

The Gothic in Contemporary Interactive Fictions

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Van Leavenworth



Umeå Studies in Language and Literature 11
Department of Language Studies
Umeå University 2010

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SE - 901 87 Umeå
<http://www.sprak.umu.se>
<http://umu.diva-portal.org>

Umeå Studies in Language and Literature 11
© 2010 Van Leavenworth
Cover illustration: Nicke Hållén
Cover layout: Gabriella Dekombis, Print & Media
Printed in Sweden by Print & Media, Umeå 2010
Distributor: eddy.se ab, Visby
ISBN: 978-91-7264-917-0

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Acknowledgments

A number of very gifted, thoughtful and creative individuals have invested in this project. I am grateful to Professor Heidi Hansson, my supervisor, who has been supportive and instructive from the very beginning. Her advice, critical eye and uncanny ability to address essential aspects of my work and thinking have been invaluable. Without your amazing talents, Heidi, this work would not be what it is. I also wish to thank my secondary supervisor, Dr. Bryan Alexander, who has been an observant reader and sounding board for ideas during the last two years of completing this thesis. His suggestions have contributed to pivotal steps in my thinking, especially with regard to Gothic scholarship.

Several individuals at the Department of Language Studies and the previous Department of Modern Languages have been instrumental to my writing and professional development. I am privileged to have been aided by countless discussions and comments from the dedicated, outspoken and critical group of readers in our literary seminars. Thanks go to Martin Shaw, Jim Barrett, Anette Svensson, Malin Isaksson, Nicklas Hållén, Elena Lindholm Narváez, Hilda Härgestam Strandberg, Berit Åström, Florence Sisask, Tove Solander, Moa Matthis and Katarina Gregersdotter. Additional thanks to Jim for discussions about reconciling literary and digital media concerns and Nicklas for the cover illustration. Warm appreciation goes out to Gerd Lilljegen, Gunn-Marie Forsberg, Christina Karlberg and Marie Figaro for shepherding me through university and departmental procedures and answering all of my questions patiently. Magnus Nordström's technical aid has been fantastic. In the final stages of this process I received invaluable help from Ingela Valfridsson, Per Ambrosiani, Maria Dahlin and Per-Arne Öberg. I also wish to express my appreciation to Lars Hübinette, Pat Shrimpton and Anders Steinvall for their encouragement and willingness to work around the challenges I created by taking a leave of absence from teaching.

I am lucky to have a home away from the department at the digital humanities lab, HUMlab, and I wish to extend my appreciation to everyone there. Specifically, I want to thank fellow graduate students Therese Örnberg Berglund, Stephanie Hendrick and Stefan Blomberg for fruitful discussions about digital media and interdisciplinary research. Cecilia Lindhé, Jon Svensson, Magnus Olofsson, Stefan Gelfgren and Fredrik Palm gave helpful

support and suggestions. I particularly wish to thank to Patrik Svensson, Director of the lab, who provided critical guidance on my application to begin graduate studies, ensured that I met guest scholars of relevance to my project and also introduced me to my secondary supervisor.

Many scholars who are not based in Umeå also took the time to advise me on research production or comment on specific chapters. My thanks go to Philip Grey for early advice and suggestions, Jan Van Looy for proposing what became my preferred working method, Erica Robles for discussions about integrating digital media studies with other critical fields and Nick Montfort for organizational advice and a discussion about the social aspect of ‘single player’ interactive fiction. In addition, I wish to thank Suzanne Martin for her comments related to genre criticism, Caroline Kelley for advice on gender issues and Jenny Sundén for extensive feedback on an early chapter and though-provoking points about arguing from the player’s perspective. My deep appreciation goes to Maria Engberg for numerous insightful discussions as well as her observant and instructive comments on the first draft of the dissertation.

This project began thanks to a two-year scholarship from the Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation. I also gratefully acknowledge the support of authors Sara Dee and Michael S. Gentry, who kindly provided permission to use screenshots of their interactive fictions.

I am grateful to my parents, Greta and Howard Leavenworth, for instilling a love of language and the importance of typing skills in me from a very early age. Thanks go to my family members in Denver and Sweden, who have been wholly supportive and patient with me during this process. I also want to thank Patrick Yates, Rickard Åström and Dave Alger for friendship and keeping me grounded.

None of this would have happened without my wife Maria, who has been supportive and critical in considerate amounts throughout the process. We have many places to go, many dishes to make and lots to write. This is for you, for everything, always.

Introduction

At the close of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Gothic interactive fiction may strike some as a genre and media form pairing firmly rooted in the (distant) past. The Anglo-American literary Gothic tradition is known for its devoted concern with how the ‘past’ haunts the ‘present,’ both within narratives and formally through the recycling of tropes and themes, a concern which traces back to Horace Walpole’s foundational Gothic novel from 1764, *The Castle of Otranto*. Conversely, contemporary, wholly text-based interactive fiction seems similarly focused on retaining aspects of the digital past as the media form bears strong visual and procedural resemblance to initial text adventures produced in the early days of computing such as the seminal cave exploration piece *Adventure*, written by Will Crowther and further developed by Don Woods in 1976. The Gothic genre and interactive fiction construct relationships to the ‘past’ as a means of creating narratives relevant to the present. In fact, it is exactly the playful reuse and reinvention of formal and literary generic praxis which contributes to the persistence and fertile creativity of the Gothic as well as the interactive fiction media form, though in distinctly different ways.

The contemporary popularity and critical relevance of Gothic fiction derives partly from its ability to revitalize narrative themes and devices for knowing audiences and partly from its exploration of increasingly diverse forms of human subjectivity. David Punter and Glennis Byron hint at the collusive contract between genre and audience with their tongue-in-cheek assertion that “the Gothic is alive (if not entirely well) in western cultures in the early twenty-first century [. . .] for example, in the apparently endless remaking and reshaping of the vampire myth in literature and film” (xix). Jerrold E. Hogle more forcefully argues for the relevance of the Gothic. He states that there “is now no question that the Gothic, particularly in prose or verse narrative, theatre, and film [. . .] has become a long-lasting and major, albeit widely variable, symbolic realm in modern and even postmodern western culture, however archaic the Gothic label may make it seem” (“Introduction: The Gothic in Western Culture” 2). Aside from the spread of the Gothic into diverse media, what these claims assert is both the popular revival of familiar, historic tropes on the one hand and the potential cultural and personal importance of such tropes for a modern audience on the other.

Catherine Spooner describes the value of this constructed relationship to the past in her investigations in *Contemporary Gothic*.

Gothic texts deal with a variety of themes just as pertinent to contemporary culture as to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when Gothic novels first achieved popularity: the legacies of the past and its burdens on the present; the radically provisional or divided nature of the self; the construction of peoples or individuals as monstrous or 'other'; the preoccupation with bodies that are modified, grotesque or diseased. Gothic has become so pervasive precisely because it is so apposite to the representations of contemporary concerns. (8)

This thematic continuity from the eighteenth century to contemporary culture underscores the Gothic's central relevance in investigating issues related to the human condition and, specifically, constructions of human subjectivity.¹ The Gothic is a particularly salient object of study in literary and cultural discourses precisely because contemporary subjects are being constructed in increasingly diverse and indefinite ways. This move away from essentialist notions of the subject is partly related to a rise in technologies and social practices which downplay the primacy (though not the relevance) of the physical human body which has long been the cornerstone of the liberal human subject (see Hall 118, Genz and Brabon 107).

With strong, nostalgic ties to textuality in the face of an ever-increasing digital production of graphically and auditorily rich interactive narratives and worlds, wholly text-based interactive fiction is uniquely positioned to support investigations of the relationships between codex-based print literature and modern forms of computer-mediated narrative generation. For example, in *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, N. Katherine Hayles contends that due to the manner in which digital media are changing writing and reading practices, print-based analytical tools are inadequate because they (usually) do not take into account a text's material form. However, "[r]eaders come to digital work with expectations formed by print, including extensive and deep tacit knowledge of letter forms, print conventions, and print literary modes" (3-4). The relevance of 'print' narrative forms for readers of a digital work is similarly emphasized for authors. In his 2007 doctoral dissertation "Command Lines: Aesthetics and

¹ For an overview of contemporary critical approaches to Gothic constructions of subjectivity, see Heiland 183-85.

Technique in Interactive Fiction and New Media,” Jeremy Douglass argues for a “deep relationship” between “contemporary independent IF [interactive fiction] and the 20th century novel” (33). The cohesion between ‘digital’ and ‘print’ forms of narrative is further emphasized by Daniel Keller, who suggests that works of contemporary interactive fiction, which are currently experiencing a revival of popular and critical interest, are notable because they explore “the possibilities of print *and* digital media” (276, 295, my emphasis). In essence, although it is possible to discuss print and digital material forms as separate, it is problematic to characterize the creation, poetics and reception of contemporary works of interactive fiction as wholly distinct from print fiction. Rather, the ‘experience’ of these digital works shares much with the experience of reading print fiction. Since works of interactive fiction engage in the some of the same discourses as other modern narratives, including, of course, the generic discourses of the Gothic, it is relevant to investigate how the poetics of literary Gothic elements function within these digital fictions.

The Gothic in Contemporary Interactive Fictions examines how dominant themes, conventions and concepts in (literary) Gothic discourses are adapted, remediated, reinvented or developed in selected works of contemporary interactive fiction. These works include *Nevermore: An Interactive Gothic*, by Nate Cull (2000), *Anchorhead: An Interactive Gothic*, by Michael S. Gentry (1998), *Madam Spider’s Web*, by Sara Dee (2006) and *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, by Star C. Foster and Daniel Ravipinto (2003).² These works have been chosen in part due to their popularity in the contemporary interactive fiction community but primarily with an interest in the diverse perspectives they present on the Gothic. *Nevermore* is an adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe’s poem “The Raven” in which the narrator of the poem, as a character in the interactive fiction, attempts to reunite with the lost Lenore via an alchemical ritual. The themes and poetics of the Gothic works of H. P. Lovecraft form the foundation for *Anchorhead*, a sprawling interactive fiction in which the primary character is forced to investigate the unusual degeneration which seems to afflict both her husband and the residents of a small, run-down town. In contrast, *Madam Spider’s Web* is not adapted from or based on any specific text(s) but produces familiar yet

² Although *Madam Spider’s Web* and *Slouching Towards Bedlam* do not identify themselves as Gothic works, they both produce narratives which align with the Gothic.

fragmented narratives of female constriction in domestic spaces. Entitled in reference to the closing lines from W. B. Yeats' poem "The Second Coming," *Slouching Towards Bedlam* is a highly intertextual work in which explicit and implicit Gothic texts provide a basis for examining future and past threats to a new form of 'human' subjectivity. Although my focus is on how the Gothic is remediated in these individual interactive fictions I also, of course, elucidate the Gothic poetics of the relevant print texts.

