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# Imagining the Unimaginable - Lovecraft in Popular Culture

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## Introduction

Howard Phillips Lovecraft was an author who mainly published short stories during the 1930s and 1940s for various pulp magazines. Lovecraft did not enjoy any commercial success during his lifetime and died impoverished and relatively unknown. Lovecraft's literary legacy started off modestly with the founding of Arkham House publishing in 1939 by August Derleth and Donald Wandrei, with the explicit purpose of preserving Lovecraft's work (Weinstock 2014: 109). Derleth and Wandrei were correspondents with Lovecraft and aspiring writers whom Lovecraft offered help and encouragement to, and following Lovecraft's death both Derleth, Wandrei and other authors used various characters and creatures alongside the imaginative space left by Lovecraft to create their own stories within his fictional world. This was what would later be called the Cthulhu Mythos (Sederholm & Weinstock 2016: 10-11). Lovecraft himself did not regard his writing as high culture, and criticized his own writing for being childish. For instance, he wrote in a letter to Frank Belknap Long that: "I really agree that "Yog-Sothoth" is a basically immature conception, & unfitted for really serious literature." (Lovecraft 1997: 339). Two things are apparent with this statement from Lovecraft. He did not consider his literature to be high culture and was content with that, and that his audience were for the most part young adults. David Punter points out that: "There is a curious tension in Lovecraft's texts themselves between the "puerile" and the adult. We can see it in their reception, where they occupy some kind of maturational hinterland; they are stories that one 'used to' read, but out of which we have now grown, now that we are 'grown-up'" (Sederholm & Weinstock 2016: 189).

In the twenty-first century, Lovecraft has started to appear in places that are both anticipated and surprising (Sederholm & Weinstock 2016: 1). On the one hand, adaptations of Lovecraft's stories have never been commercially successful or well received (Smith 2006: 137). A reason for the difficulty to adapt Lovecraft's horrors are that they operate on an utterly dissimilar scale to human life and values, which makes them more difficult to portray or narrativize (Jones 2013: 232). On the other hand, Lovecraftian elements and allusions to the Cthulhu Mythos have flourished in visual texts in recent years. Although he might not enjoy a legacy where his works are adapted as generic transpositions from text to screen, Lovecraft has

nevertheless attained an ubiquitous presence in popular culture. Smith's statement that Lovecraft does not adapt well to visual depictions seems to be erroneous. Lovecraft's stories have from the early days of his legacy been a target for appropriation, and has now been embraced by popular culture through indirect and passing references. The notion of a Cthulhu Mythos can be seen as an act of appropriation in itself, where other authors use Lovecraft's cosmic horrors, characters and objects in order to write their own horror stories. Appropriation is a term befitting Lovecraft's literary legacy, as the Cthulhu Mythos enables authors to incorporate Lovecraftian elements to their stories, while also taking "a more decisive journey away from the informing text into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (Sanders 2016: 35).

This thesis aims to explore the ways that Lovecraft has been embraced by contemporary visual texts that can be viewed as modern forms of pulp fiction, such as animated television shows, graphic novels, and video games. These types of texts have traditionally been viewed as texts that are primarily aimed at a young audience, and this harmonizes with Lovecraft's publishing history in pulp magazines. The intention behind using vastly different visual texts is to present the multiplicity of Lovecraft's legacy in popular culture, and how allusions to his fictional world can appear in surprising places. The analysis aims to find allusions to Lovecraft's literature and judge whether the inclusion of them alters the narrative thematically towards the sub-genre of horror fiction called Lovecraftian Horror.

The structure of this thesis will be two-fold. The aim of the first section is to create the groundwork for the analysis, which will help assess whether or not the inclusion of elements from Lovecraft's literature aids the appropriating texts' narrative in evoking Lovecraftian horror. As a starting point, I will define which themes are prevalent in Lovecraft's literature. The chapter "Defining Lovecraftian Horror" seeks to define how Lovecraft's characters and monsters aid in developing recurring themes in his literature. Additional background information concerning the Cthulhu Mythos will also be provided in this section, as I want to shed light on the early stages of Lovecraft's legacy. Mentioning the Cthulhu Mythos as a whole is needed in regard to the analysis that will succeed it because contemporary texts that draw on elements from Lovecraft's literature as an act of appropriation shares the same problems that Cthulhu Mythos stories have. The use of elements from Lovecraft in Cthulhu Mythos stories does not make the narrative

inherently Lovecraftian. Erroneous use of Lovecraft's horrors can cause them to become generic horror fodder (Jones 2013: 241) instead of their intended symbols of the universe's indifference to humanity as a species (Mullins 2015: 514).

The second section of the thesis will consist of a series of analyses of visual texts that allude to Lovecraft's work. The analysis aims to highlight how elements from Lovecraft's literature is used in contemporary visual texts and how the interplay between Lovecraft's creatures and the texts appropriating Lovecraft might alter the narrative of it. There is one theoretical term connected to appropriation that is relevant for the analysis. This being Julie Sanders' notion of grafting where the relationship between appropriating text and the source text remains present and relevant, and the source text is deployed as "a springboard for an often wholly different text" (Sanders 2016: 69). The texts I have chosen all use elements from Lovecraft's literature, albeit for various purposes, and these will be discussed in the following chapters. The animated television shows I will be analyzing are *Rick and Morty* and *South Park*, where both shows either satirize or parody either current events or other texts. For graphic novels, I will analyze Mike Mignola's *Batman: The Doom That Came to Gotham*, and Alan Moore's *Providence*. *Batman: The Doom That Came to Gotham* will be used as an example of how Lovecraft can contribute to a superhero narrative. *Providence*, on the other hand, is completely reliant on Lovecraft's world in order to create its narrative. The final text I will analyze is the video game *Darkest Dungeon* where I will explore the interplay between Lovecraft's literature and the interactive nature of video games.





# Opening up the terrifying vistas of Lovecraft

## Defining Lovecraftian Horror

This theoretical chapter aims to define the subgenre of horror fiction Lovecraftian horror, which Lovecraft's literature and his mode of writing created. Lovecraft's stories embody his philosophy of cosmicism and is explained by him in a letter to Farnsworth Wright:

Now all my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large. . . To achieve the essence of real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget that such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all. (Lovecraft 1997: 337)

Lovecraft's cosmicism is portrayed through "encounters with unknown external forces intruding upon the world of humans" (Mariconda 2017: 571), these external forces are cosmic deities which Lovecraft called Elder Things. The Elder Things (named Cthulhu, Azathoth, Yog-Sothoth etc.) are forces who rule the universe and are designed as symbols of the inscrutability of the boundless cosmos and the derisive insignificance of the human race within its parameters (Joshi 2001a: 23). Lovecraft noted that "one can't write a weird story of real power without perfect psychological detachment from the human scene" (Lovecraft 1997: 336), and this is reflected in Lovecraft's *oeuvre*. Lovecraft's stories can, with these things in mind, be seen as largely antihuman and "thematizes insistently that, for all our arrogant self-satisfaction and chest thumping, human beings in the larger scheme of things are small and helpless" (Sederholm & Weinstock 2016: 35). Poole suggests that this detachment from the human scene lies at the core of Lovecraftian horror, and proposes the term *conspiratorial magic*. Where "malign properties beyond our understanding are at work in the world and threaten the boundaries of human and, second, that these powerful sources can enter this world by the shattering of the parameters that guard the human being from chaos" (Poole 2016: 226).

A way of shattering the parameters that guard humanity in Lovecraft's works is through seeking knowledge. Compelled to find meaning in their existence by seeking knowledge, often "forbidden", Lovecraft's characters or the societies in which they reside are often doomed as a result. Lovecraft famously writes in the opening passage of *The Call of Cthulhu*:

"We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age." (Lovecraft 2008: 201)

In the story, a cult tries to awaken the Elder Thing, Cthulhu, in order to plummet the world into chaos. Through piecing together different pieces of information the narrator discovers the truth behind the cult, and that awakening Cthulhu would mean certain doom. What is different about *The Call of Cthulhu* and other Lovecraft works, is that those who want to awaken Cthulhu are motivated by the apocalypse and want to be architects of it, whereas in other stories, the coming threat is more sudden and for the most part, a result of seeking forbidden knowledge. Ultimately, Cthulhu does awaken but is thwarted by mere happenstance when a storm swallows its habitat. Upon piecing together all the information, the narrator reveals that Cthulhu's absence is only temporary and that the day it will arise will come once more, and next time humanity will not be as lucky.

One of Lovecraft's most recurring objects is the fictional book, "the Necronomicon". "The Necronomicon" is a good example of Poole's notion of *conspiratorial magic*, where the "forbidden" knowledge the book contains compels a rethinking of the nature of reality and humanity's place in the universe. Speaking the incantations within the book "leads to terrible consequences" as Lovecraft puts it in *History of the Necronomicon*, such as the summoning of monsters, the raising of the dead, and the magical transformation of the universe (Weinstock 2016: 75). Other malign properties that are beyond human comprehension and examples of Lovecraft's cosmicism can be seen in, *The Colour Out of Space*, where an inanimate meteorite that is "unlike any known colours of the normal spectrum" (Lovecraft 1997: 67) is the cause of the destruction of the blasted heath. The meteorite causes the vegetation of the surrounding area to wilt, the crops unnaturally large and inedible, and tainting the water supply. The corruption

seething from the meteorite eventually starts to affect livestock, and the people in the surrounding area mental faculties deteriorate, causing insanity in several of the residents. *From Beyond*, is told by an unnamed narrator and his interaction with a scientist called Crawford Tillinghast, who has created a machine which sends out a wave that stimulates the pineal gland and allows the affected person to perceive a different reality. By overlapping the realities, the denizens of the otherworldly dimension are able to perceive humans, and it is revealed that they have murdered Tillinghast's servants. In that sense, Lovecraft uses Tillinghast's machine as a device to show that humans cannot comprehend everything even in their vicinity, and what lies through the looking glass can in fact be indescribable and incomprehensible horrors.

