"Everything is True": Urban Gothic meets the Chthulucene in Multiplayer Online Game, *The Secret World*

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Gothic appears in games of all stripes, appearing across genres and platforms. Alongside Science Fiction, Gothic is one of the most diversely deployed generic languages found in games and often the two appear in the same game. In *Space Invaders* (1978, Taito), wave after endless wave of the pesky pixels demanded quick reactions and deep focus from the player, creating inklings of infinite space and a metronomic relentlessness that countered the rhythms of more human-centred narratives. The inky blackness of the *Space Invaders* backdrop conjures up the infinite sublime, a place where no-one can hear you scream as you succumb to the vertigo of the game's inexorable downward march. In early video games the black screen of space was the effect of limited resources in terms of graphics and computing power. These constraints produced some interesting creative design solutions, as with the use of video footage in games like *Phantasmagoria* (Sierra, 1995) or abstraction and synecdoche in games such as *Haunted House* (Atari, 1982) and *Clock Tower* (1995). While such constraints afforded creative solutions and media-distinctive iconography, it was only with the introduction of techniques that allowed 3D space to be recreated in games, alongside the increasing capacity for graphical fidelity, that conditions for a more realistic simulation of the urban in games became possible. As we will see the urban gothic of contemporary games draws together all these techniques.

Gothic has roots in earthly soils; coffins rot in an overgrown graveyard, a figure dances widdershins on All Hallows Eve, in the distance glides the ghost of weeping nun.

Many games have sought to remediate nodal Gothic texts such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1823) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (1765); the latter provides a blueprint for the typical horror dungeon-crawler. Literary adaptations in early videogames were common ways of calling on gothic, often relying on written text as a principle mode of creating ludic and narrative engagement. More cinematic modes of representation had to wait for the development of resources that allowed for greater visual verisimilitude. Later games deployed 3D space (within which players gain a sense of moving through a topos), alongside first or third person perspectives and varying degrees graphical realism. Not only did this make the rural and folk gothic possible in a simulative sense, as with *Clive Barker's Undying* (2001, EA) and *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (2015, The Chinese Room), but it also meant that more complex urban spaces could be realised and designed to support a variety of gameplay types.

In games that deploy urban gothic the soil does not pulse to its own othered rhythms as it does in the pastoral gothic. Instead urban dirt is made up of human detritus, sooty and morally loaded; even out in the suburbs, where the pastoral mixes with the urban, human soil erupts in neatly tended gardens. In games, the environment is never incidental: it provides story and importantly shapes the ludic experience. This essay considers the patterns and meanings of the urban gothic in games. It begins by teasing out certain themes and tropes that colour this ludic souterrain, paying attention to developments in games technology that have made possible a convincing simulative rendition of the urban gothic. This is exemplified by multiplayer online game *The Secret World* (2012, Funcom), relaunched as *Secret World Legends* in 2017, a game that uses urban myth and conspiracy as a means of articulating urban gothic and discussed in some detail later. For now, I'll continue to draw out some of

the significant features of the contexts within which the urban appears in gothic games before moving on to discuss core vocabularies.

Urban gothic developed in nineteenth century fiction by for example Charles Dicken's *Bleak House* (1853), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* provides the basis for modern games. Urban gothic games regularly seek to present cities, towns, conurbations and the suburbs as full of threat, darkness and the degeneration of humanity. Very often urban gothic games anthropomorphise the city or town itself, making it a character, often demonic and best exemplified by the eponymous town of early Silent Hill games (1999, 2001, 2003, Konami). This is a trope that has its roots in Film Noir.

In addition to the city as threat, there is also a certain strain of urban gothic games whose lineage is earthed in vampire fiction. Urban vampires generally can be traced back to des Esseintes, the urban aesthete of JK Huysmans' Decadent novel *À rebours* (1884) as well as to Anne Rice's city-dwelling vampires. These figures have their ludic counterparts in White Wolf's Vampire: The Masquerade franchise. Alongside its original table-top game first released in 1991, where players imagination is integral to engagement, the Masquerade world also includes videogames, *Redemption* (2000, Nihilistic), *Bloodlines* (2004, Troika) and *Bloodlines 2* (due for release 2020, Paradox). All these games allow players to create an urban vampire character choosing various traits and physical features. Players are tasked with surviving in a hostile urban environment, remaining hidden from the police yet feeding off unlucky humans. While players call on their imagination when playing the table-top role-playing scenarios; the videogame versions interpret and realise character, location and action. Over the various videogame releases in the series, animation, visual complexity and the affordances of space have been increasingly more expansive and simulative. This lends the urban settings of the games greater weight and meaning. *Bloodlines 2* is currently selling