Via in-depth analyses in the following four chapters, I demonstrate that literary Gothic conventions and tropes are uniquely developed in each of these four works, which underscores the interactive fictions' relationships to a literary 'past' or 'tradition.' Although my analytical method provides more precise conclusions about Gothic elements as they function in the individual works than about the Gothic generally in contemporary interactive fiction (a scope I could not hope to achieve here), I make the following broad claims. First, the reworking of Gothic tropes and conventions in these interactive fictions includes a consideration not just of textual poetics (in a 'new' context) but of additional elements involved in the digital poetics of these interactive fictions. Accordingly, I am concerned with how the individual qualities of each work illuminate its Gothic relevance, an analytical approach which underscores the value of particular analyses in contrast to critical approaches investigating the formal elements of the interactive fiction form. Second, in these interactive fictions the player's roles are designed to simulate Gothic effects related to the destabilization, collapsed oppositions, trauma and infections respectively encountered by the characters. This formal, receptive emphasis parallels the manner in which contemporary printed Gothic works actively yoke constrictions in the narrative to challenges in the reading process. Related to the centrality of simulation, my third claim is that in the order in which I examine them these four works exemplify a postmodern development of the Gothic which increasingly couples fictional indeterminacy to explicit formal effects both during interaction and in the narratives produced. Finally, this postmodern development correlates with the anxieties linked to constructions of subjectivity in all four works. Contemporary dilemmas related to the vulnerabilities of subjectivity are examined in each work, but broadly speaking a concern with the potential breakdown of language and/or communication is primary. This loss of subject coherence is frequently

mirrored in the player's configured relationship with the main character in each interactive fiction.

In this introductory chapter I first provide an overview of the context in which contemporary works of interactive fiction are produced followed by a brief summary of the works examined in this study. I then take into account the limited amount of topic-relevant research which has been conducted on interactive fiction since the 1980s as a means of establishing some of the perspectives involved in the interdisciplinary context within which my work is situated. The arguments which I emphasize in this section form the basis for the methodology I describe in the following section. Having established and contextualized concerns related to the digital poetics of the interactive fiction media form, I turn to contemporary critical approaches to the literary Gothic which are intertwined with particular rather than essential constructions of subjectivity. Finally, I conclude this introduction with a summary of the four analytical chapters in this dissertation, an overview which traces the increasingly prominent role of postmodernism in the Gothic genre. Since this is a work of literary scholarship and primarily designed for audiences familiar with the methodologies and qualities of that field, I have devoted the larger part of this introduction to a presentation of contemporary interactive fiction practices and criticism. However, in the analytical chapters my concern is predominantly with the Gothic.

Contemporary Interactive Fictions

In this study, 'interactive fiction' refers to a text-based form of computer-mediated interactive storytelling which may contain gaming elements. Early examples of the form, often referred to as 'text adventures,' 'adventure games' and a number of other terms, were more often puzzle-based, ludic works while contemporary works frequently share greater qualities with print fiction.³ Like the majority of interactive fiction that has been produced, *Nevermore*, *Anchorhead*, *Madam Spider's Web* and *Slouching Towards Bedlam* are wholly text-based, which is to say that they contain no sound or images, and proceed via a series of written output and input exchanges. The computer program outputs descriptions of locations, characters, events and situations which the player may read and consider prior to inputting (typing

³ For a list of the terms that have been used to denote interactive fiction, see Douglass, "Command Lines" 29.

and entering) commands which either guide actions within the story being produced or else direct the software to stop, restart, save, and so forth. Textual interaction occurs in dialogic steps which underscore the linguistic interchange fundamental to this particular type of storytelling.



Screenshot of the interactive fiction *Madam Spider's Web*, by Sara Dee. The statements written in capital letters after a command prompt (>) are player commands. All other text is output by the software.

The interactive fictions I examine are products of a contemporary group of authors who demonstrate a committed interest in fictional writing. These authors, along with other authors, players and reviewers, make up what may loosely be described as a 'community' whose enthusiasm for the form is evident in annual competitions, journals such as *XYZZY News*, *The Society for the Promotion of Adventure Games (SPAG)* and *Brass Lantern*, various online discussion channels including *The Interactive Fiction Wiki* and the rec.arts.int-fiction newsgroup, and, of course, archives of freely

downloadable works, most notably *The Interactive Fiction Archive*.⁴ Although some of the authors of my corpus works are programmers to begin with, the authors in the interactive fiction folk community generally lack formal computer science or programming training (Wardrip-Fruin 79). This lack of programming expertise is not a hindrance to authorship because most interactive fictions are written in programming languages so formalized that the focus is mostly on “the work of writing and structuring the fictional world,” not on creating programming innovations (79; see Douglass, “Command Lines” 129). As interactive fiction author Adam Cadre puts it, in contrast to the market driven, corporately produced interactive fictions produced in the early days of computer games, contemporary works are “idiosyncratic” works of “self-expression” (Interview). The works I investigate reflect this idiosyncrasy. While all of them are deemed praiseworthy in the community and at basis indicate a deep concern with contemporary literary practices, their programmed designs support the production of Gothic narratives and simulated experiences in diverse ways.

Nate Cull’s *Nevermore: An Interactive Gothic* was a top-ten finalist (out of 53) in the 2000 Interactive Fiction Competition and finalist in three highly contested categories in the 2000 *XYZZY* Awards. Cull’s interactive fiction is salient to an investigation of the Gothic as it is directly derived from the “The Raven,” one of the most famous Gothic poems by Edgar Allan Poe. The adaptation demonstrates a keen awareness of the aesthetic presentation of love, death and sorrow in Poe’s poem as well as of other prominent elements in Poe’s fictional work, such as the symbolic relevance of alchemy. The main character in the interactive fiction resembles the narrator in Poe’s poem and the situation is familiar: Lenore is absent and greatly missed and the only solace may come from books. However, unlike in the poem the books in question are alchemical texts which contain clues for performing a ritual which may restore the lost Lenore. The player’s attentions in the work are primarily devoted to deciphering the cryptic alchemical texts and performing the multi-step ritual correctly. *Nevermore* is notable both for its highly corporeal presentation of subjectivity and the spatial-linguistic breakdowns which accompany it, following the linguistic and spatial

⁴ The number of interactive fictions produced by this community is considerable. For example, *The Interactive Fiction Archive* currently hosts more than 3000 interactive fictions written in eleven different languages.

constrictions in Poe's poem. Cull's interactive fiction is also remarkable for its two ambivalent endings as they redouble the sense of ambiguous closure at the end of "The Raven."

Michael S. Gentry's *Anchorhead: An Interactive Gothic* won "Best Setting" in the 1998 *XYZZY* Awards and was a finalist in five other categories. Gentry's work stands out both because it is more than three times as large as a typical interactive fiction and because it is frequently discussed as the quintessential example of how to make 'horror' work in the media form (Stevens, Rev. of *Anchorhead*; Short, Rev. of *Anchorhead*). Gentry's work is also specifically related to print fiction as it remediates the Gothic themes and anxieties of H. P. Lovecraft, a seminal writer of American horror fiction. In *Anchorhead*, Lovecraft's typically gender-neutral, modernist concerns with the stability of space and mankind's ability to comprehend the basis of reality are extended and developed in an ironic, postmodern fashion. While the primary character's sense of the universe is shaken by the supernatural beings and illogically constructed spaces of the strange town of Anchorhead, her overriding concern is relational and personal rather than epistemological as it is her husband—the only reason she is in the town to begin with—who must be saved in the end. Like *Nevermore*, subjectivity is once again constructed from a corporeal referent in this interactive fiction, and it is the threats surrounding family and reproduction which engender the most anxiety. Unlike the other works in this study, *Anchorhead* is overtly ludic and features a number of 'losing' endings as well as a couple of 'winning' ones. As the player's progress through the work is driven by an interest in accomplishing the 'correct' ending, *Anchorhead* functions at least partly as a contrastive work in this study.

Sara Dee's *Madam Spider's Web* has an ambivalent status in the interactive fiction community. Although Dee's work ranked in the top ten (out of 46) in the 2006 Interactive Fiction Competition and was a finalist in the 2006 *XYZZY* Awards, reviews indicate a clear preference for programmed elements in the work which align with beliefs about so-called good design in the community and dislike of the elements which subvert or contradict these norms. In this sense Dee's interactive fiction most clearly indicates potential contradictions between prescriptive design practices and the 'idiosyncrasies' of 'self-expression.' As a fragmented narrative, one of the most relevant qualities of *Madam Spider's Web* is the seemingly conscious use and subversion of expected interactive fiction design practice for the

purposes of generating Gothic experiences. Unlike *Nevermore* and *Anchorhead*, Dee's interactive fiction is not based on a print text *per se*, but its narratives call to mind familiar Gothic tales of female constriction in fantastic and mundane domestic environments. The initial phase of the work finds the young female primary character in servitude to a giant spider in a bizarre house, while the latter phases depict an adult woman prior to and after an automobile accident in a more 'realistic' setting. Subjectivity is once again constructed around the body, and the Gothic threats to the character, partially illuminated in the projected self of the grotesque giant spider, indicate the constricting web of family concerns, expectations and inevitabilities. Although much of what is hidden is eventually revealed in the work there are many things, including the relevance of certain items and the correspondences between narrative sections, which remain occluded and unexplained. The work is likely to provide a frustrating experience for the player as it invites curiosity but thwarts expectations, simulating Gothic constraint and constriction.

The fourth work in this study, *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, is by far the most highly praised. Along with being the overall winner of the 2003 Interactive Fiction Competition, and winner or finalist in eight of the ten categories in the 2003 XYZZY Awards, Foster and Ravipinto's interactive fiction has been very favorably reviewed. Set in London in 1855, the player directs a character who is a doctor at Bethlehem Hospital ('Bedlam') as he attempts to determine the strange affliction of a deceased patient. The postmodern work is highly intertextual and references other texts and historical details fluidly while also subverting this constructed historical accuracy with fictionalized facts and the addition of fantastical machinery. As it transpires that the doctor is also afflicted with the infection which troubled the patient—a 'sickness' transmitted verbally—the viral, corporeal qualities of subjectivity are emphasized. However, unlike the solely body-based human subjectivities presented in the prior three interactive fictions, subjectivity in *Slouching Towards Bedlam* reflects the work's thoroughly postmodern ambivalence. The viral threat to the corporeal human subject, metaphorically similar to that of a vampire, is secondary to and even used as a cloak for the main threat: a breakdown of the communication networks which are essential for the posthuman subject. While the body is the key referent for the human subject, information is the referent for the posthuman subject, and it is this construction of subjectivity which

dominates the interactive fiction. Foster and Ravipinto's interactive fiction is most remarkable for its formal expression of this subjectivity; the linguistic breakdown which threatens posthuman subjects in the work also affects the player's ability to operate the interactive fiction software. This simulated posthuman condition has drastic consequences for the manner in which the player regards the five available endings to the work. As it presents the most distinct conception of subjectivity and the Gothic anxieties attending it, *Slouching Towards Bedlam* functions as a contrastive work in this study but also as the work which most cohesively employs many of the postmodern elements included in the previous three interactive fictions.