A different way Lovecraft creates a psychological detachment from the human scene in order to highlight the fragility of humanity where humans are "shown to be evolved from lower orders of life and at risk of returning to the primordial ooze from which we emerged" (Sederholm & Weinstock 2016: 36). This devolution from human to a lower order of life is exemplified in several of Lovecraft's stories. Such as the Martense family in *The Lurking Fear* who devolve into gorilla-like creatures, and the narrator in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, who devolves into a hybrid creature of a fish and a frog upon learning that he is a direct descendant of the native denizens of Innsmouth with the same physical disposition. For Lovecraft, the distinction between human and animal is negligible, where humans do not sit on top of the food-chain or the evolutionary ladder, and the line between them is much more porous and traversable (Sederholm & Weinstock 2016: 36). In *The Doom That Came to Sarnath*, the humans of Sarnath pillage an idol from the city Ib. The night after the idol has been placed in the temple, the high-priest is found dead alongside a sign on the nearby altar depicting "DOOM" (Lovecraft 2008: 16). As the city of Sarnath reaches its peak of power and decadence ten centuries later, similar to the devolution in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* and *The Lurking Fear*, the nobles of Sarnath turn into: "indescribable green voiceless things with bulging eyes, pouting, flabby lips, and curious ears" (Lovecraft 2008: 19). In *The Rats in the Walls*, Delapore returns to his family estate, where he learns that his family ran an underground city, where they raised humans as cattle in order to satiate their taste for human flesh. Upon learning the truth about his forebears, Delapore's sanity deteriorates to the point of madness and he leaps to attack his friend, where he

subsequently tries to feed upon him. Delapore's devolution does not alter his physical appearance, but rather turning him into a feral being who has lost his humanity in a more mental, rather than physical sense. Lovecraft's characters are haunted by the indiscretions of their ancestors, and are doomed as a result. It is important to point out that Lovecraft punishing his characters for the indiscretions of their ancestors should not be viewed as an act of religious retribution, as Lovecraft was remained steadfast in his atheism (Houllebecq 2005: 32). In order to avoid any further confusion this form of punishment will be referred to as atavistic guilt.

The final way Lovecraft conveys human fragility is by juxtapositioning humans with other alien species, whose civilizations are far more advanced. The Old Ones in *At the Mountains of Madness* serves as an apt example of this, their status as demi-godlike beings and rulers of an ancient earth is exemplified extensively in a passage in the story:

“These vertebrates, as well as an infinity of other life forms - animal and vegetable, marine, terrestrial, and aerial - were products of unguided evolution acting on life cells made by the Old Ones, but escaping beyond their radius of attention. They had been suffered to develop unchecked because they had not come in conflict with the dominant beings. Bothersome forms, of course, were mechanically exterminated. It interested us to see in some of the very last and most decadent sculptures a shambling, primitive mammal, used sometimes for food and sometimes as an amusing buffoon by the land dwellers, whose vaguely simian and human foreshadowings were unmistakable.” (Lovecraft 2008: 472)

Even though the Old Ones can be seen as a vastly superior predator to humans, they are not inherently evil, in the same sense that a human swatting a fly is not evil. Lovecraft makes humanity an insignificant link on the food-chain, while also thematizing how small and helpless humans are in the larger scheme of things, where humans are only allowed to survive on the grounds that the race was not considered a “bothersome form” by the Old Ones. By doing this Lovecraft puts humans as creatures of significance relative to insects (Murray 2017: 572), where the Old Ones are supreme and toy with humankind as we might toy with ants (Joshi 2001a: 24). The antarctic expedition find the ruined civilization of the Old Ones, Lovecraft uses the juxtaposition of the much more advanced civilizations of the Old Ones with humanity in order to raise the question: If a civilization such as the Old Ones are not able to survive the heartless cosmos, what chance does humankind stand against it? Life for Lovecraft has no intrinsic meaning or value in itself, and is often the backdrop of his cosmic horror. Any sentient species

are only temporary and insignificant, where “human beings are simply one species among many - and perhaps not even the one best adapted to survive” (Sederholm & Weinstock 2016: 37). Therefore Lovecraft’s literature can be seen as widely nihilistic, where the extinction of the demigod-like species of the Old Ones seemingly alludes to Nietzsche, whom Lovecraft took inspiration from, and the death of God (Poole 2016: 223). Lovecraft’s nihilism often amalgamate into the futility and helplessness of humanity’s position in the universe.

Lovecraft’s detachment from the human scene is reflected in his human characters, whom rarely show a lot of depth, and can be categorized in three different ways. First, are the characters who remain blissfully ignorant of their own insignificance as a species and retains their belief that humans are a central element in the universe. Second, are those initiated or knowing humans who learn the truth and go insane. Third, are those who learn the truth, but can adjust emotionally and intellectually to humanity’s insignificance in a vast purposeless cosmos (Campbell 1996: 177). For most of Lovecraft’s characters the emotional anguish of facing the truth that humans are helpless against the forces of the universe, is often too much of a burden to bear and is exemplified in the ending of *The Call of Cthulhu* after the protagonist has uncovered the truth “Death would be a boon if only it could blot out the memories” (Lovecraft 2008: 225). For Lovecraft, humanity is unimportant where “human laws and interest and emotions have no validity” (Lovecraft 1997: 337), of which is reflected in his small selection of character types. The suppression of the characterization in Lovecraft’s characters is used in order to throw the horror into clearer relief, where the statement his horrific creatures makes is that the universe is vast, hostile and inexorable (Joshi 2001a: 31). Lovecraft’s literature has often been criticized for being overly vague in his descriptions and has a “tendency to suggest that his fictional horrors are indescribable” (Sederholm & Weinstock 2016: 29), and his style of writing “particularly his heavy use of adjectives, long sentence structures, and use of archaisms” (Sederholm & Weinstock 2016: 29). An example of this can be seen in *From Beyond* where Lovecraft writes of “indescribable shapes both alive and otherwise were mixed in disgusting disarray, and close to every known thing were whole worlds of alien, unknown entities” (Lovecraft 2008: 391). Ramsay Campbell rejected Lovecraft’s mode of writing and called his characterization incompetent (Joshi 2001a: 31), and Edmund Wilson went to the length of calling “the real horror

of Lovecraft's work is "the horror of bad taste and bad art" (Sederholm & Weinstock 2016: 29). Roger Luckhurst, on the other hand, argues that these aspects of Lovecraft's literature might be exactly what is appealing with the author, where "the power of the weird crawls out of these sentences *because* of the awkward style. These repetitions build an incantatory rhythm, tying baroque literary form to philosophical content" (Luckhurst 2013: xx). Lovecraft's literature did resonate with someone, most notably August Derleth and Donald Wandrei who used Lovecraft's imaginative universe in order to establish the Cthulhu Mythos.

## The Cthulhu Mythos - A legacy of appropriation

Lovecraft believed that his creative work would plunge into obscurity (Houellebecq 2005: 38), however, Lovecraft's correspondents August Derleth and Donald Wandrei established Arkham House, a publishing house initially designed to preserve Lovecraft's work in hardcovers rather than the pulp magazines his stories were initially printed in (Joshi 2001b: 390). Lovecraft left behind a "fictional universe with plenty of imaginative space available for other authors to set up shop", of which Deleth coined the term "Cthulhu Mythos" (Sederholm & Weinstock 2016: 10). The Cthulhu Mythos developed in two stages, the first named "Cthulhu Mythos proper" was formulated and guided by Lovecraft during his lifetime. The second stage following Lovecraft's death, Derleth and others to expand the possibilities of the Mythos itself (Sederholm & Weinstock 2016: 11).

The nature and background of the Cthulhu Mythos was that Lovecraft urged his friends to write their own stories in which "allusions to his myth-elements might be made for the sake of verisimilitude and evocativeness" (Joshi 2001a: 24). A Cthulhu Mythos story includes four primary elements. The first being the fictional New England setting with the imaginary towns of Dunwich, Innsmouth, and Arkham (Mullis 2015: 513). The second is the forbidden literature that will "open up such terrifying vistas of reality" (Lovecraft 2008: 201), the most notable being the *Necronomicon* by "the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred" (Lovecraft 2008: 215). The third "is the pantheon of generally hostile extraterrestrials" (Mullis 2015: 513) often referred to as Elder Things, e.g. Cthulhu; who the Mythos is aptly named after, Nyarlathotep, Azathoth, Yog-Sothoth, etc. The fourth element is Lovecraft's philosophy of cosmicism, where the "fate of our species is of no universal concern" (Mullins 2015: 514). A Cthulhu Mythos story does not necessarily have to include all four elements and is exemplified by Derleth's own Mythos stories. Derleth could not comprehend Lovecraft's notions of insignificance and twisted his stories in the Cthulhu Mythos into stories that are more religious and earth-oriented than Lovecraft's (Joshi 2001a: 24).

The appropriating measure known as grafting is relevant for the Cthulhu Mythos as a whole. Grafting is when an appropriating text is deploying a source text:



“as a creative springboard for an often wholly different text, a move often signified by a radical shift in title. This creative move is sometimes achieved by extrapolating a particular storyline or character’s trajectory from the original and relocating that to a new context, historical, geographical and/or cultural. The relationship to the original remains present and relevant but it is as if a grafting has taken place of a segment, or rootstock, of the original text. The rootstock is conjoined to a new textual form, or scion, to create an entirely new literary artefact.” (Sanders 2016: 69)

The Cthulhu Mythos thus becomes an excellent example of grafting, where the contributing authors of the Mythos actively relocate elements from Lovecraft’s stories to different contexts. Grafting elements from Lovecraft’s literature are not exclusive to the Cthulhu Mythos and is a creative move that is being deployed frequently in contemporary appropriations of Lovecraft’s literature.

The Cthulhu Mythos, however beneficiary it has been in preserving Lovecraft’s literature, brings forth some problems with what Lovecraft’s “fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large” (Lovecraft 1997: 337). Derleth’s Mythos stories use Lovecraft’s Elder Things, but rather than the cosmic indifference proposed by Lovecraft’s version, Derleth’s rendition of the Elder Things exhibit a behavior that betrays a desire for domination (George 2016: 170). Similar problems can happen when the wider Cthulhu Mythos is imitated and drawn upon if the author or creator is not familiar with Lovecraft’s literature. An example of this can be seen in Ramsey Campbell’s use of Shoggoths, a race of huge fifteen-foot protoplasmic entities that inhabit the deserted city found in Lovecraft’s *At the Mountains of Madness*, Campbell’s Shoggoth is, on the other hand, an “evil spirit or demon in the shape of a tree with mouths scattered over its trunk” (Joshi 2001a: 25). The extreme discrepancy between the two Shoggoths implies that upon the time of writing *The Hollow in the Woods* Campbell had not read Lovecraft’s own work, but rather only that of some of his imitators (Joshi 2001a: 25). Derleth’s Mythos stories and Campbell’s case highlights two problems with the Cthulhu Mythos. First and foremost, it shows that a story that mentions or appropriates Lovecraft’s creatures is not necessarily a Lovecraftian story, and can be used to a widely different effect than Lovecraft’s initial intention. Second is that the appropriator might not be appropriating Lovecraft at all, but rather a different appropriator of the Cthulhu Mythos.

The aim of the following analysis will be to highlight at how Lovecraft's creatures appear in visual texts, which will lead to a discussion of whether or not themes that are pertinent to Lovecraftian Horror such as cosmic indifference, human fragility, and atavistic guilt. The openness of the Cthulhu Mythos will be taken into consideration in the discussion as some works might use Lovecraft's creatures for "the sake of verisimilitude and evocativeness" (Joshi 2001a: 24).



