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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."[1] 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

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).

Though the experience Chloé describes is relatively rare, 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 thematics 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" (1943), 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-problematized 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 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 *en*Weirding 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 *en*Weirded to reveal the chaotic space underlying our construction of place.

The *en*Weirding 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 *en*Weirding, 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 game 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 "Lovecraftan narrative" in a process that contributes to the overall *en*Weirding 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 few 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 Chloé 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 place 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 thematics 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. 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.

Image 3: Fig 3: Something terrifying lurks beyond the doorway (player photograph).

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 *en*Weird place, 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 *en*Weirding. 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 *en*Weirded, 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 *en*Weirding 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 *en*Weirding 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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