Digital Games and the American Gothic: Investigating Gothic Game Grammar

Tanya Krzywinska[1]
Brunel University

Abstract

This essay shows that the American Gothic has a powerful presence in digital games and that it has become a part of contemporary game grammar. There is a close investigation into the ways in which the formal, participatory characteristics of games shape the ways in which the American Gothic appears. Close textual analysis is made of Alan Wake and The Secret World. In addition to analysis of their ludic dimensions, principle themes, intertextual borrowing and their means of delivering story, there is consideration of the way that these games produce certain styles of Gothic reading: in the case of The Secret World, a conspiracy-style hermeneutic. The essay demonstrates that within digital games the American Gothic is defined by the use of textual tropes such as setting and theme rather than in terms of national authorship. It concludes that games are shaping the American Gothic into new forms and provide new ways of engaging with it.

Keywords: *Digital Games; Survival Horror; popular culture; technology; HP Lovecraft; Edgar Allan Poe; Stephen King, Conspiracy theory, Chaos Theory, Myth, Magic, Magic Realism.*

What might we mean if we declare that a digital game is 'American Gothic'? Does such a claim rest on the idea that the game in question draws on tropes and traditions associated with the American Gothic? Or, more simply, do we just mean that a Gothic game is set in the US? Alternatively, are we referring to a Gothic game that has been made by a US development studio? In

1. Tanya Krzywinska has been Professor in Screen Studies at Brunel University since 1996. She is the author of several books and many articles on different aspects of video games and on representations of the occult and of sex/sexuality. Currently she is working on a monograph, Gothic Games and on an interactive Gothic fiction, 'The Witch's Room'. She convenes a Masters and PhD program entitled "Digital Games: Theory and Design" at Brunel University. Tanya.krzywinska@brunel.ac.uk.

all these cases a *national accent* is emphasised and assigned a primary role in how the Gothic is deployed in a given game. Placing emphasis on national accent dovetails with a broadly socio-cultural approach to understanding texts in terms of the cultural context of their production. Such an approach has merit, but suffers from the problem of putting culture before text, rather than seeing culture *as* text. Games which deploy American Gothic are not necessarily made by Americans, and the America seen in such games is a textual and fictional property woven from a web of intertextual and intercultural reflections and refractions. In addition, the national accent of the American Gothic is also not the only factor that gives a game its shape and character. All media have their own distinctive formal properties and digital games have characteristics that, when considered collectively, are unique. Their formal properties of play a significant role in the way that the Gothic is adapted, shaping it in ways that are stronger than 'accent' alone. Digital games present something of a problem on another front in their relation to the American Gothic, because unlike some literature and television that are popularly thought of as American Gothic, the term is very rarely used in their commercial or even academic categorisation. Generic categorisation tends instead to gravitate around the primary action a player performs in game – a 'shooter' or 'role-playing game' for example. But, the Gothic remains rife in digital games, finding its way into every gaming genre. Among all its various manifestations, it is the American Gothic that proves to be the most widespread Gothic accent to be found.

American Gothic is perhaps best understood as a flavour of the Gothic with a particular accent. Given the longevity of Gothic fiction, it is unsurprising that it has evolved and transformed, and that as a result there is a 'palette' of possible accents and flavours that comprise the Gothic. We may speak of national flavours, but there are also many other flavours that are not so solidly based in nationality or geography. That the Gothic crosses boundaries easily has been noted by many theorists of the Gothic (Botting, 1996 for example). Its metamorphic and agnostic (in terms of media) nature, in combination with a characteristic focus on the evocation of emotion, seems to dispose it to adaptation, allowing it to lend its flavour to various forms (novel, comics, short story, film, television, games, etc.) and genres (comedy, melodrama, horror, science

fiction, role-playing games, first person shooters, adventure, etc.). Claiming that an articulation of the Gothic has an American accent does, however, mean that its particular characterisation in a given game requires explanation. Perhaps the strongest claim on the American Gothic can be made where a game employs recognisably Gothic themes and is made in America, by an American development team and with an American audience in mind. However, this scenario is far from unproblematic. Development teams are often multi-cultural. Authorship in a commercial context is most likely to be collaborative, involving a varied range of skills. Digital games aimed at a popular audience are rarely the result of auteurist vision but, instead, driven by commercial imperative, by genre and intertextuality. In addition to these factors, games are often made for audiences of multiple nationalities and ethnicities. The situation is, therefore, more complex than simply claiming 'American Gothic' is simply a result of the nationality of an author, as might have been said perhaps of the work of Edgar Allan Poe or H.P. Lovecraft.

