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**The Crawling Chaos: H. P. Lovecraft, Closed Gothic Spaces and 'Dungeon Crawler' Videogames**

H. P. Lovecraft is a highly visible influence on the modern gaming landscape; games signalling a debt to Lovecraft continue to be produced at a rapid pace, despite increasing criticism of the writer's personal and racial views. Lovecraft's presiding influence has been recognised as lying in the 'mythos' he established and the linguistic and aesthetic style that supported it rather than any single 'text' itself, with Roger Luckhurst tracing the propagation of the 'Cthulhu Mythos' by August Derleth and others after Lovecraft's death, through the critical appreciation of commentators such as Colin Wilson and Maurice Lévy, to 'the mass market paperbacks of the stories published in the late 1960s [which] finally brought Lovecraft to a mass readership' (Luckhurst, 2013, p. xiii). This chapter will continue to trace this influence, showing how distinctly Lovecraftian elements have become encoded into 'dungeon crawler' video games by examining two modern examples, *Darkest Dungeon* (2016) and *Crawl* (2017), and demonstrate that this influence extends more deeply than the overt references and superficial trappings. These games operate on the principle of creating the reaction of horror in the player, although also, through a combination of aesthetics and gameplay elements, are capable of invoking the sense of the 'weird' or awareness of outer forces, that Lovecraft emphasises. In demonstrating this, it will also show that by embodying the player in the world of the Lovecraftian dungeon crawl, and by opening up the dungeons and monster-filled mazes as a space for play, the experience is extended into forms of affect that are both exemplary of horror and the weird, and are undeniably Lovecraftian in their origins, but are not bound or limited by this legacy.

Any discussion of Lovecraftian videogames must acknowledge the direct line of influence from pen-and-paper roleplaying games; continuing the diffusion of Lovecraft's style from mass market paperbacks. Chaosium's role-playing game *Call of Cthulhu* (1981-present) marks a further point of departure of the 'Lovecraftian' from Lovecraft's actual work, instead asking players to create their own adventures in the heterocosm[1]. Indeed, Chaosium's role-playing game may have done more to

[1] A term used by Linda Hutcheon (as discussed in detail later) to denote the idea of multiple versions of a fictional 'cosmos' created through the process of adaptation.

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extend Lovecraft's influence that is often realised, with Jones locating the game 'as the most essentially faithful of Lovecraftian derivations in popular culture' and Harms identifying it as 'one of the most important factors' for the resurgent popularity of Lovecraft (Jones, 2013: 230, Harms, 2008: xv). Putting aside the question of whether 'faithfulness' is the goal (or even possible) in an adaptation of this nature, it is worthwhile to look at where it draws these supposedly faithful elements from. The game is a composite creation, less indebted to Lovecraft's 1928 short story 'Call of Cthulhu' than to Lovecraft's imaginative world as a whole, and one that draws on a wide range of other authors, as Harms states 'Its creator, Sandy Petersen, combined the lore from many different Cthulhu Mythos authors to assemble the monsters and books to create the background for his game' (Harms, 2008: xv). In turn these pen-and-paper roleplaying games have influenced the subsequent generation of videogames.

The process of dissemination of the Cthulhu Mythos texts continued with the rise of video games, as Perron notes, 'In this line, it was *Alone in the Dark* (1992) that obtained the greatest notoriety' (Perron, 2009: 5). The title itself is an apt description of Lovecraft's fiction: the imagined experience of being 'alone in the dark,' and crucially for the similarly-influenced works that followed the game proclaimed its influence heavily, with the box art proudly displaying the tagline 'A virtual adventure game inspired by the work of H.P. Lovecraft.' Taylor notes that '*Alone in the Dark*'s game designers drew from H. P. Lovecraft's horror writing, elements of horror and Gothic fiction and film, and added an unusual gameplay format' (Taylor, 2009: 47), showing that the influence was wider than just Lovecraft's fiction. This unusual gameplay focused on exploration, slow traversal of space, puzzle-solving and searching for clues to expose the underlying mystery. Following *Alone in the Dark*, Infogrames would go on to collaborate with Chaosium, publisher of the *Call of Cthulhu* roleplaying game, to produce two traditional adventure games:

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> the graphical adventure genre always favoured detailed visuals over fast manipulation of the assets and as such became an ideal to develop the repulsive aspect of horror; notable examples include *Shadow of the Comet* and *Prisoner of Ice* […] both inspired by the Cthulhu mythology created by H. P. Lovecraft (Therrien, 2009: 33-34)

*Alone in the Dark*'s foundational significance in the genre of 'survival horror' (it is a clear influence on subsequent games like the 'Resident Evil' and 'Silent Hill' Franchises), is not just in its thematic and aesthetic debt to Lovecraft, but structurally, in its reliance on a slow exploration of an enclosed space. Horror, then, particularly Lovecraftian horror, was becoming associated with a focus on slow speed, closeted atmosphere and unsettling story elements. Videogames, as we will show, draw out a deeper shaping of world-building and play, particularly on a spatial level as well as visually and in terms of play.