# Lovecraft in visual texts

## Animated television shows

### Rick and Morty

The ongoing animated television series *Rick and Morty* by Justin Roiland and Dan Harmon, might not appear to be Lovecraftian at the core, due to its comedic nature. While Lovecraft is never mentioned in the series, and none of his characters appear during the run time of the series, Lovecraft's Elder Thing, Cthulhu, does however make an appearance during the title sequence of every episode, as it chases after the protagonists of the show. It is also important to point out that the title sequence has slight variations from season to season, but the appearance of Cthulhu is

one of few elements of the title sequence that has persisted throughout the entire series, and is always used right before the show's title screen appears. This slight allusion to Lovecraft's most famous cosmic entity thus serves to frame the various episodes and giving the viewer an indication that Lovecraftian



Fig. 1. Lovecraft's Cthulhu appearing in the title sequence of *Rick and Morty*

themes and elements might appear on the show.

*Rick and Morty* revolves around the titular characters Rick, who is a genius scientist that can traverse dimensions and the universe with his 'one-of-a-kind' portal gun, and his grandson Morty, who is a very average high school student. The dynamic between the old scientist and his young sidekick is reminiscent of the 1985 science fiction movie *Back to the Future*, where the young, curious teenager works as a foil to the much older and more cynical scientist. Unlike *Back to the Future*, the narrative of *Rick and Morty* involves adventures around the universe and

multiverse (alternate dimensions), rather than the time-travel narrative in *Back to the Future*. The similarities between *Back to the Future* and *Rick and Morty* does however stop at the characterization and the dynamic between the eccentric scientist and his high school student sidekick. Rick and Morty's intergalactic and transdimensional escapades often involve saving or leaving planets in ruin in their wake. Rick and Morty share some of the similarities with the various characters and creatures of Lovecraft's literature. Morty, for instance, may not be a direct parallel to a Lovecraftian character per se, but still resembles one of Lovecraft's three 'archetypes': The character that sees a glimpse of the "cosmic truth", and manages to bear the burden of realizing that existence is meaningless, and the universe is completely indifferent to humanity's survival (Campbell 1996: 177). This grave and existentialist sentiment is jokingly punctuated in the episode *Rixty Minutes* as Morty tells his sister, Summer: "Nobody exists on purpose, nobody belongs anywhere, everybody's gonna die. Come watch TV." (Harmon & Roiland 2014: S1E8).

Rick, on the other hand, does not fit any of Lovecraft's archetypal human characters, he is characterized by Morty as being uncaring about anyone but himself and as someone who does not think about the consequences of his actions. Rick's friend Bird Person interjects and tells Morty: "And as a result, he has the power to save or destroy entire worlds" (Harmon & Roiland 2015: S2E5). In fact, Rick can be characterized as a force of the cosmos himself, able to traverse dimensions and galaxies at a whim with the power to alter realities, something that can be seen as more akin to Lovecraft's Yog-Sothoth. Where Lovecraft in *The Dunwich Horror* writes: "Not in the spaces we know, but between them, They walk serene and primal, undimensioned and to us unseen. Yog-Sothoth knows the gate. Yog-Sothoth is the gate. Yog-Sothoth is the key and guardian of the gate." (Lovecraft 1997: 132-133), and much of this can be applied to Rick, through the use of his portal-gun, similar to Yog-Sothoth, allows him to walk undimensioned between space and different dimensions, and for the most part unseen, which is a necessity seeing that he is also a wanted intergalactic criminal.

*Rick and Morty* is a television show that builds on referential humor while often parodying multiple texts at the same time, and it can therefore sometimes be problematic to pinpoint precisely what is being referenced. In the episode *Love Potion #9*, the title of the

episode is also an allusion to the romantic comedy movie of equal name and shares a similar premise to the episode, where Morty asks Rick to help him win over his high school crush. The administration of the love potion goes wrong, and the entire planet Earth gets “Cronenberged”, a direct reference to film director David Cronenberg, who is known for creating movies in the body- and visceral horror genre. The humans that become “Cronenberged” devolves into ooze-like, deformed creatures akin to the protagonist of David Cronenberg’s movie *The Fly* (1986). Similar to *The Fly*, a scientific experiment goes awry and turns the scientist into a giant man/fly hybrid (Cronenberg 1986). The Lovecraftian notions of being skeptical to technological advancement and human fragility, where something as small as a virus can destroy an entire species and show how fragile humans can be, are both themes explored in Lovecraft’s stories *From Beyond* and *At the Mountains of Madness*. However, two problems arise by calling *Love Potion #9* Lovecraftian. Firstly, a virus changing humans appearance and civilized disposition is something that has been used time and time again in the horror genre, especially in zombie-fiction. Secondly, the term Rick and Morty use for the infected “Cronenberged” humans, can be seen as a direct reference to film director David Cronenberg, while the title is in reference to the movie *Love Potion #9* (1992). With these things in mind and the absence of references to Lovecraft, the only Lovecraftian aspects of the episode are the overall tone of technological skepticism and human fragility.

Lovecraft’s philosophy of cosmicism and alien entities toying with humankind is a theme that comes across in several episode of the show. In the episode *Get Schwifty*, where the title can be seen as an allusion to either the Group X song “Schifty-Five” or the artist Lloyd’s song “Get It Shawty”. Because the episode satirizes televised talent shows such as *American Idol*, *X-Factor*, *Britain’s Got Talent*, etc. the title cannot be viewed as an allusion to the movie *Get Shorty*, due to the difference in the narratives. In the episode an alien species of sentient asteroids called Cromulons, the Cromulons visit different planets in the universe to demand them to: “Show us what you got” (Harmon & Roiland 2015: S2E5). The episode criticizes logical fallacies where correlation implies causation, the appearance of the Cromulons triggers “climate change and natural disasters we thought were impossible for at least another eight years!” (Harmon & Roiland 2015: S2E5). The giant heads in the sky that bring nothing short of a biblical

rapture, which result in a group of people forming a cult that worship the Cromulons called “Headism”, after a character seemingly appeases the Cromulons by praying to it. The Cromulons are however looking for contestants for their intergalactic talent show where: “All participation is involuntary. Disqualified and losing planets are disintegrated by plasma-ray” (Harmon & Roiland 2015: S2E5), and is not appeased by the prayer but the performance of Rick and Morty’s song “Get Schwifty”. In the same sense as the Old Ones in Lovecraft’s *At the Mountains of Madness*, the Cromulons seek out lesser beings to be their “amusing buffoons” and “extirpating any whose presence became troublesome” (Lovecraft 2008: 469). The intergalactic equivalent of *American Idol* serves as a good frame for Lovecraft’s cosmic indifference, where the Cromulons have no problem with eradicating the losing contestants of their talent show. The bizarre premise of the episode does however encapsulate cosmicism and the coldheartedness of the universe beyond Earth, but with a comedic twist instead of the cosmic horror of Lovecraft.

The episode *The Ricks Must be Crazy*, alludes to the movie *The Gods Must be Crazy* (1980), where a tribe in the Kalahari desert with no knowledge of technology or the world beyond finds a Coke bottle of which they believe is sent by the Gods. The episode explores cosmicism from Rick’s point of view, where the engine of Rick’s spacecraft stops working. Similar to *The Gods Must be Crazy*, Rick reveals to Morty that he had built a “microverse”, where he had given its denizens the technology to generate electricity through a device called the “Gooblebox”. Rick then siphons electricity created by his “Goobleboxes” in order to have an infinite energy source for his spacecraft. In order to figure out what is wrong with the craft, they have to shrink themselves down in order to visit the microverse and troubleshoot the problem. Within the microverse Rick meets the scientist Zeep, who has the same aspirations as Rick, and has created a “miniverse” in order to power his own “microverse”. Zeep, currently unknowing that he is standing before his maker, and that his own universe has been created only to power a spacecraft, brings Rick and Morty into his own “miniverse”. Within Zeep’s “miniverse”, Zeep and Rick meet yet another scientist, Kyle, who is in the process of creating his own “teenyverse”, which again would render Zeep’s “miniverse” unable to be powered his own “microverse”. Eventually it is revealed that Kyle and Zeep’s respective universes are simply creations that are used in order to power Rick’s spacecraft. Burdened by the revelation Kyle suffers an existential

crisis and exclaims to Morty right before he crashes his vehicle into a mountain: “So he made a universe, and that guy is from *that* universe. And that guy made a universe. And that’s the universe where I was born. Where my father died. Where I couldn’t make time for his funeral because I was working on my universe.” (Harmon & Roiland 2015: S2E6). Kyle understands that his existence, along with his entire universe’s existence is unimaginably insignificant, and his reaction and sudden demise following the revelation is reminiscent of countless of Lovecraft’s characters that are faced with the “cosmic truth” and the precariousness of their existence.

The different narratives in *Rick and Morty* are built on a series of homages to other texts and explore how the different texts play off each other. The *Rick and Morty* episode *Love Potion #9* acts as a good example for the television show as a whole, where it extrapolates the movie’s storyline, as an act of grafting (Sanders 2016: 69), while also adding additional intertexts through a series of homages in order to create a “new cultural and aesthetic product, one that stands alongside the texts that have provided inspiration, and, in the process, enriches rather than ‘robs’ them.” (Sanders 2016: 53). Lovecraft’s stories have yet to appear in the show in this manner, but the presence of Cthulhu and themes that can be deemed as Lovecraftian, shows that Lovecraft’s literature can communicate with intertexts that are or has been a part of popular culture. The use of Lovecraftian themes in *Rick and Morty* aids the show by helping it move away from the classic humancentric science fiction that revolves around humans’ exploration and exploitation of outer space. Lovecraft’s cosmicism alongside *Rick and Morty* does the opposite and asks the question: What if humanity is an insignificant species? Even though the show is centered around the animated human characters Rick and Morty, the show retains the Lovecraftian idea that humanity as a whole is a vulnerable speck of dust in the grander scheme of things, susceptible to being wiped off the plane of existence for losing a talent show, or because an experiment goes wrong and “Cronenbergs” the entire planet.





## South Park and the Self-Inflicted Apocalypse

The satirical and often controversial animated television show, *South Park*, written and directed by Trey Parker and Matt Stone satirizes current events and popular culture in its particular brand of humor. The show revolves around the four boys Stan, Kyle, Kenny and Cartman, where the plots of the episodes are often set in motion by events or discourses founded in reality. *South Park* as a whole cannot be considered to be Lovecraftian, however in the episodes, *Coon 2: Hindsight*, *Mysterion Rises*, and *Coon vs. Coon & Friends* references to Lovecraft's characters are nonetheless included in the show and become pivotal in the narrative of the episodes.