American culture itself is far from self-contained, and consumed across the globe as part of daily life. The audience and fan-base for the American-made television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), for example, remains highly diverse in terms of nationality (as well as in other markers of social and cultural difference). American popular culture might be pervasive globally, but it is often referenced and recontextualised in games that exhibit other accents; the Silent Hill franchise, which is set in the US yet made by a Japanese development company provides a strong indicative example. There are many games that are made by Nordic, British, Canadian and Japanese based development companies which employ an American Gothic accent, alongside traditional Gothic themes, and which locate the story and action in a version of the United States. What might constitute an 'American Gothic' game is, therefore, far from straightforward and as such presents some tricky problems. But one of the values of not being afraid of entering this tangled and thorny thicket is that our exploration will deepen our understanding of the form of contemporary games and show how digital game form creates new ways of experiencing the Gothic. Exploring digital games through the lens of American Gothic raises questions not just about form, content and representation, but also about commercial contexts,

authorship, textuality and engagement. Digital games have developed a universal 'game grammar', which alters our engagement not just with American Gothic but the Gothic more generally. American Gothic has become a staple of that grammar.

Digital Games as Medium: Why we need to consider form.

If we are to understand the nature and complexities of the American Gothic in relation to, and in the specific context, of digital games it is important to start out by outlining how digital games differ in formal terms from other media. As opposed to the more generalist category of 'play', games are regularly characterized by academics as possessing a set of rules and some kind of winning condition or conditions. These are structural features that distinguish games from less goal-directed forms of play. Philosopher Roger Caillois (2001) proposed this distinction using the terms *paidea* (play) and *ludus* (game). These opposed concepts underpin much academic work on digital games (Juul, 2006; King and Krzywinska, 2006). We can easily see how games are built fundamentally out of a set of rules if we consider Chess, for example, or card games such Rummy or Patience (Solitaire), or board games such as Scrabble or Monopoly. Digital games too are rule-based and most offer sets of winning conditions. Digital games do, however, differ from other types of games because they are in their entirety computational artefacts (hence my use of the term *digital* games rather than videogames, a distinction made more valid with the recent popularity of games for small handheld devices such as phones and tablets). Any game played with material tokens and supports can be made into a digital game, as is evident in the case of Solitaire/Patience. As with any digital game, rules are no longer in the domain of the player but, instead, are administered by the computer. In the computerised version of Solitaire/Patience, cards are not made of printed card and held in the hand by the player, but are instead represented on screen and manipulated by some kind of interface device such as a mouse. Examining the effect of digital adaptation proves important if we are to gain a better understanding of the formal characteristics of games and how this affects their version of American Gothic.

Digital games have, therefore, to provide onscreen representations of real materials. These, alongside story and character, are tools with which game designers create meanings that allow players to make sense of computational and game rules in an audio-visual context. Even though games need rules, they are therefore more than just rule sets, as both Janet Murray (2001) and Barry Atkins (2003) have argued. In addition to the use of various fictional devices to inculcate the player into the game, they are in part simulations, as Jon Peterson (2012) has noted, thereby arguing that games are particular types of fictional worlds. Because rules are hidden from the player's view in digital games, and are largely non-negotiable, the experience of playing a digital game is very different to playing a board game. In a card or board game, at least one person must attend to the rules of play and possibly keep the score (a possible source of dispute, as well as creativity and negotiation). There are certainly many Gothic-themed board, card or table-top role-playing games, *Call of Cthulhu* (Chaosium Games, 1981), *Arkham Horror* (Fantasy Flight Games, 2005), *The Glooms* (Atlas Games, 2004) for example, but our focus is digital games. In contrast to other types of games, the digital game is screen-based, audio-visual in nature (close to film and television in this regard) and it is comprised of computational algorithms, which respond to a player's input. These formal nodes constitute the nature of the medium of digital games and affect the way that American Gothic is realised and experienced.

