanced himself from any responsibility regarding the attacks of Char Gar Gothakon, denying once and for all the monster’s existence. In the episode, the monster is completely deconstructed and his existence denied; nevertheless, this is only a superficial reading, as the episode can be read at different levels.

Having a fan impersonating the mock-Cthulhu, the show acknowledges that the monster now belongs to the interpretive community that is highly familiar with Lovecraft’s fictions and the monster acquires a life of his own, so much so he does not even need the authority of his creator, Hatecraft/Lovecraft, to continue existing. Moreover, in the episode the unmasking of the fake Char Gar Gothakon does not stop Hatecraft from using the monster for future novels. In the same way, the proliferating of various versions of the Octopoid Monster is not going to stop fans from going back to the previous readings of Cthulhu, as those readings do not exclude one another but can co-exist as they are all possible readings of the monster.

The most interesting of the possible readings of this episode of *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated* is the one that takes into consideration the structure of the television show. The show is a reboot of the 1969 cartoon *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You?* and as its predecessor features a group of teenagers investigating cases involving supposedly supernatural creatures, revealing at the end of each episode that the monster was in fact one of the suspects wearing a costume. For each monster to be contained in the show’s formula, the monster needs to be normalized and reduced to a mere costume. However, it is necessary to point out how, except for the very ending of the show where the culprit is unmasked, for the rest of the episode each monster is believed to be real and some of the protagonists are often scared by them. The show often plays with young viewers’ suspension of disbelief and depicts the monsters doing extraordinary things which are at the end only briefly and unconvincingly explained. For example, Char Gar Gothakon can emit powerful sound waves capable of flipping cars over and is seen grabbing a student with his tentacles. Once unmasked, the student impersonating the monster explains that he conveniently followed some lessons in “sonic scream technology,” while his mysterious ability to grab people with tentacles is not even explained. Thus, despite Cthulhu being stripped of all his threatening elements at the end of the episode, for the most part of it he still maintains all his monstrous elements and is seen as a menace and an evil force. It is significant that the monster of the episode is named Char Gar Gothakon: while this monster is used to normalize and make a parody of Cthulhu, in the end it is Char Gar Gothakon, and not Cthulhu, to be revealed as being just a man in a costume. The monster created by Lovecraft still retains his monstrousness, but also shows his availability as a subject of different readings. Moreover, in the episode it is Char Gar Gothakon to be revealed as a fake, and not Cthulhu. Once again then, Cthulhu manages to escape, only to reappear somewhere else.

The monsters featured in the *Scooby-Doo* franchise are all inspired by creatures from literature, folklore or famous Horror films and they are easily recognizable. Thus, the inclusion of Cthulhu in this gallery of famous monsters is a further authorization of the monster’s role in popular culture. Moreover, this episode, as the one of *The Real Ghostbusters*, presents a simplified, but not less intriguing, version of Cthulhu, offering the young audience the chance to become familiar with the monster (Germaine Buckley 139). The function of “The Shrieking Madness” is not only pedagogical, as it is also a means to introduce new readers to elements and tropes of Weird fiction and the Lovecraftian mode. Germaine Buckley explains how the animated films *Frankenweenie* and *ParaNorman* do not require their audience to decode every citation but they “celebrate a broad and inclusive Gothic horror film aesthetic” (157). The same can be said for this episode of *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated*, which contains a vast number of reference and parodied elements from Lovecraft’s fictions. The adult viewers, who are a secondary but still important target audience of the show, are likely to possess the correct interpretive code to understand the reference presented in the episode. The young viewers, who are the primary target audience, are instead introduced to the Lovecraftian mode and to various elements of Weird fiction. The episode “The Shrieking Madness” does not require any previous interpretive code to be understood, and the young viewers can enjoy the show and, without being fully conscious of that, enjoy the Weird and Lovecraftian tropes. Thus, Char Gar Gothakon / Cthulhu is a monster in the large *Scooby-Doo* gallery of villains but can also become an element that drives those young viewers to a later approach to any Lovecraft-related text.
Case Study 3: South Park

In 2010 Cthulhu appeared again in an animated television show, South Park, in a story arc spread across three episodes titled, respectively, “Coon 2: Hindsight,” “Mysterion Rises,” and “Coon Vs Coon and Friends.” As the titles suggest, these episodes are not related to Lovecraft’s fictions nor the mythos but are mostly a spoof of superhero films. This mini-saga starts with the South Park kids dressed as peculiar superheroes, trying to fight crime in their own way. Meanwhile, a drilling vessel of a big oil company causes a massive oil leak in the ocean; in the attempt to fix it, the company drills again and again, but the damage escalates quickly, causing the opening of a portal to another dimension from which Lovecraftian monsters come out and devour people. With their last, disastrous drilling attempt, the oil company incredibly manages to release Cthulhu, who brings havoc along the United States coast.

The depiction of Cthulhu is again in line with that of Lovecraft’s idol in “The Call of Cthulhu” and perfectly matches that of the Octopoid Monster. Cthulhu appears as heavily normalized: his appearance is more anthropomorphic and less tentacular, with the monster having a pair of big, expressive eyes, and his behaviour is similar to that of King Kong, that is of a giant intelligent animal. The biggest difference between The Real Ghostbusters and South Park is that, while in the former Cthulhu’s awakening is the main focus, in the latter the monster is only used as an element in a very creative pastiche and, surprisingly, his role is only that of a supporting character. When the kids decide to ban The Coon (the alter-ego of Eric Cartman) from the superhero group due to his extremely selfish and violent behavior, Cartman is so angered with his peers that he decides to partner with Cthulhu to make the world a better place. The Coon’s plan is surprisingly successful, and the child ends up manipulating Cthulhu so that the monster kills and destroys everything Cartman hates.

South Park is a television show that often uses parody as part of its formula, referencing famous films, videogames, and even real-life events and trends. Thus, in its process of containment of Cthulhu into its structure, the show uses the monster for a very explicit parody. A whole sequence is a shot-by-shot parody of another animated film, My Neighbour Totoro written and directed by Hayao Miyazaki (1988): here The Coon is sitting on the belly of a sleepy Cthulhu, exactly as the little girl in the Japanese film sits on that of Totoro, a gigantic, fluffy, benevolent spirit of the woods. Then the monster flies through the sky, The Coon riding on his back. This scene and the montage that follows are accompanied by a cheerful song (whose music sounds extremely similar to the main theme of My Neighbour Totoro) that sings about how Cartman and his friend Cthulhu will make a world a better place, through murder and mass destruction. In The Real Ghostbusters episode Cthulhu was compared to another Japanese creature, Godzilla, to help introduce the monster to a new audience. Cthulhu here replaces the friendly Totoro to generate a hilarious parodic sequence. Obviously, for this parody to fully work, the audience needs to have some previous knowledge of both Cthulhu and Totoro. As noticed by Hutcheon, “parodic codes, after all, have to be shared for parody—as parody—to be comprehended” (93). Viewers familiar with the film My Neighbour Totoro can grasp the deep irony of having Cthulhu and the even more evil The Coon / Cartman replacing the innocent characters of the Japanese film. However, while at first this parody seems to reduce Cthulhu to a pure object, there are a few elements that demonstrate South Park is instead paying homage to the monster.