itself on realistically rendered characters in a vast, simulated Seattle cityscape. In noirish vein, there is even a nod to the city itself as vampire in the trailer, 'this city will bleed you dry'. This latest incarnation is cinematic in its visual qualities and the ratio format reflects that; the visual, spatial and auditory detail of the urban gothic evoked in literature and displayed photographically in cinema has become more literally realisable as game technologies have become more sophisticated.

Such detailed environments have also become more integral to gameplay and in some cases are able to better realise the themes that are integral to the Urban Gothic. In their high resolution urban world, Masquerade's player-character vampires must navigate vampire as well as human laws. It is this that forms the design of the player's ludic experience as well as the design of the game's urban environment. There is therefore a thematically laden morality system built into the games: each vampire has 'humanity points' that are lost when killing innocents, so possible behaviour must be managed, and the urban spaces warily navigated. It is here that the social urban context created by the game also becomes instrumental to gameplay design, rather than solely providing an atmospheric backdrop.

Gothic games that deploy urban settings frequently call on aspects of 'noir' and I will now focus on how noir is used in games. Noir is by far the most commonly used vocabulary within urban gothic games Generally, in noir the urban is consonant with murder. Frank Wedekind's play *Pandora's Box* (1904) and Fritz Lang's '*M*' (1931), both of which reference the Whitechapel murders of the 1880's, provide early examples. Death is inevitably at the heart of things, linking crime fiction to gothic. As Borde and Chaumeton have said in their essay 'Towards a Definition of Film Noir' written in 1955, 'In every sense of the word a noir film is a film of death' (2002, p.19). They also identify key noirish features, features that have become staples within urban gothic games. These include: realistic settings; moral ambiguity;, a passive rather than heroic protagonist; plot twists; uncertainty of motivations;

oneirism and weirdness. To this list we should also add pessimism, following Packer and Stoneman's focus on pessimistic rhetoric in popular culture (2018, pp. 20–24).

Oddly, what Borde and Chaumeton don't mention is the way in which the city or the urban provides the condition for gothic to be rendered in noir style. In the context of games, the urban also provides geometry, and, as with architecture generally, it is from geometry – the basis for 3D modelling tools - that game environments are built. Game spaces are far more easily built and designed in a geometric context rather than in the organic melange of the rural. Urban spaces are full of geometry, architectural lines and symmetries that are far easier to manage in a game engine. Geometric structures and *chiaroscuro* lighting design bring drama and demonic life to an urban location that are then easily co-opted for gothic intent. With its clean, jagged lines Deco-syle noir brokers no squishy, home comforts or gauzy mysticism. In games, solid architectural forms become part of the ludic design. As urban spaces are mappable systematised enviornments, street names and signs navigate players purposefully through vast complex sand-box spaces while providing back streets and dives to secrete noirs' demi monde.

As with Film Noir, and as the Masquerade example above indicates, the urban gothic trades on anxiety, paranoia and conspiracy. Such noirish thematics provide the context and atmosphere required for those gothic games that seek to play cat and mouse with a player's sense of mastery over events. Such games within games ratchet up a sense of panic, jeopardy and uncertainty for players. Masquerade's vampiric rule set, for example, means that players are not cast as individualistic, free-agent superheroes, instead they are vulnerable and need to exercise caution to survive in a complex social world. These vampires know what it is to feel fear and act cautiously. The urban and social context puts obstacles in their way; these vampires are not therefore lord of their domain as Dracula was in his rural homeland

(although we should note that it was the complexities of urban undead living that bested Dracula in Stoker's narrative).

Noirish elements are found across a vast range of game genres and platforms. Some games focus more on the gangster and criminal caste of noir, as appears in the Grand Theft Auto (henceforth, GTA) or LA Noire series' – gothic can however seem more distant within such games where magic or the occult do not feature. The Max Payne series for example is a fast-paced first-person shooter set within the urban criminal underground in New York with no presence of the supernatural or magic. Max's existential and pessimistic outlook, episodes of altered consciousness and the use of names derived from Norse myth tailored to a contemporary urban context, make for a darker experience than that of GTA and LA Noire, thereby the Max Payne series has a stronger claim on the urban gothic and new weird.

