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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.[1] 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 whether he wants to or not, he crosses the First Threshold as he takes his first step onto a decrepit bus. To Campbell, the First Threshold inevitably lay outside the safe environment of which the protagonist had hitherto existed; "the folk mythologies populate with deceitful, dangerous presences every desert place outside the normal traffic of the village . . . the regions of the unknown are free fields for the projection of unconscious content" (78-79).

In correspondence with the Campbellian structure, Lovecraft sets his stories in dilapidated, backward New England towns, off the major routes of trade and travel and seldom visited by outsiders. Innsmouth is "dying and half-deserted," "not shown on common maps or listed in recent guidebooks" and described at length as a place of crumbling churches, abandoned wharves and general decrepitude (383, 385). The Lovecraftian setting, at least, aligns itself with Campbell's supernatural world: it is at best passingly familiar, recognizable modern elements becoming a haunting contrast with the strangeness of the town at large. What, then, of the narrative events?

Campbell's First Threshold, in Lovecraftian terms, is a confrontation with some monster of the *mythos*, either indirect (revolving around a reliable report or undeniable evidence of its existence), or direct (a physical encounter). In many of Lovecraft's stories, the narrative advances no further; the protagonist cracks at the first sight of the *mythos* creature or phenomenon. If he does go on, he is consumed for a time in horror, before setting forth on what Campbell called the road of trials: the arduous journey toward the final test, the ordeal from which the Campbellian hero returns with knowledge applicable to their familiar "real" world. The protagonist of "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" escapes from 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.[2] 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 role-playing 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.

2 See discussions of the *World of Darkness* games by Jøn (2001) and Tobias (2006) for an exploration of the appeal in playing the monster.

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 Peterson 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 resolve 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 Lem 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 which accurately reflects the hopelessness of Lovecraft has hitherto been a process of trial and error. It is far from impossible to adapt Lovecraft's narrative style into a game mode. However, game adaptations of Lovecraft require attention to the fundamental matter of what winning looks like, and how players are encouraged to win. Game creators must ensure they define the right kind of victory, encourage the right kind of behavior, and do it all without making the game appear arbitrarily unwinnable and thus betray all principles of good design.

Call of Cthulhu struggles here, aligning mechanical incentives with an outcome that is far from commonplace in Lovecraft's fiction, although there is room within the roleplaying mode to realign and redefine the desired outcome. *Dark Corners of the Earth* similarly struggles: it adjusts the experience of the first-person shooter in a Lovecraftian direction but not far enough, as the experience of play sooner or later devolves into stock gameplay territory. *Arkham Horror*, however, has succeeded, by transforming the whole activity of play into an encounter with the cosmic, the unknowable, the arcane and the alien, in the form of its self-playing mechanics that hint at a guiding intelligence behind the activities of non-player agents. The game recreates the aesthetic experience of Lovecraft's protagonists as best it can, allowing it to create the sense of draining, Pyrrhic victory experienced by the most successful of Lovecraft's protagonists.

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