Interactive Fiction Scholarship: From Media Form to Digital Literary Work

Developments in the study of interactive fiction have paralleled developments in the media form's history. In contrast to works from the 1980s, when the media form enjoyed commercial popularity, the particular narrative relevance of individual works produced today derives from greater freedom in authoring choices as well as a growing awareness of and response to traditional formal elements. Although there are only a limited number of histories available at the time of this writing, all essentially agree that the interactive fiction form 'begins' with the mid-1970s popularity of Crowther and Wood's *Adventure* and continues to the present, with the commercial success of the form in the early 1980s given particular attention.⁵ Espen Aarseth, one of the first to document the media form's history in 1997, suggests the 1980s period as most significant (in part by developing his theoretical model of the form via an investigation of Marc Blank's *Deadline* from 1982), and cites concern that the form is no longer popular in the 1990s (101-02). In contrast, writing in 2001, author/programmer Graham Nelson asserts the ongoing relevance of interactive fiction and claims that development is continuing along lines which are more literary and less puzzle-like, spurred by growing communities of enthusiasts sharing information on the internet (342). Although Nelson does not discuss the media form as an object of study, he nonetheless highlights "turn of the

⁵ For additional overviews of the history of interactive fiction, see Jerz, "Storytelling and Computer Games"; Granade and Granade, "A Brief History of Interactive Fiction"; Maher, "Let's Tell a Story Together" and Montfort, "Riddle Machines."

century interactive fiction” as characteristic of a “growing appreciation of the medium’s potential for art” (362). Similarly, Nick Montfort, writing in 2003, describes contemporary interactive fiction authors as a “still-growing community” and implies that current innovation and vitality in the development of the form indicates that the period after the commercial era has been the most significant (*Twisty Little Passages* 193-94). Both Montfort and Douglass underscore the importance of community and accessibility for the contemporary growth of interactive fiction. Montfort explains that works written today are “typically free for download and, thanks to the Internet, available worldwide,” while Douglass, writing in 2007, presents a telling new perspective on the media form’s history which is not periodical but instead features a unified development from 1975 to 2007 (and onwards) in which interactive fiction practices are seen as a successful ‘folk’ or independent movement (193-94; “Command Lines” 21). Such a unified development provides the basis for developing artistic sophistication.

A prominent reason why contemporary interactive fiction is particularly significant for the purposes of my study is that in contrast to the necessary expert programming knowledge and desire for financial success which often delimited the production of works in the commercial era, current authors have a greater potential for experimentation and are able to produce a work with much less programming experience (Wardrip-Fruin 394). Although experimental and powerful work was certainly produced in the commercial period, contemporary interactive fictions such as those I examine demonstrate greater range in terms of length, narrative generation, intertextual reference to past conventions in the form and relationship to literary poetics.⁶ They are, as Keller notes, distinguishable by their emphasis on experimentation and storytelling (287). As such, contemporary works are model examples of electronic literature.

Despite enjoying a relatively long history for a computer-mediated form, interactive fiction has been little studied in literary studies or digital media studies and it is only recently that a handful of critics have taken a more concerted interest (Douglass, “Command Lines” 8-9; Montfort, “Generating Narrative Variation in Interactive Fiction” 7). Although much has been done

⁶ This development is not unusual. For arguments which contrast the creativity of non-commercial, independently authored digital works to the repetitive and limited elements of works produced by the well-funded commercial industry, see Gentry, “And if a Puzzle is Not Puzzling Anymore?”; Lantz ix-x; and Ryan, “Beyond Myth and Metaphor.”

to advance an understanding of the specific digital poetics of the media form, only a few individual analyses (that is, close ‘readings’) of individual works exist; these tend to be brief and feature varying methodologies since there are as yet no agreed-upon models for how to perform such analyses (as there are with print fiction). In addition, there are very few—if any—investigations of each of the interactive fictions I examine. With these limitations in mind, the methodology I develop and employ for examining how my works individually mediate the Gothic draws on general research exploring interactive fiction as a digital media form. This research gestures to a perspective shift from textual poetics to digital poetics, and may be loosely grouped into four phases: initial studies which call for alternative methodological approaches to the form as a new type of literature in the 1980s, considerations of interactive narratives as spatially-structured and constrained for the player in the early 1990s, seminal though divergent claims regarding the complexity of how stories develop from the player/reader’s engagement with a computer program just prior to the turn of the century and the current focus on the specific digital poetics of contemporary interactive fiction in the first decade of this century.⁷ While the increasing body of scholarship does point to refinements in analytical approaches, the overall ‘field’ of interactive fiction research, if it can even be called such, is still nascent and so the following progression is not intended to represent a movement from ‘old’ to ‘modern’ ideas but rather a spectrum of valid points which are relevant to my analytical framework.

Parallel to interactive fiction’s rise in commercial popularity in the 1980s, initial studies consider interactive fiction as undoubtedly though not unproblematically related to print literature and attempt to address potential difficulties analyzing these interactive narratives. These studies include Anthony J. Niesz and Norman N. Holland’s “Interactive Fiction” (1984), Mary Buckles’ doctoral thesis “Interactive Fiction: The Computer Storygame ‘Adventure’” (1985) and Richard Ziegfeld’s “Interactive Fiction: A New Literary Genre?” (1989). Although there are discrepancies between what these critics consider to be ‘interactive fiction,’ all three studies suggest that the formal differences between interactive fiction and printed text require an analytical approach which differs from typical literary praxis. Niesz and

⁷ For more comprehensive overviews of interactive fiction scholarship, see Aarseth 106-14 and Jerz, “Interactive Fiction.”

Holland and Ziegfeld describe the media form as fundamentally different from print literature and assert, to varying degrees, the present and future need for new tools with which to examine it (110, 125-27; 359, 367). In contrast to these two exploratory studies, Buckles conducts an in-depth analysis of a single interactive fiction. Her analysis indicates a similar difficulty in approach, however, as it includes both a textual investigation in which she attempts to apply Vladimir Propp's structural methodology for analyzing folktales to *Adventure* as well as a non-empirical reception study whose aim is to determine the distinct requirements of 'reading' the work. Alongside the need for an appropriate form of analysis indicated by these three works, the importance of genre is suggested, at times indirectly, as central to the 'literariness' of interactive fiction. Buckles draws comparisons to the story form of the folktale as well as the structural form of lyrical poetry (104-33, 178). Both Ziegfeld and Niesz and Holland express concern that the dominance of popular genres such as mystery and adventure in interactive fiction seems to preclude linguistic complexity and literary merit (370-71; 125-26). What is notable about these claims is that they all positively or negatively present genre as a potential starting point or framing device for a literary analysis of interactive fiction. In this regard the Gothic, no stranger to the high-culture whip, provides a pertinent means of ingress.⁸

Two important concepts for analyzing interactive fiction develop in criticism from the early 1990s: the importance of space as a structuring element and the need to consider how constraints or limitations affect the process of 'experiential' reading. In *Computers as Theatre* (1993), Brenda Laurel proposes that human-computer activity may be understood as an encounter with a spatial realm. Laurel implicitly defines computer-mediated works as representational 'worlds,' and contends that "how people find the edges of the universe—discovering what is possible—is a central issue in design" (67). Laurel's emphasis on the effects of designed spaces is further developed by Robert T. Kelley in his investigation of the commercially popular *Zork* trilogy of interactive fictions from the 1980s in his article "A Maze of Twisty Little Passages, All Alike" (1993). Kelley explains how spatial

⁸ For accounts of 'critical snobbishness' against the Gothic, especially in early criticism, see Botting and Townsend, General Introduction 13-14; Hogle and Smith, "Revisiting the Gothic and Theory" 4; and Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic* 24-25.

concerns configure player interaction on many levels while progressing through *Zork*. The player/user

must make maps, keep records of where items and rooms are located, and constantly imagine how to use items he [sic] already has and what items to look for to perform necessary tasks. In this way, IF manifests itself as a writerly text by demanding the intervention of the reader in making meaning (literally, intellectual and simulated physical action on the user's part is required for the game to continue). (56)

Progress through a work is inherently connected to developing a spatial sense of the environment which is presented and actualized via text output and input. In addition, the player is more comprehensively involved in “making meaning” than a reader of traditional print text because physical input is required to advance the software.

Since textual-spatial configuration and allowable player input are bounded by physical, media form and authored constraints, an analysis of interactive fiction should acknowledge how such constraints impact the production of narrative. This approach is evident in J. Yellowlees Douglas' and Jay David Bolter's work with interactive narrative forms, although neither scholar deals specifically with the type of command-based interactive fiction I examine.⁹ Douglas implicitly argues that the non-linear, interactive qualities of digital fictions necessitate an analysis where equal consideration is given “to reading strategies translated directly from reading print narratives and to strategies which embrace the text as an interactive narrative existing in virtual [. . .] space” (“How Do I Stop This Thing?” 172). In *Writing Space*, Bolter combines these dual strategies employed in reading an “electronic” text into the image of “a journey through a symbolic space,” a metaphor which allows a particular ‘reading’ to be thought of as following “one path from among those suggested” by the text (100).¹⁰ This subjective spatial metaphor is fundamental to describing the process of playing or ‘reading’ interactive fiction where, as Douglas points out, “aesthetic experience becomes more reader/viewer/player-oriented” (“Where the Senses Become a Stage and Reading Is Direction” 33). Paths, of course, while

⁹ Following critical trends at the time, both scholars use the term ‘interactive fiction’ when referring to hypertext fictions. For criticism of Douglas’ dismissal of command-line interactive fiction as implicitly less ‘literary’ than hypertext fiction, see Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages* 11. However, some of Douglas’ points regarding the ‘experience’ of interactive textuality are relevant for my study.

¹⁰ Although I refer to the 2001 edition of *Writing Space*, I group Bolter with the early 1990s theorists as the first edition of *Writing Space* was published in 1991.

‘chosen’ by the reader/player, define constraints; the author’s control over the *traversal* of a text is largely related to what paths have been created for the player (see Bolter 127). The effects of textually-mediated space and authored constraint on the player are thus central to my analysis of individual interactive fictions.

Although derived from studies of interactive fictions produced in the 1980s, Janet H. Murray’s *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narratives in Cyberspace* (1997) and Espen J. Aarseth’s *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997) may be said to represent complementary perspectives on how interactive fiction should be understood as a form of computer-mediated, generic engagement with text. Interactive fiction is software; any examination of the story in a work requires at least some consideration of the programming which helps to produce it. While Murray more broadly conceptualizes computer programs as ‘procedural,’ which is to say that they “execute a series of rules” in order to “embody complex, contingent behaviors,” Aarseth details the “internal design” of interactive fictions generally as a system of relationships between data, processing engines, the interface and the ‘user’ (71-72; 103-05). Notable in both studies is an emphasis on the significance of the computer-mediated feedback loop (Murray’s proceduralism, the basis for Aarseth’s *cybertext*) and, particularly relevant to my own methodology, the self-determined limitations with regard to the level of programming complexity considered. Another point made by Aarseth and Murray is that the ‘story’ in an interactive fiction is not primary but shares a roughly equal relevance with the player/reader/user’s physical and mental engagement with the work. Aarseth argues that the “reader *is* (or at least produces) the story,” while Murray posits that interactive fictions like *Zork* are ‘participatory’ in the sense that the player metaphorically converses with the computer program in order to enact the “computer-based story” (112, original emphasis; 74). Finally, genre is once again portrayed as salient to formal qualities of interactive fiction. Murray indicates that spatially ordered, adventurous literary genres are ideally suited to the folkloric, participatory qualities of interactive fiction (79, 130, 192). Although Aarseth argues for an understanding of interactive fiction’s formal properties as distinct from narrative plot (as part of his attempt to define a new print and digital textual tradition he refers to as *cybertext*), his alternative organizational model of ‘intrigue,’ where the player must discover the ‘secret plot’ of a work, relies

heavily on popular generic conceits and he demonstrates how it functions via an examination of an interactive fiction detective story (112-28). The experience of playing a work of interactive fiction is central to understanding its function, but that experience is governed by how the work is authored, both as a text which intersects with the literary (Gothic) tradition and as a program which simulates (Gothic) effects for the player.