In order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the peculiar characteristics of the digital game medium it is helpful to think of them as input/output devices that work principally on *feedback*. Players respond to what they see and hear on the screen and the game responds to that response. Many micro-transactions of this nature take place, which lend the illusion of agency and of moving through a 'real' space. A game, therefore, responds to a player's actions and choices. In most games various types of feedback provide commentary on progress in the game. For example, a player tries to open a door, but as they have not yet found the key that opens that door, the game responds to the player's premature action with a discouraging sound or a voice saying that a door is locked. This call-and-response structure prompts the player to look further afield for a way to open the door. Like a Gothic detective, the player reads the game text

closely to hunt for clues to help solve the puzzle and progress through the game. The game designer will use variations on established game grammar conventions to provide clues to enable the player to read the code of the game. The player is, therefore, required to be attentive to the way the game is organised as a system, in which the procedural, ludic and the semiotic/representational are united. Some aspects of the system will be part of a pre-existing game grammar. For example, in most PC games the 'w' key moves the player's character forward, while pressing the spacebar makes them jump; in Western console games the 'x' key acts as the principle 'do' key. It is not only interface conventions that are in play, however: drooping sounds may indicate a failed action for example, while visual anomalies are likely to indicate some kind of cue for action. Each game will borrow from established game grammar, which also touches on textual conventions such as genre, style and theme, to construct its own particular vocabulary. A seasoned player can be said to have a high degree of game literacy. As a literate player you may 'naturally' look for some place that a key might be hidden for example, perhaps investigating an anomalously coloured brick in a wall, a slightly open drawer or reading a letter placed on a desk for information as to your next action.

The narrative and hermeneutic potential of solving puzzles and looking into mysteries informs fiction across media and is used in many texts that might be claimed as American Gothic, perhaps best emblemised by Poe's prototypical Gothic detective, Dupin. A reader or viewer must, however, follow the investigations and reasoning of a narrator-investigator, but in the context of a digital game it is the player who motivates their investigation as an active agent. In addition to the activity, the player is also offered choices, what might be termed *ludic agency*. The choices offered to players may have anything from a zero to a profound effect on the game, and in some cases choice might go beyond winning conditions to also affect story outcome. In *Bioshock* (2007, 2K Games/Irrational Games) different endings ensue depending on whether a player has chosen to kill or refrain from killing the 'little sisters'. *Silent Hill 2* (Konami/KCET, 2003) has five different potential endings, with more added in later versions of the game. The alternate ending scenario is not used in all games, however. In other more linear games, players might make choices along the way, but the resolution remains the

same. While many games offer some degree of choice, they are nonetheless heavily designed and authored environments and we march to the beat of the game design. This can prove a source of frustration, where we may not be able to perform actions in the prescribed manner, leaving one in stasis and unable to progress. Frustration might also ensue where rules seem arbitrary and incoherent: 'why can't I jump over this tiny boundary when before I was permitted to jump something four times as high!'. When playing a board or card game rules can be re-written if necessary to ensure enjoyment.

The specific combination of agency and authoring is balanced differently across the range of games and game genres that include elements of American Gothic, but in all cases it is the participatory nature of games that sets them apart from other media. Making good use of the direct address that they make to the player, games that draw upon the Gothic generally tend to either centralise investigation or use it as a means around which to organise other types of activities. Gothic games are extremely diverse, ranging from simple shooters such as the House of the Dead series (Sega, 1998-2012) to blockbuster games such *Bioshock*; single-player games such as the Silent Hill (Knomani/ KCET: 1999-present) to multiplayer games such as *Left 4 Dead 1 & 2* (Valve/EA, 2008, 2009) and *The Secret World* (Funcom/EA, 2012), and independent and art-based games that seek to test the boundaries of digital game form such as *Slender* (Parsec, 2012) and *The Binding of Isaac* (McMillen and Himsl, 2011)

Adapting the American Gothic for Digital Games

Having outlined some of the principle features of game media, a closer analysis is now needed of the how the American Gothic is adapted to game form.