Reviewers and critics do not always look upon Lovecraftian videogame adaptations favourably; perhaps because they sit so uneasily as 'adaptations'. Matthew Gault, in a 2018 *Vice* review of *The Call of Cthulhu* videogame released the same year calls the Cthulhu mythos 'played out garbage' (Gault, 2018) and notes that the racism and misogyny of Lovecraft's personal life are not easily separated from the fiction. Sam Greer, in the 2018 *Eurogamer* article 'Games Really Need to Fall Out of Love with Lovecraft', raises similar objections but points out that 'for decades video games have been regurgitating the themes, plots and aesthetics of his stories with not one ounce of scrutiny' (Greer, 2018). This surface level engagement with the mythos has already been criticised in fiction by writers like Ramsey Campbell, D.M. Mitchell, Robert M. Price and S.T. Joshi, as Mark Jones summarizes: 'the potential for ossification in these homages and pastiches has been identified by many commentators, and yet they continue unabated' (Jones, 2013: 228). Linda Hutcheon in *Adaptation Theory* writes that a work need not be reliant on the original story if it offers 'extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work' with the specific exception that 'allusions to and brief echoes of other works would not qualify as extended engagements' (Hutcheon, 2013: 8, 9). The

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lack of scrutiny of Lovecraft's is not merely a convenient omission by developers, but one that makes these texts inherently flawed as *adaptive* works. Hutcheon seemingly identifies a broader pattern of adaptation within videogames, writing that:

> when it came to analysing videogame adaptations, I realized that it was less the story itself than the story world, or what I called the "heterocosm" (literally, an other cosmos), that was being adapted (Hutcheon, 2013: xxiv).

Lovecraftian videogames, then, are not alone in quietly distancing themselves from the original work; they recreate the appealing aspects of the heterocosm Lovecraft, and others, created without calling for a direct engagement with his written texts. Entities like Cthulhu, and even the theme of cosmic horror itself, has become another entry in the pantheon of horror monsters like vampires and werewolves with the brand of weird horror he pioneered woven into the fabric of popular culture, particularly gaming. Hutcheon claims that adaptation 'is more likely to target different audiences through different media' (Hutcheon, 2013: xxiii), which is indeed the case for a willing audience in gaming, who may or may not otherwise be drawn to reading Lovecraft's fiction. In the move to gaming, the dungeon crawler expands what Hutcheon calls the 'modes of engagement' (Hutcheon, 2013, 22), from the 'telling' mode (Lovecraft's written work), to both the 'showing'[2] and 'participatory/interactive' modes in the videogame medium. In this move, however, there is a distinct possibility of a dilution of the original work and themes. The examples we have chosen are ones that understand something deeper about Lovecraft's fiction and retain crucial elements, at the same time as taking full advantage of their shift in the modes of engagement to produce new meaning.

One genre that remains critically underexplored, but that engages closely with these same elements is the dungeon crawler. These role-playing games, often combining fantasy and horror themes, again

[2] It should of course be noted that Lovecraft's fiction has a long history of visual companion artwork from the pulp magazines and paperbacks to comic books that interweave the 'showing' mode with his words.

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situate the player as 'alone in the dark', traversing ruins or subterranean caverns like Lovecraft's characters, with fading torches, dwindling rations, and fear of encountering a monster. Subterranean passages, labyrinths stalked by monsters and hidden basements therefore act as connecting devices between Lovecraft's fiction and videogames inspired on his work. It is in these kinds of games that we situate a structural parallel with Lovecraft's writing. This chapter will first explore the use of space in Lovecraft, and the mental conditions encountered by his characters, which will later be relevant in thinking about player experience of dungeon-crawler games. It will then directly compare these games to a selection of Lovecraft's short fiction, demonstrating their engagement with the same 'primal' causes of fear (as associated with Lovecraft and the Cthulhu Mythos). The intention is to show the shared core themes between dungeon crawlers and Lovecraft's writing, and how core elements of this horror are recognisable as gameplay mechanics, proving a direct line of influence that goes beyond the lip service to Lovecraft's name seen in advertising material.