Following the British Petroleum Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010 *South Park* made these three episodes satirizing the event. In *South Park*'s satire of the oil spill, British Petroleum has been renamed to Beyond Petroleum, similar to reality the BP in *South Park* and their deepwater drilling goes wrong, but with a vastly different consequence. The drilling disaster rips a hole into another dimension unleashing creatures



Fig. 2. *South Park*'s depiction of Cthulhu

that start to wreak havoc on humanity (Parker & Stone 2010: S14E11). In an attempt to save face BP rename themselves to Dependable Petroleum or DP, and attempt to try and close the otherworldly dimension by drilling on the moon. This does not go according to plan and they manage to unleash Cthulhu, ultimately bringing “about three thousand years of darkness, [...], where we will all be driven to madness and made to service Cthulhu's cult as his slaves” (Parker & Stone 2010: S14E11).

Mark Jones argues that the widespread appearance of Cthulhu in postmodern popular culture puts Lovecraft's mythos in danger of becoming mainstream horror fodder (Jones 2013:

241). Cthulhu might be in danger of becoming just a generic symbol of death and destruction, disassociated with the author, but *South Park*'s specific narrative use of Lovecraft's Cthulhu is however appropriate. Man-made environmental disasters might not be particularly Lovecraftian, but considering that a common theme in Lovecraft's texts is that species will ultimately be their own harbingers of doom, means that environmental disasters and humankind's impact on the planet is a topic in contemporary culture where Lovecraftian horror is a particularly apt metaphor, as Sederholm and Weinstock point out:

“As a consequence of technological innovation allowing unprecedented destruction and general awareness of the ways in which human beings are despoiling the environment and altering it in ways that may be inhospitable to human life, the fantastic and science fictive narratives of apocalypse imagined by Lovecraft are now entrenched cultural preoccupations. Although our contemporary monsters may not resemble those in Lovecraft's imagination, we nevertheless live today with the very Lovecraftian awareness of the looming specter of a sudden apocalypse.” (Sederholm & Weinstock 2016: 34)

Cthulhu's appearance in *South Park* can therefore be seen not to be only a generic apocalyptic monstrosity, but rather as a fitting element in a contemporary “apocalyptic Gothic” (Sederholm & Weinstock 2016: 21). Cthulhu is not the only reference to Lovecraft that is prevalent in the aforementioned episodes of *South Park*, in the episode *Mysterion Rises* both the fictional grimoire the Necronomicon and its author Abdul Alhazred are mentioned (Parker & Stone 2010: S14E12). Lovecraft's famous couplet “That is not dead which can eternally lie, And with strange aeons even death may die.” (Parker & Stone 2010: S14E12), is also mentioned. The allusions to Lovecraft in these episodes is exclusive to *The Call of Cthulhu* of which these episodes of *South Park* has an intricate and embedded relationship with (Sanders 2016: 36). *South Park* actively engages with *The Call of Cthulhu* where the boys even figure out that a Cthulhu cult resides within their town (Parker & Stone 2010: S14E12), and employs a couple of appropriative subgroups in the narrative of the episodes. The episodes can be considered a graft of *The Call of Cthulhu*, where the storyline of the Cthulhu cult residing in the underbelly of the city and the narrator uncovering the secrets about the cult and Cthulhu has been relocated to a new historical, geographical and cultural context (Sanders 2016: 69). Proximation is another appropriative approach that is relevant for *South Park*, where *The Call of Cthulhu* have been culturally relocated into a contemporary setting and brought it into greater proximity with modern

audiences (Genette 1997: 304). *South Park* drops the Lovecraftian narrative of cosmic indifference, but in turn uses the Lovecraftian narrative of humanity expediting their own destruction through technological means which is explored in *The Call of Cthulhu*: “The sciences, each straining in their own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality” (Lovecraft 2008: 201). Lovecraft’s technological skepticism is used to illuminate “the ways in which human beings are despoiling the environment and altering it in ways that may be inhospitable to human life” (Sederholm & Weinstock 2016: 34)

The interplay between *South Park* and *The Call of Cthulhu* brings up Hutcheon’s notion of unknowing and knowing audiences. The knowing audience of *South Park* that are unknowing of Lovecraft will simply experience the episodes as new episodes of the television show (Hutcheon & O’Flynn 2013: 121). The knowing *South Park* audience expects the characters of

the show to act according their developmental arc that has been developed over time (Dalton & Linder 2016), e.g. Cartman will be extremely manipulative, Stan and Kyle will be the voice of reason, and Kenny will most likely die. The knowing audience of both *The Call of Cthulhu* and *South Park* will recognize the interplay between the two narratives, and will as a result “have their experience deepened and enriched by a wider range of possible responses” (Sanders 2016: 37). Cartman’s personality is accentuated through the intertextual play between *South Park* and *The Call of Cthulhu* for comedic purposes. Cthulhu symbolizes a

hopeless doom, and the universe’s indifference to mankind, and Cartman being able to befriend and eventually command Cthulhu to help him destroy his friends “because even Cthulhu knows what evil assholes Kyle and Stan and those guys are” (Parker & Stone 2010: S14E13). The palimpsestic doubleness the knowing audience of both texts will notice is the absurdity of Cartman being able to manipulate Cthulhu to do his bidding.



Fig. 3. Cartman commanding Cthulhu

The release of the *South Park* video game, *The Fractured But Whole*, showed a different entity from Lovecraft's Mythos, Shub-Niggurath. Similar to the use of Cthulhu, Parker and Stone use Shub-Niggurath to frame a different societal problem in America, in order to do this Parker and Stone parody Lovecraft's well established xenophobia and racism, and juxtapose it with contemporary discourse that American policemen use excessive force towards black people. Upon exploring the basement of the police station in *The Fractured But Whole* the player is met with a cinematic cutscene, where the policemen of South Park are draped in hooded cloaks. The hooded policemen continue with sacrificing African Americans to Shub-Niggurath, and upon confronting the policemen the player is told:

“Oh, I see. I guess because cops feed African Americans to an Elder God they're...racist. Shub-Niggurath is an Outer God, kids, who must be appeased and whose coming was foretold by the great H.P. Lovecraft. But I suppose H.P. Lovecraft was a racist too! Oh, fuck, was he really? Like - Like how racist? Really, really?”  
(Ubisoft 2017)

There are a few noteworthy aspects of using Lovecraft in this manner. It shows that Parker and Stone are more acquainted with the author than the animated program suggests and also it sheds light on the problematic nature of Lovecraft's racism and how it affects his literary legacy. Sederholm and Weinstock point out that “the racism at the core of Lovecraft's fiction may be part of its appeal today in a world that would like to think of itself as “postracial” but demonstrates again and that it is far from having overcome race-based hatred.” (Sederholm & Weinstock 2016: 37). *South Park* is acknowledging and critiquing Lovecraft's racism, while also commenting on the violence and systemic racism towards black people in America that sparked the Black Lives Matter movement.

In conclusion, *South Park* is a surprising place to find traces of the Lovecraftian and the author's literary legacy. What *South Park* shows, due to its nature of satirizing current events in often bizarre and absurd ways, is that Lovecraft is relevant in the current cultural climate. The Lovecraftian elements used in *South Park* are not used for the purpose of portraying a cosmic indifference to humankind which is often the case when Lovecraft is alluded to. Even if it is by making fun of his highly racist tendencies, or tapping into anxieties concerning human

exploitation of natural resources, resulting in global warming and a more realistic Lovecraftian doom.



## Post-analysis discussion of *South Park* and *Rick and Morty*

*South Park* and *Rick and Morty* are similar types of texts, where both are comedic animated television shows with often bizarre premises to their narratives. The bizarre narratives in *South Park* and *Rick and Morty* do harmonize with what Lovecraft considered to be essential to a weird story, both are “rejecting normality and conventionality” (Lovecraft 1997: 335) as well as undermining the “human presumption of knowledge, displaying the abyssal contract between delusions of human exceptionalism and the reality that we are but one species of animal among thousands” (Moreland 2017: 164). A distinction has to be made between the two texts, *South Park*’s comedy emerges through satirizing current events and as Jones notes “the Lovecraftian mythos has proved extremely adaptable, and reflective of a range of contemporary social and political paranoias.” (Jones 2013: 240). *Rick and Morty*’s comedy on the other hand emerges through parodying several texts that reside within popular culture at once, and exploring how the juxtapositioning and interplay between those texts within its own universe that is colored by themes of Lovecraftian Horror. In short, *South Park* actively uses Lovecraft’s creatures in order to comment on society, whereas *Rick and Morty* passively evokes Lovecraftian Horror through the show’s title sequence and allows an interplay between generally unrelated texts and a universe that is indifferent to humanity’s existence.

The disparity in the tone of Lovecraft’s stories vis-à-vis the animated television shows, where Lovecraft’s stories aim to elicit a sense existential dread, and *South Park* and *Rick and Morty* use Lovecraftian imagery in order to elicit forms of comedic expression either through parody or satire. Lovecraft fitting into contemporary narratives in this manner aids them in portraying a specific societal problem or a certain feeling. Edmundson explains that an antidote to pressing Gothic fears can be achieved through ridicule, which “shows evidence of praiseworthy human desires for change.” (Edmundson 1997: 77). This gives a strong indication that Lovecraft tapped into anxieties that are relevant in the contemporary cultural climate, where: “Although our contemporary monsters may not resemble those in Lovecraft’s imagination, we nevertheless live today with the very Lovecraftian awareness of the looming specter of a sudden apocalypse” (Sederholm & Weinstock 2016: 34).





## Video games

### Darkest Dungeon

Video games have in recent years become more narratively driven, and as a result become a popular medium for interactive storytelling, but “rather than games *being* narratives, they *contain* narratives through narrative forms” (Domsch 2013: 31). The computer game *Darkest Dungeon* is developed by the small independent game development studio Red Hook Studios. The game thoroughly explores how Lovecraftian horror can be achieved within the frames of the interactive nature of the medium. *Darkest Dungeon*’s narrative and gameplay are heavily influenced by Lovecraftian elements, and even the name of the development studio allude to Lovecraft’s short story *The Horror at Red Hook*.