Alan Wake: Losing the Plot

Alan Wake (Remedy/Microsoft, 2010, 2012 PC version) is a single-player game developed by the Finnish company Remedy for an international market. The game follows its Max Payne games, which also made use of an American style and idiom,

in that case Hard-boiled Noir. Both games feature male protagonists who have 'lost the plot' – literally in the case of Wake - and whose normal lives have been radically disrupted. The high concept of *Alan Wake* combines aspects of David Lynch's television series *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) with a distillation of Stephen King's fiction, spiced with lesser-order references to other forms of American Gothic horror, such as various stories by H.P. Lovecraft, Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963, US), John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972, US) and George Romero's Zombie films (1968-2009). The eponymous Wake is our point of entry into the game; the player controls this character's actions and experiences events from his point of view. This limited perspective is underlined by the thick layer of vocal narration provided by the character and supplemented by dialogue-heavy cut-scenes. Wake is a writer; a blocked horror fiction writer and as in Stephen King's beleaguered-writer novel *Misery* (1987), proceedings start with a car accident in a remote back-woods location (back-woods representing the primal, the unconscious with an American accent, while drawing on older uses of the forest in Gothic fiction more generally). The story arcs around the enigmatic proposition that the nightmare that Wake experiences seems to be based on a book he has written, but the contents of which he has forgotten, thus vocalising a classic Gothic dream-logic scenario where temporal order and agency become dis-ordered. This ambiguity contributes to the game's highly referential and self-referential style. The yoking of authorship to the dissolution of borders between reality and fiction is therefore a pivotal theme of the game. A strong American accent is evident through the geography of location as most of the game is set in Bright Falls, Washington, a fictional small-town. It is also present in the impasto-thick references to both Stephen King, as author and his fiction, alongside the allusions to American Gothic 'back-woods' horror fiction. As also occurs in stories written by American Gothic writers such as Poe, Melville and James, Wake is faced with a multitude of unreadable signs and regularly exhibits a 'lack of interpretative certainty' (Savoy, 2002: 179). Wake's ostensible, forgotten involvement in authoring the manifestation of evil hangs around the disappearance of his wife. In this the game conforms to Savoy's notion that American Gothic

'turn(s) obsessively to the personal, the familial and the national past' (168). As a result of these features, *Alan Wake* might be regarded as a quintessential work of American Gothic in terms of story and theme, but how might the American Gothic translate in terms of the ludic dimensions of gameplay?

The game's story, character and theme are marshalled around the tasks the player must carry out, a fundamental feature of all games. From the outset, we learn that Wake is constantly under threat from 'the darkness', which manifests in multiple ways, thereby demanding various actions of the player. This evil force turns ordinary people into homicidal maniacs, a device that draws on a range of American Gothic horror texts, from Herschel Gordon Lewis' *2,000 Maniacs* (1964, US) and *The Deliverance*, through to *The Shining* – King's novel (1977) and Kubrick's cinematic adaptation (1980). Various key non-playing characters are commandeered, as well as numerous miners, woodsmen, townspeople, who resemble zombies, slow and none-too-bright, making for easily-defeated foes when not too numerous and dispatched with a range of semi-plausible incidental weapons. The darkness itself also manifests visually as a mixture of hurricane-force wind and black hole; often there is no defence against it and the only recourse is to run. References here range from the silent film *The Wind* (Victor Sjöström, 1928, US.), where a supernatural desert wind uncovers the body of the slain rapist, acting as a kind of unforgiving, vengeful and even misogynist hand of God, through to use of a black hole as demonic, possessing force in *Event Horizon* (Paul W.S. Anderson, 1997, US). The source of the darkness, present as a form of corruption and disruptive of the everyday and normal, is throughout the game a mystery, but as one plays and finds pages from the forgotten book, Wake himself is increasingly implicated in its generation. The game does however, at least on the surface, make use of a classic binary of good-versus-evil. This is evident in the game's most prominent mechanic, which guides the rhythm of gameplay, and which very neatly dovetails a ludic mechanic with a well-established Gothic theme. It very quickly becomes apparent when first playing the game that light, from whatever source, protects Wake from the fatal touch of the darkness in whatever form it takes - axe

wielding maniac or deadly miasma. Given that the game takes place largely under cover of darkness, the source of light is mainly electric, in the form of torches, street lamps, head lamps, house lights, and lights designed to allow work outside in the dark, powered by generators. Seeking out torches and batteries is one of the main motivations for close exploration throughout the game; simply shooting these supernaturally generated enemies alone without the aid of a paralysing light beam from a torch fails to dispatch them.

