# Conspiracy Hermeneutics

## The Secret World as Weird Tale

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> *...he began to read into the odd angles a mathematical significance which seemed to offer vague clues regarding their purpose. (Lovecraft, "The Dreams in the Witch House," 2005, p. 303)*

Through close consideration of the multiplayer online game The Secret World (2012), this paper works towards a definition of "Weird Games" as a basis for advocating the aesthetic potential of Weird for digital games. The paper forms part of a more expansive project to examine the uses and formal specificities of Gothic and Weird in digital games. While the Weird Tale shares some features with Gothic, it has a very distinctive form that is beautifully summed by H.P. Lovecraft:

> *The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space.*
> *(Cited Joshi, 1990, p. 6. My italics.)*

The Weird Tale may be regarded broadly as a part of twentieth-century populist or even trash writing, but, as this special edition of Well-Played attests, it also has a place in digital games and like

Gothic it crosses genres and (plat)forms. Indicative of its presence in Indie games are: Alone (Greenwood Games,2013), developed for the immersive context provided by Oculus Rift providing many opportunities for breaking the fourth wall; Dear Esther (thechineseroom, 2012), which pushed horror grammar towards atmosphere rather than action and The Binding of Isaac (Headup Games, 2011). To these I add examples from prior, bigger budget games such as the Lovecraftian homage Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem (Silicon Knights, 2002), the early entries in the Silent Hill series (particularly 1 and 2) and the Twin Peaks-like Deadly Premonition (Access Games, 2010/2012), where a real-time mechanic contributes to the creation of its version of Weird. More than simply adaptation, Weird is exerting an influence on the formation of innovative contemporary game grammar, largely in contention with established conventions. The analytic framework around this assertion is based in an investigation of the ways that the participatory and rule-based nature of digital game form shapes, at a fundamental level, the ways that the Weird tale manifests in games and I will truncate the term to "Weird", which further helps relocate it outside text-based literature and places emphasis on its affective coordinates. As such, the paper works towards the proposition that there are certain properties of digital games that are capable of generating a new dimension to the affective experience of Weird.

MMORPG The Secret World (Funcom, 2012) provides a fitting example of the ludic adaptation of the Weird Tale and offers a means of exploring the adaptive possibilities within games for Weird fiction. As will be shown, in TSW these possibilities emerge through the specific use of intertextuality which is pivotal in the production of what I will call the "Conspiracy Hermeneutic". As a disturbance in the symbolic order generated by the specific nature of computer-based media, the conspiracy hermeneutic is aimed to create for players a strong sensation of Weird. Central to the argument of this paper is the idea that at the conjunction of participatory game media and the characteristic features of Weird fiction there lurks a powerful means of fundamental disturbance that has transformational and critical potency. Such potential is ably illustrated by the derangement

of schematic and conventionalised boundaries between the signification of fact and fiction. Such derangement produces a vast and dizzying network of looped refractions and recursive intertexts that are intended to induce vertigo and to scatter asunder the coherence and stability of the symbolic order. Working with, and undermining, our in-built will to mastery and knowledge, the Weird of the game carves a frisson of doubt into any comforting sense of rational certainty and authority. It does this by casting precarious the base distinction between fiction and fact and thereby causing the frameworks by which we assign meaning to fall into disarray. We may have physical mastery over the game's interface, but unlike the affective trajectory of standard games, that mastery is frequently belittled and devalued in the face of monumental, obscured and occulted powers – even if with a rather less melancholic affect than the case with games such as Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem or Limbo (Playdead, 2010). TSW is therefore trying to innovate on "action-based" game grammar in an open world setting rather than reframe it elsewhere or use a more linear, closed world, as is the case with Limbo, Eternal Darkness or Alan Wake (Remedy Entertainment, 2010). In blending together H.P. Lovecraft's critical attempts to locate the sphere of Weird with a type of paranoiac, everything-is-true reading that underlies conspiracy theory and Graham Harman's "Weird Realism" (2012), this paper claims that Weird has an aptitude for ludic participation that is most apparent in its power to recast tired regimes of player sovereignty. Seeded from Harman's tree, this paper shows that Weird becomes present where the medium of games is used against itself.