**Lovecraft's Writing: Closed Spaces, Mental Instability**

Lovecraft produced a body of fiction that reaches imaginative heights but spends a lot of time in thematic depths that continues to resonate with readers and authors. Partly this is because Lovecraft's weird fiction has become entangled with the tradition of the 'weird tale' generally, to the point of being interchangeable and sometimes completely conflated, to the detriment of attention to other authors. Lovecraft's own construction of a weird fiction canon in his essay 'Supernatural Horror in Literature' (1927) identifies the authors he admires in this mode, many of them British and Irish. As James Machin writes, his definition has become a well-recognised 'formula from which most if not all discussions of weird fiction ensue' (Machin, 2018, p.2). Lovecraft distinguishes the weird from horror of 'mere physical fear and the mundanely gruesome' and suggest that 'an unexplainable dread of outer forces must be present' (Lovecraft, 2008, p. 1043). His consistent mining of this seam

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of weird fiction has made his writing appealing to a diverse range of readers from publication to the present day. Victor LaValle, whose novel *The Ballad of Black Tom* (2016) is a direct response to Lovecraft's racism, writes of the strange experience of being an African-American reader of Lovecraft, drawn to aspects of the writing while being repelled by the hatred exhibited within, concluding that 'you can love something, love someone, and criticize them' (LaValle, 2019, p. xiv).[3] 'Lovecraftian' games may be frustratingly silent on the topic of race, but they are responding to and engaging with the Cthulhu mythos in a manner worthy of analysis, honing in on the themes that made them compelling reading then and now. It seems appropriate, then, to begin with how confined spaces become entangled with mental instability within the short story that LaValle's *Lovecraft Country* creatively responds to and that gives its name to the development studio behind *Darkest Dungeon*: 'The Horror at Red Hook' (1927).

'The Horror at Red Hook' is the tale of a New York detective, Thomas Malone, who uncovers a subterranean cult under the city. Initially investigating illegal immigration and the exploitation of a seemingly senile old Dutchman called Robert Suydam, Malone discovers that Suydam has been a willing participant in occult rites that eventually see him being killed and subsequently resurrected in monstrous fashion. Having confronted a scene which oscillates between Sudyam's apartment and another dimension of horror, Malone finds himself in a subterranean basement, filled with monsters, as the roof is brought down around him. He is left with a fear of urban spaces and brick buildings. 'The Horror at Red Hook' has been extensively discussed for its hysterical racial paranoia, which portrays urban areas where different people mix as inherently corrupt. As Joshi notes, the story suggests that, 'a city whose urbanism has gotten out of control actually *generates* decadence'

[3] As LaValle points out, there is a potentially delightful, if not entirely redeeming, irony in that Lovecraft has attracted 'such a diverse cast of readers that Howard himself would probably never believe it possible (LaValle, 2016, p. xiv). In this context, then, works can potentially engage with the Cthulhu mythos and its cycle of shared themes, moods, fictional gods and monsters without replicating racial hatred, even if encoded into the originals.

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(Joshi: 223). Lovecraft describes Red Hook as an area of 'hybrid squalor' (Lovecraft, 2008: 316), where, 'Syrian, Spanish, Italian, and negro elements' (Lovecraft, 2008: 317) intermingle. It is even suggested that Suydam's accomplices are Yazidis, lazily demonised in the story as devil-worshippers. Malone himself is Irish, which is enough racial otherness to give him 'the Celt's far vision of weird and hidden things' (Lovecraft, 2008: 315) but otherwise he is 'normal-featured' (Lovecraft, 2008: 314). In this fictional world, he fulfils the role of a default protagonist, whose assumptions and world view are not so far from Lovecraft's own, and his presumed readership. The story documents the descent of this protagonist into a monstrously hybrid environment, which is strange and threatening to him. Malone survives at the expense of his peace of mind: an exchange familiar to players of *Darkest Dungeon,* but recognisable throughout closed spaces in horror literature.