The central use of the light mechanic makes a property of the environment central to gameplay, providing diegetic plausibility, but it also works in other more symbolic ways creating a rich textual coherence. It should be said that few digital games work against conventions of good-versus-evil in a Gothic horror context. This is partly to do with issues of regulation, but may also suggest that clear moral positioning aids the interpolation of a player into the game diegesis by making clear character motivation. As with so many other forms of popular media, violence is very often justified within fiction under the banner of 'good'. Gothic horror, with its tangible supernaturalism, very often deploys such binaries providing for the player a 'feel-good' factor, by militating against moral ambiguity. *Alan Wake* is not, however, quite so straightforward in moral and metaphysical terms. Wake is implicated as author of the darkness and, rather than providing an example of a muscular hero, he is often running for his life, confused and stunned rather than actively fighting for 'good'. The Darkness maybe 'out there' but the 'out there' is also a product of Wake's imagination. What the player must do is to make use of light as a gameplay tool to stay alive in a very practical sense; while metaphysical resonances are clearly in play, light is never given agency nor is it personified.

The game most certainly 'remediates' other American Gothic texts and formats, to use a term coined by Grusin and Bolter (2000) to explain how ideas are recycled from one media to another. But this is no straight-forward repetition as the game also refers very knowingly to other media. The 'collectors' edition' is shaped like a book, for example, and televisions showing a *Twilight Zone*

style show, as well as various forms of books, newsprint and radios, are found throughout the gamespace. The game takes a structural framework from the serial form, in particular that developed within American popular television but also looking back to the episodic structure used by Charles Dickens in his version of Gothic. There are cliff hangers at the end of 'episodes' and recaps on what has gone before at the start of new ones. The use of televisual devices such as these are not simply repetitive, as remediation implies. Ludic form means that a player's performance is under scrutiny throughout the game. If the player does not pass muster, is unable or unwilling to 'skill-up' according the learning curve of the game, there is no access to the rest of the story – Wake is left hanging on the petard of his own imaginative construct. This crucial performative factor divides digital games from other media. In this sense games prove to be media that have unique capacity to resist their audience. This is why *Alan Wake*, like many other games, has variable difficulty settings – it is however still a hard game to complete, even on 'easy' mode and for a seasoned player. *Alan Wake* is therefore a game that takes existing forms, themes and tropes of the American Gothic and relocates them in the realm of player participation.

Alan Wake was originally designed to be an 'open world' game, meaning that players would be able to roam in the game world freely, visiting landmarks and picking up story elements in any order as However, the game designers soon discovered that the open-world format that worked so well in for example the Grand Theft Auto games was not well-suited to the topography of Gothic horror. A core problem with the open format is that it proves difficult to determine the order in which players discover plot nodes. The virtues of tight linear storytelling with its temporally critical series of cause and effect chains were required if the game was so lovingly to re-create the type of pace, suspense and dramatic tension found in the American Gothic fictions to which the game refers. Remedy therefore reverted to a closed format of the type that is more regularly used in single-player adventure games to more tightly control the player's experience to afford the types of affect we associate with the genre. In this, *Alan Wake*'s version of

American Gothic calls not simply on the breathless roller-coaster plot structure of Stephen King, but also on other Gothic traditions such as the lurid orchestrations and manipulations of Grand Guignol theatre and the Ghost Train, where thrill is produced by putting the audience 'on-rails' through the textual space, unable therefore to slow the experience down and inspect the construction. This is not to say that a more open world is unable to support an articulation of the American Gothic in games, however. *The Secret World* provides an example of how this is not just simply possible, but highly productive.