In the last seven years, cornerstone work primarily by Nick Montfort and to a lesser extent by Jeremy Douglass has outlined potential conceptions of the form's digital poetics and helped define a common terminology of interactive fiction's formal elements.¹¹ Both critics contend that interactive fictions produce narratives through player interaction (Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages* 3; "Generating Narrative Variation in Interactive Fiction" 1, 155; Douglass, "Command Lines" 396). In addition, both critics indicate the need for analytical methodologies for studying interactive fiction, and all of the approaches they suggest relate to elements of the form's poetics. While several of the methods they promote prove too form-based or too broad to be cohesively valuable for the specific aims of this study, Douglass' concept of 'frustration aesthetics' indicates interactive conceits which may support the production of simulated Gothic experiences for the player in some of my works.¹² Douglass contends that 'frustration' is central to interactive fiction aesthetics in part because interactive fiction functions as "a tightly defined system of rigid constraints" and also because it is common that these authored constraints often "involve the deferral or betrayal (sometimes cruelly) of the interactor's [player's] desire to resolve the simulation and reach a terminal closure" ("Command Lines" 156-57). Authored constraint, developed discretely in individual works, is seen to simulate the Gothic experience of frustrating limitations for the player, in particular when it functions to create distance between the player and the player character.

¹¹ Montfort's extensive and varied work on interactive fiction and narrative has been fundamental to my understanding of the media form. Douglass' work has been particularly relevant in establishing the need for and value of close 'readings' of individual works.

¹² Montfort's methods include considering an interactive fiction as a literary riddle in *Twisty Little Passages* 37-63 and increasingly narratological conceptions of how simulation and narrative function together at different levels of the media form in "Narrative in Digital Media" 177, 185 and "Generating Narrative Variation in Interactive Fiction" 26. Aside from 'frustration aesthetics,' Douglass presents the idea of "implied code," which presents a model of how the player mentally conceives of the hidden program governing the interactive fiction in "Command Lines" 69-152. Although I do not employ these models cohesively in my own approach I will draw on select points made by both critics in individual analyses.

Alongside Montfort's and Douglass' concerns with poetics, the scholars have helped clarify the function and terminology of specific elements of the media form, especially with regard to the player and the player character. Although both Montfort and Douglass convincingly argue for use of the term 'interactor' to describe the person interacting with the software ("Generating Narrative Variation in Interactive Fiction" 29; "Command Lines" 11-13), I use the more common term 'player,' favored by the interactive fiction community, throughout this study for the particular purpose of highlighting the metaphorical relationship between the player and the player character. This relationship is frequently the basis for simulated Gothic effects in the four interactive fictions I examine. Following Montfort, I use the term 'player character' to describe the character entity which the player guides or directs in the interactive fiction ("Generating Narrative Variation in Interactive Fiction" 39).¹³ In the four works I examine, the player character functions as a focalizing interface through which the player may encounter and affect environment(s), characters, items, and so forth. This understanding is partially supported by Montfort's suggestion that the player character is "a sort of vehicle" which the player must use in order to experience and affect the world presented in the interactive fiction ("Fretting the Player Character" 140). Douglass' conception also lends support to the idea of the player character as an interface through which the player may affect the interactive fiction, as he argues that the player character is a 'conduit of agency' for the player as s/he directs the action in the interactive fiction ("Command Lines" 207). The four works in this study follow the interactive fiction convention of using the second-person form of address to refer to the player character entity. This conceit further emphasizes the focalizing function of the player character.

Critically, the player character interface is not neutral; the player characters in the works I examine are authored creations who exhibit feelings, concerns, desires, crippling personal dilemmas, and so forth which constrain or govern the player's ability to guide them to an ending. For this reason, I posit that the manner in which the player is allowed to progress through these works is founded on the player's configured 'relationship' to the player character. As this relationship is rarely apparent at the beginning

¹³ Douglass prefers the term 'protagonist,' in the sense of 'first actor,' as part of a general preference for describing the entity as one who performs actions at the direction of the 'interactor' in "Command Lines" 207.

of a work, the player's efforts to learn about the player character and her or his situation in the scenario may be described as a continued effort to embody the player character. Embodiment refers not to any sort of emotional identification with the character, though that may well occur, but to the player's ability to learn of the limitations, goals, abilities and functions of the authored player character entity in its relationship to the setting, characters and items in the interactive fiction *and* to use that information as the basis for guiding the player character.¹⁴ The term 'embodiment' indicates a corporeal perspective; the player must usually consider (though perhaps not envision) the player character as a physical agent in the spatial world of a work. In this respect the relevance of embodiment in these works is similar to its relevance in narrative. In an article on narrative theory and character, Genie Babb argues that "issues of embodiment saturate narrative," noting that even omniscient narrators in texts tend to present information through corporeal means, indicating smells, sounds, sights and other body-in-world details even when it is obvious that the narrator is not an actual figure in the story (207, 203-05). Since the extent of this corporeal perspective is inherently tied to conceptions of subjectivity (relevant for the fashion in which these works express the Gothic), the emphasis on physicality in the player character interface is seen to vary from work to work.¹⁵ In addition, although embodiment may be seen as an implicit aspect of interacting with the four works in this study, I will only discuss embodiment in my analyses when an individual work calls attention to this process via difficulties, changes or hindrances to the player's effort to embody the player character at various points in traversal. Such difficulties often signal Gothic effects.

Although Douglass resists a conception of the player character as capable of being embodied, his arguments derive from a holistic conception of the aesthetics of interactive fiction which, while credible, does not acknowledge the manner in which particular works may investigate conceptions of subjectivity via the player character interface. Rather than situate the player character as the locus for interaction, Douglass argues that the player does not 'steer' the player character, s/he "steers the work" ("Command Lines"

¹⁴ In the latter respect embodiment involves more than the readerly identification with a character in a narrative.

¹⁵ For a discussion of how embodiment (as it relates to subjectivity) is becoming increasingly relevant in contemporary discourses, see Balsamo 3. For an example of how embodiment may form the primary lens for investigating texts, see Dickinson.

204). This conception of the player engaging the work as a whole provides the foundation for his discussion of ‘implied code,’ the developing mental model of the operational logic of the simulated world which a player creates in learning to understand and even predict how things work in an interactive fiction (69). While ‘implied code’ does provide one possible critical lens for considering what is involved in interacting with a work, Douglass’ aesthetic is designed to encompass interactive fiction generally, including those works which feature multiple player characters or, more rarely, do not have one (see “Player Character”). This analytical perspective is too broad for my purposes, as the player character is central to player interaction in each of the works in this study as well as primary with regard to the Gothic effects produced. Douglass raises two additional objections to player character embodiment. First, he decries the idea of the player character as a ‘puppet,’ suggested much earlier by Sarah Sloane in “Interactive Fiction, Virtual Realities and the Reading-Writing Relationship,” on the grounds that this metaphor ignores the linguistic command needed to control the player character and also falsely suggests that the player/puppeteer is free to control the puppet as s/he wishes (“Command Lines” 188-89). My own conception of embodiment neither ignores the semiotic basis of the relationship between the player and player character (in fact it is the textual qualities of this relationship which are highlighted in the analyses) nor assumes the latter to be a freely governed, empty shell. Second, Douglass implies that the notion of the player embodying the player character leads to a non-critical conflation of the player and player character (“Command Lines” 206-07).¹⁶ I agree with this concern and treat these entities separately throughout this study, especially when I am discussing aspects of traversal.

The term ‘traversal’ indicates the player’s actions in progressing through an interactive fiction and as such provides a perspective for examining a work’s digital poetics. Montfort suggests the term ‘traversal’ to describe “what happens in one or more sessions, and one or more interactions” when a player ‘completes’ a work (“Generating Narrative Variation in Interactive Fiction” 32; see *Twisty Little Passages* 32). Like Douglass, I have adopted this term from Montfort, but I use the concept of traversal somewhat more

¹⁶ One reason for this frequent conflation is the second-person form of address. Many players, including several reviewers, describe their traversal of a work as if they were the agent performing actions within the fictional setting.

broadly to indicate any degree of the player's interaction with or progression through a work, and so I am careful to qualify if a player's traversal is 'complete,' encompasses only one part of or course through a work, and so forth. The act of traversal is complex and involves the player in several activities which include, but are not limited to, reading and interpreting texts, experimenting with writing commands, making decisions and devising strategies for progression, exploring 'spaces,' 'talking' to characters and interacting with or using items. As several of these activities are focalized through the player character interface, traversal also involves the implicit process of embodying the player character. Based on what is involved in traversal, the digital poetics of an interactive fiction derive from textual poetics, of course, but also from pre-programmed rules, 'paths,' or potentialities as well as other issues related to player agency. However, the player's progress through a work is also salient in that traversal produces a narrative or, in some cases, narratives. As player traversal and narrative production are ultimately governed by the manner in which digital poetics are employed to produce an overall 'experience,' individual works of interactive fiction determine, via their construction, the relative significance of traversal and/or narrative.¹⁷ My analyses are structured to indicate how the four works in this study individually configure digital poetics in order to produce Gothic effects.

The concept of traversal, of moving through space, involves a conception of the fictional space of the interactive fiction as a simulated 'world.' While this simulated world is materially distinct from the possible 'world' which may be produced by a text narrative, the manner in which a work projects a world (or not) is particular to the individual work. Brian McHale suggests that fiction, whose ontological foundation "ultimately rest[s] on the material book and its typography," projects a possible world which "must be believed in, imagined, wished for etc., by some human agent" (180, 34). Although, like a reader, a player may also develop a mental conception of a world from an interactive fiction, the work itself is materially distinct as it is a computer

¹⁷ In digital media scholarship it is common to refer to the complex actions involved in the reception of a digital work as an 'experience' of the work. For example, in "Playing to Solve *Savoir-Faire*," Montfort contends that Emily Short's interactive fiction *Savoir-Faire* involves a "play experience," "an experience of solving," and "a reading experience" 175. Conversely, Engberg consistently argues that digital poems are not just read but 'experienced,' a term she uses to indicate "an embodied multisensory event reliant upon a range of contextual factors" 6. Although I do not use 'experience' with this degree of specificity, I employ the term throughout this study to indicate a player's overall sense of a work.

program which models the setting, physical laws, objects and characters of a world via the player's interaction with a textual interface (Montfort, "Generating Narrative Variation in Interactive Fiction" 33; Douglass, "Command Lines" 394; Ryan, *Avatars of Story* 128). Despite this material difference in media forms, an individual interactive fiction may configure its textual and simulated projection of a world in a manner which obfuscates this distinction for the player. For example, in an article which explores the "richly simulated IF world" of Emily Short's *Savoir-Faire*, Montfort contrasts Short's work to a work whose narrative elements do not "offer a very satisfyingly systematic world" and to another work with highly developed narrative elements which nevertheless "does not offer a very deeply simulated world" ("Playing to Solve *Savoir-Faire*" 183-84). A more extreme example of an interactive fiction which creates a rich narrative world without simulating it is Stephen Bond's *Rameses*. According to veteran interactive fiction reviewer Duncan Stevens, the work's "lack of interactivity [is] among its primary virtues"; while a player may attempt to command the recalcitrant player character it is also possible to complete the work by repeatedly typing the command 'wait' (Rev. of *Rameses*; "Rameses"). While the distinction between textually-projected and simulated worlds may be relevant when distinguishing between media forms, these varied examples of how works present worlds to players blur this distinction and underscore the need to examine the particulars of 'world-building' in individual works. The manner in which the individual works in this study present a world (or the suggestion of a world) will be indicated in each analytical chapter.