Manuel Aguirre's *The Closed Space: Horror Literature and Western Symbolism* (1990) draws critical focus to the importance of enclosed spaces and Gothic literature; caverns, catacombs and labyrinths. For Aguirre 'the world is defined in horror literature as *space* and, furthermore, as a *closed space*' (Aguirre, 1990: 2). There are few writers whose work better reflects this than H. P. Lovecraft, whose weird tales frequently turn on terrible secrets uncovered in secret, subterranean tunnels. Aguirre's words, however, seem equally applicable to 'dungeon crawlers,' as a genre of videogame that sees adventurers charting forgotten castles, underground networks, and monster-filled mazes. Often punishingly difficult, these are equally recognisable for their atmosphere and tension as players move from room to room dreading their next encounter. As Aguirre states, 'behind the many doors and walls of horror fiction lurks an Adversary' (Aguirre, 1990: 3). In the example of 'The Horror at Red Hook' above, the reader is invited to vicariously experience the fearful events happening to Malone. In the videogame this relationship with the protagonist is even more direct. Diane Carr notes that in games, 'the avatars are our emissaries in the game world and thus each is (to some degree) our double' (Carr, 2006, p. 68). This doubling (which is in fact a very

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Gothic trope) means that avatars, for Carr, 'are capable of generating forms of uncanny resonance' (Carr, 2006, p. 68).

Exploring underground becomes thematic across Lovecraft's fiction, with other key examples we are going to draw upon including 'The Beast in the Cave' and 'The Shunned House'. Games studies often stress distinctions between kinds of spaces that are crucial in design terms. Both *Darkest Dungeon* and *Crawl* are largely procedurally generated, with *Crawl* putting other players in charge of the monsters. This means that each instance of play is unique, although this is not to say that the tension created is not by design. A full-blown analysis of the differences between these and more linear Lovecraftian game experiences such as *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (2002) and *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (2010) is a matter for another study. What matters here is the structural descent, as noted by David A. Oakes as a feature of weird fiction: 'A tale also can involve a descent underground, whether it be into a tunnel, dungeon, tomb, cavern or labyrinth' (Oakes, 2000: 4). This descent is a focus of Aguirre, who claims that the world of horror symbolism is defined in terms of walls and boundaries put in place specifically to exclude a malevolent Other, which he refers to as the *numinous*. This chaotic presence can be detected in the earliest Celtic myths where other worlds leak into this one at several points, for example in the mythological structure of the Quest narrative:

> The *descensus ad infernos* involved in the Quest as a spiritual undertaking is meant to make the hero face his innermost self, often symbolised by some mirror-image of himself […] The Quest involves a journey from the Court to the Other, from Here to There, and back; and through this pattern it impressed upon us the notion that the world is the world *and* what lies beyond, that the self is the self *and* what lies within; and that wholeness and harmony reside only in this understanding (Aguirre, 1990: 19).

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This achievement of wholeness and harmony is what is most distinctively lacking in Lovecraft's fiction, and the encounter between self and Other is more often a shattering revelation. In the 'Horror at Red Hook' the area of Red Hook serves as an urban dungeon; an underworld where the most hellish possibilities lurk. Describing Malone's descent, Lovecraft writes: 'for was not his very act of plunging into the polyglot abyss of New York's underworld a freak beyond sensible explanation?' (Lovecraft, 2008: 315). In keeping with Lovecraft's wider mythos, Malone's encounter with the knowledge of the true reality of this world is one that breaks him, and it is a knowledge he is then compelled to keep secret from others for fear of being thought mad: "To hint to unimaginative people of a horror beyond all human conception—a horror of houses and blocks and cities leprous and cancerous with evil dragged from elder worlds—would be merely to invite a padded cell instead of restful rustication" (Lovecraft, 2008: 315).

Writing about these structural elements of Lovecraft's fiction, Oakes claims that, 'Novels and stories in this genre also often deal with hidden secrets or revelations that come to the surface and change the lives of the characters' (Oakes, 2000: 4). This is evident in many, if not most, of Lovecraft's stories. Notable examples might include 'The Rats in the Walls' (1924) where the narrator discovers an subterranean lair beneath his ancestral home, where his predecessors indulged in slavery and cannibalism, and 'The Shunned House' (1937) where the narrator discovers the elbow of a titanic monster buried below his basement. In each case there is the physical descent that is representative of a plunge into a version of the self that is inseparably entwined with genetic ancestry. Purity of ancestry is important for Lovecraft, as seen in his separatist racial thinking which holds hybridity and miscegenation as true horrors. On the other hand, it is actually recognition of the self that makes this doubling truly uncanny. Lovecraft's earlier work revels in this Freudian doubling that is characteristic of Victorian Gothic, as can be seen in his piece of juvenilia 'The Beast in the Cave' (1918). Already using his characteristic first-person narration, Lovecraft sketches out the story of an