An important element of parody Hutcheon notices is that “parody’s transgressions ultimately remain authorized—authorized by the very norm it seeks to subvert” (75). Hutcheon suggests that, no matter how the subject of parody seems to be derided and reduced to a mere object, the parody itself is sanctioned by members of an interpretive community that deeply care for the parodied content. In the case of South Park, the authors of the show are not deriding Cthulhu, but celebrating the monster. Thanks to the multiple references to Lovecraft’s fictions present in the three episodes taken into analysis, it is clear how the people behind the show possess a deep knowledge of Lovecraft’s source material. The show depicts Cthulhu’s cultists during their evocations, shows unnameable creatures similar to those described in Lovecraft’s At the Mountains of Madness and Cthulhu’s extra-dimensional realm is as nonsensical as Lovecraft’s non-Euclidean geometry. The team of creators behind South Park are part of the interpretive community that possesses a large knowledge of Lovecraft’s material and appreciates it. Thus, this parody cannot but be both benevolent and one that gently mocks Cthulhu, only to celebrate it.

In this parody Cthulhu also maintains important elements of his monstrousness. During the song montage Cthulhu is seen smashing religious buildings, crushing a van full of hippies and killing people, while The Coon laughs. Even if the contrast between the innocent song and the violent images is utilized for comedic purposes, it is undeniable that this version of Cthulhu is still the Extrdimensional Evil. Cohen’s thesis that the monster always escapes is maintained, even though in quite a humorous way. Cthulhu is literally dragged back to his dimension by Mint-Berry Crunch, the kid with the most ridiculous superhero identity who incidentally discovers to be the only one with real superpowers. However, the monster is again only temporarily banished, and may find his way to our world in the future.

Moreover, while possessing the interpretive code for properly reading the references to My Neighbour Totoro may enhance the view of the episodes, viewers can still enjoy and laugh at it. The comedy comes from the clash between the cheerful and happy music and the evil deeds committed by Cthulhu, and any viewer can perceive that without having any knowledge of the Japanese film. The humor of the musical sequence, but also of the use of Cthulhu across the three episodes, can also be enjoyed by those viewers who do not have any previous knowledge of Cthulhu and Lovecraft’s fiction. South Park does not waste much exposition in explaining Cthulhu, but from the reactions of all the characters and the monster’s actions a viewer can easily understand that Cthulhu is supposed to be an evil monster from another dimension. The main difference between South Park’s use of Cthulhu is how the monster is integrated into the television show’s formula. The Real Ghostbusters uses Cthulhu to create a mythos story for children,
while *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated* uses the monster and other elements from Lovecraft’s fictions to create a mystery that is also a parody of the Weird fiction genre. *South Park*, compared to the other two animated shows, has a less restrictive formula that allows its writers a more creative approach. Cthulhu is positioned into a superhero-themed story arc, where the monster has a less prominent role. However, the show still finds a clever way to introduce the monster into its formula, having Cthulhu interacting with The Coon/Cartman. Cthulhu, the embodiment of absolute chaos, is slowly overshadowed by the evil nature of Cartman, who in the end becomes the true villain of the story arc. Having Cthulhu becoming the right-hand-man of the kid allows the show to use the monster to continue one of the recurring themes of its formula. Cthulhu is then only partially normalized to enhance the comedic side of the show, while retaining his monstrosity to highlight the higher evil of Cartman.

**Conclusion**

All the shows that I have analyzed, in different ways, present ready-to-use characters and situations. *The Real Ghostbusters* is based on a successful film and uses the same characters while expanding on their stories. *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated* not only reboots the characters of the previous *Scooby-Doo* series, but uses tropes from the murder mystery genre and the haunted house films. *South Park* often uses real-life characters and other media properties in the service of parody and humor. Moreover, the show is in its second-season and some of its characters, such as Cartman, have become iconic and carry with them some expectations regarding their behavior. These shows include Cthulhu in their own formal processes of simplification and repetition, thus producing a ready-to-use version of the monster that is easy to understand for their audiences and is also quite marketable. It would be a challenging task to introduce an unnameable monster like Cthulhu in a twenty-minute and often self-contained narration, while also trying to follow a well-established formula. A partially normalized version of Cthulhu offers a practical solution for the shows’ creators, as the monster becomes an iconic character that can be used and reused for multiple purposes. Cthulhu does not lose his origins of monstrosity and becomes recognizable enough for the viewers that are already familiar with him, but not too obscure for those who are new to the monster. The different versions of Cthulhu appearing in *The Real Ghostbusters*, *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated*, and *South Park* only partially normalize the monster, so that they can fit him into their formulas.

As demonstrated by the analysis of the three television shows, Cthulhu still retains part of his monstrousness. A comparison between the trajectory of another monster, already mentioned in this article, can help to better understand the fluctuation of Cthulhu’s normalization. Godzilla first appears as a threat and metaphor of the atomic bomb in the film *Godzilla* (1954), only to slowly become one of humanity’s ally in *Destroy All Monster* (1968), and in the animated series *Godzilla* (1978-1980). However, in *Godzilla 1985* (1984) the monster becomes again a menace for humanity, only to go back to be the only one capable of stopping other terrible monsters in the 1990s and early 2000s. Even in recent years Godzilla seems to be going through different stages of normalization: it is a threat, but also an accidental savior in the American reboot *Godzilla* (2014), while in the Japanese *Shin Godzilla* (2016) the monster is an absolute menace. Lastly in *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (2019) Godzilla is now back fighting other giant creatures for the sake of humanity’. Cthulhu is then following a trajectory similar to that of Godzilla. His monstrousness is often reduced, sometimes even drastically, as in the graphic novel *Howard Lovecraft and the Frozen Kingdom* (2010) and its animated adaptation released in 2016, where Cthulhu becomes the pet and guardian of young Lovecraft. Not unlike Godzilla, Cthulhu always manages to escape and come back later in another text. However, while in a few films the giant lizard has been almost completely assimilated, Cthulhu resists a complete normalization. Despite possessing a defined shape, Cthulhu also contains elements of the unnameable, which makes this creature impossible to be fully comprehended and, thus, allows him to stand out among the other monsters. In the animated television shows analysed in this article Cthulhu is hunted, parodied, and manipulated, but his monstrosity never truly disappears.