Overall, critical analyses of interactive fiction have primarily focused on defining and investigating interactive fiction generally as a media form or else contextually with regard to other forms of digital or print textuality. In this study I demonstrate that an approach based on close 'readings' or careful analyses of individual works is both possible, now that much work has been conducted to clarify formal aspects of interactive fiction, and also necessary for a more sophisticated understanding of how (Gothic) generic elements are authored in contemporary works. To borrow from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's discussion about the need for close readings in comparative literature, reading a work closely in its original form allows for a more open critical investigation of the particulars of the work as they shape larger discourses than performing a distanced reading which examines the

work against the closed “taxonomies” which develop in every discipline (6). Although the value of single-work analysis has been implied by Montfort’s careful presentation of the diversity of individual interactive fictions (“Fretting the Player Character” 141-45) and partly demonstrated via investigations of formal elements in exemplary individual works (“Playing to Solve *Savoir-Faire*”; Montfort and Moulthrop, “Face It, Tiger, You Just Hit the Jackpot”), few scholarly analyses exist at the time of this writing. Douglass directly addresses the lack of what he terms “close interactions” in interactive fiction criticism:

Browsing through stacks of critical monographs, piles of papers, and a hard drive of files, I am struck by the infrequency with which I encounter close readings – or rather, close interactions – in relation to these [study] objects: a rarity of extended critical engagements with not only the form but also the texture of IF works as they unfold for us in all their aesthetic particularity. (“Command Lines” 36)

Accordingly, although his dissertation’s aim is to describe aesthetics of the interactive media form, Douglass performs several “close interactions” of individual works, including one of my corpus works, *Slouching Towards Bedlam*.¹⁸ With regard to general interactive fiction scholarship, extended, careful analysis of individual works is necessary to address issues neglected by the broader investigations of form, including those related to, as Douglass puts it, “the human uses of human art” (37). Concerns with constructions of human subjectivity, central to the Gothic, are pertinent in this regard; for example, the political aspects of gender have been greatly overlooked in interactive fiction studies, even when more superficial concerns have been addressed (Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages* 156-59; Douglass, “Command Lines” 199-201; “Category: Social Issues”). An investigation of narrative generic conventions, tropes and elements is also remarkably absent in current research, despite the prominent mention narrative genres receive in much scholarship. My study addresses these concerns as they function specifically and particularly in individual interactive fictions. To my knowledge, this dissertation presents the first book-length collection of in-depth critical analyses of contemporary interactive fictions.

¹⁸ Close reading methodologies have often been seen as problematic in digital media studies, in part due to early misconceptions related to works’ formal properties. However, recent scholarship indicates a growing appreciation of such methodologies. For claims asserting the relevance of particular, focused considerations of individual works, see Van Looy and Baetens 7-10 and Bardzell.

Media-Specific Methodology: Conceptual Biases in the Interactive Fiction Authoring System

As a media form, my corpus works are spatially-structured, provide telling constraints for the player (primarily via the player character) and function as computer-mediated means through which to produce narrative. As individual works they marry textual authorship to diverse configurations of the form's digital poetics in ways which develop literary Gothic discourses. Accordingly, the method I use for extended, in-depth analyses of these works is media-specific to the extent that I consider spatial construction, player constraint and narrative production as related to the conceptual biases inherent in the programming system used to design these works. This methodological perspective is intended to take into account aspects of the interactive fiction authoring process in much the same manner as a reader of print fiction understands the basic process of writing and is aware of organizational and aesthetic narrative devices. This approach is not so rigorous as to preclude consideration of the individual manner in which works express themselves through interaction, as will be evident in the chapter analyses.

As the critics discussed in the previous section variously indicate, an analysis of interactive fiction should be media-specific, that is it should take into account the particular aspects of the form's digital poetics. Hayles is one of the most well-known proponents of media-specific analysis of digital works, and she describes it as a "criticism that pays attention to the material apparatus producing the literary work" (*Writing Machines* 29). Media-specific analysis, then, includes a sense of how the computer, running an authored computer program, facilitates the production of a work for the reader/player. Sloane indicates the potential complexities involved in this type of analysis.

When we look for the traces of an author within the bob and weave of an advanced story generation system [. . .] we must look into the materials of production themselves, into the gaps and silences of story and teller, to see the reflections of body, mind, and cultural milieu of their creators. While some would argue that *all* written fiction is separated from its composers [. . .] digital fictions expand those distances [. . .] especially when the prose, pace, and sequencing of stories is adjusted by computer. (*Digital Fictions* 66-67, original emphasis)

An examination of the computer's material role in 'adjusting' the "prose, pace, and sequencing of stories" may lead to near infinite levels of complexity, as adjustment occurs in a complex interplay of the "texts that

users (almost) never see, ranging from source code to object code to the alternating voltages that correlate with assembly language” (Hayles, *Electronic Literature* 163-64).¹⁹ While the interaction of programming codes within the computer’s materiality is necessary for the execution of an interactive fiction, my method for analysis only acknowledges general conceptual biases in the authoring system used to create each work. This limitation is partly due to the typical unavailability of programming codes for a work and partly due to the gap between a program and the interaction it enables. Montfort makes the significant point that different programs may nonetheless produce the same result in traversal, so rather than focus on details like code, a critical analysis of an interactive fiction only needs to consider “the program instead as a black box that accepts input and generates output” (“Generating Narrative Variation in Interactive Fiction” 28).²⁰ A broad, conceptual sense of how interactive fiction functions as an authored program is also relevant with regard to the approach taken generally in the interactive fiction ‘community.’

A brief overview of the steps involved in producing and running an interactive fiction will help to clarify how a conceptual understanding of programming or coding practices may provide the basis for a media-specific analysis. Put simply, authors write works in a textual format which braids programming language and English fiction together into a script called the source code. The source code, which I will describe in greater detail below, “can be read—admittedly after a little tuition [. . .] by humans” (Firth and Kesserich 18).²¹ However, for the source code to function as a program it must be compiled by a related program into machine-readable language. This ‘translation’ produces a “binary file not meaningful to human eyes” which is called the story file (Firth and Kesserich 19). The file that is downloaded from a database such as *The Interactive Fiction Archive* is this binary story file. To be able to run the story file on a computer, however, an

¹⁹ Code is a general term for the languages that are used for human-computer communication as well as internal machine routines. In digital media studies there is much debate about the necessity of understanding program code. For example, Mateas argues that so-called new media scholars should read code as a meaningful part of a work in “Procedural Literacy.” In contrast, for a discussion of some of the possible limitations surrounding such an approach, see Wardrip-Fruin 36-38.

²⁰ Montfort is careful to assert that reading code as part of analysis is also valuable; he primarily argues that it is not necessary for credible analysis. See “Generating Narrative Variation in Interactive Fiction” 28, note 7.

²¹ Like a fictional manuscript draft, the source code may contain comments or notes from the author which have no bearing on the interactive fiction when it is executed.

interpreter program is needed. Similar to a computer program like *Windows Media Player*, the interpreter is used to open and run the story file in the same way that a media file can be viewed and manipulated in *Media Player*. The interpreter program the player uses configures a particular graphical user interface through which the player traverses a work. For that reason, I use the same interpreter for traversing each work.²² In short, as with many files playable in *Media Player*, interactive fictions are produced using a separate set of software tools which, although significant as a lens for the authoring process, the player need never encounter. This set of software tools governs the production and function of the source code.

In order to limit the formal conceptual aspects which affect my media-specific analyses, the four works I examine have been chosen partly because they share the same authoring software tools. All of the interactive fictions in this study were written using Graham Nelson's authoring system Inform, version six, one of the most popular programming tool kits for creating interactive fiction around the turn of the century (Firth and Kesserich 9; Montfort, "Generating Narrative Variation in Interactive Fiction" 16). Basically, Inform 6 is a series of programming tools which includes the programming language used to program the work to begin with (terms, syntax and punctuation), a library of commonly used codes and the compiler program. The programming language, which an interactive fiction author must learn, acts as a framework within which the author writes the fictional text which the player reads in traversal (that is, the descriptions of locations, events, items, characters, and so forth). This initial script of fictional and program text is the source code, and while it is itself a program which governs aspects of traversal, Inform 6 also includes pre-existing bits of code which are 'called' or activated by key terms or short phrases. This collection of codes is referred to as the library, and by calling specific files in it an author incorporates both required and, if desired, optional features in her or his interactive fiction without having to program those features or even see the program code which governs them ("Library Module"). These features of Inform 6 represent a default or standard system of programming routines which translate to behaviors in traversal ("Authoring System"), which means

²² The interpreter I use is *Windows Frotz 2002*, written by David Kinder. According to *The Interactive Fiction Wiki*, the *Frotz* interpreter is "perhaps the most well-known and popular" of the interpreters which are used to run story files written in the coding system used by Inform 6. See "Frotz."

they represent a particular set of quasi-normative perspectives, practices and approaches to what an interactive fiction is and how it may be played.

The most important imaginative frame for an author using Inform 6 is an understanding of object-oriented design; the work is defined as a series of objects, each with its own specific properties. An object is “a collection of variables which together represent the *capabilities* and *current status* of some specific component of the model world” (Firth and Kesserich 177, my emphases). As bits of code, objects discretely encapsulate both data properties *and* the procedures that pertain to them, which means that an object in a program usually corresponds directly to an item encountered in traversal (Murray 78, “Object”). Nearly everything in an interactive fiction may be regarded as an object: each “room is an object, each item that the player [character] sees and touches is an object; indeed the player [character] herself is also an object (one that’s automatically defined by the library)” (Firth and Kesserich 50; see Nelson 76).²³ These different types of objects have certain rules. For example, all spaces in an interactive fiction must be represented as rooms and the player character must always be located in a room.²⁴ The fundamental focus on objects is apparent also in the source code script; although it may be written in any order it is common for it to be organized by object (Nelson 47). This conceptual sense of objects as inherently contained—both data properties and allowable procedures—is the fundamental ordering basis for an author creating an interactive fiction, as it is the potential relationships between objects that are most relevant in traversal of a work. Objects in an interactive fiction reveal their often subtle properties via relationships to other objects. Traversal is, in many ways, about discovering these relationships.

With Inform 6 the primary conceptual frame for programming an interactive fiction is the overarching ordering logic related to object-oriented design, where objects form the basic structuring unit in a work. Knowledge of how objects are used and function in Inform 6 provides a sense of the media form’s specific ‘black box’ and indicates potential conceptual ramifications for the creative process. While my purpose is not to attempt to

²³ A room is any specific location, be it indoors or outside.