The Weird Tale can appear hard to distinguish from other related genres such as Fantasy, Supernatural, Horror, Gothic and Science Fiction; often based on taste, critics tend to overly tribalise such imagination-based fiction (much as occurs with Rock music). The value of such labour is not so much that we can beat our friends in late night arguments about what stories belong to which tribes (as fun as that might be), but instead lies in the help that such distinctions can provide in the identification of the more subtle threads, tangential intertexts and elusive affective intentions of Weird fiction. In their

introduction to Realms of Fantasy (1983), Malcolm Edwards and Robert Holdstock outline five settings for stories that fall into the Fantasy, Supernatural, Horror, Gothic and Science Fiction camp: stories set in the past; those set in present-day lost worlds; those on other planets; those in the distant future and those in fantasy Earths quite separate from our own (but with affinities to it) (Edwards & Holdstock 1983, p. 7). Weird does not however fit neatly with any of these, and the fact that it does not tells us a great about the weirdness of Weird. Principally, Weird fiction takes place in the here and now: there is no comforting distancing device of placing events in the past or the future, or indeed in a constructed "secondary creation" such as Middle Earth or Azeroth. Equally, Weird is devoid of the epic qualities so common in Fantasy and has no principled, valiant or intrepid heroes such as Aragorn or Conan, nor even an anti-hero like Moorcock's Elric. There is never too much action, bar perhaps some wild flailing about and, possibly, some running away. Weird might therefore be said to be in its best sense the antithesis of epic fantasy and technological optimism: tech-noir, for example, is marked off by its Weird negativism and pessimism. While I have rather confidently asserted its differences, Joshi cautions that "the weird tale…did not (and perhaps does not now) exist as a genre but as a consequence of a world view….If the weird tale exists now as a genre, it may only be because critics and publishers have deemed it so by fiat." (Joshi 1990, p. 1).

This does not mean that newer, altered uses of the term Weird are not legitimate or interesting, far from it. The adoption of the Anglo-Saxon word "Wyrd" for example has rich resonance with outsider art, mystical and/or occult fiction and shamanistic practices. However, the definition of "Weird" in play in this paper and its address in the context of games is guided by Lovecraft, mainly to provide a starting point for understanding its presence in games and its existing and possible relationships with the games and game form. Joshi suggests that it is Lovecraft's insistence on psychological realism that leads it away from Gothic; although in an overly tidy manoeuvre he locates Gothic temporally within novels written in late 18th and early 19th century. While ETA Hoffman's (1776-1822) short tales

might be said to be characterised by psychological realism, tellingly their distinction is apparent. For example, the plot of "The Sandman" (1816) revolves around the fatal, conspiratorial misreading of events on the part of the mad central character, thereby framing the supernatural as subjective and not as a property of objective reality. This diegetically grounded "conspiracy hermeneutic" is therefore a feature in keeping with the Gothic, rather than fully occupying the domain of Weird. Specifically, Weird is a property of reality; it is not an effect of psychology, even though it might be taken as symptomatic of a character's imagination by that or other characters. The supernatural in the context of Weird is not metaphysical or mystical, even though it might appear to have such properties. As Joshi says, it is "not ontological but epistemological: it is only our ignorance of certain laws that creates the illusion of supernaturalism" (Joshi 1990, p. 7); as is evident in Lovecraft's "post-Eucildean-post-Einsteinian-post-human tale" "The Dreams in the Witch House". Adding a further dimension, appropriately, to this conception, Harman places emphasis on the otherness of real when explaining the value of Lovecraft's Weird, "reality itself is weird because reality itself is incommensurable with any attempt to represent or measure it…when it comes to grasping reality, illusion and innuendo are the best we can do" (Harman 2012, p. 51). Harman insists that Lovecraft is a writer of great allusive subtlety rather than a literalist genre hack, while Joshi claims that the appearance of Lovecraft's work in the pulp magazine Weird Tales may have made Weird into a genre but caused "the contemptuous dismissal of all weird work on the part of academic critics." (Joshi 1990, p. 3) The appearance, then, of Weird in games has much to live up to, mixing, as it does, horror with allusive intimations of the dark sublime. Weird clearly has the power to appeal across the pulp-elite divide and like the Weird tale, digital games have been lauded as wasteful, populist adolescent pulp and a new, highly sophisticated art form.