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explorer in the Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, which he had researched in the Providence Public Library (Joshi, 2008, p. 1). The narrator becomes 'hopelessly lost' (1), and becomes increasingly fearful of an unseen beast in the darkness. Here, similarities with the dungeon crawler game genre are tempting, as the element of fear of an obscure enemy creeps in. He arms himself with a rock, but without much hope that he can overpower the creature. Similarly, this very lack of power is what often distinguishes games that aim for a horror affect from those that seek to empower the player with over-the-top weaponry (the *Doom* series is one of few examples that do both). Using his sense of hearing to locate the creature, he manages to wound it with the rock. Approaching the figure, which is nearing death, he sees that its skin and hair are pure white, the eyes blind, and the limbs adjusted to moving on all fours as well as two. The moment of horrific revelation is when he realises that this 'was, or had at one time been, a MAN!!!' (Lovecraft, 2008, p. 5). This moment of uncanny kinship is the ultimate horror, and shades of Lovecraft's dungeon-crawling narrator can be seen in the protagonists of the dungeon crawler games we discuss, alone in the dark against hybrid horrors. In *Darkest Dungeon* the player must face the horrors unleashed by a mysterious ancestor, and in *Crawl* defeat actually means that the hero player actually becomes the monster, turning against the next player to be put in control. In the case of *Darkest Dungeon*, specifically, this results in madness.

**Madness and Difficulty: *Darkest Dungeon***

Lovecraft's stories frequently employ the recurring trope of madness within, maintaining a consistent link between inner and outer forces, and the ways that the latter can impact on the human mind. As S. T. Joshi notes in *The Weird Tale*: 'An unusually large number of Lovecraft's characters go mad at some point or other, and many others have madness imputed to them' (Joshi, 1990: 212). This serves several purposes within the text, not least being that the destabilising of the narrator's sanity allows the reader's imagination to run riot: just *what* was so sublimely horrible that even a sight of it can send someone mad? More significantly, this is presented not just as a reaction

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to trauma, but to *revelation*: it is not the 'horrors' that are harmful, but the confrontation with truths, even, perhaps especially, long-buried yet familiar ones. As Joshi notes, 'These characters end up not dead but psychologically shattered, and the suggestion is that their impure approach to intellection has brought this about' (Joshi, 1990: 205). This lack of understanding as a character trait is a feature that continues in gaming, including *The Call of Cthulhu* roleplaying game and its spiritual successors. Jones, citing Alexander, points out that, 'The fact that early versions of the game often resulted in the characters going insane, and even with modifications of the game play this still remains a possibility, makes it an even closer reflection of Lovecraft's invariable plotting (Alexander)' (Jones, 2013: 229). The key point we are stressing here is that madness is more than a feeling or affect afflicting the reader but exists within the game world as a tangible mechanic that changes how the player's in-game avatar operates. Similarly, Lovecraftian video games often tend to engage with madness not just as a theme but as a mechanic. By presenting the player with an inexorable crawl throughout dungeons, starving of not only food but even light, fighting not only with monsters but with madness, these games adapt the spirit of the weird tale in a structural sense.

*Darkest Dungeon* is instantly recognisable to any genre aficionado as a Lovecraftian game. It shows the influence very clearly from the name of the developer (Redhook Games) to the inclusion of a dramatic narration by voice actor Wayne June, who has previously recorded audio versions of Lovecraft's short stories. Not only is the base game heavily Lovecraftian in its theme but it even has a downloadable expansion called *The Color of Madness* (2018) which is clearly directly based on Lovecraft's 'The Colour Out of Space' (1927). *Darkest Dungeon* draws on a wealth of Lovecraft's short stories to present an innovatively told, disturbing narrative of ancestral corruption, otherworldly powers and crumbling mansions. *Darkest Dungeon* allows, even forces, players and their team of heroic avatars to confront this; risking madness, death and other afflictions as they penetrate deeper into the subterranean passages created by their sinister ancestor. This is horror in