Video games have multiple ways of creating a narrative, but a distinction has to be made between the levels of involvement by the player. These levels are split into active and passive forms of engaging the player in the video game’s narrative. In active forms, the player’s actions interact with the dynamic systems in the video game, where the game presents narrative content relating to the player’s action (Domsch 2013: 33-34). Passive forms take control away from the player and are “a large part of the presence of narrative in video games” (Domsch 2013: 31), this “is constituted by forms that cannot be interacted with by the player. These are mainly textual narratives and cinematic narratives (called ‘cutscenes’)” (Domsch 2013:32). A common way to “create and employ fictional worlds starts with a narratively conveyed exposition (often called an intro) before the actual gameplay starts” (Domsch 2013: 32), the intro explains to the player the setting, the characters, and the objective of the game. *Darkest Dungeon* is no different and the player is met with a narrator who exclaims:

Ruin has come to our family. You remember our venerable house, opulent and imperial, gazing proudly from its stoic perch above the moor. I lived all my years in that ancient rumor shadowed manor, fattened by decadence and luxury, and yet I began to tire of... conventional extravagance. Singular unsettling tales suggested the mansion itself was a gateway to some fabulous and unnameable power. With relic and ritual, I bent every effort towards the excavation and recovery of those long buried secrets, exhausting what remained of our family fortune on... swarthy workmen and... sturdy shovels. At last, in the salt soaked crags beneath the lowest foundations, we unearthed that damnable portal of antediluvian evil. Our every step unsettled the ancient earth, but we were in a realm of death and madness. In the end, I alone fled, laughing and wailing through those blackened arcades of antiquity. Until consciousness failed me. You remember our venerable house, opulent and imperial. It is a festering abomination! I beg you, return home, claim your

birthright and deliver our family from the ravenous clutching shadows of the Darkest Dungeon. (Red Hook Studios 2017)

There are a few significant visual elements in the opening cinematic where *Darkest Dungeon* evokes Lovecraft. The most notable of these is the fact that when the narrator mentions the “gateway to some fabulous and unnamable power”, a piece of parchment with the image of Cthulhu appears on the screen. The core premise proposed by the introductory cutscene is

Lovecraftian in essence and touches on several Lovecraftian themes. Atavistic guilt, in the sense that the player is returning to the family estate to uncover the dark secrets of his forebears. The Ancestor’s search for the buried knowledge underneath the mansion results in madness, death, and destruction.

The themes are strengthened further by having the game set in a fictional town called



Fig. 4. Cthulhu appearing in *Darkest Dungeon*’s introductory cutscene

Hamlet, where the plot of the Shakespearian play revolves around the same themes of madness and saving the “family from the ravenous clutching shadows of” (Red Hook Studios 2017) Claudius. Initially, the game’s setting is more similar to the genre of Gothic horror rather than Lovecraftian horror, as the player explores a gothic mansion in order to uncover the truth behind the family’s downfall. As the game progresses the tone shifts slightly away from the gothic and more into the cosmic, where the player encounters foes that are otherworldly and labeled as cosmic beings.

A common way to end a video game narrative is by having the player go face-to-face in a battle against the game’s antagonist (often called the final boss), serving as a climax for what the game’s narrative has been building towards (Domsch 2013: 71-71). *Darkest Dungeon*’s final boss is a cosmic ethereal, and omnipresent deity named “Heart of Darkness”, that has manifested itself through the misdeeds of the Ancestor. One would assume that the name “Heart of Darkness” refers to the Joseph Conrad novella of the same name, which explores some of the same themes that harmonize to a certain degree with Lovecraftian horror, such as madness as a

result of technological advancement. A more apt reference in this case is the creature from the “Call of Cthulhu” tabletop roleplaying game “Nssu-Ghahnb” or “The Heart of Ages”. The similarities between the roleplaying game’s “Nssu-Ghahnb” and *Darkest Dungeon*’s “Heart of Darkness”, are consequently name, shape, and role as a cosmic Lovecraftian deity. Upon defeating the Heart of Darkness the player is congratulated by the narrator for completing the game, and is met with an ending cutscene where he exclaims:

Victory... A hollow and ridiculous notion, we were born with this thing, made from it. And we will be returned to it, in time. A great family of man, a profusion of errant flesh. Multiplying. Swarming. Living. Dying. Until the stars align in their inexorable formation. And what sleeps, Is aroused once more. To hatch from this fragile shell of earth and rock, And bring our inescapable end... So seek solace in your manner, Befitting your lineage. And take up your nugatory vigil haunted forever by that sickening prose, echoing through the infinite blackness of space and time. Ruin has come to our family. (Red Hook Studios 2017)

A common way to end a video game narrative is by having the ending cutscene bring a resolution to the game’s narrative and leaving the player with a feeling of catharsis. *Darkest Dungeon* rejects this common video game trope and offers the player little to no catharsis, where Lovecraft’s cosmicism is echoed throughout the ending cutscene, as the narrator proclaims that it was all for nothing. The wording used to describe humans as: “Multiplying. Swarming. Living. Dying.” (Red Hook Studios 2017) invokes a relative insignificance to the species as a whole, which is reminiscent of the brand of horror that Lovecraft puts forth in his literature. The choice of actions that explains the human condition in the monologue is that of insects and explains the meaning of human life with a Darwinian approach at best. Such a bleak outlook on life and humanity as a whole is seen in Lovecraft’s *At The Mountains of Madness*. The ending monologue also echoes Lovecraft’s *The Call of Cthulhu* in both style and tone. The monologue proposes that what the player has been doing throughout the game is ultimately futile, as the cosmic monstrosity is bound to return. In comparison to *The Call of Cthulhu*, where a member of the Cthulhu cult explains that: “When the stars were right, They could plunge from world to world through the sky; but when the stars were wrong, They could not live. But although They no longer lived, They would never really die” (Lovecraft 2008: 214). Cthulhu does ultimately not fully return in *The Call of Cthulhu*, but the ending paragraph of the story proposes that “What have risen may sink, and what has sunk may rise. Loathsomeness waits and dreams in the deep,

and decay spreads over the tottering cities of men. A time will come - but I must not and cannot think” (Lovecraft 2008: 225).

The active narrative form is present and central to how *Darkest Dungeon* crafts its Lovecraftian narrative, when the player starts the game for the first time a prompt appears stating:

“Darkest Dungeon is about making the best out of a bad situation. Quests will fail or must be abandoned. Heroes will die. And when they die, they stay dead. Progress autosaves constantly, so actions are permanent. The game expects a lot out of you. How far will you push your adventurers? How much are you willing to risk in your quest to restore the Hamlet? What will you sacrifice to save the life of your favorite hero? Thankfully, there are always fresh souls arriving on the stagecoach, seeking both adventure and fame in the shadow of the Darkest Dungeon” (Red Hook Studios 2017).

The prompt tells the player that the gameplay of *Darkest Dungeon* will rely on the actions the player, where “things happen, but the specific form of the event is influenced by the player” (Domsch 2013: 35). Player actions are one of the ways a video game can get the player to actively engage with the narrative rather than having the player being a passive observer (Domsch 2013: 35). The game gives the player an indication that the heroes are in a sense expendable and will sometimes have to die in order for the player to succeed, but it is up to the player to decide whether or not to do so. The heroes the player conscript for his/her party can be viewed as Lovecraftian characters, and like Lovecraft’s characters their lust for adventure and search for a “fabulous and unnameable power” (Red Hook Studios 2017) leads to insanity and, on occasion, death. Insanity leading to death is reflected in *Darkest Dungeon* through a gameplay mechanic called the Stress Bar. The heroes on their adventure will encounter different foes, spring traps, or interact with objects in the environment, all of which will slowly fill up the Stress Bar. The interactable objects in the game’s environment is an example of the active narrative form in video games called an event trigger. “An event trigger defines an action performed by a player that triggers a narratively relevant event that would not have occurred without this action, yet is not causally related to in the storyworld.” (Domsch 2013: 41). Interacting with the environmental objects in *Darkest Dungeon* is at the will of the player and is an example of how the actions of the player can create “a narratively relevant event” (Domsch 2013: 35). When a hero becomes sufficiently stressed, he or she will gain an affliction, which is disadvantageous to the party as a whole and can lead them to become hopeless, fearful, irrational, masochistic, etc. If

the hero gets even more stressed, he or she will eventually die from a heart attack. The heroes in *Darkest Dungeon* can be seen as Lovecraftian characters through their actions, when they have encountered enough unspeakable horrors for their mental faculties to have deteriorated into an affliction. An affliction can cause a hero to yell incoherent incantations at the rest of the party, cause them to self-harm, or even attack the fellow party members. The heroes of *Darkest Dungeon* therefore seem to portray Lovecraftian characters when they are afflicted like: Gordon Arthur Pym in Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness* who, for instance, becomes irrational and is only able to mutter "Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!" (Lovecraft 2008: 503), Delapore in *The Rats in the Walls* attacks his friend upon learning the truth about his family's past (Lovecraft 2008: 104), and Crawford Tillinghast in *From Beyond* dies from a stroke after an encounter with the denizens of an alternate dimension (Lovecraft 2008: 392).

The sheer amount of allusions to Lovecraft's literature in *Darkest Dungeon* gives the indication that the developers of Red Hook Studios initially set out to create a Lovecraftian game. The name of the developing game studio itself is an allusion to Lovecraft's story *The Horror at Red Hook*. The narrator and voice of the Ancestor is Wayne June, who prior to voice acting his part in *Darkest Dungeon* narrated several of Lovecraft's short stories in an audiobook format. *Darkest Dungeon*'s art style is reminiscent of Mike Mignola's art style in his Lovecraft-inspired comic book *Batman: The Doom That Came to Gotham*, where both *Darkest Dungeon* and *Batman: The Doom That Came to Gotham* heavily use negative space in their artwork. The Lovecraftian heroes of *Darkest Dungeon* can also encounter various objects hidden in the environment that can be interacted with, some of these are allusions to items found in *The Call of Cthulhu* such as a bas-relief and an idol that looks like Lovecraft's drawing of Cthulhu. *Darkest Dungeon*'s aim is to create its own Cthulhu Mythos story by including themes and creatures that are essential elements in a Mythos story as an act of grafting, while also alluding to other texts and people who have



Fig. 5. Lovecraft's drawing of Cthulhu, and the fish-idol in *Darkest Dungeon*

partaken in creating Lovecraft inspired narratives. A gleaming problem for video games as a vehicle for Lovecraftian horror is that they often put the player into an empowerment fantasy where he or she plays as a mighty hero, who sets out with their agency to defeat and stop an imposing evil. The empowered player put into a horror narrative that manages to overcome an evil through trials and tribulations cannot be regarded as Lovecraftian, because Lovecraft's cosmic horrors are used as symbols for a certain doom of which humans have no agency in combating. A Lovecraftian game is therefore seemingly uncreatable, because upsetting the player's control in both the narrative and play of the game, would effectively move a game away from its intended medium as an interactive text. Player freedom and agency are core aspects of a video game narrative, where the narrative of the game "is used to motivate the player to strive for closure" (Domsch 2013: 73). *Darkest Dungeon* gives the player this closure in a Lovecraftian tone, however, if a game were to be truly Lovecraftian the final boss would be unbeatable and the player would not get any sense of closure.