In his essay, Supernatural Horror in Literature (1973) Lovecraft lists some characteristics that help identify the properties of Weird. "Indeed we may say that this school [romantic, semi gothic, quasi moral] still survives; for to it clearly belong such of our contemporary

horror-tales as specialise in events rather than atmospheric details, address the intellect rather than the impressionistic imagination, cultivate a luminous glamour rather than a malign tensity or psychological verisimilitude, and take a definite stand in sympathy with mankind and its welfare. It has its undeniable strength, and because the 'human element' commands a wider audience than does the sheer artistic nightmare. If not quite so potent as the latter, it is because a diluted product can never achieve the intensity of a concentrated essence" (Lovecraft 1973, p. 43). We can summarise these as: atmosphere over events; malign tensity; psychological verisimilitude; appeal to the impressionistic imagination; and a lack of any sympathy for humanity. These are helpful coordinates through which to assess any claims to Weird in games) and as a lens through which to evaluate TSW as Weird fiction.

In setting the scene for the analysis of TSW as a ludic addition to the pantheon of Weird tales, it is noteworthy that prototypical Weird tales have made use of codes and ludic elements. As John Peterson (2012) has argued, Stevenson's Treasure Island (1883) contains various elements that have proved important to games. But an important pre-Lovecraft Weird tale to which we will later is Poe's short story 'The Gold Bug' (1843). As with Treasure Island, maps are central search for "Phat Lewt" that serves as engine for its plot. Crucially, this is a story based on a cryptographic puzzle which works to involve the reader as puzzle solver above and beyond narration. This extends therefore beyond that of the usual code of enigma that Barthes' S/Z (2004) claims is integral to story-telling[1]: the enigma is not solved simply by 'reading on', forward through the text, but instead the reader has to put some work in, becoming more than a reader. The enigmatic dimension to storytelling, reading and games proves important for the discussion of the conspiracy hermeneutic of TSW. Suffice to say for the present that connections with games are seeded into the Weird tale from early-on and it is this capacity that

1. "Let's designate as hermeneutic code…all those units whose function it is to articulate in various ways a question, its response, and the variety of chance events which can either formulate the question or delay its answer; or even, constitute an enigma and lead to its solution." (Barthes, 2004, p. 17).

contemporary games regularly mined. In its highly-reflexive and baroque way TSW invokes a complex web of literary and popular cultural sources as a means of producing Weird and in so doing constructs its conspiracy hermeneutic by attempting to dissolve the boundaries between Myth, Fiction and Reality.

It is part of normative game grammar for players to act on the situation that a game presents them with – the term "player" is predicated on this supposition. A fundamental feature of games is their arrays of feedback systems through which game and player respond to one another – a player acts in response to a situation and the game responds, often in ways that lead a player to understand their action as either helpful or unhelpful towards achieve a winning condition (or at least not failing in some way). In this sense players expect games to be predictable, rule-based entities; players suppose feedback and we can consider feedback as an "event" in the computing and design processes of game, which grates against Lovecraft's coordinates of Weird. In addition, what the player is able to do in a game, the possibilities open to them are yoked to other pre-scripted narrative events that are causally linked. Games are therefore "event" heavy even in those of the most ambient of games. In games, the entire construction of place, time and mise-en-scène are dovetailed with affordances for action both in terms what the player is able to do and how the game feeds back. Games then are largely event-based, and, more than that, events are very often predictable and regulatory. In this sense the logical and purposive construction of games, with their stable currencies and balances, and our pleasure in their regularity and predictability, is very far removed from the anti-human irrational dissonance of Weird. TSW inevitably draws on this normative vocabulary and indeed formal characteristic of games. As a MMORPG, players build their character's powers through the accumulation of skill points gained from killing enemies and running quests of various types. In skilling up, new areas of the map open up to players and more difficult quests and dungeons become available. The quest and dungeon structure that constitutes the principle mode of gameplay are event-based, even if there are many atmospheric devices throughout the game. Regularity and predictability are built

in to game-play so that players are able to plan the trajectory of their character and manage risk; the game provides much information to help the player in these regards (maps, location of quests, health bars, "xp" tracking, numeric hit statistics etc). Like many games, there is an ethos of building knowledge and skill towards an increase in purchase power in the game's world. There is however a considerable attempt in TSW to shift the game away from the traditional dungeon-crawler, where gathering loot is emphasized in a very clearly coded fantasy world, towards a play experience that has depth and atmosphere. The game is thickly encrusted in a web of atmospheric intertextual details, drawn from a huge range of sources, thereby acting as a Lovecraftian counter weight to the event based form of games. In weighting the game against events towards intertextually laden atmospheric detail, it begins to coincide with Harman's definition of "Weird Realism", where the medium of games is used against itself.