More squarely placed in urban gothic soil, if by way of a fantasy rather than referential world, is the adventure/conversation game *Discworld Noir* (1999, Perfect/Teeny Weeny,) based on the world created by Terry Pratchett. The game creates its blend of noir using ingredients derived from Dashiel Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos mixed with a jigger of genetic occultism. *Discworld Noir* does however rely heavily on on-screen written narration and instructions to tell its story and its environments lack the visual simulative density of more recent games. This represents a very different way of immersing and locating the player than is found in fully rendered 3D games, where environmental storytelling is fully in play. In a similar vein to *Discworld Noir*, *The Wolf Among Us* (2013-2014, Telltale), another more recent adventure game, based on the comic series Fables (2002-2015, Vertigo) written by Bill Willingham, is set in contemporary New York. Having fled Europe to become refugees in the city, characters from European fairy tales must find the murderer in their midst. Placing rural gothic characters and stories in an urban context throws up some interesting dramatic juxtapositions. The urban setting of this

game provides the context for a noir-ish faceless murderer tale that underscores the characters' anxiety around their need to normalise to their 'new' world. With less gameplay and an 'on-rails' linear narrative, the game takes a more literary, figurative approach to its version of urban gothic. In this it is in line with *Discworld*; both are best described as interactive fiction than as a games where game play verbs take precedence.

There has also been some transmedial traffic from videogames into other noir-ish and new weird fiction, thereby altering and expanding urban gothic tropes. The multi-layered, opaque cities of China Miéville's fictions, i.e. *The City and The City* (2009) and *Un Lund Dun* (2007,) are indebted to games as it is in games that single spaces often have many layers; his role as game writer may well have originated the way he figures space in these novels. This formal strategy appeared in games as a means of managing available computing resources. Giving 3D assets new 'skins' (textures) meant that one space could be used in two three different ways. This distinctive aesthetic chimes with that of the underground, the hidden souterrain, and decadent demi-monde as figured by Alexander Dumas (1855). The layering of space in urban Gothic allows for an expression of Alt.spaces, the disawowed, the transgressive and the unconscionable. Early games within the Silent Hill series provide a representative example of this aesthetic spatial economy – areas of the eponymous town have 'hellish' *and* 'normal' incarnations: same space in the game and the same architecture, but dressed in different textural digital skins. In games this is a resource-led textual strategy established earlier by *Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver* (1999, Crystal Dynamics), where the player-character must switch perceptual modes between material and spectral planes to solve puzzles. This doubling invests a given location with different signifying and ludic elements. The split city mode then carries the potential to represent shadow worlds, rendering space liminal and uncertain, as it occurs in Miéville's *Un Lund Dun*. In noir, the urban is

treacherous, ambiguous and has a mind of its own; no longer a domain that is in the service of 'man', it has become unpredictable and othered.

In games or in any fiction, setting and its mise-en-scene are always tightly controlled by authors. The noir urban space must function to signify, to tell a story environmentally through its characterisation, and, in games, it must further be architected to support gameplay activities. The Assassin's Creed series has set the industry benchmark for creating believable urban spaces in games. The creation of increased depth of field allowing expansive city vistas rendered as crisp high-resolution images that are incrementally redrawn as the player traverses the space has set an expectation about the rendition of urban spaces in contemporary games. With Assassin's Creed, the stage was set for gothic games to create complex urban spaces that are capable of providing the type of sublime visual expansiveness found in Pieter Bruegel's painting *Hunters in the Snow* (1565, Oil on Wood).[1]

Urban contexts provide game designers with a range of possibilities with which to engage players in gothic gameplay. Providing social, psychological and spatial mechanics, as we have seen with Vampire: The Masquerade series and other examples mentioned above. Urban space is never therefore simply backdrop. Instead it has substance, is often an active protagonist and designed around core gameplay activities. Whether it is a fantasy urban space (Discworld), a real space (Los Angeles or Seattle in Vampire: The Masquerade and, London or Seoul in *The Secret World*), realised in a figurative or simulative way (*Wolf Among Us* or *Bloodlines 2*), or experienced as linear or free-roaming, the same principle follows; backdrop is never simply setting. What must be present in that depiction of urban space for a game to be earn the title urban gothic is an an existential pessimistic edginess, where monstrosity breaks the bounds of self and other, of space and time, and following that, no substantial