²⁴ As they are the primary means of localizing information and events in traversal, room names are used as the basic means for citing specific information or simulated actions throughout this dissertation. In some cases, ‘documents’ which the player character may read are also cited for specific information.

discover an author's intention with an individual work, a sense of this media-specific 'black box' allows me to evaluate why certain aspects of a work encountered in traversal may be more relevant for analysis than others in much the same manner that a reader's knowledge of narrative techniques may help determine pertinent details in a text.²⁵ Of course, as interactive fictions are not merely computer programs the pertinent details for analysis of a work include both program conceits and textual conceits, especially when they function together in order to produce a Gothic effects.

Although I examine relevant Gothic elements comprehensively in the individual, in-depth analyses of *Nevermore*, *Anchorhead*, *Madam Spider's Web* and *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, a brief presentation of how my media-specific methodology underpins analysis may prove illuminating. For instance, attention to the qualities of 'thing' objects, programmed allowances for the player-player character relationship and the varied function of endings in the works helps elucidate how these interactive fictions express the Gothic in the production of narrative. Examples of elements in these categories are dealt with here in isolation for the sake of simplicity; in the chapter analyses these elements are examined within the fictional, holistic contexts produced in traversal.

As the main structuring element in coding a work and as elements which frequently provide a focal point for traversal, objects are necessarily central to my analyses. Three types of objects are relevant for Gothic expression in the following chapters: items (things), non-player characters and rooms.²⁶ In *Nevermore*, the alchemical books are significant because the manner in which the player character may 'read' the books provides a central stop-gap for traversal. The 'snack' discovered in the arachnid's closet in *Madam Spider's Web* is covertly pertinent to the fragmentation in the work, and several technological apparatuses—each object with its own particular function—in *Slouching Towards Bedlam* are essential to completing the work. Non-player character objects have a built-in level of complexity simply because they require additional coding to facilitate being 'alive' and receptive to interpersonal commands such as 'kiss,' 'ask,' 'tell,' 'show' and so forth

²⁵ As my approach is formal and I am concerned with investigating the manner in which these works express the Gothic as a type of electronic literature, I have not contacted the authors in my study to discuss analyses and I reference any comments they have made about their own work only sparingly.

²⁶ Non-player characters are any of the characters in a work who are not the player character.

(Firth and Kesserich 87). However, generically relevant non-player characters include the unexpectedly present Lenore in *Nevermore*, the informative magic shop proprietor in *Anchorhead* and the grotesque Madam Spider in *Madam Spider's Web*. Rooms are relevant not just because they provide the underlying framework for locations in an interactive fiction but because room descriptions are central both to helping the player understand their function and to contributing to the atmosphere of a work (see Nelson 396-399). Atmosphere and place are major concerns in the Gothic genre, of course, so rooms become particularly relevant when spatial tropes from the Gothic function within a work, as is the case with the labyrinthine Narrow Corridor series of rooms or the changing accessibility of the Hidden Court room in *Anchorhead*. Several rooms in *Madam Spider's Web* trigger unexpected memories for the player character and entering certain rooms in *Slouching Towards Bedlam* provokes strange verbal ejaculations from the player character. In *Nevermore*, the final room distinctly confines the player character.

Of importance in my study is a consideration of how the player's 'relationship' to the player character is configured throughout traversal.²⁷ This relationship relates to the player character object but also to a complex combination of programming issues related to other objects. The player character interface is an entity which the player must learn to embody, paying attention to the player character's goals, concerns, desires, her or his situation in the narrative scenario and what s/he appears to 'know.' This inherent process of embodiment is part of traversal, but in some cases it is made explicit by unexpected difficulties, changing allowances or hindrances built into the player's role. In *Nevermore* and *Madam Spider's Web*, problems with player character embodiment at certain points during traversal signal Gothic effects of profound containment for the player. In *Anchorhead*, the process of embodiment is implicit for the bulk of traversal to a winning ending, but is unexpectedly restricted in the epilogue, alongside a narrative shift in the player's formal relationship to the player character. These joint changes simulate helplessness in the player's role and may generate a readerly sense of terror. In *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, embodiment is not made explicit; rather, it is the essential nature of the

²⁷ For an argument which emphasizes the need for further scholarship examining this important relationship in interactive fiction studies, see Keller 295.

player's relationship to the player character which provides the overt basis for the simulated vulnerability of the player's role.

Finally, the manner in which endings are employed in my four works proves telling for the sense of each work as a whole. An interactive fiction terminates itself when it meets programmed conditions which may be said to provide, if not always closure, a sense of insight (or denial of the same) regarding how to interpret the work. The endings of *Nevermore*, *Anchorhead* and *Madam Spider's Web* include a final room scenario which is distanced from the rest of the work.²⁸ Otherwise, each work deals with endings differently: *Madam Spider's Web* and *Slouching Towards Bedlam* each have five endings, though only three of the former may be considered conclusive, albeit ambivalent, and all five of the latter collectively suggest that ultimately there is no ending. *Nevermore's* two uncertain endings encourage the player to perform a hindsight interpretation of the narrative produced in traversals. In contrast to the other works, *Anchorhead* has overtly ludic or game-like elements and so the endings may be said to indicate winning and losing—though in each case with a Gothic twist.

Although *Anchorhead* is the only game-like work in my study, my media-specific analysis obviously involves a focus on the act of traversal which necessarily includes a consideration of the player's part in running an interactive fiction. In each chapter I construct arguments based on the player reactions, interpretations, constraints, possible actions and other issues related to the player's role. As much as possible, arguments related to the player are based on verifiable factors such as the available details at a certain juncture in traversal or else supported by other individual critical or popular experiences with the works. However, my discussions of the player are subjective and governed by my critical concern with how these interactive fictions mediate the Gothic.

Anxieties of the Subject in the Contemporary Gothic

A presentation of a tradition as lengthy and diverse as the literary Gothic is beyond the intention and scope of this study. However, it is possible to loosely define the Gothic as a genre concerned with the vulnerabilities of

²⁸ In *Anchorhead* there are actually two final rooms, but as the spaces are somewhat indistinguishable and given that the player character can 'hear' her husband from either space they function as one, sequestered location.

subjectivity. This general perspective is based on recent scholarship which re-conceptualizes the Gothic. Increasing critical interest in the last decades has led to a variety of new approaches to and perceptions of Gothic fiction (Botting, *Gothic* 17; Heiland 180, 182-86; Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic* 24-25) which have, in turn, led to a number of diverse definitions (see Spooner and McEvoy 1). The diversity of these definitions causes some critics to underscore the difficulty of defining the Gothic (Punter and Byron ix, xviii; Williams 12-17), while other critics only discuss central 'parameters' of the genre. Recurring parameters include character anxieties related to time and space. For instance, concern for how the imaginary past affects the present is conspicuous in many Gothic works (Bruhm, "The Contemporary Gothic" 259; Punter, *The Literature of Terror* 2: 183), as is an emphasis on how historically, culturally, socially or individually distinct places prove highly affective to characters (Hogle, "Introduction" 2; Mighall xviii). Both of these elements, usually in combination, work to trouble or even disintegrate the coherence of 'self' or 'identity' in characters. Hogle suggests that Gothic fiction investigates "some of the most important desires, quandaries, and sources of anxiety" related to the human condition, generally and individually, a sentiment echoed in Steven Bruhm's contention that definitions of 'Gothic horror' are "intimately bound up with the representation of the thinking subject" ("Introduction" 4; "On Stephen King's Phallus" 170). The Gothic's spatio-temporal parameters and focus on the vulnerability of the 'self' are neatly, if broadly, encapsulated in Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik's description of the genre as concerned with "the permeability of boundaries," a concern which manifests as "a deep anxiety about the coherence of the human subject" (1; see Punter, *The Literature of Terror* 2: 184). Based on the diverse ways in which it expresses itself in the four works in this study, the Gothic is a genre which indicates what fundamentally troubles human subjectivity, including *posthuman* subjectivity, and so may be described as concerned with epistemological, ideological and ontological boundaries.

Constructions of subjectivity, the inherent sense of the self's 'identity,' are understandably varied and distinct in different discourses from different social, cultural and historical periods. However, while individual texts may construct subjectivity in a particular manner, the basic referents for human subjects and, to a lesser extent, *posthuman* subjects, remain constant, especially when contrasted to each other. The human subject's primary

referent is the body, the “biological entity, psycho-sexual construction, [and] cultural product” which provides the “source and a locus of meanings” in literary (and other) discourses (Brooks xii). With the liberal humanist subject which has dominated discourses for centuries, society’s and the individual’s sense of what constitutes the ‘self’ is inherently tied to the body as it is imagined as a physical container for the soul, thought, spirit and emotions. The centrality of the body is assumed, for example, in Charles Taylor’s exploration of the ‘inwardness’ consistently attributed to human subjectivities as they have been constructed in Western thought in *Sources of the Self* (x, 111, 186, 211, 390, 498). The concept of ‘depth’ or ‘inwardness’ relies on the body as an envelope separating inner “thoughts, ideas, or feelings” from “the objects in the world which these mental states bear on” (111).²⁹ Gothic writing investigates the explicit and derivative boundaries which define the coherence of this subject; for example, between

the quick/the dead, eros/thanatos, pain/pleasure, ‘real’/‘unreal’,
 ‘natural’/‘supernatural’, material/transcendent, man/machine,
 human/vampire or ‘masculine’/‘feminine’. (Horner and Zlosnik 1)

Chapters one through three in this study involve considerations of the Gothic boundaries to human subjectivity.

In contrast to the human subject, the posthuman subject’s central referent is most often information and less frequently the organic body, though the latter is still relevant. As an underdeveloped conception compared to the human subject, the posthuman subject may be seen as a particular permanent blurring of the “man/machine” boundary (Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* 2-3; Smelik and Lykke x; Halberstam and Livingston 2-4). Within this blurring, depictions of the posthuman may include subjects who perform identity construction as cyborgs via deep connections to information technology, as is investigated in Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto,” for instance, or subjects who are metaphorically or inherently regarded as complex bio-mechanical information systems themselves, as is explored by Stephen Dougherty in “Culture in the Disk Drive.” Although the body is less significant for notions

²⁹ Traditional Western conceptions of human subjectivity are necessarily problematic from many contemporary theoretical viewpoints. However, it is not my intention to investigate so large and complex an issue in this study but rather to indicate core referents for the particular constructions of subjectivity which foreground Gothic expression in the four works I examine. For an overview of theoretical approaches to subjectivity, including political concerns related to gender, race and postcolonial ideologies, see Hall.

of identity in posthuman constructions of subjectivity than in human ones, it nonetheless may function somewhat similarly as an “*interface* between mind and experience” or be narrated “as a site of exploration and transfiguration” through which “electronically-based postmodern experience is inscribed” (Bukatman 98, original emphasis). Rather than function as an envelope or barrier between self and world, as happens predominantly with human subjectivities, the body in posthuman constructions is less absolute, more permeable and possibly transformative, reducing or even nullifying the separation between ‘inner’ self and ‘outer’ world.³⁰ As conceptions of the posthuman are comparatively nascent in literature and thus also in Gothic criticism, chapter four of this study attempts to present how the Gothic may function in relation to a particular construction of posthuman subjectivity.