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The Cthulhu Casebooks: Sherlock Holmes and the Miskatonic Monstrosities
by James Lovegrove.

Review by Kyle Brett

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The Cthulhu Casebooks: *Sherlock Holmes and the Miskatonic Monstrosities*, by James Lovegrove.


Book Review DOI: 10.18573/sgf.53

**REVIEW BY KYLE BRETT**

James Lovegrove’s *The Cthulhu Casebooks: Sherlock Holmes and the Miskatonic Monstrosities* (2017) continues the Weird/detective fiction mash-up of pairing Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson with Lovecraftian ultra-strangeness. However, while juggling both the horrors beyond all human conception and the cocaine-addled logical deductions of Holmes, Lovegrove’s book struggles to really do justice to either. Instead, what we are left with is a collection of pastiches that is more distracting and disorienting is a fan of either Holmesian or Cthulhian mythos. Beyond merely organizational and tonal issues in his text, Lovegrove also inherits the same cultural backwardness of the authors he attempts to ventriloquize. In a market that is packed with Lovecraftian interpretations and reformulations, Lovegrove’s *Miskatonic Monstrosities* does little beyond recapitulating the rhetoric of abhorrent racism and colonialism featured within the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century canons.

However, to give Lovegrove some credit, the two authors he fuses requires an extensive knowledge and command of an array of literary themes and tropes. In this way, *Miskatonic Monstrosities* shines. Clearly Lovegrove is an avid reader of both Doyle and H. P. Lovecraft and convincingly capitalizes on that knowledge, allowing the two universes to collide in a way that seems so natural. It is an ambitious project that will, at the end of the day, span across three books. The premise of Watson and Holmes secreting off to battle and match wits with Outer and Elder gods is fantastic and blends great with the undercurrent of occultism that is on the periphery of canonical Sherlock Holmes. This is to say that at the onset I was primed to like the mash-up, hoping to add this to a collection of other standalone Lovecraft adaptations, but as I continued past the found-narrative preface and the early chapters introducing the mystery of Zachariah Conroy, my anticipation quickly fell away to bored confusion.

Organizationally the plot of *Miskatonic Monstrosities* falls apart in the last third of the novel when Watson and Holmes discover and read Conroy’s journal. While this is a nice nod, in theory, to Lovecraft’s penchant for plots-within-plots, it seems stretched and oddly placed, distracting from the tension that peaks right before in Watson and Holmes’s case. As a reader, I had more trouble caring about Watson and Holmes when presented with a hundred and sixty-three-page side story. Yet, this digression is where some of the best Lovecraftian moments happen, and I could see this being a fantastic standalone short story. But as it upsets the main narrative, readers may be less receptive and more critical in the shift from the hybrid voice of Doyle-Lovecraft to pure Lovecraft. Once we get back to the reveal of the text—the return of Sherlock’s nemesis—we have lost the tension of Watson and Holmes awaiting their doom, chained next to a half-eaten corpse and sleeping ghoul. Instead of playing off that tension to amplify the ending twist (which has its own problems), Lovegrove interrupts it so that by the time we get back on track our attention is fractured.

While Lovegrove’s own need to peddle the Lovecraft-found-document trope does disrupt, it is perhaps the jarring banality of the eldritch horrors that ruins the point and power of such literary borrowing. Instead of blissfully being unable to correlate the contents of our minds, as Lovecraft often intends through pseudo-descriptions of cosmic beings, readers of *Miskatonic Monstrosities* are rewarded with easily digestible explanations of the Weird. From the diadem that Holmes and Watson use to control their slithering underlings and casually speaking unutterable tongues, to the literal death of the Crawling Chaos itself—Nyarlathotep—in favor of a certain professor to not only ascend to godhood, but still retain the mortal infatuation with his nemesis, readers continually have the shambling terrors of mythos laid bare to them. The result from such literary alchemy is often bemused resignation. By the ending explanation of the events, the puppet master of true cosmic horror is nothing more than the very knowable and predictable human-like villain. Instead of taking advantage of the mystery, the sheer unknowability of Lovecraft’s deep forms of terror, Lovegrove cements humanity at the center of a trite cosmic battle against good and evil. The game is predictably afoot.

Yet, readers could excuse such revision if Lovegrove was completely engaged in overhauling the entire Doyle-Lovecraft canon. This is far from the case, however, as Lovegrove seems to transplant into the twenty-first-century malign racial and colonial philosophies of the nineteenth and twentieth. Case in point is a troubling scene describing Watson’s moment of tyrannical power and desire to rule over a nest of snake men, deemed “Irregulars,” to the point of submission “as [is done] with a horse” (137). Who then better to guide and goad but the English war-veteran doctor with his “judicious application of whip, spur and rein” (137)? To credit Lovegrove, Watson does relent and begrudgingly frees those “Irregulars” in a scene that plays out the entire history of British colonialism in mere paragraphs. Perhaps, then, this was a minor moment to demonstrate the sickness of the old rhetoric. And I am sure that would be the case if such instances only happened once throughout the text. Sadly, however, Lovegrove seems to revisit the politics of the past, often without much commentary, knowingly or
otherwise creating characters in the same vein as Lovecraft’s “The Horror at Red Hook” (1927). From maligned and cultist Sikhs, to the brain transplantation of a white racist into a black body, turning the innocent exterior into a form of performative monstrosity who must be destroyed by the “Red Indians,” Lovegrove perhaps copies too much from those he wishes to emulate without enough of an overt purpose to showcase just how backward and harmful these ideas and ideologies were.

“Well, old friend,” Holmes asks Watson after reading Conroy’s journal, “What do you make of it?” (Lovegrove 405). Tellingly, Watson answers honestly and in a brief moment of what I would isolate as metacommentary with his literary critique: “A grueling read . . . Gruesome, too. There are passages where, in spite of Conroy’s somewhat florid and ungainly turn of phrase, the vivid horror of the scenes depicted gave me chills” (405). And this is pretty much where I fall as a reader and lover of Lovecraftian fictions and retellings. *Miskatonic Monstrosities* is at times compelling and the tone does indeed often capture the feeling of reading Conan Doyle’s prose. As Holmes pesters Watson shortly after this critique of literary style and not simply content, I, too, am obliged to follow the good detective’s command. My issues with the novel are not solely with its style, but rather its content. James Lovegrove’s project is ambitious, and perhaps the final installment of *The Cthulhu Casebooks* will revise the devotion to both the style and ethos of long-dead authors. I hope that this is the case. Yet, if this middle text is a marker of what is to follow, then I can honestly say it might be better to leave such literary alchemy to those who may be more fit for such experimentation.