The Secret World: A Conspiracy of Signs

Released in June 2012, *The Secret World* was developed in Norway by Funcom for a European and US market. The game expands on the grammar of existing Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing games (MMORPGs) and was the first of the genre to place Gothic themes and forms centrally. To play the game players need to be connected to the internet and pay a monthly subscription. Players start out by building a character, choosing from a wide-range of possibilities the look of that character, as well as selecting one of three factions: Dragon, Templar or Illuminati. There are no fantasy races here; all characters models are human and there are many physical characteristics, as well as clothes and accessories, to select from. Unlike other MMORPGs games such as *World of Warcraft* (2004-present), the game is set in a version of the 'real' world to which is added a layer of supernaturalism, in accordance with the premise of Magic Realism. The game pivots around the theme of the *occult*. Supernatural forces are in various degrees of conflict, some which are organised and institutionalised, others are merely chaotically evil, all of which are unseen under normal conditions. The player-character awakens to find that they have acquired strange powers and are called on to develop that power to fight against anti-human forces. They are sent on a mission to Solomon Island located off the coast of New England where, in a geographically appropriate manner, there is an outbreak of Lovecraftian Mythos.

In this the game draws on a very specific and highly influential regional accent of the American Gothic.

The ingénue player arrives in the area's main town, Kingsmouth to discover a running battle between living and dead townsfolk – seemingly a classic zombie-situation. Players are requisitioned by the local Sheriff to run errands, conducted while also gathering knowledge for their faction. 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 players are sent to other parts of the world, they spend a lengthy period in the New England area, pursuing a range of goals and engaging with a range of geographically-appropriate myths and texts. The game is, however, much more open than *Alan Wake* and players are free to quest, indulge in exploration, shop, gather, or fight other factions. Accumulative, slow-burn character development and world-building is where emphasis lies in this game, affecting its rendition of the American Gothic and providing a distinction from the classic literary unity that governs *Alan Wake*. Polyphony is created by collecting together numerous Gothic accents as a means of creating a strong sense of 'worldness' for players. 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.

The New England location places the game firmly within American Gothic and it is ripe with heavily accented stories and histories. Myth and reality as interlaced, characteristic of Magic Realism. 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*. The objective approach is a necessary property of MMORPG form. *The Secret World* demands collectivity in the fight for the survival of the human race, within which the player plays their small but robust part. Nonetheless this is a game and a world woven from many intertexts. 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: xvii). Entry into the town reveals street names, 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 the trail of empty boxes are followed the player is greeted by a large tentacled sea monster. The boxes state in bright lettering, 'Fresh from the deep to your door' and 'Product of the USA' –implicating human activity in the plight of the town. The first group task that the player encounters is, of course, to defeat an enormous tentacle sea-monster: Cthulhu in all but name (Lovecraft fans might note that the location better suggests the less well-known monster, Dagon). The game is then thickly populated with many and diverse intertexts, creating a rich and highly readable texture that rewards generic knowledge.

In combining American Gothic with Magic Realism, *The Secret World* achieves a distinctive blend of fact and fiction. Like conspiracy theory, the mythical is made real within the game. Every sign is to be read and decoded as indexical of a great hidden, occulted, system. This is made evident in the design of the game environment, exemplified by an early quest, 'The Kingsmouth Code'. Players seek out signs inscribed into the fabric of the town's infrastructure left by the founding fathers of the town, who were members of the Illuminati faction. These signs lead the player to understand something of their secret activities and quest for power. Games generally often employ environment 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 Gothic detective, Dupin. The investigative act of gathering and attending to fragments in order construct story is a central mechanism of *The Secret World* and one that is infused with what we might term a 'conspiracy-style' approach to reading. 'Lore' fragments, which tell snippets of a larger story/history in written form, for example, are scattered around the gamespace, often hidden in hard to locate places. These build into a rich tapestry of back stories, encouraging players to find each fragment to complete a given story arc. If collected, players can read, for example, crew-member's tale about the terror he encountered at sea, his ship now anchored in Kingsmouth monster-infested dock, delivered in the same peculiarly crusted enunciative style of Lovecraft's writing. This story arc dovetails into another strand of lore entitled, 'The Fog', following Stephen King's novel, detailing the arrival of the fog in Kingsmouth. In addition to the use of 'lore' as a storytelling device, Kingsmouth is peopled by 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 and Norma Creed is an old-lady with a smoking rifle and a gritty attitude. 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 lighthouse. Within *The Secret World*, storytelling is a multi-dimensional assemblage of fragments and remnants. It is far 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 underlying patterns. Nowhere is this more apparent as in the game's 'investigative' quests.