Alongside and perhaps due to the paradigmatic upheaval signified by changing conceptions of subjectivity, contemporary Gothic critics increasingly investigate specific, contextually-based perspectives on how the genre promulgates itself. The current difficulty and disinterest attached to defining the genre testifies to this move away from the absolutes which earlier dominated critical approaches. In contrast to scholarship which viewed the Gothic through a lens where value was “measured in terms of enduring human qualities, instincts and emotions,” the last few decades have seen a rise in “materialist, feminist and poststructuralist readings of the Gothic [. . .] in opposition to such essentialist notions” (Botting and Townshend, General Introduction 14).³¹ For example, Horner and Zlosnik’s groundbreaking study of the comic turn in the genre specifically addresses areas overlooked by “the orthodox account of what is Gothic,” in part via an emphasis on individual analyses of texts which have fallen into obscurity, which have been overlooked in Gothic criticism or which “cannot be contained within the conventional Gothic aesthetic” (3). The focus on the

³⁰ The blurred conception of self and world depicted in constructions of posthuman subjectivity has the potential to produce a profound rethinking of traditional aesthetics in Gothic fiction. For instance, one quality of Gothic writing which might be seen as a defining trait is the significance of space as it relates to character anxiety, developed through countless narratives in which fears are connected to crypts, labyrinths, maze-like urban alleyways, weather-beaten heaths, tension-fraught domestic spaces and so forth. However, these spatial anxieties derive from the body-in-world aesthetic of human subjectivity and may not be relevant for depictions of posthuman subjectivity in which the separation of self and world is not necessary for the stability of the subject. My broader contention that the Gothic investigates human and posthuman subject anxieties is intended to encompass traditional and contemporary fictional expressions of the Gothic.

³¹ Taken to excess, particular approaches may also prove problematic. In “Gothic Criticism,” Baldick and Mighall express great concern regarding critical trends in which anti-realist and poststructuralist theories seem to preclude considering a work, especially an older work, within its historical context.

particular is also apparent in David Punter and Glennis Byron's introduction to Gothic studies, *The Gothic*, which describes "what constitutes the Gothic" via a consideration of the "individual significance" of seventy-eight writers who each demonstrate their own "particular brand of Gothic" (ix). Similarly, Spooner contends that the immense diversity of possible "permutations" of generic elements enables a "resurgence of Gothic in so many different areas of contemporary culture" based on "localized needs rather than one overarching one" (*Contemporary Gothic* 156). *The Gothic in Contemporary Interactive Fictions* supports and contributes to investigations of the Gothic as it is expressed 'locally' by focusing on how individual interactive fictions mediate the poetics of generic conventions and elements. While a number of general conclusions about how the Gothic is remediated in contemporary interactive fiction may be drawn from this study, my purpose is chiefly to examine how individual works express their "particular brand of Gothic" via singular "permutations" of generic elements.

Investigation of the Gothic's spread into digital media forms is an emerging area in contemporary Gothic criticism to which this dissertation contributes. To my knowledge, there are as yet no developed investigations of the Gothic in text-based electronic literature, to say nothing of interactive fiction. The literary Gothic has long been known to hop media boundaries, including early (eighteenth century) remediations into plays and operas (Hogle, "Introduction" 1). The genre is well-adapted to medial shifts such as these because it provides a "language and a set of discourses with which we can talk about fear and anxiety," which is obviously relevant to a variety of different creative and cultural forms (Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic* 30). Gothic criticism from the last few decades has investigated a number of these forms, including film (Brophy, Clover), music subcultures (Young, Eckart), graphic novels (Punter, *The Literature of Terror* 2: 146-49; Smith, "Gothic and the Graphic Novel"), role-playing games (Fyhr, *De mörka labyrintherna* [*The Dark Labyrinths*] 144-48) and other diverse media.³² However, research into the ongoing "proliferation of Gothic media still remains a relatively under-researched area" (Spooner, "Gothic Media" 195), and criticism of the Gothic in digital media specifically is a particularly unformed field. Notably, this is not because the Gothic is under-represented in digital

³² As criticism in many of these areas is quite extensive, these sources should only be seen as examples.

media; in fact, Heather Anne Wozniak posits that digital media “has proven to be an especially fertile site for the evolution of gothic tropes and themes.” As a companion essay for Hayles’ *Electronic Literature*, Wozniak’s short “Sites of Disturbance: The Gothic in Electronic Literature” illustrates the literary Gothic’s formal and thematic remediation into specific works of electronic literature. Other scholars have asserted the genre’s ability to recycle itself in other digital media forms. In “Traces of Gothic Spectrality in New Media Art,” Wendy Haslem investigates the “haunting of time, space, bodies and objects” in digital artwork. In “Gothic and New Media,” Jason Whittaker surveys the many ways which the internet and related software provide the potential for Gothic development in online communities, social forums and fan-based modes of information distribution. As is indicated by these three approaches, the diversity of Gothic digital media provides scholars with a myriad of objects and phenomena for examination.

A number of scholars have considered the intersections of the Gothic and video or computer games. Although these analyses are less relevant to the particular, wholly-textual and media-specific underpinnings of my study because they involve a number of audio-visual games with radically diverse material (programming) bases, some of the issues they raise related to interaction and play are pertinent. For example, Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska stress the relevance of narrative genres such as horror or the Gothic in establishing evocative game spaces in *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders* (see 54-59), an emphasis on the importance of atmosphere and environment which Fyhr also supports in *De mörka labyrintherna* (144-48). Computer games are also apposite to Fred Botting’s discussion of trends in contemporary Gothic works in “Aftergothic: Consumption, Machines, and Black Holes.” Although Botting only refers to games such as *Doom*, *Silent Hill*, *Resident Evil* and *Tomb Raider* as part of a larger argument related to the “cultural exhaustion” visible in postmodern Gothic forms (298), he nonetheless connects the remediated revitalization of generic elements in the highly visual game formats to the literary Gothic tradition (277-82). Conversely, Krzywinska investigates horror-based video games from a formal, media-specific perspective in “Hands-On Horror.” Although her arguments compare and contrast two particular video games to horror film rather than the literary Gothic, Krzywinska makes the significant point that the player’s sense of control, governed formally by how the software has been authored, forms the basis of experiencing horror (see 208, 216). A more

extended investigation of how conventions from the Gothic *and* horror films work subversively in video games is presented in Laurie N. Taylor's dissertation, "Not of Woman Born: Monstrous Interfaces and Monstrosity in Video Games." Taylor conducts thematic investigations of monsters, fractured identities, ruinous spaces, gender and 'real'/'unreal' formalism in video games which may be loosely categorized as belonging to what she terms the "ludic Gothic" (6). Although many of the points made by Botting, Krzywinska and Taylor support arguments I make in individual chapters, I reference them sparingly as my study more specifically examines the remediation of Gothic elements in 'spaces' where the tensions related to player control are governed *textually*.³³

Postmodern Developments in Gothic Interactive Fictions

Interactive fictions are overtly material forms; however, in the four works I examine there is an increasingly postmodern shift toward the rhetorical use of formal structures (encountered in traversal) to simulate Gothic effects. The postmodern developments I identify in *Nevermore*, *Anchorhead*, *Madam Spider's Web* and *Slouching Towards Bedlam* contribute to contemporary Gothic research that is increasingly concerned with devices of form and receptive effects in print fiction. In the last two decades, "critical interest in the related questions of gothic aesthetics and the reception of the gothic" has gained momentum (Heiland 185), in part influenced by the perspective shift away from essentialist readings in favor of contextual ones. In my study, the player's ability to govern the player character provides a foundation for examining the relationship between Gothic aesthetics and 'reception.' The particulars of these player-player character relationships will be examined in detail in each chapter alongside specific intersections of the Gothic and postmodernism. However, the formal structures of the interactive fictions, as well as the sense of how the player's role is configured, also contribute to greater and greater Gothic simulation when the works are viewed in sequence.

³³ Digital narratives exist within a complex media ecology. The interactive fictions in this study do not derive solely from a textual tradition but are likely to have been influenced by or exhibit connections to other media forms. For discussions surrounding the contemporary tendency towards media convergence, see Pool 23-24 and Jenkins 3, 11, 14-16. However, as the works I examine are predominantly textual media forms which are explicitly and/or implicitly related to literary Gothic traditions, I have limited the scope of my study in order to focus on primarily textual influences.

These postmodern Gothic works deal with unstable constructions of subjectivity, and as such reflect uncertainty in form and narrative. Specifically, the interactive fictions I examine reflect Gothic elements which correspond to postmodern tendencies toward self-awareness or self-reflexivity, the indeterminacy of spaces and subjective boundaries, self-fragmentation and occlusion, and recursive narrative structures which are also associated with 'cybergothic,' a subgenre which explores the vulnerabilities of posthuman subjectivity.

In chapter one I examine Nate Cull's *Nevermore: An Interactive Gothic*. As an adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's famous poem "The Raven," *Nevermore* is inherently a self-aware work in which self-reflexivity extends to the remediated use of the Gothic conventions of 'the unspeakable' and 'live burial' which function in Poe's poem. Gothic works, like postmodern fictions, self-consciously "speak in other voices and employ techniques that undermine the coherent reader-author relationship" via devices such as exaggeration or incoherence (Lloyd-Smith, "Postmodernism/Gothicism" 13). The raven undermines coherence in Poe's poem by expressing what may be perceived as communication to the narrator regarding his lover's situation in an afterlife, a potential communication which is ultimately profoundly indeterminate and which, via the anguish it causes, leads to the narrator's increasing figurative spatial constriction. The metaphorical boundaries to communication and space indicate the Gothic conventions of the unspeakable and live burial, conventions which elucidate barriers for the soul-in-body human subject which are profoundly disturbing (Sedgwick 12-14). In *Nevermore*, the raven is not mysterious but simply a companion which follows the player character from room to room like an overt reminder of intertextuality and familiar uncertainty. However, I contend that the disruptive, self-reflexive poetics of the unspeakable are shifted to 'reading' a series of alchemical texts. With these difficult to read books, communication is blocked or rendered uncertain on two levels for the player: access to all of the information in the texts is obscured by the random presentation of passages and the script in the books is encrypted. In addition, while the narrator's metaphorical live burial in the poem involves a shrinking physical space and increasingly supine posture in a single room, the player character's live burial in the interactive fiction is more overtly incoherent as it involves mysterious movement to an unconnected room which seems removed from any sense of 'reality' in the overall setting of the work. Once there, the player

cannot get the player character to leave the room and is likely to be at least somewhat surprised by what s/he finds. With the remediated use of the unspeakable and live burial conventions, *Nevermore* alludes to the poetics of “The Raven” and adheres to Gothic reinvention for the player.