**About the Author**
Kyle Brett is a PhD candidate at Lehigh University studying nineteenth-century American literature and Transatlantic Romanticism. His dissertation project focuses on sentimental writers’ engagement in the nineteenth-century literary market. His other critical interests are American horror and weird fiction in relationship to traditional Gothic conventions.
None of This is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer, by Benjamin J. Robertson.

Review by Jake Brewer

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With a title that conveys the New Weird’s subversion of even Speculative fiction’s generic tenants, *None of This is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer*, by Benjamin J. Robertson, considers Jeff VanderMeer’s distinct brand of New Weird fiction, and its hallmarks and importance in a late capitalist, anthropocentric world that every day becomes less habitable and weirder for humanity. Robertson’s scholarship, through careful consideration of genre tenants as well as the usage of VanderMeer’s (and others) fiction as an authorial grounding, tackles the New Weird and Weird’s relationship with Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror, all under political auspices that attempt to explain these genres and subgenres in terms of borders, spaces, and an ever-changing environmental worldscape.

Through his text, Robertson takes on the idea that VanderMeer’s fiction is distinct even among the fantastically unique realms of the New Weird fiction genre. Weird fiction has morphed and transformed with the culture it is situated in, from Edgar Allan Poe to China Miéville, and Robertson places VanderMeer as the newest in a line of New Weird icons with his *Southern Reach* Trilogy comprised of *Annihilation* (2014), *Authority* (2014), and *Acceptance* (2014). VanderMeer’s New Weird, argues Roberson, does more than just subvert cultural norms. Indeed, VanderMeer does not even take these norms themselves for granted and thus his subversion is one step removed. The fantastic worlds conjured by the author, in Robertson’s estimation, can help the audience glimpse beyond anthropocentric humanity and realize a world of possibility beyond the human, beyond a species seemingly hellbent on destroying the aspects of this Earth that make it habitable for not only our life, but for any life.

VanderMeer’s fiction, Robertson contends, “cannot be reduced to any generic framework” (21). Yet, he admits, the parameters of the Weird and New Weird can help explain and frame VanderMeer’s novels in ways that Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror cannot. Unlike these other genres, the New Weird is marked by unexplained occurrences, moments of extreme confusion, and ultimately a disavowal to ever explain such fantastic occurrences, preferring instead to muse on their fallout rather than their origin. Robertson uses VanderMeer’s unique brand of genre-fusion prose to comment and argue on the place and purpose of such writing in our modern, Anthropocene era. Robertson utilizes this current epoch to periodize VanderMeer’s fiction as well as situate it in terms of a reaction to humanity’s dominant and acquisitional influence on both the climate and environment.

Finally, Robertson argues that the author’s fiction displays “fantastic materiality, a materiality that manifests in weird fiction . . . rather than one assumed to be represented . . . in fictions of realist or mimetic leanings” (4). In other words, VanderMeer’s worlds do not represent an established reality but rather one constructed on its own terms that does not necessarily have direct allegorical connections to our world. Yet, these fantastic realms allow a reader to understand human thought and modern history under newly considered vantages by relating the fantastic to borders, liminality, and the inherent irrationality of climate change ignorance in the face of overwhelming evidence. Robertson contends that fantastic materiality is woven throughout VanderMeer’s novels and is one of the important artistic inferences of their work.

Robertson is particularly well suited to present this argument about VanderMeer’s fiction. An Assistant Professor at the University of Colorado, Robertson’s writing has appeared in publications such as *Science Fiction Studies* and *The Journal for the Fantastic in the Arts*. His work and teaching focus on genre fiction, specifically in terms of the fantastic. Robertson writes from the perspective of a scholar who has a deep and abiding interest in the Fantastika genres. This evident consideration for Weird Fiction serves to support his scholarship.

The book itself is divided into four primary chapters, with an introduction and an afterword by VanderMeer himself. The first chapter engages with conventional norms, seeks to define and explain fantastic materiality, and goes on to relate the Anthropocene to genre hybridity, particularly to consider how this notion arguably represents a reaction from artists to the epoch. In so doing, Robertson explains that the New Weird acts in opposition to the “the Tolkienesque heroic fantasy” (23). Steph Swainston, a Weird fiction practitioner upon who Robertson frequently relies to comment on VanderMeer and the genre as a whole, considers Weird fiction to have one foot squarely in modern street culture and the other foot in ancient mythologies. Indeed, Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station* (2000) serves as such an example. Additionally, setting in primary and secondary worlds is considered with special relation to the monsters that might occupy such spaces in the New Weird.

The second chapter takes the fictional city of Veniss—from VanderMeer Veniss cycle comprising of the novel *Veniss Underground* (2003) and a number of short stories—as a symbolic point of reference in a discussion about setting. Much of *None of This is Normal* follows the thread of place or location in VanderMeer’s novels and this chapter tackles that consideration most directly. Veniss is unfixed in time and unfixed in space,
even within its fictions, and so as a point of reference, it is an ironic choice. Robertson challenges and explores “setting” on a conceptual level. Next, he relates setting-related plot limitations with characteristics of the historical period of the Anthropocene. Above all, he argues that what he calls the “Veniss Milieu” illustrates fantastic materiality in its representation as cities and people as incomplete, blurred figures. They may interact in ways that cities and people in our world cannot, and thus serve to show a world both divorced from our concepts of the Anthropocene as well as wrapped up in a climate-apocalypse of its own.

Ambergris, a fictional city that is the center of three of VanderMeer’s novels—City of Saints and Madmen (2002), Shriek: An Afterworld (2007), and Finch (2009)—is the subject of Chapter Three. Generic Fantasy and concepts of secondary worlds are discussed in relation to postmodern fiction. Ultimately, Robertson compares and contrasts the fantastic materiality displayed by Veniss and Ambergris. Building off the Veniss Milieu of Chapter Two, Robertson compellingly argues that Ambergris is a unique setting that manages to combine Fantasy with postmodernist fiction—a feat that the foundational fantastic genres of Fantasy, Science Fiction, and Horror cannot manage.

Chapter Four centers on the Southern Reach Trilogy, mentioned above, books that explore Earth and humanity’s intersection with a weird space called Area X. The humans who encounter Area X are inherently unable to understand it, but similar to the recently-made-weird wildlife and vegetation surrounding them, begin to transform in accordance with these impossible phenomena. Robertson shows that the Southern Reach Trilogy explores the gap between human understanding and utterly alien ontology. Monsters are again taken up in this chapter in perhaps a less effective manner, especially in that Robertson does not utilize Noël Carroll’s conception of the monster from The Philosophy of Horror: or Paradoxes of the Heart (1990), a text that confronts monstrosity in terms of borders and liminality in a similar fashion as None of This is Normal. The conclusion looks at VanderMeer’s novel Borne (2017), where Robertson contends that Borne is the author’s most explicitly political statement on climate change.