Unlike other MMORPGs games such as Star Wars: The Old Republic (BioWare, 2011-present) or World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004-present), TSW is set in a version of the "real" world in which the supernatural and the occult have become manifest, making the familiar strange as is instrumental to Weird and current in popular texts such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997-2003), True Blood (2008- ) or Penny Dreadful (2014-present). The real world context helps a move closer towards Loveacraft's requirement for "psychological verisimilitude". There is no doubt that the supernatural exists and that lack of ambiguity in the game frames it squarely as "occult fantasy", thereby shoring up a basic distinctions between real and imaginary, although some features of the game do chip away at these markers. In terms of existing game grammar, the game overturns the expected RPG alignments of "lawful good" and "lawful bad" or neutral and chaotic and aims for far greater moral ambiguity. It is hard to judge if the three institutionalised factions (Templar, Dragon and Illuminati) are good or evil, neutral, lawful or something quite different. All three have at least dubious moral standing, the details of which are well beyond the sphere of knowledge of the player-character. This works against the usual "knowable" and quantified world of system-based games. The

factions' shaded history provides a further layer of enigma that plays into the conspiracy hermeneutic. Psychological verisimilitude arises out of this in congealing a sense that the player-character is simply a mere speck on vast opaque canvas. Here different rhetorics of monstrosity crowd into the scene and there are many and various intimations that call into question the "humanity" of the individual factions and what we might as player-characters do under their aegis. Although operating in secret, the various factions are in conflict, struggling to gain or retain power even as other forces are seeking to destroy humanity. This precarious situation is the premise on which the atmospherics of "malign tensity" are created as well as providing motivation for the standard MMORPG practice of PvP.

The format of PvP in the game has three flavours (termed Battlefields, Warzones and Fightclubs) and there is no world-based PvP or specialist server. Warzones differ little from standard "Capture the Flag" and "King of the Hill" formats; while the persistent Battlezone offers something different in that faction buffs can be won that reach into PvE, arguably representing an invisible/occulted force that underlines the game's conspiracy milieu. The player-character awakens at the start of the game to find that they have acquired strange a power that emanates from their body and are called to join one of the factions: Templar, Dragon or Illuminati. Players have already chosen a faction (based in the first instance on little knowledge of the nature of that faction) in a previous starting screen. Character name, look, race and gender are also chosen from set options, choice-making that helps bind player to character. In terms of the player-character narrative arc, joining a faction is justified as their only option if they are to develop their nascent powers and help in the fight against the forces seeking to destroy humanity. There are no playable fantasy races dividing the game off from other Science Fiction or Fantasy-based games: all available characters are coded as human, are gendered with wide range of racial characteristics available. In addition the game is very fashion-conscious, with clothes and accessories stores in a vast range of styles available – and paid for with in-game or out of game currency – to help players express themselves in the game world. The world might be

in peril yet players are strongly encouraged to look stylish in the face of adversity. The palpable sense of humanity that is created through these (inevitably normative) elements is aimed at bridging the gap between player and character but differ from the polarisation of human and monstrosity of much Fantasy fiction (in games as elsewhere). Creating a bond between player and character and at least intimating something of the vulnerability of the human is, however, important if the full effect of Weird is to come into play.

In the game's realisation of the Lovecraftian Weird, in particular the "creation of atmosphere", "malign tensity" and "appeal to impressionist imagination", audio has a strong contribution to make. Central to all these elements is the generation of the mood of pensiveness and foreboding which helps players read malign tensity into the game's visual context. The branding motif of the game is a clutch of notes played on the high end of the piano in which lies a dissonant note resonant of disturbance and grating against the laws of the human harmonic scale. Music also deepens the game's sense of scale: it opens up impressionistically unknown dimensions and in a hallucinogenic way mythologises events and actions (largely this is actioned through the use of "epic" and "cosmic" orchestral and electronic music found in relevant film genres). The high piano key motif becomes accompanied by a high, soft, soaring yet distant human voice (connoting both the human and the angelic) or the scything sounds of dulcimer, evoking John Barry's haunting theme to the TV Show The Persuaders (1971), to which are added a low-end horn section that threatens "something below" and a soft insistent drum beat that inexorably counts down to doom and suggests a brewing storm. Ambient sound in the game's Gothicised version of London builds a sense of place, yet the cawing of crows forewarn malice calling on Poe's raven harbinger (ravens/crows are everywhere in the early part of the game). Audio, story and graphics each pull their weight in building a palpable sense of tension.