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the cosmic sense, creating uncanny ties between the sublime forces of otherworldly dimensions and the protagonist/player's all-too-human consciousness. What makes the game stand apart is its mechanics that, like Lovecraft's prose, indoctrinate the player into this narrative of cosmic horror by placing emphasis on the psychological aspects of their mission. This includes an 'affliction system' that invites the player to, 'battle not only monsters, but stress! Contend with paranoia, masochism, fear, irrationality, and a host of gameplay-meaningful quirks!' (Website). By making these negative character traits a game mechanic, *Darkest Dungeon* introduces an element of pessimism that is usually absent from games but very much present in Lovecraft's fiction. The game is also incredibly challenging, and the 'permadeath' system means that a carefully levelled-up and equipped party of adventurers can be wiped out in any given confrontation with monsters in the dungeons of the title. Should they live, they may be changed by their encounters with horror, and must be sent to an asylum to recover, or else continue to suffer negative gameplay affects due to post-traumatic stress.

'The Horror at Red Hook' provides parallels in content that go beyond the general Lovecraftian mood of the game. Malone has been so affected by the collapse of Sudyam's residence and the sights he has borne witness to, that he fears the city itself. Lovecraft describes him as. 'staring queerly for a second at the tallest of the buildings before him, and then, with a series of terrified, hysterical shrieks, breaking into a frantic run which ended in a stumble and fall at the next crossing' (Lovecraft, 2008: 314). This has immediate and grounded consequences for his ability to perform his job. He has been compelled to take a leave of absence and move to the small village of Chepachet in order to undertake his 'psychological convalescence' (Lovecraft, 2008: 315). Lovecraft's recurring motif of forbidden knowledge suggests that there is a terrible truth at the heart of the universe that humans are not meant to know. Malone may be seen as 'insane' but actually he knows something that others do not. Malone has not been locked up for his recovery, but Joshi's point about asylums fits well: 'madhouses in Lovecraft are habitually places housing those who have glimpsed some truth

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about existence too horrible to bear […] It is not necessarily the case that the inmates of asylums are actually mad' (Joshi: 213). In *Darkest Dungeon*, characters can go to the abbey to pray, meditate, or even self-flagellate as penance, or alternately the tavern, to drown their sorrows. Like Lovecraft's 'mad' characters, it is more appropriate to think of their being victims of traumatic, but truthful, experiences.

*Darkest Dungeon*'s gameplay is 'roguelike', with turn-based combat, procedurally-generated dungeons, and the aforementioned permanent death of characters. The character parties consist of a motley crew of heroes, villains, and everything in between. They all have their different motivations, but are pitted against eldritch forces that are beyond any human concerns. The player, then, is not empowered as such, as every encounter may end in a death which is only made worse by the bleakly mocking comments of the narrator. Lovecraft's fiction, too, is characterised by selfish and flawed protagonists who very pointedly do not rise up to the occasion in some kind of heroic fashion, as in Aguirre's characterisation of the quest narrative. Oakes notes that, 'a few basic guidelines shape the majority of his human characters. One is that they cannot suddenly become capable of performing extraordinary feats' (Oakes, 2000: 31). This is an aspect of characterisation that is usually the converse in videogames, which tend to offer players the chance to be more than human through the on-screen avatar (although there is a distinct turn away from this broad characterisation in gaming as a whole as different kinds of storytelling continue to evolve in the form). If anything, Lovecraft's fiction shows a trajectory from being potential heroic to cowardice. In 'The Horror at Red Hook' he asks, 'what could reduce a dauntless fighter to a quivering neurotic; what could make old brick slums and seas of dark, subtle faces a thing of nightmare and eldritch portent' (Lovecraft, 2008: 315). This is the horror of *Darkest Dungeon*: the cast of characters includes noble knights and dangerous highwaymen, but all can be broken and afflicted with gameplay-

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altering traits that might see them run from a battle or even turn on their companions, as with the crazed narrator of 'The Rats in the Walls' who ends up turning on his companion and eating his flesh.