The strengths of this book lie in Robertson’s understanding of VanderMeer’s work and that of important authors in the surrounding speculative genres. Robertson has an encyclopedic ability to call upon and reference other authors in the New Weird and its surrounding fields. The delineations and edgings of the New Weird are ill-defined and thus it takes a significant depth of to connect authors who, on the surface, seem to be occupying different generic spaces entirely. Robertson cites authors as diverse as Clive Barker and Stephen R. Donaldson, a grounding which enables them to show VanderMeer’s locale within this fantastic world. Yet, as Robertson points out, the genres Fantasy, Science Fiction, and Horror all bring to bear fantastic worlds or spaces that create, or help to create, literary conversation with modern culture. He alleges that the difference in the New Weird is its relation to our contemporary anthropocentrism and the genre’s push to de-anthropomorphize our world. Succinctly, the Earth will go on without humanity, without even the vaguest suggestion of humanity, and that this species-centrism is successfully dispelled within the New Weird in ways that other fantastic genres struggle with.

Robertson’s work examines, argues, and ultimately recontextualizes Jeff VanderMeer’s fiction in None of This is Normal. Not only is this text a strong work of scholarship in argument, structure, and clarity, but it is also written with an attention to detail regarding VanderMeer’s fantastic worlds that can only be borne of evident admiration for the author’s craft. After reading Robertson’s book, one cannot help but think that, like the sentient fungal gray caps in Ambergris, VanderMeer’s fiction “infiltrates and fills the spaces between worlds, spaces no one else has thought to navigate for fear of falling into the abyss” (104).

About the Author
Jake Brewer is a is a PhD candidate at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, where he teaches creative writing, British Literature, and composition. His research focuses on the interplay between subgenres in speculative fiction.
Winter Tide, Tor, 2017, 368pp and Deep Root, Tor, 2018, 352pp, by Ruthanna Emrys

by Richard Mooney

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**Winter Tide, Tor, 2017, 368pp and Deep Root, Tor, 2018, 352pp, by Ruthanna Emrys**

Book Review DOI: 10.18573/sgf.55

**Review by Richard Mooney**

Lovecraftian themes have constantly resurfaced since the original writer’s impact on Weird Fiction in the 1920s and 30s. H. P. Lovecraft has inspired video games and prog-rock albums, modern silent films, and novels beyond count as other writers dive eagerly head first into the madness inducing scope of cosmic apathy for humanity. Among those inspired is Washington D. C.’s Ruthanna Emrys and her *The Innsmouth Legacy* (2017) series. What separates her from many of her sycophantic peers is her desire to acknowledge the inherently racist, anti-Semitic, and misogynistic works of Lovecraft and subvert them into a tale of acceptance. Emrys sees the flaws (and there are many) in Lovecraft, where others simply see an opportunity to shove nameless tentacled shapes into their story. Both books of her series so far, entitled *Winter Tide* (2017) and *Deep Roots* (2018) respectively, create a niche voice for the “outsider” that Lovecraft regarded with such disgust and tried to convince us all to fear.

Of all the Lovecraftian homages that perforate the modern creative sphere, I feel like Lovecraft himself would despise Emrys’s reworking of his mythos tales the most. Considering Lovecraft’s attitudes, that is quite the moral victory. It has been refreshing to read a Lovecraftian story that does not have the tortured male protagonist or be devoid of women in any meaningful capacity. Instead Emrys presents a diverse (and predominantly female) cast led by female protagonist Aphra Marsh. The story takes one of Lovecraft’s most popular and influential stories, “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” (1931), and turns it around so that, rather than acting as a telescope allowing us to glimpse the darkness and cruelty aeons away in impossible cosmic plains, it is in fact a mirror, reflecting the very darkness and cruelty of humanity.

The inspiration for Emrys is written clear as day on the opening page of Lovecraft’s famous story which discusses the government raids on the seemingly suspicious eponymous town of Innsmouth, as:

> Keener news-followers, however, wondered at the prodigious number of arrests, the abnormally large force of men used in making them, and the secrecy surrounding the disposal of the prisoners. No trials, or even definite charges, were reported; nor were any of the captives seen thereafter in the regular gaols of the nation. (504)

Instead of looking at the people of Innsmouth as monsters that should be feared or despised, something Lovecraft was very prone to when he eluded to race, Emrys gives the spotlight to them, showing the side never given a voice. Aphra Marsh and her brother Caleb are the only two survivors of the government raids on Innsmouth and are now trying to live their own lives, but in an ironic twist of fate, are asked by the very same government that annexed them, to help protect the United States.

While the story and concept are fascinating, the writing sadly lets the novels down at times. The narrative, told in two forms: the first being Marsh’s first-person narrative, the second being the third-person omniscient narrator, varies wildly in style. Marsh’s description of the scenes are conveyed in a very down to earth manner, which when coupled with her own feminist insights, creates a refreshingly blunt style. But in the third-person, we see Emrys try and capture some of the dense literary style of Lovecraft himself. It is these scenes which tend to remove the reader from the narrative.

The first book of the series is weaker than its predecessor in most departments. It has enough substance to ignore its lack of style, but even at that, the plotting is amateurish. The first novel involves Marsh and her brother returning to Miskatonic University to try and figure out if Russian spies have discovered an Eldritch spell of body swapping. Set against a backdrop of Cold War paranoia, such a prospect would be considered a genuine threat to national security. Yet such promise is not built upon as new narrative threads join the tapestry. No body swapping takes place, no Russian spies press themselves upon the plot, and national security is never threatened. Mrs. Trumbull, a professor taken over by an ancient cosmic cataloguer, known as the “Yith,” is the only example of one conscious taking over another, but it becomes clear that this is unconnected to the plot, merely an extremely lucky coincidence. Another character introduced is Audrey, a University student who becomes Marsh’s apprentice of sorts only to discover she is the descendent of the “Mad Ones Under the Earth.” Again, a pleasant coincidence. Sub-plots add more meat to the bones of the story, but the skeleton has to be able to stand on its own, and in *Winter Tide*, it does not.