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[1] Got to https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/hunters-in-the-snow-winter to view a high-resolution image of the painting.

sense that the player-character is a straightforward hero with mastery over the space. While other approaches are effective, abstract representation is no longer the only choice for game developers. With greater computational resources in play, complex visual landscapes are now easier to deploy, making it easier to realise the nineteenth century gothic trope where cities are places of disease, crime, transgression and exploitation. Through technologies such as high resolution graphics, motion capture, fluid dynamics and AI, videogames now have the ability to render and animate believable humans and creatures and create complex traverable spaces.. Such tech-driven shifts challenge Leonard Cassuto's view that urban gothic is the domain of human rather than supernatural monsters (2017). I submit *The Secret World's* extensive and varied demonology to support the point and to provide a closer look at the realisation of urban gothic in the context of a multiplayer online game.

Urban Gothic, Cththulucene and *The Secret World*

As is common with so many examples of recent popular culture, *The Secret World* creates a world – taking advantage of the simulative aspects of game technology, it is a world set in the contemporary 'real' world including multiple recognisable urban spaces. This game also provides social spaces, or what Ducheneaut, Moore and Nickell (2004) call 'third space', (home and work being the first and second), that operate much as a bar might in the physical world . As Dimitri Williams (2006) notes, multiplayer online games are designed around social interaction between players, and, further, to create the conditions for what Lisabeth Klastrup calls 'emergent player stories' (2009) which are likely to arise from group's working to over come gameplay challenges. The advantage of creating a world designed as a social space is that it can support a vast range of elements and is infinitely expandable, perfectly suited for franchises and multiplayer online games. Just as Tolkien set out to build

Middle-earth and its ecologies as a toolkit for others to use, *The Secret World* has within it many different types of gameplay activities, different diegetic cultures, a multitude of micro and macro storylines as well as supporting role-playing, emergent behaviours and fan culture. While a world has inevitably different types of spaces within it, this game has a high concentration of urban ones. It has cities that we recognise, such as London, Tokyo, Seoul and New York, plus a host of towns of various sizes and displaying different types of cultures dotted across the game's world. There are also many rural locations, some coastal, others arboreal and desert. These sparsely occupied spaces make the urban spaces more solidly 'urban' because of their differential juxtaposition. Equally, the rural locations benefit in terms of their ability to be experienced as places of solitude (cities can be places that are busy with other players doing daily tasks, hanging out with friends and managing their resources).