While ostensibly the game world is signified as the world we live in, distortions in the space and time continuum are evident from early on giving the otherwise Gothic signification a science fiction

feel, yet nonetheless creating the vertigo that's emblematic of Weird. Very early on in TSW the player is treated to a cutscene where they stand on a tube train platform but look out into the infinite void of cosmic space. This spectacle scale treated the spectacle of is intended to give generate a sense of vertigo, physically, psychologically and metaphysically. As established in Lovecraft's Story "The Dreams in the Witch House" (1932), non-Euclidean geometry alongside juxtapositions in scale become a sure fire means of raising Weird. It is in this mode that atmosphere and psychological verisimilitude take centre stage in the game – even if both are generated through the evocation of (oddly) familiar signs of Weird. If the game did not use such devices so reflexively in the context of the grammar of an MMORPG and as a means of undermining the position of the conventional hero, then the experience offered by the game would be simply quotidian. However, there is a problem that arises between the expectations of player agency and mastery in the context of an MMORPG and the intention of Weird. Let Lovecraft be our guide, once again.

Walter Gilman, the central character of Lovecraft's "The Dreams in the Witch House'" (1932), is beleaguered by dreams and haunted by increasingly alienating sounds and visions. Rather than the active hero, he is largely passive and terrified throughout the story, occupying the role of "false hero" – unable to act, to save the day, as is common to Gothic fiction. Gilman becomes a somnambulant participant in a satanic pact and when he finally finds the wherewithal to react to prevent the sacrifice of a child he is bested and at the end of the story he lies dead with his heart eaten out. Alongside this passivity, and indeed by virtue of it, Gilman is involuntarily flung beyond normative space and time, boundaries between waking and dreaming collapse in an affective context of paralysis and bewilderment. These are signified by disarranged perspectives, impossible geometries and "unplumbed voids" causing certainties to fall in a welter of unresolved enigmas. Compounded by drumming cacophonies of sounds and dim memories of agreements without agency, Gilman is left dumfounded and confused. He is subject to an occult conspiracy that he has no grasp of and thereby becomes

an emblem of paralysis and involuntarism. This affective palette is counter to the normative, positivist, trajectory inherent in most games. Given that human activity, technology and computing are often integral to a belief in progress, it isn't too far off the pace to argue that Weird in games work against their own medium (or least the discourse that surrounds that medium).

The experiences of gaining mastery, problem-solving and improving skill are principal pleasures for players that drive the design of many digital games. This is a problem for games that follow Gothic or Weird pathways and particularly so given that the "false hero" is so fundamental to them. As Manuel Aguirre (2013) has written, "A key to Gothic thus resides in its centring the flawed character as protagonist…[while] the standard hero of traditional tales is often demoted to a helpless or passive stance." (Aguirre 2013, p. 11) Even in TSW's opening cut scene, the player-character's newly found power comes at the price of visions and dreams that disturb the borders of knowability, reality and fixed identity. When considered in the round, the representation of humanity conjured by the game is far from "good" or heroic; humans are either in a state of banal denial or foolishly questing for the acquisition of knowledge and power over others. This is evident in the design of the game's PvP supports. While PvP differs little from the usual structures that support for players a sense of mastery and skill, in their act of "killing" other player-characters from other factions while the world burns, morally ambiguity is already raised – more so because of the general context of moral ambiguity that the games constructs. Nonetheless at some level the "human" is still valued in all its fallen and confused state; it is even defined by such. This conception provides the door for the game's entry into the types of affect and atmosphere associated with romanticism, pathos and tragedy. To this is added a distinctly Schopenhauerian pessimism, much as would be expected of any text that makes a claim on Weird. In this even though perhaps obliquely, the game is at least somewhat consonant with Lovecraft's Weird counsel for a lack of sympathy for the human. This is apparent and contextually drawn out through the presence of the other Lovecraftian components in the absence of anything more than short term

resolutions, the absence of redemption and the blatant presence of entropy. There is of course as an MMORPG just the endless return of only temporarily slain monsters and striving for more skill points. The tensions and oscillations between game form/grammar and Weird are now explored through a closer look at gameplay and the way that it constructs its conspiracy hermeneutic.