The reason it falls so short of an interesting story is despite the threat of body swapping, the Yith, and even mention of the “Mad ones under the Earth,” the majority of the novel is spent accessing books confiscated from Innsmouth during the government raids. Countless scenes are spent in the libraries and the Halls of the University. It took 150 pages before anything of significance happens, when Aphra returns to Innsmouth for the first time since the raids and meets her grandfather, the amphibious humanoid known by Lovecraft fans as “Deep Ones.” At this point I straightened up, ready for the plot to take off, but after a heartfelt reunion, lots of superfluous dialogue, Aphra was back in the
library. My frustration with the plot in the first novel was summed up by a moment near the end where all the reading of diaries and textbooks reveals a potential lead on a Russian who has learned the body swapping spell. Rather than take this information to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) – who are employing her in an uneasy alliance – she decides it is better left unsaid as it may potentially escalate tensions between her community and the United States’ government if the latter believes that the Russians are already aware of the spell. By this point in the book, Aphra has developed a longing to rebuild Innsmouth and is willing to sacrifice the mission to protect her new agenda. But in doing so it essentially makes the plot the novel begins with obsolete. A bold move indeed, and one that does not pay off for me personally due to how the narrative was built so strongly around this early plot device.

However, these narrative threads carry through into the second novel, *Deep Roots*, which despite taking place in a totally different setting and under entirely different circumstances does actually follow through and build upon the narrative the story begins to build. Aphra, now fully committed to rebuilding Innsmouth, is searching for those who might have some connection to the now desolate coastal town. Her search takes her to 1960s New York, normally a common literary setting trope, but one that works well after the dull scenery of Arkham and Massachusetts in general. Here she does in fact encounter some distant relatives, as well as a Lovecraftian faction, the Mi-Go.

Although the two books in the series vary in quality, one thing strongly unites them: the acceptance of the Other and the fallacy of unbiased views towards them. Aphra is an outsider to humans as she belongs to the Deep Ones – who, in an almost Kafkaesque way, will eventually transform into amphibious creatures and return to their true home beneath the sea. Until that time comes, however, she must deal with the prejudices of “men of the land” (139). In her motley group of followers, friends, and allies we have: Neko, who met Aphra in an internment camp not because she was an Innsmouth resident, but because she was a Japanese native living in post-World War Two United States; Audrey, a young headstrong woman with a bloodline that relates her to the enigmatic “Mad Ones under the Earth”; and a professor whose body was the host of the Yith throughout most of the first novel. As “outsiders,” they stand in opposition to the insiders, who the book foregrounds as being white men. From the Dean of Miskatonic University to its students, the novels are not shy in showing these groups to be worse than the entities which humanity does not understand.

Most men in the series beyond the inner circle of Marsh are portrayed as sexist on varying levels, but always plain to see. The Dean of Miskatonic University, a relatively powerful man believes “study interferes with the development of feminine faculties” (29) while introducing Mrs Trumbull. Some way through the second novel, a chance meeting with a character’s brother sees his “eyes linger on each of us – no. On the women with a little frown completing his assessment of each” (15). Such quips perforate the book and although set in the 1950s where attitudes towards women were far less progressive than today, they highlight the subtle sexism women still deal with in everyday situations. The truth of this notion is more horrifying than depictions of Lovecraftian races beyond our understanding.

Emrys’s handling of the Other in the second book is what really showed off the improvement of plotting as Marsh presents an incredible bias towards the Mi-Go because of the Deep One’s historical distaste for them. She reveals herself to be as bad as those who showed her disdain, but instead of religiously sticking to that prejudice towards the Mi-Go, she instead learns about them, understands their differing perspective, and comes to accept them for who they are. This gradual enlightenment is expertly played out by Emrys across the novel and the competition between the Deep ones and the Mi-Go for the future of Innsmouth residents worked so much better as a main narrative for the other subplots to weave around. Though there are still some scenes dominated by dialogue that neither progress the plot or give particularly interesting insights to characters or the world they inhabit. Emrys has definitely grown as a writer to handle the plotting much better.

Taken collectively, Ruthanna Emrys’s *Innsmouth Legacy* novels present us with a pleasant alternative to Lovecraft, one devoid of the toxicity that makes his presence in mainstream culture so problematic for the twenty-first century. Her handling of interesting characters and well-established lore in an entirely new direction have made her one to watch out for in the future. Her feminist and anti-patriarchal leanings drape over the novel as a defiant stand against Lovecraft and gives us hope for the future, even if we ourselves have no eternal city beneath the waves that calls to us like Aphra Marsh does.

**Works Cited**


**About the author:**

Richard Mooney is a writer who graduated from the University of Glasgow with a Master’s Degree in Literature with Honours. He is best known for writing the comic *Daughter of Titan*. 
The Gothic Tales of H.P. Lovecraft.
Ed. Xavier Aldana Reyes.

Review by Claire Quigley

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The Gothic Tales of H.P. Lovecraft. Ed. Xavier Aldana Reyes.

Review by Claire Quigley

The Gothic Tales of H.P. Lovecraft, published last year by the British Library, offers a fresh approach to the celebrated author of Weird tales. In the introduction, editor Xavier Aldana Reyes delivers a brief but comprehensive overview of Lovecraft’s work and his influence throughout the twentieth century. Aldana Reyes recognizes Lovecraft’s influence on contemporary horror writers and comments with some bemusement on the author’s swift rise to the status of pop-culture icon, due in large part to the commercialized success spawned by Lovecraft’s Cthulhu Mythos. With all this attention on Lovecraft’s imagined worlds of cosmic horror, Aldana Reyes proposes that the traditional Gothic themes of the writer’s work have largely been overlooked. Thus, the editor offers this compilation comprising thirteen of Lovecraft’s short stories as a means to rectify this issue.

The first story in the compendium is “The Alchemist” (1916), which is an early example of Gothic motifs in Lovecraft’s texts. In his introduction, Aldana Reyes considers this piece to be an example of Lovecraft’s juvenilia and it is easy to see why as this story certainly feels like an immature tale written by an inexperienced author. Aldana Reyes makes it clear why this story is included in this collection, as he seeks to present the Gothic influences in Lovecraft’s work that will “span the entirety of his career” (xi). Unfortunately, the result is that The Gothic Tales of H.P. Lovecraft starts on a rather weak note. “The Alchemist” is decorated with Gothic embellishments such as an imposing crumbling castle, the dread of a family curse, and the anguish of an isolated protagonist set apart from the rest of society. Yet the narrative lacks the unnerving depths usually on display in Lovecraft’s fiction. I understand Aldana Reyes’s reasoning for the addition of “The Alchemist,” but this collection is intended for the commercial market. If this were the first story of Lovecraft’s one was to encounter, I doubt the reader would feel compelled to pursue the author further.

After such a lukewarm beginning, however, the collection picks up with Lovecraft’s next eerie tale “The Tomb” (1922). “The Tomb” is laden with impressions of the Gothic such as a chilling apparition in a graveyard and a mind driven to the brink of madness by unchecked obsession. This tale is imbued with a creepy atmosphere, but the narrative lacks the depths of apprehension leading to terror that sparks life into many of Lovecraft’s other works; all this is soon to come in the collection.