The Secret World provides a range of different types of quest activities available for players. Some involve stealth-style missions, others collection-type

activities, while others send the players down a central story-arc, but the most innovative are the investigation quests. These conjure with materials similar to those of Poe's 'tales of ratiocination'. Of all the quest types these are most well-suited to the gamification of American Gothic. This is one example of many. The quest is entitled 'Angels and Demons'. The player has 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, '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 designed to be published in episodes in 1893; players are 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 the pirate Captain Kidd, to disguise the location of his treasure. Using this code to render the word 'Glass' gives entry to the computer and the evidence required. This quest is neatly emblematic of the way that *The Secret World* translates the American Gothic into game form. 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 other such missions, the player must closely read the game's geography and it helps to have a high-end graphics processor to better the signs and notices that litter the gamespace. The in-game internet browser is designed to help players make sense of the more abstruse clues, looking up chapter-and-verse 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 space, the borders of fiction and fact are softened, in accord with a central plank of Gothic fiction, and the sense of conspiracy is strengthened. 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 to the American Gothic.

Conclusion

American Gothic is a property of the act of fiction-making and as such is amenable to translation into digital game form. In digital games, American Gothic is rarely centred on the nationality of authors, in fact it seems much more likely to be called upon by European and Japanese game designers. Instead it is generally focused around the location of a game and the concomitant themes, myths and tropes. These are often deployed as means of creating meaning and depth, as well as appealing to the literacies of players, as indicated by *The Secret World*. The Silent Hill franchise also deploys American Gothic as an extension of a Japanese incomprehension at the inherent surrealism found in David Lynch's version of American Gothic, producing some extremely interesting distortions of the syntax (see Martin Picard, 2009: pp. 96-97).

The *return of the repressed* is a staple theme of American Gothic texts and it is fruitful to look at how it informs games. *Midnight Mysteries: Salem Witch Trials* (Mumbojumbo, 2012) is a simple point and click, find-the-hidden object, game set in Salem. Like Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953) and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), the game reveals a bloody and persecutory history, very far from the American dream. Players help the restless spirit of Hawthorne to solve the mystery of his own death before he is able to Rest In Peace; that Hawthorne's father was a Judge in the Witch Trials is also implicated in this articulation of the return of the repressed. The unquiet dead, rising in anger, regret or as result of greed, are staple populous of games. Where they bear an American accent, there is often an implicit, sometimes explicit, indictment of social, familial or institutional practices and mores. In *The Secret World*

one mission sends the player beyond the town graveyard to look for unmarked mass graves. One of which contains the burned bodies of Salem witches and another the bodies of suffocated miners – an industrial accident covered up. These dead are powerful and resonant adversaries. Wake's haunting is of his own making. While there is mention of indigenous people, where in native sacred grounds are desecrated by white immigrants, the nub of the matter hinges around the disappearance of Wake's wife. She is 'of the other' in this game, victimised and importantly emblematic of fear itself: it is she that fears the dark and not Wake, who comes to fear it. Fear is what has been repressed, othered and then floridly returns. Gender difference is therefore implicated and given voice in this articulation of the return of the repressed; the lost and fearful wife defined by that which is remaindered by masculinity. Freud's concept finds, therefore, fertile ground in the context of American Gothic games.

While 'American Gothic' is not a term commonly used by players to categorize games, it is nonetheless a profitable means of understanding the nature of contemporary games. Generally the Gothic in games is far from easy to pin down because it has so many forms. The American Gothic is much easier to locate. It is a comprised of a set of conventionalized tropes, with setting as a principle player. With so many games using such tropes, the American Gothic has become a staple of gaming and it has become embedded in the global language spoken by games. This ubiquity does, however, make a nationalised notion of Gothic in the context of games problematic: it is no longer a property of objective, geographic reality but has instead become inscribed into and through the grammar of games.

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Suggestions for Further Reading

A greater understanding of Gothic themes in the context of digital games can be found in the following:

KRZYWINSKA, T. (2002) Hands-on horror. In G. King & T. Krzywinska (eds.), *ScreenPlay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces*. London: Wallflower Press. Pp206-223.

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