We'll start with a general sense of the design and experience of the game space, seen through the lens of Lovecraftian Weird (players of the table-top RPG Call of Cthulhu may well be very afraid to look through said glass!). Players find their first mission on Solomon Island, located off the coast of New England where, in a geographically appropriate manner, there is an outbreak of Lovecraftian Mythos. In this area the game draws on a very specific and highly influential regional accent of the American Gothic to create its ludic version of Weird. The ingénue player-character arrives in the area's main town, Kingsmouth, to discover a running battle between living and dead townsfolk – seemingly a classic zombie-apocalypse situation. Players are requisitioned by the local Sheriff to run errands as well as to fulfil the factional requirement to investigate the nature of this manifestation. It soon becomes plain that zombies are the least of the town's troubles and symptomatic of a far more dangerous threat to humanity. While later the player will be sent to investigate other locations, Egypt for example, the player spends a lengthy period in the New England area, pursuing a range of goals and engaging with a range of appropriate myths and texts. The game is much more open than, for example, Alan Wake and players are free to quest, indulge in exploration, shop, gather, or fight other factions. Players can also easily visit other areas of the game-world by virtue of a kind of fast travel device known as Agartha, a kind of mystic, faster-than-light underground railway system wherein a distortion of space-time continuum is harnessed generously to enable players to travel quickly and easily. Accumulative, slow-burn character development and world-building is where emphasis lies in this game and the sense of progress that this implies does sit incongruously with the intention of "Weird", although unlike most MMORPGs there is no expression of level that consolidates the progression system. Nonetheless a

polyphony of Gothic accents are collated as a means of creating a strong sense of "worldness" for players; and indeed that world is never what it appears to be; nor are players ever afforded full revelation of what governs the world. Polyphony abides there in the range of signification mobilised by the game, creating a fabric of competing narratives and intertexts that add complexity and mitigate across narrative closure: in addition to American Gothic, we encounter Steampunk/Victorian Gothic, Eastern mysticism and martial arts, witchcraft and various versions of folk magic, Occultism and occult systems, ranging from John Dee through to post-Quantum theory Chaos Magic. All these intertexts also help to turn away from "events" as primary towards imaginative engagement and atmosphere produced by enigma and textual richness.

The New England area locates the game firmly within the literature of Weird as an offspring of American Gothic and this location is ripe with stories and histories well-suited to a strongly accented Weird theme. As in Magic Realism, myth and reality are interlaced. What the player encounters in Kingsmouth is a catastrophe that has objective reality in diegetic terms. It is not a subjective projection of a delirious author, as with Alan Wake which revisits a similar scenario in the film In the Mouth of Madness (John Carpenter, 1994). As suits the formal specificity of a multiplayer online game, players of TSW fight collectively and ostensibly for the survival of the human race, within which the player plays their small part by trying to make meaning from their place and limited agency in this world of enigma and obscurities. TSW is a game woven from many fragments and in that sense it is consciously multiply authored. The game's environment is testimony to this. The closeness of the name Kingsmouth to the Innsmouth of Lovecraft's short stories 'The Call of Cthulhu' and 'The Shadow over Innsmouth' is enough to alert the literate player to an important legacy requisite to the American Gothic and to Lovecraft's "fictionalized New England landscape" (Joshi 1999, p. xvii). Entry into the town also reveals street names, visible collectively on the in-game map, such as Dunwich Road, Arkham Avenue (probably more widely-known in the contemporary imaginary from the Asylum of the Batman franchise, yet a key

fictional place in Lovecraft's geographic mythos) and Lovecraft Lane. Other popular American Gothic texts are evoked in the names of landmarks such as Poe Cove and Elm Street. A short trip down the Dunwich Road confirms that we are knee-deep in Lovecraft's Mythos: boxes of rotting squid lie abandoned yet half eaten on a zombie-infested street, and if we follow the trail of empty boxes we arrive at the sea, to be greeted by a large tentacular sea monster, who seems to regard the player as a large and tasty squid. The boxes state in bright lettering: "Fresh from the deep to your door" and "Product of the USA" – subtlety suggesting, rather against the ethos of Lovecraft's cosmic horror, that human activity may well be implicated in the plight of the town. The first group task (the Polaris dungeon) that the player encounters is, of course, to defeat an enormous tentacle sea-monster: Cthulhu in all but name (although Lovecraft aficionados might suggest that given the location it should really be the much less well-publicized Dagon). The game is thickly populated with many and diverse intertexts. The effect of which is to create a "rich" text that helps to interpellate the player into the game space by making use of their prior knowledge of horror and gothic texts. In this the game is tailored to a genre literate audience (genre is applicable in terms of Gothic, Weird and Horror as well as MMORPGs/RPGs) who already have an investment in the subject matter.