“The Music of Erich Zann” (1922) is a welcome addition to the anthology. The protagonist opens in distress telling the reader of his time as a student of metaphysics, when boarded in a house situated in the mysterious Rue d’Auseil. Having since moved from the property, the narrator now not only fails to locate the street on any modern or ancient map, but strangely all who he asks answer that they have never heard of such a place. The narrator then launches his tale, one in which he becomes darkly obsessed with the weird unearthly music performed by a mute violist residing in the narrator’s building. This story hits numerous beats typical of Lovecraft, such as an outsider student who stumbles upon an unmentionable and cosmic horror, as well as the maddening fixation of the narrator on some otherworldly entity which eventually reveals an awfulness so incomprehensible it leaves his view of the world forever altered. Well-known for narratives that bombard the reader with an assault on the senses, in this piece Lovecraft balances the uncanniness of the Gothic with hints of another unfathomable world beyond human comprehension, all in an auditory attack of ghastly harmonies.

“The Outsider” (1926) is another worthy story in this compilation and it is within this tale that the blending of the Weird and the Gothic comes to the fore. Like “The Alchemist,” “The Outsider” is rife with Gothic tropes from the story’s beginning. It is a tale of psychological terror following the protagonist, his all-consuming loneliness and seclusion, who is hidden away in an impossible labyrinthine castle. The mental toll this isolation takes can be felt in the physicality of the narrator’s surroundings, such as the boundless forest laden with thick fog, in the bones settled in the crypt below the grounds, and the overpowering darkness of a tower’s interior staircase. All these details combine Gothic and Weird elements to produce a tale that is both gripping and haunting.

A further story appropriate for the collection is “Cool Air” (1928) which opens with the intriguing words: “you ask me to explain why I am afraid of a draught of cool air . . .” (123). Such an odd premise cannot help but impulse the reader to continue and uncover the origin of this unusual fear. This tale perfectly displays Lovecraft’s uncanny ability to transform what once appeared innocent and innocuous into something sinister and full of menace. What is more, this narrative benefits from being a stand-alone tale of horror and disgust. Many of the works in this anthology are pulled from the Cthulhu Mythos, which is not a drawback by any means, but the inclusion of Lovecraft’s independent stories displays the author’s expansive range of fiction.

However, the collection ends on a strong text which is not only heavily steeped in Cthulhu lore but was also Lovecraft’s last written work: “The Haunter of the Dark” (1936). This tale, more
than any other in the collection, succeeds best in merging Gothic staples such as a daemonic churchyard and a fearful religious cult with the inexplicable monstrous horror of Lovecraft’s Weird fiction. From the beginning of this wretched tale the reader is confronted with the death of the protagonist, Robert Blake, and is told that many have tried to explain the circumstances of such a terrible occurrence as an unfortunate accident of nature. At this stage, of course, the reader certainly knows better.

Overall *The Gothic Tales of H.P. Lovecraft* is a useful addition to the vast array of collected Lovecraft fiction in circulation. The compendium is successful in presenting the Gothic influences on the author’s Weird tales, yet still recognizes Lovecraft’s unique position in the history of horror writing. Importantly, Aldana Reyes stresses in the introduction the fact that Lovecraft does not simply re-hash Gothic tropes wholesale. Rather these tales are presented with all their Gothic trimmings but that Lovecraftian linchpin, of overwhelming paralytic terror in the face of the impenetrable unknown, is still unmistakably present.

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Claire Quigley is a PhD candidate at the University of Sussex, United Kingdom. Her doctoral thesis examines the transformative possibilities of the Weird in contemporary fiction. She has an MA in Contemporary Literature and Culture from Birkbeck, University of London, United Kingdom, and has a BA in English with History from University College Dublin, Ireland. She was published in the first special edition of *Fantastika Journal* and delivered a variety of papers, including at the annual “Current Research in Speculative Fiction” and the “Memory Studies Association” conferences. Her research interests include the history of Weird fiction, speculative realism and the materiality of memory.
Normal Deviation: A Weird Fiction Anthology.
Edited by Lyle Skains and De Ann Bell.

Review by Michael Wheatley

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Normal Deviation: A Weird Fiction Anthology. Edited by Lyle Skains and DeAnn Bell.


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Review by Michael Wheatley

Normal Deviation: A Weird Fiction Anthology comprises a commendably varied collection of twenty-two short stories. Born from a desire to create an anthology “based on a weird ass picture,” editors Lyle Skains and DeAnn Bell source ekphrastic responses to Valery Sidelnykov’s photograph, “Suitcase” (223). To eschew “clichés and genre tropes,” Skains and Bell then introduce “Third Option Thinking,” an exercise in creative practice whereby contributors conceive three stories, discard the first two, and develop the third (223). Proposing that initial ideas necessarily draw upon previously encountered works, Third Option Thinking intends to encourage new narratives in a manner reminiscent of the Surrealists’ use of automatic writing. Consequently, Normal Deviation contains a range of forms, styles, and genres. Each tale takes a different approach to Sidelnykov’s image and to writing Weird fiction. Some draw on the Old Weird traditions of madness and unreliable narrators; others reflect the New Weird’s interest in the fantastic and the ecological. Yet despite this variance, frequent themes reoccur, including light versus dark, political unrest, and eco-horror.

The most frequent mode within the anthology is perhaps the most difficult: comedy. “On Location,” by Jonathan Howard, both succeeds and fails in opening the collection, providing supernatural scares while being burdened by a less than humorous narrative voice. Adopting the perspective of the photographer of Sidelnykov’s image, the narrator’s attempts at cracking wise, including references to “The Clichéd Photographer Guide,” come at the cost of undermining the unsettling narrative (1). Jesse Rodriguez’s “Prophecy” and Chris Loud’s “A Young Evil Departs” also lack effective humor. Rodriguez writes a metafictional tale where the editors are seeking “the Chosen One hidden among the Third Option Deviation submissions,” while Loud’s work lacks a consistent tone, as a rebellious youth ruminates on the nature of evil alongside exclamations of needing to “GET THE FUCK OUT” (Rodriguez 47; Loud 67).

Buoyed by its characterization, Cath Barton’s “Conjuring Tricks” proves more successful. Imagining two actors, Jan and Melchior, auditioning to be a part of a new work by “The Master,” it provides wonderfully comic stereotypes of aspiring thespians before taking a sinister turn. L. G. Keltner’s “Becoming Death’s Personal Assistant,” however, is the collection’s funniest tale. A wry take on the afterlife reminiscent of Tim Burton’s Beetlejuice (1988), after the protagonist accidentally dies she finds herself working for Death in the bureaucracy of the underworld. With a clear grasp of its sardonic tone, yet with emotional depth beyond the laughter, Keltner’s is a clear comic success.