The Secret World's urban spaces employ a wide range of vernacular and stylistic vocabularies. While the whole world communicates human imperilment and moral ambiguity, its noir-ish characteristics co-exist with other gothic modes: part of the game is set in Egypt therefore co-opting what Roger Luckhurst calls 'Egyptian Gothic' which has a strong occult flavour (2012) and the myth of the mummy's curse (Frayling, 1992). Another area nominates vampire gothic in the part of the game set in Transylvania. The gameplay proper opens on Solomon Island, off the coast of Maine and draws on American gothic staples. The first I of which is thethe Cthulhu mythos , a fictional world referred to by several different writers that is populated by monsters that originated from stories written HP Lovecraft's (as distinct from Haraway's differently spelled Cthtulhucene, but sharing a relationship to the tentacular. See Fig 1 for Lovecraft's drawing of the monster Cthulhu and its characteristic tentacles). The second is the literature of Stephen King (King is represented as a character, a horror writer living in a lighthouse).
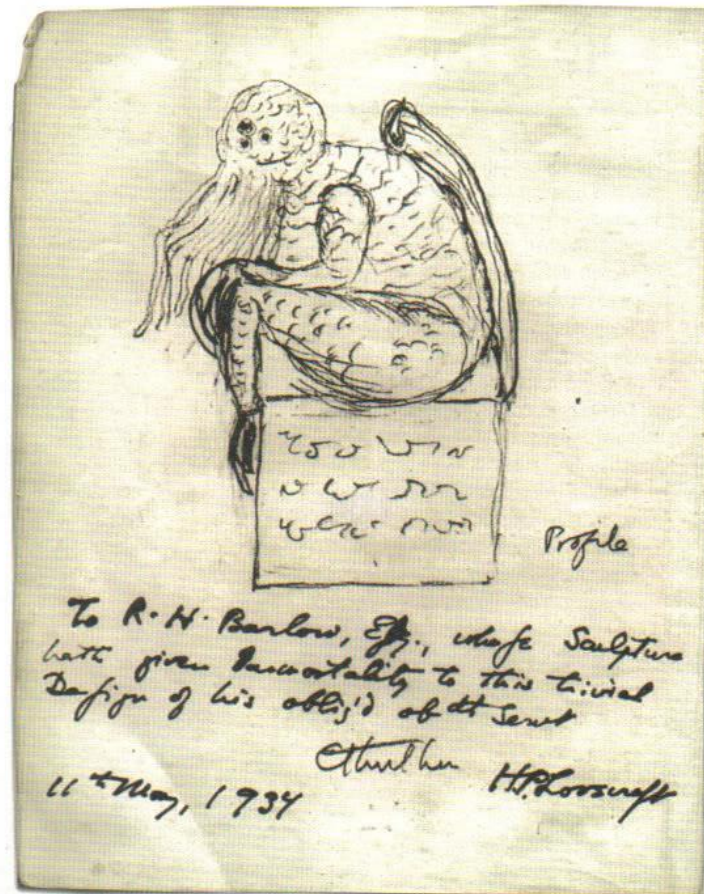
Fig.1. HP Lovecraft's sketch of the Great Old One, Cthulhu.

However, what unites the distinctive regional and stylistic vocabularies is the game's creation of a sense of paranoia. Noir often links paranoia with the urban as if it belongs best in busy social space where conspiracy is most able to thrive. *The Secret World* is very much indebted to the occult conspiracy paranoia inducing scenario set out in *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* (1975), novels written by Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea (*The Eye in the Pyramid, The Golden Apple* and *Leviathan*), Wilson's subsequent essay-fiction Cosmic Trigger series (1977) and a card-based spin-out game *Illuminati: The Game of Conspiracy* (1982) designed and published by Steve Jackson games.

Echoing the language of the Illuminatus Trilogy, the game heralds the player with the maxim that 'Everything is True'. This is a part quote from Albert Camus' existentialist novel

L'Étranger (1942) – 'Everything is True, Nothing is True' is the complete phrase. In the context of the game, the aphorism refers specifically to conspiracy theories, myths and urban legends. In effect, *Everything is True* radically challenges the notion of absolute truth, rendering meaning infinitely ambiguous. As a literary effect, this places all 'into the abyss' (*mise en abîme*). A similar aphorism is used Assassin's Creed series, here 'Nothing is true, everything is permitted' (this is the eponymous creed) – here it provides a defiant statement of amoral free will; this game cannot therefore be claimed for the weird gothic where entropy and the inability to act holds court. By contrast, *The Secret World*'s usage of *Everything is True* means that there is no longer any discernment possible between truth and fiction; we've descended into a semiotic hall of mirrors typified and noirished as a case of weird, delusional paranoia. This suits the urban myth and conspiracy theme of the game. Paranoia is then the rubric of the entire game where all monsters and urban myth of every type are now potentially real. Taking the 'noir' urban climate to the regional diversity of the game's world, it is thematic *and* semiotic. The requirement that players must use the 'real' internet to help solve certain puzzles blurs the diegetic parameters of the game. Additional blurrage comes from the information that the game developers have planted across the 'real' web. In breaking the fourth wall, the game's 'magic circle' and its diegesis, is drawn far wider than is usually the case. Given that the world-wide web is infested with conspiracy theories, false news, myths and misinterpretation, its co-option by the game underscores its ability to implicate the player in its fictional web of 21_{st} century paranoia. As part of this matrix, it is clear in the game that technology will not provide a solution to the ecological and existential threat posed to humanity, so the game builds its aesthetics of paranoia around aspects of the anthropocene.