*Darkest Dungeon* casts away the classic empowerment fantasy of video games while also retaining the player's agency, by mixing active and passive narrative forms. The *Darkest Dungeon* player does not fully take on the role of an empowered hero, and gradually adds gameplay elements which disempower the player's agency and control. The stress mechanic is a good example of this, as it makes the player lose control over the party he or she is commandeering, effectively making the game harder. Ultimately the stress bar will fill up and the heroes will descend into madness, and the player has to decide whether or not it is worth it to save or sacrifice the hero whom the player has lost control over. It is important to note that the player still plays the game whether or not one of the heroes suffer from an affliction, but the loss of control affects the difficulty of the game tremendously. The inclusion of this gameplay mechanic adds an additional Lovecraftian layer which would otherwise be hard to attain in an interactive text such as a video game. As a result, the player becomes an active participant in a Lovecraftian narrative that tries to evoke the feeling of futility and hopelessness, that is often explored in Lovecraft's literature, in the player.

## Comic books and graphic novels

### Batman: The Doom That Came to Gotham

Mike Mignola created a mini-series of the popular superhero franchise Batman called *Batman: The Doom That Came to Gotham*, the Batman mini-series is a reimagining of the superhero in a noir 1920s Lovecraftian setting. The title of the mini-series alludes to Lovecraft's story *The Doom That Came to Sarnath*, and can be viewed as a graft of several of Lovecraft's stories and characters, and not just the story alluded to in the title. The narrative of *The Doom That Came to Gotham* follows the style of Lovecraft's *The Call of Cthulhu*, where the protagonist pieces together information through letters and objects. *The Call of Cthulhu* can in that sense be seen as a detective story, which fits the general Batman narrative as he is often referred to and heralded as the world's greatest detective.

*The Doom That Came to Gotham* opens with an expedition to Antarctica, where a rescue party led by Bruce Wayne find a logbook from the Cobblepot expedition that has gone awry. The logbook and what happened to the Cobblepot expedition almost adapts the chain of events and what happened to Lake's party in Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*. The logs of both Lake's party and the Cobblepot expedition stated that weird events happened at their base camps, such as the dogs growing uneasy and members of the expedition winding up dead or missing. After surveying the area the rescue party in *The Doom That Came to Gotham* finds a man called August Grendon. August Grendon can be seen as an allusion to August Derleth and one of his writing pseudonyms Stephen Grendon, who contributed to the creation of the Cthulhu Mythos (Sederholm & Weinstock 2016: 11). August Grendon is found by the rescue party in a glacier cave as he is chipping away at a wall of which an octopod-like monstrosity is residing within. Grendon is confronted by the rescue party, and acts aggressively towards them by leaping to attack. Grendon is however subdued and continues to yell out: "The lurker is on the threshold and behold... A shadow out of... Time." (Mignola 2015). Grendon's words is a reference to the Cthulhu Mythos and not just Lovecraft himself, where *The Lurker at the Threshold* is a story written by August Derleth where the base premise of the story was outlined by Lovecraft, and



*The Shadow Out of Time* is a short story written by Lovecraft himself. Lovecraft's literature has from the inception of the Cthulhu Mythos lent "itself readily to reworkings, and particularly to self-conscious, meta-textual reworkings that draw attention to - even strength from - their status as hybrid texts" (George 2016: 167). *Batman: The Doom That Came to Gotham* communicates more with the Cthulhu Mythos as a whole rather than focusing solely on Lovecraft's original stories. Derleth's Mythos stories often stray thematically from Lovecraft, Derleth could not comprehend Lovecraft's notions of insignificance and twisted his stories in the Cthulhu Mythos into stories that are more religious and earth-oriented than Lovecraft's (Joshi 2001a: 24). *The Doom That Came to Gotham* borrows from Derleth's Mythos, by including some religious elements such as a templar who exclaims that: "will destroy it, of in this I am God's chosen instrument" (Mignola 2015). A plague of reptiles also invades the streets of Gotham, even though this can be considered an allusion to the Bible, it can be viewed as an allusion to Lovecraft's *The Doom That Came to Sarnath*, of which the name of the comic book series alludes to.

August Grendon's characterization is also appropriated from Lovecraft's *Cool Air*, where Bruce Wayne asks his crewmen: "Boys what stinks down here? - That would be our guest Mister Grendon. As soon as we got him warmed up, he started to, well...Spoil. [...] Blood and tissue samples prove it. He's been dead for weeks." (Mignola 2015). Grendon's sudden decay upon heating him up serves as an appropriation of Lovecraft's *Cool Air*, where it is revealed that Dr. Torres has been keeping himself artificially alive and hindering the deterioration of his flesh and organs by cooling his body (Lovecraft 2008: 232). Dr. Torres', similar to Grendon, exterior starts to dissolve when his temperature rises, and in both *Cool Air* and *Batman: The Doom That Came to Gotham*, it is revealed that both have been dead for quite some time. Grendon is a reimagining of the recurring villain in the Batman Mythos: Viktor Fries also known as Mr. Freeze, who also needs a cooling suit in order to stay alive. The effect renaming Viktor Fries to August Grendon has on *The Doom That Came to Gotham* is that the character itself invokes both Lovecraft and the larger the Cthulhu Mythos at once. Some of Lovecraft's overarching characters and objects do appear in *The Doom That Came to Gotham*, it is however important to note that even though the comic book consistently references the Cthulhu Mythos, it does not

include any of the central characters to the Mythos. Mignola has rather appropriated them in a way in order for them to fit into the Batman universe. Ra's al Ghul is one of Batman's recurring adversaries and has been reimagined in *Batman: The Doom That Came to Gotham* to resemble Abdul Alhazred, which is Lovecraft's fictional author of the fictional book the "Necronomicon". Similar to Abdul Alhazred, Ra's al Ghul has written his own magical book "The Testament of Ghul", which replaces the role of the Necronomicon in *The Doom That Came to Gotham*. Ghul's goal is to unleash Iog-Sotha upon Gotham, although it is never revealed in *The Doom That Came to Gotham* what Ghul's motivation for bringing doom to Gotham is, but one can through other Batman stories assume that his motivation to cleanse the city of those who oppose him.

Oswald Cobblepot is in the regular Batman Mythos referred to by his alias, the Penguin. In *The Doom That Came to Gotham* Cobblepot's alias is used in a more literal sense, Cobblepot adopts the lifestyle of the local Antarctic inhabitants and devolves into a penguin. Devolution is something that repeatedly happens in Lovecraft's stories, and is the main focus in *The Lurking Fear*, *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, and *The Rats in the Walls*, where "the civilized facade of the modern man is a thin veneer covering primitive savagery that can reassert itself" (Sederholm & Weinstock 2016: 36). The theme of devolution continues throughout the narrative of *The Doom That Came to Gotham*. The peripheral character Harvey Dent becomes infected with a poison and visits the doctor Herbert West, a reference to the titular character of Lovecraft's story *Herbert West-Reanimator*. West's appearance in *The Doom That Came to Gotham* serves no purpose to the overall narrative and can be viewed as more of a fan-service to the readers of Lovecraft, as the comic book allows the reader to trace additional interrelationships between the Batman and Cthulhu Mythos, without it being pivotal to the overarching narrative. In Lovecraft, Herbert West is a doctor who is obsessed with bringing people back from the dead who goes to the length of murdering people in order to have subjects for his experiments (Lovecraft 2008: 34-57). The knowing audience of Lovecraft will recognize the name Herbert West and will know that he is not the type of doctor one should visit. The poison eventually spreads and Dent, who is commonly referred to as "two-face" in the normal Batman comic books, starts to sprout tentacle-like appendages on half of his body (Mignola 2015). Batman himself is not exempt from

devolution in the narrative and ends up shedding his skin and becoming half man and half bat, upon confronting Iog-Sotha, whose name is similar to Lovecraft's Elder Thing Yog-Sothoth.

Batman does manage to defeat Ra's Al Ghul and stop him from awakening Iog-Sotha, effectively stopping the Lovecraftian doom manifest itself and is stopped by a heroic figure. For Lovecraft, there are no heroic figures in his stories and humans are "reduced to things, demoted to matter that doesn't really matter in the larger scheme of things" (Weinstock 2016: 76). The Lovecraftian character type that who can adjust emotionally and intellectually after learning the truth of humanity's insignificance "in a vast, purposeless cosmos" (Campbell 1996: 177). Batman's closing words harmonize with this character type as he exclaims: "And God help you all if you ever again have the need of me" (Mignola 2015), as Batman has retained his sanity but is clearly affected by the events that have occurred. The Lovecraftian doom has however shown itself not to be a hundred percent certain in Lovecraft's fiction, as Cthulhu's awakening never truly happens in *The Call of Cthulhu*. The main difference between Lovecraft and Mignola's comic book is that Mignola's hero has agency against the cosmic horrors and can defeat or stop them. Cthulhu not fully awakening is by mere chance and not as a result of good conquering evil. The implication is that when Cthulhu eventually awakens there is nothing that can save humanity. The difference in the narratives of *The Call of Cthulhu* and *Batman* is that having the hero repel the horror, lessens the sense of futility and indifference Lovecraft imposes on his narratives since the heroic figure is able to repel the horrors that are created to symbolize an inevitable doom.

## Providence

Unlike Mignola's Batman that draws upon the Cthulhu Mythos, Alan Moore's *Providence* exclusively draws on Lovecraft's fiction and poetry in order to craft its narrative. The narrative of *Providence* is split into twelve chapters, of which each draws heavily on one or several of Lovecraft's works. The graphic novel is set in early twentieth century New York and New England, which coincides with when and where Lovecraft's literature was written. *Providence* follows the story of Robert Black, as he quits his job and travels from New York and around New England in search of a story for a novel he aspires to write. Black's journey around New England brings him in contact with a secret occult society named Stella Sapiente, which Black ends up researching as it might be an interesting element to include in his novel. The graphic novel solidifies its connection with Lovecraft in several different ways from early on, the title refers to Lovecraft's hometown Providence, Rhode Island, and each chapter start with an excerpt from Lovecraft's letters. The excerpts often give the reader an indication of which story the following chapter will have a strong intertextual connection with.