In making use of Weird's psychological verisimilitude, TSW achieves a distinctive blend of fact and fiction. This is underlined through the structures and properties of conspiracy theory and the type of reading that is intrinsic to conspiracy theory. The game, and indeed the player, forges connections that traverse usual boundaries, paying little attention to their signifying frameworks. All signs regardless of their status – iconic, symbolic or indexical; real or imaginary – are texts to be read and decoded as components of a great hidden (occulted) system. The game environment is itself a "text" to be read in this way, as is clear from an early quest "The Kingsmouth Code" in which the player must seek out signs inscribed into the fabric of the town's infrastructure left by the founding fathers of the town, who were Illuminati members and which indicate their secret

activities and quest for power. Games rely heavily on properties of the game space to convey story, thereby placing the player in the role of investigator. Playing any game requires of the player, at some stage, acts of close reading. In the context of a game drawing on the Gothic, close reading is not only constitutive of a ludic mode of engagement but also fuses that engagement to thematic syntax. The requirement of close reading has in particular a special resonance with Poe's Weird detective, Dupin. The investigative act of gathering and attending to fragments in order construct story is a central mechanism of the game and one that is infused with aspects of a conspiracy-style approach to reading. "Lore" fragments are scattered around the gamespace, often hidden in hard to locate places or encountered randomly while undertaking other tasks. These provide an extensive back story, often contextualising places, people and situations. If collected, players can then read, for example, about the plight of the trawler The Lady Margaret at dock in Kingsmouth's harbour, what its crew encountered at sea and brought back to the town, all delivered in the same peculiarly encrusted enunciative style of Lovecraft's writing. This story arc dovetails into another strand of lore entitled, "The Fog", a clear homage to Stephen King's novel, detailing the arrival of the fog in Kingsmouth. Players can also learn about the how the town was founded by members of the Illuminati and the presence of the character Beaumont who sought to steal from them, providing is a large cog in the main story quest chain. There are still many enigmatically charged gaps however; the lore fragments never quite give the whole story – just limited perspectives and are never authorial, omniscient statements.

In addition to the use of lore as a coded means of storytelling, the area is also peopled by some staple figures of American mythology, each of whom have their individual story and add colour. Sandy "Moose" Jansen is free-wheeling, philosopher-biker, repurposing himself as explosives expert. Daniel Boon is an old-fashioned, modern-day Cowboy positioned to advise the ingénue player in their fight against evil. Norma Creed is an old-lady with a smoking rifle and a gritty attitude, resembling Lillian Gish's character seeing evil off her land in The Night of the Hunter (1955). The horror writer, fast becoming

a staple figure of American Gothic is also represented, in homage to King yet also to Alan Wake. Here however he appears as Sam Kreig, a hard-drinking, world-sour writer notably, with regard to Wake, living in the Kingsmouth light house. Not only does TSW refer to a plethora of literary and cinematic Weirdly texts, but also to other games with a bearing a similar cast. Story here is a multi-dimensional assemblage of fragments and remnants, and is more powerful, far-reaching and enigmatically rich for this. It is more than simply a means of giving meaning to progress bars, instead it is a complex and carefully constructed tapestry aimed to locate the player in terms of place and time, geared toward encouraging a close engagement with the game as text. Like the conspiracy theorist, the player of The Secret World is invited to put together an assemblage of signs in order to ascertain and elaborate on underlying patterns – the Weird world of conspiracy "Everything is True", as we are told in Shea and Wilson's conspiracy-based The Illuminatus! Trilogy (1998). Nowhere is this made more apparent than in the game's investigation quests.