To help explore and substantiate this idea, it may help to define paranoia in a psychological context. Charles Rycroft defines it thus, 'Functional psychosis characterised by

delusions of grandeur and persecution, but without intellectual deterioration. In classic cases of paranoia, the delusions are organised into a coherent, internally consistent delusional system on which the patient is prepared to act' (1968, p.125). In other words, discernment between fantasy and reality is subject to failure, demonstrating that our grasp on reality is fragile and even where we are 'sane' our internal world colours our interpretation and indeed perception of what is thought to be external. As Mark Fisher notes, 'The weird thing is not wrong, after all; it is our conception that must be inadequate' (2016, p.15). To which we might add that the ability to read and enjoy fiction itself is based in our facility to temporarily delude ourselves. Configurations of *mise en abîme* are the stuff of paranois on which the house of weird gothic is built. Other games, *Eternal Darkness* (2002, Silicon Knights) and *Call of Cthulhu Dark Corners of the Earth* (2005, Bethesda) draw from the same weird pool and as Bernard Perron notes player-characters of these games are 'affected by various distortions' (2018, p.275). Uses of *mise en abîme* manifest in urban gothic contexts where meaning has become critically unstable and the geometries have turned monstrous. *The Secret World* helps to see how this paranoid schema plays out in the game and in the particular Anthropocentric caste of the urban spaces it creates.

The player-character awakes into the game world in a modern, functional apartment. We see our character pushing balls of energy around, a power newly acquired. Before this power becomes normalised as a superpower, they are approached by the faction that rules the city that they live in. Prior to entry into the game proper, optional videos provide information about the three occult factions from which the player must choose – it's clear that none are fully trustworthy and each regard you as a pawn. The Templars operate like an empire, with rules and traditions. The Illuminati have 'stocks, hell and compromising pictures of angels' plus a long history of manipulating business and governments for their own gain. The Dragons seek to see and manipulate patterns in chaotic systems and use them to bend reality.

This game world is not then a replication of the hero's journey: a spiralling process of dissolution and dissemblement unfolds. The player-character is then informed visually in a dream that they must choose, 'lose all or become a god – the choice is yours'. Of course, there is no choice and whatever faction you have chosen the outcome is the same: you've been pressganged by occulted forces that you neither know or understand. And, no matter which faction you choose, they each have you under constant surveillance. In effect, and even before hitting the end of the prologue, the usual definitions of fantasy and reality, choice and determination, are put to question. It becomes clear retrospectively that the little, apparently incidental, bee that flew in through the apartment's window and into the sleeping player-character's mouth in the opening cut-scene of the game was in fact what chose us, heralding the acquisition of a power we did not choose, over which we have little control. This little bee seems out of place in the city – a benign insect that tells another story: a case of the bees telling us? Something is clearly going on; the tidy apartment is now in disarray, uncontrolled power arcs through the player-character's body. The usual rules no longer apply. Even the newly established player-character identity is quickly undermined as the player soon finds themselves in another character's skin, experiencing an event that occurred in the past – time, space and self are no longer stable. Waking again, this time the player's bedroom walls give way to a graveyard, that classic gothic location, a suitable place for the player to learn the basics of the game's interface and where the dead are infinitely expendable. In terms of gameplay interface, the design of the input controls are not standard and therefore not easily mastered. This makes play somewhat awkward, , requiring some contorted manoeuvres at the outset. Nothing and Everything is True.

It's clear from our starting zones that we are urban dwellers; 'cool' contemporary characters models are available for the player to choose. There is clearly an urban concern for clothing; in each hub city there are clothing store where players can tailor their fashion

encouraging personal expression and backstory creation; even in the face cosmic horror we should adopt sharp contemporary apparel. No cloaks or chain mail here. The urban spaces in the first section of the game are economically drawn, but what is small in scale in terms of explorable space is compensated by detailed architecture, giving a semblance reality through depth. There is also a whole world awaiting exploration and providing a host of myths urban and otherwise to encounter. *The Secret World's* urban space does however have an exotic, weird caste. London is full of street-based occult references, evident in the names of the streets, shops and pubs there (e.g. Saintsditch, Lud Ale Brewery, The Horned God) and the templars control the police force who have the city on lockdown, justifying the presence of barriers.