The narrative of *Providence* a mix between the regular graphic novel that consists of a visual narrative unfolding in the traditional panels (static images in sequence to each other (McCloud 1993: 8)) and gutters (the space between panels, that is used to connect the panels together in order to "mentally construct a continuous, unified reality" (McCloud 1993: 67)), and Black's "commonplace book", a written diary of which his thoughts and feelings are explored through a stream of consciousness style. The narrative style of the commonplace book in *Providence* is reminiscent of Lovecraft's fiction, where most of his stories are told through a first person narrative as a recollection of previous events. Black and his commonplace book narrative can therefore be seen as Alan Moore's attempt at creating a character that is akin to many of Lovecraft's unnamed narrators, while also employing Lovecraft's style. *Providence* suggests an interesting venture in adaptation and appropriation, where each chapter extrapolates one or more of Lovecraft's storylines or characters. Moore imitates Lovecraft's writing style in Black's commonplace book as a form of pastiche, while also using fragments of Lovecraft's stories in

order to craft his own narrative. *Providence*'s narrative is actively grafting Lovecraft's *oeuvre*, where Moore actively uses Lovecraft's universe in order to create something new.

The places and characters Black come in contact with are often analogues or parallels with distinct features that Lovecraft puts forth in his literature. An example of this can be found in the second chapter of the graphic novel, *The Hook*, of which Moore alludes to Lovecraft's *The Horror at Red Hook*. What is significant about this chapter is that it is one of the few times in *Providence* that Moore uses characters with the exact same name as Lovecraft's characters, which are Thomas Malone a police detective who has been diverted from his role as protagonist in *The Horror at Red Hook* to a peripheral role in Moore's *The Hook*, and Robert Suydam, an occult scholar and purveyor of occult artifacts, who is under investigation of the death of his wife, Cornelia Gerritsen. Suydam and Malone's roles have been slightly shifted in *Providence*, where Suydam is not the same villainous character as he appears in *The Horror at Red Hook*, and Malone is not the protagonist of Moore's story. However, Moore does not disregard the characterization of Lovecraft's Suydam, and is in appearance identical to Lovecraft's description of him as an older man with: "unkempt white hair, stubby beard, shiny black clothes, and gold-headed cane" (Lovecraft 2008: 152). Moore's Suydam aids Black in his mission to find *Hali's Booke of the Wisdom of the Stars*, which serves as *Providence*'s analogue of Lovecraft's *Necronomicon*. After his meeting with Suydam, Black walks down into Suydam's basement, where he finds an underground landscape that is inhabited by a glowing figure that leaps to attack Black. In Lovecraft's *The Horror at Red Hook*, there is also an underground landscape beneath Suydam's flat, which is inhabited by the "leprous limbs of phosphorescent Lilith" (Lovecraft 2008: 161). A significant difference between Moore's and Lovecraft's narrative in Suydam's basement is that Malone is the character that encounters Lilith. The struggle in the basement ends in Lovecraft's story with the underground landscape caving in, bringing down Suydam's flat and killing everyone, but Malone. Moore's ending consists of Black being woken up by Suydam and Gerritsen in their basement, with everyone's life intact and the events that happened underneath the house being by a gas leak in the basement that has caused Black to pass out and dream of the landscape. After the encounter in the basement Black mutters "Of course it was a dream" (Moore 2017a), which is identical to Malone in Lovecraft's story who concludes

that the events in the underground landscape must have been a dream (Lovecraft 2008: 160). The last page of the chapter gives the reader an indication that it was in fact not a dream, as it shows a street merchant outside of Suydam's house with three large claw marks which are identical to the claw marks Black saw in the basement.

The differences between Lovecraft's *The Horror at Red Hook* and Moore's *The Hook* serves as an apt example of the overall narrative of Moore's graphic novel. Moore is actively using Lovecraft's stories as a springboard in order to craft his own narrative (Sanders 2016: 69) surrounding his own character, Robert Black, as an act of grafting. Moore does, however, distance himself from Lovecraft's geography, where Lovecraft's narratives often take place in the fictional towns of Arkham, Dunwich or Innsmouth. Moore has instead used real locations in the New England area, and used them as analogues for Lovecraft's fictional cities. In the introductory letter of chapter five in *Providence* a letter from Lovecraft to F. Lee Baldwin is presented, stating:

“My mental picture of Arkham is of a town something like Salem in atmosphere & style of houses, but more hilly...The street layout is nothing like Salem's. As to the location of Arkham - I fancy I place the town & the imaginary Miskatonic somewhere north of Salem - perhaps near Manchester.” (Moore 2017b)

Moore has with this information used the real city of Manchester, and the nearby Saint Anselm College as analogues of for Lovecraft's fictional Arkham, and Miskatonic University (Moore 2017b). Black's adventure to various locations in the New England area are all presented with elements that appear in Lovecraft's fictional locations, such as the “blasphemous fish-frogs” (Lovecraft 2008: 511) of Lovecraft's *The Shadow over Innsmouth*, inhabit Moore's version of Salem, Massachusetts. The Whateley family from *The Dunwich Horror* appears as the similarly named Wheatley family of Athol, instead of Dunwich. The changes in various names does initially seem like an arbitrary way to pull the story away from Lovecraft's source texts, when Moore's work is consistently appropriating and referring to them. *Providence* makes it apparent that Moore has not just changed the names for the sake of distancing the story from Lovecraft, but rather the opposite. Lovecraft himself enters Moore's narrative through placing him and Black at an event Lovecraft himself attended in real life, which is stated in his letters with Reinhardt Kleiner of which Moore refers to at the beginning of the chapter (Moore 2017c). Moore intersperses events from Lovecraft's life into the narrative of *Providence*, and by doing so

he mixes real and fictional history, and Lovecraft becomes similar to his own character Richard Upton Pickman in *Pickman's Model*. Pickman's art is so otherworldly yet realistic at the same time, it is revealed that Pickman's art is not just the work of his own creativity, but the "monstrous being he was painting on that awful canvas [...] *it was a photograph from life.*" (Lovecraft 2008: 200). *Providence's* rendition of Lovecraft borrows Black's commonplace book and exclaims that what Black has observed in his journey through New England is as follows: "I'd not considered my native soil a suitable backdrop for the fantastical. [...] I'd have to alter some names and places" (Moore 2017c). Moore's rendition of Red Hook is therefore an example of a chain of events that happens to Black, which inspires Lovecraft to write a story with the same setting and characters, but with a different outcome. Moore effectively plays with the notion of appropriation, where his narrative initially seems to be taking stories from Lovecraft and appropriating them into his own narrative as an act of grafting, and turning Lovecraft's literature to an appropriation of Black's commonplace book.

Black consistently questions his mental disposition throughout the events of *Providence*, and he explores the notion that he might have gone mad in a very Lovecraftian manner. Black's narrative in his commonplace book explores this by using a stream of consciousness style:

"It felt as if all of my life, all of my mind, all of the universe were irrecoverably destroyed right there and then, and all of the continuities of sense and cause and reason that there are in the world suddenly snapped like cotton threads to reveal a screaming, senseless blizzard of a billion unconnected facts that I knew to be the awful truth of human existence, the meaningless noise and chaos that forever churns beneath our desperate attempts to impose a sane and reasonable narrative." (Moore 2017b)

Black's madness is intermittently halted as he later exclaims that "I seem to at last to be recovering from Lily's death and the appalling mental breakdown and hallucinations that I went through afterwards" (Moore 2017c). Black's sanity is on the brink of shattering after a conversation with Lovecraft, where it is revealed that Lovecraft's grandfather had been a founding member of the Stella Sapiente. What Black had disregarded at guilt induced hallucinations following the death of his wife, e.g. the basement scene, was in fact orchestrated by the occult society. Black returns to his hotel room, where his sanity is shattered upon being confronted by a cosmic entity named Carcotha that congratulates him for bringing Lovecraft the ideas that will aid him and the Stella Sapiente's mission to turn Earth into Yuggoth, a doomed planet from Lovecraft's story *The Whisperer in Darkness*. The manifestation of Black's madness

turns him into a Lovecraftian character, where he is confronted with the cosmic indifference that have driven many Lovecraftian characters mad. The truth of being the architect of the world's coming doom is so overburdening to Black that he sees no other way out than taking his own life. Black's final entry in his commonplace book before his demise is a note to Tom Malone, where he states: "And Suydam in Red Hook. There is something going on, under his house. I'm not sure, but it might involve children" (Moore 2017c). The note to Malone establishes that the events that have happened in Suydam's basement is a prequel to Lovecraft's *The Horror at Red Hook*. Over the course of Black's exit scene Moore intersperses events from Lovecraft's stories as well as events from Lovecraft's life, where the Lovecraftian characters Black has met over the course of the narrative start to suffer from their predisposed fate. The Stella Sapiente's plan to turn Lovecraft's literature into a reality is starting to take shape, as Malone starts to investigate Suydam, and Suydam and Gerritsen are killed, Dr. Alvarez, an analogue of Dr. Torres of *Cool Air*, is found melted in his apartment as stated in Lovecraft's story.

The narrative gradually shifts into a contemporary setting, and the reader is met with characters from *Neonomicon*, another graphic novel by Alan Moore's which is also inspired by Lovecraft. The world which is presented in the final chapter the Lovecraftian doom has occurred, and Black's commonplace book is presented as proof that Lovecraft's "stories were engineered to cause what's happening now" (Moore 2017c). Lovecraft is referred to as "The Redeemer" by members of Stella Sapiente, who had been used as a tool to create the reality of which the narrative has shifted into. Moore uses the contemporary setting and the surviving members of the society as a tool to comment on Lovecraft's reception: "When The Redeemer died, he was almost unknown. It seemed that all our efforts were for nothing." (Moore 2017c). The implication here is that since Lovecraft's fiction did not become a mainstream success until much later, which intermittently halted the Stella Sapiente's plan to transform the world. Lovecraft now enjoys an unusual, but rich literary legacy in popular culture, which Moore has used as a narrative device in order to set the transformation of Earth into a Lovecraftian hellscape in a present-day setting. Moore punctuates this during his zoom from Black's temporal setting to a present-day setting, where he shows a shop window which sells various Cthulhu paraphernalia.



Siobhan O’Flynn and Linda Hutcheon’s notion of transmedia adaptation is relevant to Moore’s *Providence*, where “Transmedia adaptations also exist as reworkings of the Mythos and content of a given story and storyworld” (Hutcheon & O’Flynn 2013: 184). Hutcheon and O’Flynn points out that marketers have started to tap into the marketing potential of existing fan communities for adaptations beyond the relationship between reader and audience member (Hutcheon & O’Flynn 2013: 180). Transmedia adaptations include online communities for various fan groups, where “audiences remix and extend given properties creating new forms of intermedial adaptation” (Hutcheon & O’Flynn 2013: 181). Fans of Lovecraft and Cthulhu often refers to themselves on online communities as cultists, or seek out other avid fans of Lovecraft by asking questions on web forums, such as “Any Cthulhu cults in Sydney Australia” (Reddit 2018). Online homages and merchandise are examples of Lovecraft’s transmedial afterlife (Sederholm & Weinstock 2016: 23), and is commented on by Moore through the appearance of cute Cthulhu stuffed animals in *Providence*. Moore has in that sense used the current state of Lovecraft’s legacy and intertwined it with *Providence*’s narrative, where Lovecraft has finally reached a level of fame that the Stella Sapiente needed in order to transform the world. The line between the fictional Cthulhu cultist and the real fanbase referring to themselves as cultists is blurred, as Moore shows fans of the author holding signs and celebrating that “The stars are right” (Moore 2017c), which echoes the cultists in *The Call of Cthulhu* who claims Cthulhu will return “when the stars were right” (Lovecraft 2008: 214).