There are a limited range of different types of quest activities available for players, clearly designed to appeal to different play styles. Some involve stealth-style missions, others collection-type activities, while others send the players down a central story-arc, but the most innovative and Weirdly laden are the investigation quests. These conjure with materials similar to those that at work in Poe's tales of ratiocination. Of all the quest types these are most well-suited to the "gamification" of Weird. There are several in each geographical zone of the game. One example of many is recounted here but I have to warn you, dear reader, that I am spoiling the game here in the name of analytical investigation. The quest is undertaken in the Egypt zones and is entitled "Angels and Demons". The player seeks to find out if a company operating in the zone is a front for something more "murky". On entering their offices, the player encounters a dead employee, an ID card can be retrieved from the corpse. This provides a clue to gaining access to the man's email system and it is delivered as a type of riddle, reading: "My surname is common in classic literature. And my clearance level is the key." The ID card shows that the man's name is H. Glass and his clearance

level is: Gold-bug. 'The Gold-bug' is a short-story by Poe written to be published in episodes in 1893; players are more likely to find this out by googling, using the game's inbuilt web-browser. Poe's story has within it a cryptographic code, made up by Captain Kidd, to disguise the location of his treasure in written form. The player must codify "Glass" to gain entry to the computer. This quest is neatly emblematic of the way that TSW translates the Weird fiction into digital game form, without losing sight of either its investigative and over-determined hermeneutic dimension nor its wider textual heritage and at the same time goes some way towards using the medium of games against itself to create at least for some players a Weird sense of paradox and ambiguity. The choice of 'The Gold-bug' for the quest here is interesting. Not only is the Gold-bug part of the family of scarab beetles, relevant to therefore to the Egyptian location, but the story has a puzzle at its heart, a cryptographic puzzle that Poe challenged readers to solve. In many such missions, the player must gain a good knowledge of the geography and have a decent graphics processor in order to get a good view of all the signs and notices that litter the gamespace, as with the mission 'The Kingsmouth Code' mentioned above. In addition to the game's wiki, the in-game internet browser is designed to help players make sense of the more abstruse clues, looking up verse and chapter in the Bible for example in the case of 'The Kingsmouth Code', or hunting down the source of The Gold-bug. In bringing the internet into the game the borders of fiction and fact are softened, in accord with a central plank of Gothic fiction and strengthening the sense of conspiracy. This is exemplified when undertaking a mission to find out Sam Kreig's backstory where the player is channeled into looking for a clue on a cover of one of his books that can only be found online. One of advantages of the blurring of fact and fiction is that it adds depth and diversity to a given fiction and it is often the case that horror has often tried to convince the reader in various ways not just to suspend disbelief, but instead to read psychotically and believe, providing a further association with conspiracy-style reading. The presence of puzzles, enigmas and fragments invites the player to go deeper into the text, the ludic hermeneutics of which can be regarded as an innovation

in the way that players are engaged and marking a significant and powerful addition through the use of game media to Weird fiction.

To conclude, the type of paranoiac reading that successful Weird generates is produced by the conspiracy hermeneutic but is also of course the outcome of an individual's subjective inclinations and serendipitous correspondences. The investigation quests and intertextual flurries of TSW are geared appeal to those sensitive to such pleasures; for those players less inclined to such the game provides other more immediate means of creating atmosphere. However, the game has not done well commercially suggesting a limited market. But I would claim for the game a welcome innovation in MMORPG design, which is had through the lens provided by Weird and that push at the boundaries of what game media is and how normative the grammar has become. TSW occupies a space that has been hollowed out by writers such as Eco, Foucault's Pendulum (2007) in particular – a book that features in another TSW investigation quest, 19th century magical systems including Crowley's database of correspondences Liber 777 (1987) as well as post-Crowleyian fiction such as The Illuminatus! Trilogy, Kenneth Grant's conspiratorial reading Lovecraft's fiction as reality (1994) and the more recent "neo-Weird" fiction such as the novels of China Melville. Conspiracy and magic then are closely bound: hidden connection are sought out and imagined, fictions are regarded as true, perspectives become deliberately distorted and, thereby, normative distinctions and assumptions are challenged. TSW goes some way towards that by sewing such chaos into its design, well beyond simply style and aesthetics. Following Lovecraft's coordinates of Weird, the game creates its media-specific version of Weird through the vertigo of infinite, detailed, impressionistic and over-determined ecstasy correspondences. Intensifying all this is the way that the "real" internet is woven into the fabric of the game, breaking the medial frame of the game and opening it onto a sea of tangential connections, interconnections, paranoia and conspiracy.

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