New York houses some crazy illuminati body-jackers intent on pumping the player-character full of psychedelic drugs located in a car park and the entire zone has a more hectic feel. This is the home of the all-seeing eye, the Illumaniti. Seoul is calmer, cleaner, marrying traditional Korean architecture with electronics stores. We learn early on that both Tokyo and Times Square have been attacked by a variety of cosmic horrors. All these places connect the

Fig. 2. Times Square under attack in *The Secret World* prologue.

player with their own contemporary urban world – a place not heretofor the subject of

multiplayer games, which tend to be set in fantasy worlds as is the case with *Everquest*

(1999-. Verant/Sony), *Elder Scrolls* (2014, Zenimax/Bethesda, 2014) and *World of Warcraft*

(2004, Blizzard). The deployment of these real urban spaces in the game further works to

demonstrate that the fabric of human reality is at stake, about to be swept aside by

unfathomable cosmic forces that only occult knowledge and perhaps the bees can help to

combat.

The first assignment that the player-character is tasked with is on Solomon Island, off

the coast of Maine, US. Monsters have come in from the sea and the dead have awakened,

hungry for living flesh, another gothic trope and one that the game often connects to

environmental exploitation. While running around the streets of Kingsmouth (note the

reference to both Stephen King and Lovecraft's fictional town 'Innsmouth'), we are

enmeshed in world of urban myths, conspiracies – old and new - and occult histories. Out at the Island's airport, Black Ops activities are taking place and the player encounters an a pair who allude to the *X-Files*' Mulder and Scully; both perplexed by events and demonstrating that liberal referential use of conspiratorial fiction in the game. Kingsmouth itself is permanently dressed up in Halloween garb, shrouded in a lurid orange haze out of which legions of the undead and sea monsters emerge. Nordic warriors and Draugrs (Old Norse for 'revenants') are encountered along the harbour and beach-front; they can be found in the town's woods overseeing the undead working to unearth the bodies of deceased townsfolk and those killed in witch-hunts and industrial disasters. It is unclear what their purpose is, bar killing the living – something more than that is definitely afoot indicated by the ravens that lead the player to sites of occult rituals inhabited by powerful revenants.

Quests vary from the staple killing of monsters, through to lore-gathering designed for players less focused on ratcheting up their skills and more involvement in the deep storylines that the game contains. Most innovative of these are puzzle quests that involve the player in seeking out information or solving occult riddles. In these the player must look outside the game often to relevant literature i.e. Poe's story 'The Gold Bug' or into occult history, for example the quest 'Digging Deeper' requires players to decode masonic sigils to unlock a tomb (for more see Krzywinska, 2014). These quests are most strongly aligned to the conspiracy and paranoia theme of the game and, in the case of Solomon Island, all its urban spaces are deeply embedded in occult machinations, having been built and designed by members of the Illuminati. Evidence of this urban occult authorship is littered around the entire island, evident in the quests like Digging Deeper, and involving a high degree of environmental storytelling is in place to provide the game's lore. The island's lighthouse provides an example of a functional building that is also emblematic of the all-seeing eye of the Illuminati whose symbol is the eye in the pyramid and it is also the residence of Sam

Kreig, writer of horror fiction. As with the other factions, surveillance is core to the power over the diegetic world and over you, the player-character and this underwrites the aesthetics of paranoia at work in the game.

Urban myths are closely bound into larger conspiracies and occult factions within the game; often in a spiralling set of complex intertextual connections and references which in a paranoid mindset are given fallacious credence. For example, *Black House* (2001), a novel by Stephen King, who regularly uses Maine as a setting for his fiction, features children that are being killed and cannibalised by a character known as The Fisherman who is, in turn, an agent of the Crimson King (a take on the King in Yellow of Robert W. Chamber's eponymous novel [1895], and whose 'yellow king' guise is adopted by the cult-loving back-woods psycho killer in the first True Detective series [2004]). *The Secret World* also has its version of the Black House and its dedicated questline. The house stands at the edge of the

Fig. 3. The Black House that stands at the edge of town in *The Secret World*.