*Darkest Dungeon*'s plot revolves around the player inheriting a mansion owned by a relative, clearly influenced by 'The Rats in the Walls'. He has uncovered the otherworldly monstrosities by excavating the land he possessed and has now passed down through the family. Like Lovecraft's fiction more generally, the player is faced by a threat coming uncannily from their own lineage, and this is a threat that is greater than the human. The human nature of the characters is emphasized by their reliance on basic needs such as food and light. Light, in particular, serves a specific gameplay function, as torches fade and monsters become stronger in the dark. The rewards to be gained are greater, but it is rarely wise to risk facing these even greater challenges in the dark. 'The Beast in the Cave' emphasizes the particular challenge faced in such dark and hidden places. The narrator's lack of supplies leads him to think that, 'starving would prove my ultimate fate; of this I was certain' (Lovecraft, 2008: 1). Starvation is no less horrific because it is mundane compared to unnatural monstrosity. Similarly, his dwindling torch brings its own fears, in a line that could be lifted from *Darkest Dungeon*: 'already my torch had begun to expire; soon I would be enveloped by the total and almost palpable blackness of the bowels of the earth' (Lovecraft, 2008: 1). Redhook's use of overt references to Lovecraft's fiction as a marketing tool is only the beginning of a relationship between the game and Lovecraft's Mythos, but also including structural and tangible parallels. We could even go so far as to characterise much of Lovecraft's fiction as comprising a 'dungeon crawl' in literary form, and the legacy of this fiction is evident in its adaptability to the videogame format.

**Monsters and Disorientation: *Crawl***

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*Crawl* is in many ways the opposite of *Darkest Dungeon.* It's fast-paced, requires frantic button pressing, and, most significantly, multiplayer. Whereas *Darkest Dungeon* uses difficulty, mechanics of disease and mental instability, and character permadeath to recreate the atmosphere of a literary dungeon crawl, Powerhoof Games' *Crawl* places characters in the chaos. *Crawl* turns the dungeon crawl into a thirty-minute competitive multiplayer session: one player is the living hero while the others beset them with traps and monsters trying to kill them. When the hero dies the 'ghost' that killed them takes their place and the crawl continues, something that happens frequently. The hero levels up, can buy equipment and spells, while the ghosts can increase the power of their monster forms. The session culminates in a boss fight; confronting a portal guardian to return to the surface world. Between them players can challenge the boss three times. If the boss is defeated the hero that was in control at the time makes it to the surface and the other characters remain trapped in a true cosmic horror ending. In focusing on the dungeon crawl as an experience, then, *Crawl* is able to turn it into a fun, multiplayer experience rather than an emotive, narrative one. Whereas *Darkest Dungeons* adds on sub-systems to the dungeon crawl to better recreate the oppression of Lovecraft's fiction, Powerhoof positions players so that they can generate their own frustration. This in turns puts the focus on two distinct elements of cosmic horror: monsters and disorientation.

*Crawl*'s presentation is less overtly 'Lovecraftian' than *Darkest Dungeon* but the game's marketing overtly re-uses the language of the Cthulhu mythos, particularly to describe the dungeon and its inhabitants. *Crawl*'s 'Greenlight' trailer, for instance, refers to 'the dark gods' being 'pleased with the living blood I had spilt' (Crawl Greenlight Trailer: Youtube). That this recognisable language is directed at the *monsters* accords with Joshi's assertion that 'the most distinctive feature of Lovecraft's fiction is its elaborate system of imaginary gods, places, and other paraphernalia' (Joshi - 190). The trailer's voice-over also replicates the panicked, unravelling tone of Lovecraft's own narrators. In the 'Lurking Fear' the narrator describes a shadow as: 'a blasphemous abnormality from

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hell's nethermost craters; a nameless, shapeless abomination which no mind could fully grasp and no pen even partly describe' (Lovecraft, 2008: 227). *Crawl*'s trailer is similarly nebulous about its own monsters, describing them as 'Long dead things with tentacles and blades' (Crawl Greenlight Trailer: Youtube). A later trailer concludes with:

> And I'll not think at all of the soul who took my place, shrieking in those caverns beneath our feet, cursed to drift the halls forever. Dead. And alone. (Crawl early access trailer: Youtube)

The tone here matches 'The Horror at Red Hook's own basement full of monsters: 'nothing can ever efface the memory of those nighted crypts, those titan arcades, and those half-formed shapes of hell that strode gigantically in silence' (Lovecraft, 2008: 327). Monsters in *Crawl* then are not just the familiar tentacled creatures inspired by the Cthulhu mythos then – they are positioned as unknowable, indescribable horrors from below.