Moore’s story does rely on the reader to be intimately acquainted with Lovecraft’s literature, in order to be fully engaged in the narrative. The narrative initially sets out on what seems to be a voyage of Lovecraft’s “terrifying vistas of reality” (Lovecraft 2008: 201), and evolves into trying to create a narrative that connects Lovecraft’s universe in a way that is not specified by the author. Moore does this by connecting the individual grafts of each chapter into a larger narrative which makes the grafts and Lovecraft’s literature communicate with each other.

Moore’s story is without any doubt a Cthulhu Mythos story, as it contains all the elements that defines a Mythos story - The New England setting, forbidden books, the pantheon of hostile extraterrestrials, and Lovecraft’s philosophy of cosmicism (Mullins 2015: 513-514). Lovecraft’s

stories and Mythos is unique in that it “lacks a solid narrative core running throughout its various installments” (Mullins 2015: 513). *Providence* tries to be a unifier and prequel to Lovecraft’s unrelated stories while also being a prologue and epilogue to Moore’s other Lovecraft inspired graphic novel, *Neonomicon*.



## Conclusion

Lovecraft's literary legacy has blossomed in the modern low-culture texts, where the aforementioned textual forms (video games, graphic novels and television shows) can be seen as just that, easily consumed text that can be completed in a relatively brief amount of time as cheap entertainment. It is therefore not surprising that Lovecraft as an author of pulp fiction, at least with his publishing history in pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales* in mind, that his literary afterlife has been enriched by modern equivalents of pulp fiction, and especially in visual texts. An explanation to Lovecraft's contemporary stardom can be attested to several different factors. First, the openness of his mythos invited participation by other authors in an early version of fan fiction (Sederholm & Weinstock 2016: 23), which resulted in the creation of the Cthulhu Mythos. The Cthulhu Mythos has proven that Lovecraft's creatures are extremely malleable, and do not have to evoke the same themes commonly associated with Lovecraftian horror. Second, various genres of speculative fiction (fantasy, science fiction, and horror), have expanded significantly during the past thirty years, and have finally, entered contemporary popular culture (Sederholm & Weinstock 2016: 24). Edmundson refers to a contemporary cultural obsession with the apocalyptic Gothic which "often comes in an ecological mode. Thus one encounters the fear that, as a punishment for human excess, especially of the technological sort, the world is doomed to become a flyblown waste some time in the next decade or two." (Edmundson 1997: 27). This is a sentiment which Lovecraftian horror aptly harmonizes with.

What is surprising with Lovecraft's legacy is how seamlessly it communicates with popular culture, or how Lovecraft can be included in already established imaginative universes in order to alter it slightly for the purpose of a particular storyline in that universe. Smith's suggestion that Lovecraft's horrors do not adapt well to visual depictions (Smith 2006: 137) is conflicting. The analysis of various visual texts shows that Lovecraft's monsters can be depicted visually in order to evoke themes that are pertinent to Lovecraftian horror without any major issues. However, it does also have sentiment. Lovecraft seldom takes center stage in contemporary texts, in part because his racism is problematic in the current cultural climate. Lovecraft is currently being used almost exclusively in conjuncture with other texts, where his

creatures are the only allusion being made to his literature. The result of this is that Lovecraft becomes at risk of being dwarfed by his own creations. Jones notes that Lovecraft's "previously obscure and arcane mythos is in danger of becoming mainstream horror fodder" (Jones 2013: 240-241), where Cthulhu can appear without the symbolism Lovecraft initially attributed to his Elder Things. In *Batman: The Doom That Came to Gotham*, Batman defending Gotham from the forces of the cosmos, the core Lovecraftian idea that humans are a temporary species that are at the mercy of cosmic forces that are indifferent to our survival is not reflected. This "good versus evil" type of narrative can be attributed to the early days of the author's legacy, where other Cthulhu Mythos authors, such as August Derleth, who depicted the Elder Things as a more generic evil whose aim is to destroy humanity rather than Lovecraft's Elder Things that are more indifferent to humanity as a whole. The Cthulhu Mythos has played a significant role in Lovecraft's legacy, but has in turn created some confusion surrounding the themes Lovecraft's creatures evoke in his literature.

Hutcheon and O'Flynn's notion of knowing and unknowing audiences is relevant for Lovecraft's legacy. The texts we have considered for the most part, with the exception of *Providence*, require no prior knowledge to Lovecraft or his works. The widely popular television shows *Rick & Morty* and *South Park*, or the equally popular Batman franchise, will for most audience members be experienced as any other work without the palimpsestic doubleness that comes with knowing. (Hutcheon & O'Flynn 2016: 127). The knowing audiences of readers and viewers who know Lovecraft's works will in turn expect the cosmicism that defines Lovecraftian horror, or at least a narrative that is painted by it. There is a discrepancy between narratives in Lovecraftian horror and the young adult nature of the types of visual texts in this thesis, but as Jones argues, "the dystopian mode in contemporary young adult fiction, while not in general explicitly Lovecraftian, recognizes an amoral and futile world inimical to humanity" (Jones 2013: 240). Lovecraft's stories never end on an optimistic note. Cthulhu's return in *The Call of Cthulhu* may have been delayed, but the narrator has become aware of the precariousness of his and humanity's existence and exclaims: "Death would be a boon if only it could blot out the memories" (Lovecraft 2008: 225). Narratives in popular culture have a reasonable expectation to end optimistically, for the sake of mainstream appeal. Episodic series such as *Rick and Morty*

and *South Park* are expected to reach a resolution of the plot within their narrow twenty-minute timeframe. The same can be said for monthly superhero comics and video games, where the hero or player must at some point defeat the villain and save the city, world or universe.

Lovecraft's legacy is being appropriated, from the early stages of the Cthulhu Mythos to contemporary visual texts that allude to his creatures. Knowledge of Lovecraft is for the most part not required, with Alan Moore's *Providence* serving as an anomaly that requires prior knowledge of the author. Lovecraft's popularity within popular culture is at an all-time high, where American culture has become suffused with Gothic assumptions, characters, and plots (Edmundson 1997: xii). Lovecraft has certainly made his mark on popular culture to the degree that yet to be released video games such as *The Sinking City* is advertising itself as "a game of investigation and mystery taking place in a fictional open world inspired by the works of H. P. Lovecraft" (Frogwares 2018). HBO is currently adapting Matt Ruff's novel *Lovecraft Country*, a novel that appropriates Lovecraft while also criticizing the racism of a 1950s America (HBO 2018). Grafting has been a central term throughout the analysis of this thesis and as the horticultural practice implies, Lovecraft the scion has become incorporated with the rootstock of popular culture. Appropriation of Lovecraft's literature is widespread in popular culture, where the appropriations explored in this thesis constitute only a speck of dust in the expanding cosmos that is Lovecraft's legacy.



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## Figures

Figure 1. "Lovecraft's Cthulhu appearing in the title sequence of *Rick and Morty*".

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Figure 2. "*South Park*'s depiction of Cthulhu".

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Figure 3. "Cartman commanding Cthulhu".

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Figure 4. “Cthulhu appearing in *Darkest Dungeon*’s introductory cutscene”.

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Figure 5. “Lovecraft’s drawing of Cthulhu, and the fish-idol in *Darkest Dungeon*”.

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## **Abstract**

The aim of the thesis was to explore how Lovecraft has become embedded in popular culture through appropriation of his creations, and whether including elements from his literature alters the narrative of the appropriating hypertext. Each of the texts analyzed does not only exemplify how Lovecraft is used in popular culture, but also serves to explore the multiplicity and malleability of Lovecraft's imaginative universe. *Rick and Morty* is a show that parodies a multitude of popular cultural texts in order to craft its narrative, and the aim of the analysis of the show is to explore how Lovecraft's literature interacts with both the narrative of *Rick and Morty* and other texts in popular culture. The analysis of *South Park* explores how Lovecraft fares in a narrative that satirizes current events. The inclusion of *Batman: The Doom That Came to Gotham* enables an investigation aimed to investigate the interaction between Lovecraft and a superhero narrative. The analysis of *Providence* shows that Lovecraft's universe may be depicted visually independent of a different informing narrative universe, and demonstrates how it is able to craft its own visual Cthulhu Mythos story. The intention behind including a video game narrative such as *Darkest Dungeon* is to explore one of the more surprising ways that Lovecraft has entered popular culture, where there is a discrepancy between the player's agency and the lack of agency conveyed by Lovecraft's human characters when faced with his cosmic creatures.



## **Appendix: Thesis relevance for teaching**

This thesis has dealt with appropriation and various forms of visual texts and their ability to create different narratives. As stated these types of texts - graphic novels, animated television shows, and video games - are for the most part aimed at a young adult audience, which makes them relevant for the ESL-classroom. Video games might not be the best teaching tool inside the classroom, but since they have a narrative and clear rules that the player will have to learn through an in-game tutorial. They will work well as a tool for learning. In addition, they may contribute in fulfilling a variety of competence aims such as: “discuss and elaborate on English language films and other forms of cultural expressions from different media” (UDIR 2013) and “evaluate and use suitable listening and speaking strategies adapted for the purpose and the situation” (UDIR 2013). These competence aims are also relevant for the other types of visual texts that have been considered in the thesis. Moreover, since video games and animated television shows are audiovisual texts, they may challenge and develop students’ listening skills. The visual component of graphic novels, animated television shows, and video games will aid the teacher in a classroom where the students have mixed abilities, where “graphic narrative materials are an excellent means to reduce the “affective filters” of anxiety and lack of confidence blocking student pleasure in learning L2” (Templer 2009). The visual component will aid students of lower competence levels bridge the language gap through viewing the context of how the narrative is unfolding, and by doing so reluctant students might feel comfortable in joining class discussions (Harmer 2015: 386) that are pertinent to the text. Advanced students will also be challenged to take part in discussing or analyzing the narrative of the text (Harmer 2015: 320)

The episodes of *South Park* and their interplay with Lovecraft harmonize with the “core curriculum for primary, secondary and adult education in Norway”, since the narrative portrays human exploitation of the environment and how it modifies the human condition and nature. The core curriculum states that: “Education must therefore provide a broad awareness of the interconnections in nature and of the interplay between humans and the environment.” (UDIR 2015: 36).



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