town, is suitably coloured and emits strange noises; it is also surrounded by a powerful energy field that resists entry – players must find a secreted way into the house. Earlier the player is told that a woman was burned alive inside the house by townsfolk and you are tasked with putting her soul to rest. Once in, the house throws debris at you – it's clearly alive, possessed and is invested with all those many urban myths around the 'terrible place', a derelict, unkempt house.There is a clear sense of urban decay here as part of the anthropic landscape – a place where questionable human actions transform into entropic imagery. To quell the concomitant anxiety and attempt to restore (the) 'home', the player must perform rituals to cleanse the house including scattering the ashes of the burned woman in the Miskatonic river. The opening quest text tells us that 'The burnt-out shell of the Black House sits like an accusation among Solomon Island's picket fences and townhouses.'As is so apparent with the urban myths that are common in small-town horror, cities are not the only places to harbour monstrosities and paranoia. In addition to meta-texts and urban myths embedded in the Black House narrative, completion of its quests produces different faction responses that show clearly how they are manipulating you; undermining in different ways any sense of heroic agency. The site of inaction is that of the gothic and where the conservation of physical energy generates psyhic energy in the form of anxiety.

     The Secret World's people and places are filtered through numerous intertextual references that work to thicken the game's spiralling, meta-fictional narrative and thereby challenge the assumed boundaries between reality and fiction. The result is a psychoactive blend of urban myth and gothic, the aim of which is to create a strong sense of the vertiginous nature of the weird for the player that has hitherto not been achieved within populist games. Players may gain some physical mastery over the game's interface but in the context of this weird and urban, where factions, histories and interpretations constantly slide, there is an escalating sense of uncertainty and paranoia that makes for a weird and gothic

contemporaneous means of overturning the usual certainties and predictabilities found in videogames. The game provides an exemplar of the ways in which the urban gothic has (optimally) been deployed in the context of videogames.

The Secret World's monsters are in different ways connected to injustices of the past, a Freudian 'return of the repressed' spewed up to take revenge on the living. Some of these are related to the treatment not just of other humans but of the environment. The game refers to Anthropocene in this gothic way , and also connects with Donna Haraway's alternative conception of the epoch, the Chthulucene, which she uses as a call to alternative to the 'man-centric', marginalising and technocratic uses of the Anthropocene, 'We need another figure, a thousand names of something else, to erupt out of the Anthropocene into another, big-enough story' (2016, n.p.). We hear another story in the buzzing of the game's enigmatic bees and that little bee that afforded the player-character power at the start of the game. These bees seem lead to an elsewhere and a very different story than appears on the Anthropocentric surface of the game, where Lovecraft's Cthuhulean monsters represent a deep pessimism about the fate of humanity and the world. The bees are also allied to the many mentions of Gaia in the game, as Haraway says, 'Gaia was and is a powerful intrusive force, in no one's pocket, no one's hope for salvation, capable of provoking the late twentieth century's best autopoietic complex systems thinking that led to recognizing the devastation caused by anthropogenic processes of the last few centuries, a necessary counter to the Euclidean figures and stories of Man' (2016, n.p.). *The Secret World*'s occult focus enables the game to look beyond Euclidean geometry, bureaucracy and other human constructs and while players might run around looking for power, the game refers to an othered Chthulucene power located within the realm of the bees. As Haraway tells us, 'In many incarnations around the world, the winged bee goddesses are very old, and they are much needed now' (2016, n.p.).

As we have seen, urban gothic is represented in games in ways that are increasingly more responsive in terms of activities for players as well as more visually realistic and simulative. With virtual reality, mixed reality and augmented reality platforms increasingly available for the domestic market, the possibility of creating extremely effective immersive perceptual spaces is now upon on us. Horror works extremely well in these immersive contexts. Augmented Reality games such *RoboRaid* (Microsoft, 2018), overlays and maps images of interstellar robots such that they appear to come out of the walls in the room you are standing in. Other AR games, such as *Knock of the Dead* "Your own home compromised', *Holophobia: Spiders* (which is meant to be therapy!) or *Night Terrors: Bloody Mary* (Imprezario, 2018) for smartphones and *Dreadhalls* (White Door, 2016), *Alien Isolation: MotherVR Mod* (Creative Assembly/Nibre, 2017), Kobold (Another World, 2018) *The Exorcist: Legion* for VR, show that there is now capability to create games that have an even greater capacity to generate paranoia, anxiety and erase the frameworks that signify 'fantasy'. I eagerly await an Augmented Reality version of the likes of *The Secret World* that mobilise potent and rich aesethetics of paranoia and conspiracy within the transformative rubric of Haraway's Chthulucene where the urban gothic reminds as that 'human beings are with and of the earth' (2016).

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