*Crawl*'s mechanic of becoming the monster yourself is also an articulation of Lovecraft's fears. In 'The Beast in the Cave' the narrator realises with hysteria, emphasised through punctuation that the 'creature' he killed was once human (Lovecraft, 2008: 5). Equally, in the 'The Lurking Fear' there comes a similar revelation about the 'creatures' underground:

> It was the ultimate product of mammalian degeneration; the frightful outcome of isolated spawning, multiplication, and cannibal nutrition above and below the ground; the embodiment of all the snarling chaos and grinning fear that lurk behind life. (Lovecraft, 2008, 239)

Not only are the creatures degenerate human beings, but their classification is indivisible from their subterranean existence and their chaotic nature. *Crawl* players may not be the products of cannibalistic incest but their requirement to act the role of monsters, 'as a creature of the old gods', through the use of 'arcane symbols' marks this same embodiment of 'snarling chaos' (Crawl, Greenlight trailer: Youtube). Oakes writes that Lovecraft believed 'that the universe is an amoral place where there is

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neither good nor evil' (Oakes, 2000: 33), a sentiment recognisable across his oeuvre. By pitting players against each other *Crawl* skilfully enacts this aspect of Lovecraft's fiction.

*Crawl*'s other distinct element is disorientation: through its gameplay, and its titling, it emphasises to the player that the dungeon is something labyrinthine that needs to be escaped. Not only are the dungeon layouts randomly generated, but players must descend multiple floors until they are able to challenge the boss. One of the newest *Crawl* trailers, the Nintendo Switch version, advertises its key gameplay in a sentence, 'Crawl the dungeon while your friends possess the traps, beasts, and bosses against you' before later adopting the phrase 'Lose yourself to the darkness of the void' (Crawl Switch trailer: Youtube). Giving players only limited details of the scenario has been recognised as inkeeping with horror fiction, as Rouse III notes: 'A popular game design device is to give players some information about their surroundings, while leaving a lot out. This again is a natural fit for the horror genre' (Rouse III, 2009: 18). In situating the game not as a voyage *into* the dungeon, as is common in the genre (even in *Darkest Dungeon*) but a flight from it this effect is heightened. This echoes a section from 'The Beast in the Cave':

> I was lost, completely, hopelessly lost in the vast and labyrinthine recesses of the Mammoth Cave […] That nevermore should I behold the blessed light of day […] my reason could no longer entertain the slightest unbelief. Hope had departed. (Lovecraft, 2008: 1)

The Beast in the Cave 'is an example of the futile – and as it turns out, dangerous - attempt to control wild nature; but nature has the last laugh' (Joshi, 1990: 221). This too reflects a wider trend within Lovecraft's writing: 'One disturbing tenet of Lovecraft's cosmicism is that the human race is at the mercy of its environment and subject to forces it cannot control' (Oakes, 2000: 32). As players race from room to room, beset by foes, alternating between hero and monster the disorientation of the gameplay inadvertently emulates this sensation of being subject to an uncontrollable

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environment. Players are at the mercy of forces they cannot comprehend, let alone stop, which is all part of the crawl.

**Conclusion: 'In that gaping abyss we will find our redemption'**

The Dungeon Crawl is, whether in literary fiction or a videogame, an *experience*. It's something the readers or player must partake in by degrees. For the weird tale this is accomplished through language; we're told about the loss of light in 'The Beast in the Cave', we experience Malone's quest alongside him in 'The Horror at Red Hook'. That Lovecraft was able to accomplish this so effectively is a feat, as he writes himself in 'The Lurking Fear':

> What language can describe the spectacle of a man lost in infinitely abysmal earth; pawing, twisting, wheezing; scrambling madly through sunken convolutions of immemorial blackness without an idea of time, safety, direction, or definite object? (Lovecraft, 2008: 234)

Videogames like *Crawl* and *Darkest Dungeon* bring us into the abysmal earth with them. Their mechanics of mental instability and difficulty sends us 'scrambling madly' just as Lovecraft's prose seeks to do. Their procedurally generated maps and disorientating gameplay puts us in the position of 'twisting' through the 'immemorial blackness' with the same loss of safety or direction. It is undoubtedly the case that elements of Lovecraft's world view and perhaps even themes belong firmly in the past. These games differ from the stories which have inspired them by introducing a playfulness that is both inherent to the medium but also one that allows for a revision of Lovecraft's presentation of the fear of the Other, in particular. *Darkest Dungeon* does this through engaging single-player gameplay that at least raises the possibility of redemption over ancestral evil, and *Crawl* takes this further by its rapid and light-hearted switching of adventurer and adversary in a multiplayer setting. The history of gaming may have deep ancestral roots that intertwine with his fiction but the innovation and forward-thinking approach of dungeon crawlers may potentially point to a way out, even if the hope of victory remains an illusion designed to pull the player back into the

depths for another try.

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