Also threaded throughout Normal Deviation is the genre of science fiction, first introduced to the collection with DeAnn Bell’s queer romance, “Blind Date.” Possessing a nonlinear, epistolary structure, the narrative drifts between different stages of “bond mates,” Nina and Haven’s relationship, as they orbit a supermassive black hole (6). Despite some initial jargon, Bell’s work flourishes into a tale of two lovers separated by time. Josh Dygert’s “The Judges and the Suitcase,” meanwhile, reminds of John Wyndham’s cozy catastrophes. In the desert outside the fictional town of Discomber, Nevada, two “strange silent aliens” arrive (169). Progressing from first contact to vigils, war to apathy, the tale critiques human reactions to unknown entities and our innate aggressive desires.

However, Science Fiction also houses the weakest story of the collection, Jetse de Vries’s “Where Angels Fear to Tread.” Engaging intertextually with H. P. Lovecraft, Vries also inherits the worst indulgences of Lovecraft’s writings, reaching for absurdity but finding incoherence. A graduate scientific researcher is accepted into Miskatonic University’s Shenzhen research station, an accelerated space where time moves so swiftly that its inhabitants are ceaselessly mutating. As the protagonist himself begins to morph, lines such as “what the hell, I’m a hermaphrodite!” hint at the unfortunate gender politics that follow (25).

Faring better, the collection’s sole Fantasy offering, Olivia Berrier’s “Three and a Half Thoughts,” tells the story of a former royal guard attempting to become an assassin for the Muaaji Shadows. While replete with the genre tropes that Skains and Bell sought to avoid, it paces its world-building efficiently, and the story is no less enjoyable because of its generic roots.

Moving to historical fiction, Sam Hirte-Runtsch’s “Lumière, Noir, et la Valise” takes place against the well-realized backdrop of German-occupied Paris. However, its narrative of two opposing factions loses impact due to its similarity to other tales. “Moirai,” by Molly McLellan, blends Nazi history with Greek myth, as Colonel Stauffenberg finds himself being judged by the Fates. Possessing similar tones of bureaucracy to Keltner, McLellan misses the same heights due to an uncertain tone and a slightly overlong narrative.

The standout historical piece, Emma Venables’s “Good Night, Travel Well,” is set during the days of “World Wars, Great Depressions, and National Socialism” (183). Hamnelore and Silke, a grandmother and her granddaughter, strive to survive in Bolshevik invaded Germany. Adopting the tone of a Grimm fairy
tale, Venables is uncompromising in her exploration of rape, abuse, and trauma. Yet, the familial bonds between Hannelore and Silke are what truly sustain the story.

Indeed, the anthology’s most resonant works largely forgo the narrative inclusion of Sidelnykov’s image, instead drawing on it thematically. Arathi Menon’s “A Suitcase of Small Stories” moves through non-human perspectives, inhabiting the objects found within a man’s suitcase. A stamp, a twig, a safety pin: these curios recount moments of their owner’s life, of missed opportunities and those finally taken before a concluding injection of existential weirdness. “No More Clouds,” by Dan Cox, updates the unreliable narrators of Edgar Allan Poe to explore dementia, with an elderly gentleman taking the train with his partner whom he claims suffers from “manias and delusions” (64). Lastly, “Gemini,” by Charlie Wilson, also engages with the hereditary nature of mental illness, as the protagonist wakes every day to her personality being decided by a white and a black doll inherited from her mother: “they tell me who I’m going to be today” (77).

In a particularly fascinating theme, Nicola Thompson’s “The Fly Catchers” and Clare Weze’s “Take Back Control” both provide ecological takes on Weird fiction. Thompson evokes Jeff VanderMeer’s Southern Reach Trilogy (2014), as a young woman, hunted across the desert, finds refuge in a subterranean kingdom of sentient plants. Reinventing classic Old Weird tropes to reflect modern anxieties, here the human relationship to nature is intrinsically ugly. Meanwhile, in a tremendous work of flash fiction, Weze uses the life of a moth to ruminate on the afterlife, fairy tales, and changing bodies: “when you finally see the fairy tale for what it is, there’s nothing but relief” (151).

Finally, the collection’s political stories all find their mark. Though occasionally circuitous in its structure and dialogue, Joanna Michal Hoyt’s “The Last Protest” critiques our current democratically-divided dystopias, as two protestors set about undoing the damage caused by “the Directorate.” “The Lost and the Found,” by Amanda Marples, imagines cities where homeless children are “Lost.” A woman named “the Director” rescues these children and takes them to her home, where they are fed, clothed, and housed, so long as they work and perform for tourists. With shades of China Miéville and Margaret Atwood, Marples provides an excellent capitalist critique wrapped up in a Young Adult package.

Josephine Bruni’s “Brexit,” however, is undoubtedly the strongest story of the whole collection. A politically-charged attack on British patriotism, fears of immigration, and the Brexit saga, it follows an Italian immigrant who “had left nepotism and bribes, the cocky self-assurance of a governing body full of contempt for the poor,” to find a new life in England (128). Following the protagonist working in a coffee shop on the eve and aftermath of the Brexit vote, Bruni’s tale could not be more removed from traditional conceptions of Weird fiction, but remains incredibly moving, poignant, and urgent.

Unfortunately, the closing stories end the collection on a relatively moot note. “One Way Out,” by Dean Knight, suggests a Climate Fiction narrative, but like Vreis before him it proves incomprehensible, with an unclear sense of character and place. Lyle Skains concludes the anthology with “To the After,” creating an entire dystopian landscape complete with culture, societies, and subterranean methods of living. However, the interspersed narrative of aliens cycling through different species risks this final story juggling too many ideas.

Overall, Normal Deviation is a success. At times, the conceit of Sidelnykov’s image proves an unfortunate bridle, returning the stories to the same core concept which Third Option Thinking may have undone. As contributors attempt to narratively integrate the image into their works, “Suitcase” begins to become a cliché itself, its two robed figures wearing unfortunately thin. However, the quality of the anthology’s strongest works makes up for this occasional repetition. “Brexit,” “Gemini,” “The Fly Catchers,” and “Take Back Control” each draw on Sidelnykov’s work thematically, using the photograph as a launching point for their own narratives. Considering the stories individually, Normal Deviation does forget its own position as a Weird fiction anthology. However, taken as a whole, it is a wonderfully weird journey worth taking.

About the author
Michael Wheatley is a creative writing and practice-based PhD student at Royal Holloway, University of London, UK. Through creative and critical research, his thesis re-evaluates Weird fiction as an ecological mode that can help us engage with our current climate crisis. His debut collection of short stories, The Writers’ Block (BlackPear Press, 2019), explores mental health, the creative process, and the perception of the tortured artist. Further creative and critical work has been published in numerous literary journals and online magazines.
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