Postmodern indeterminacy, especially with regard to the tensions between spaces and subjective boundaries, is apparent in the means through which the trope of the labyrinth is remediated in Michael Gentry’s *Anchorhead: An Interactive Gothic*, discussed in chapter two. The sense that no “point on the map is exactly where or what it seems” (Punter and Byron 50) indicates the bewildering uncertainty of the labyrinth, a spatial-psychological trope distressing to the thinking, seeking human subject. I argue that the Gothic labyrinth functions as a demarcated site where oppositions depicted as needful in the text blur subversively, forcing a character to struggle to navigate between conflicting conditions, states or concepts. In H. P. Lovecraft’s modernist Gothic fiction epistemological boundaries related to the stability of space and the scientific basis of life in the universe are dissolved for characters in labyrinths. In *Anchorhead*, boundaries are excessively blurred as the collapsed oppositions within the labyrinth do not necessarily ‘reset’ when the character escapes but reflexively implicate the instability of the boundaries of the labyrinth itself. Not neatly contained, the poetics of the labyrinth convention in *Anchorhead* demonstrate that unlike Gothic works of earlier periods (such as the modernist period) the postmodern Gothic seems “less able to restore boundaries” (Botting, “Aftergothic” 281) for either the player character or the player. Although collapsed oppositions and normative boundaries are seemingly restored by the end of a successful traversal, the instability of boundaries emphasizes the formally reflexive function of the labyrinth in the interactive fiction. Whereas Gothic fiction is “fiction in which the ‘implicated’ reader is placed in a situation of ambiguity with regard to fears within the text” (Punter, *The Literature of Terror 2*: 183), postmodern Gothic fictions such as *Anchorhead* more overtly enforce ambiguity in the player’s role by ultimately questioning the foundations of contemporary epistemological boundaries.

While fragmentation is a long-standing trope in Gothic works, postmodern fragmentation more explicitly works at the levels of formal structure and plot to purposefully occlude things vital to the text. Such fragmentation is essential to the “the divisions and doublings of the self” in

postmodern Gothic fiction (Punter and Byron 51). In the fragmented narratives produced via traversal of Sara Dee's *Madam Spider's Web*, which I discuss in chapter three, the player character's self-fragmentation, indicated by the poetics of the uncanny as well as of the Gothic-grotesque, illustrates a destabilized conception of this particular human subject. In a bizarre house ruled by a giant spider, the amnesiac player character experiences unexpected memories associated with rooms and situations which she cannot have knowledge of, an anxious state in which "the barriers between the known and the unknown are teetering on the brink of collapse" (Punter, "The Uncanny" 130). This is the trope of the uncanny as it functions in the Gothic, the familiarization of the unfamiliar which relates to apprehensions of how hidden things may unseat the interior sense of self (Royle 1-2, 23). In the fragmented, seemingly unrelated narratives produced via traversal of the interactive fiction, the player character's self-fragmentation is evident partly in these uncanny memories and partly in the form of Madam Spider. I claim that Madam Spider is the player character's 'monster within' or monstrous conception of the self, although the arachnid is never identified as such by the player character in the narratives produced in traversal. Like the link between environment and memory which is crucial to the self, Madam Spider's being is intertwined with the house both conceptually (as a spider in a web) and as an open, grotesque body which is materially incorporated with its surroundings (see Bakhtin 316-17). As a figure which combines human and arachnid forms in excessive size, Madam Spider is linked to the "comic grotesque" and "the grotesque as strange and uncanny" (Russo 7), an ambivalence which is significant for the player character's self-fragmentation. Given this ambivalence, the player character's postmodern sympathy for the monster, "the most curious development in contemporary Gothic" (Tracy 39), works in conjunction with a fear of her. A similar flickering of emotional reactions is designed as part of the player's role: various types of interaction with the spider's 'snack' (hanging entwined in a closet) produce unforeseen and illogical effects which greatly affect the ending achieved and, illogically, the fate of the player character. In traversal, the player enacts her or his own hidden monster 'within.'

The player's 'experience' of a work is most evident in Star C. Foster and Daniel Ravipinto's *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, which I examine in chapter four. Traversal of this work produces a series of narratives which function in

a postmodern, recursive fashion to implicate the player in the viral infection threatening the decidedly posthuman player character. Although the body is still significant in *Slouching Towards Bedlam*'s posthuman construction of subjectivity, the player character's identity derives from his information-based, distributed relationship to several pieces of information technology. Set in Victorian London yet featuring a number of fantastical technologies, the interactive fiction has been described as steampunk, a genre which is concerned "with the interface between humans and their machines" like cyberpunk (from whence the name derives), but which prefers "technologies of the time" to "cybernetic" technologies examined in cyberpunk (Crandall 39). However, technologies in the interactive fiction are simultaneously cybernetic, like contemporary technology, and "of the time," which indicates a constructed relationship between an imagined past and contemporary society that is visible in other aspects of the work, making it also an example of historiographic metafiction. Hutcheon describes historiographic metafiction as over-determined and self-reflexive, with a "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs" (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 5). In the interactive fiction this explicit construction is particularly apparent in the interplay between abundant intertextual reference to historically 'credible' details and the fictionalization of those same details. Within this construction the threat to posthuman subjectivity comes not from the past, as with traditional Gothic, but from the present and/or future. A machinic, cyberpunk emphasis in a Gothic work often dislocates anxieties to the future, but with the difficulties related to conceptualizing future threats, such works also often make reference to "fictional precursors like vampires" (Botting, *Gothic* 163). The word virus which infects and threatens to possess the player character in *Slouching Towards Bedlam* represents just such a future threat to the information-based posthuman subject, yet in conception I argue that it is specifically linked to the Victorian, human subject-threatening qualities of Bram Stoker's vampire, Count Dracula. The interactive fiction is thus a prime example of cybergothic, a subgenre of the Gothic which investigates future anxieties related to the posthuman subject via a recycling of past tropes. Since threats come from the future (disguised as forms from the past) in cybergothic, it is always too late to avert the threats in the interactive fiction, both for the player character and the player, as symptoms of the linguistic 'infection' afflict the graphical user interface.

The in-depth analyses in the following chapters demonstrate that these interactive fictions develop the Gothic in ways which are relevant to changing conceptions of subjectivity in contemporary fiction. As literary narrative experiences in the twenty-first century are increasingly presented in interactive digital forms, this study also indicates the particular relevance of studying the Gothic in interactive fiction, a form of electronic literature.

Chapter One: Poetics of Destabilization in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" and Nate Cull's *Nevermore*

"Edgar Allan Poe would have loved IF" (Mary Ann Buckles, "Interactive Fiction as Literature").

As a genre concerned with the vulnerabilities of subjects, Gothic fiction frequently showcases the acute distress of a character as s/he attempts to deal with the dilemmas of a particular situation. A typical plot involves a main character who is shown to experience irritating restriction, possibly even disempowerment and at worst, dissolution. Edgar Allan Poe's fictional characters showcase this progressive destabilization keenly; the reader encounters the "often disordered mentalities" of Poe's protagonists at various stages in their plunge to self-dissolution (Gargano 825). Poe's most famous poem, "The Raven," published in 1845, features a narrator who suffers distress as a result of emotional and philosophical uncertainties provoked by the loss of the beloved Lenore. The figure of the raven in the poem serves as a node for this anxiety.

The poetics of character destabilization in "The Raven" are contextualized in the conceptual foundations of Poe's metaphysical philosophy and touted poetic trope. Poe's 'philosophic perspective' is defined in *Eureka: A Prose Poem* (Carlson 208-09). In *Eureka*, Poe describes the conflicting natures of spirituality and materiality in all matter and emphasizes a conception of the human subject where the soul is confined in the body and desires release. According to Poe, release is possible via the imagination of a poetic soul, aided by spiritual catalysts such as female characters of heavenly beauty. Poetic souls are all men; female characters in Poe's fiction tend to be objectified. *Eureka's* centrality to Poe's oeuvre has been asserted periodically over the last century by George Bernard Shaw (99), Paul Valéry (110), Eric W. Carlson (208) and W. C. Harris (1), scholars who also emphasize the strong intertextual bonds between his writings. "The Raven" maps the anguish of the poetic soul who has lost his spiritual catalyst in the ideal Lenore, providing the basis for Poe's "most poetical topic," the death of a beautiful woman ("The Philosophy of Composition" 680). The emphasis on disruption and loss in these conceptual foundations points toward the

“unmistakable Gothic characteristics” of the poem (Fisher, “Poe and the Gothic Tradition” 78-79; see Fyhr, *De mörka labyrintherna* 79; Hogle, “The Gothic at Our Turn of the Century” 157-58).

Within the poem’s philosophical and aesthetic foundations the Gothic conventions of ‘the unspeakable’ and ‘live burial’ depict the linguistic and spatial boundaries which drive the narrator to self-destruction. Based on recurring metaphors of language breakdown and individual constriction in Gothic fiction, the unspeakable and live burial are figurative tropes which elucidate the poetics of subject destabilization. The unspeakable refers to a failure in communication which occurs at a crucial moment, such as when a character is unable to reveal key information to a compatriot or when a manuscript is fragmented just prior to divulging a necessary detail. Live burial indicates a sense of overwhelming spatial constriction which is seemingly inflicted on a character by circumstance or situation. Exemplified in the narrator’s indeterminate dialogue with the bird and ever-shrinking environment in the poem, these conventions reinforce Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik’s claim that “Gothic writing always concerns itself with boundaries and their instabilities”; on the one hand the instability of communication and on the other the threat of individual dissolution (1). Despite their metaphorical differences, these conventions often work together to illuminate the mechanisms of subject disempowerment and eventual dissolution in Gothic texts.

Nate Cull’s interactive fiction *Nevermore: An Interactive Gothic* is an adaptation of “The Raven,” released in 2000 and available through *The Interactive Fiction Archive*. Cull’s work is a wholly text-based interactive fiction in which the player character has a role similar to the narrator of the poem. The player’s perceived goal for most of the interactive fiction is to bring the player character in contact with Lenore again, echoing the wishes of the narrator in Poe’s poem. This imaginative response to and development of a central issue in “The Raven” provides a context for the question of how the Gothic conventions which restrict the narrator function in the interactive fiction. As an adaptation of “The Raven” and a self-titled Gothic work, does *Nevermore* employ the generic conventions which elucidate the character’s emotional conflict in Poe’s poem? If so, how do the unspeakable and live burial function in *Nevermore*? How does the move from textual poetics to a broader conception of digital poetics affect the manner in which these conventions are expressed? Finally, as corollary to this, how are prime

elements in “The Raven” addressed and/or reworked in *Nevermore*? To investigate these questions, this chapter presents a comparative in-depth analysis of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven” and Nate Cull’s *Nevermore*.

Nevermore provides an interpretation of Poe’s poem which amplifies Gothic elements so that they are relevant for the player character and simulated in the player’s role. The basis for this amplification lies in the work’s digital poetics, which includes an overt emphasis on the process of player character embodiment. In contrast to the textual poetics of the poem, *Nevermore*’s digital poetics involves many of the same elements as readerly, textual poetics, but with the addition of a consideration of pre-programmed limitations and allowances, the spatial structuring of rooms, potential courses through the work, the construction of the player character interface and many other issues related to traversal. Within this broader conception, the setting, characters and scenarios in the interactive fiction may be seen from two focal points: via the player’s role in traversal and as narrative(s) produced as a result of traversal. In interactive fiction generally traversal involves the implicit process of learning to embody the player character, of working to discover the limitations, goals, abilities, knowledge and function of the authored player character entity in order to use that information to guide the ‘figure’ who functions as an interface between the player and the simulated world. This embodiment is important because with most interactive fiction it “is often the case that the player character and environment fit together in an essential way” such that it is sometimes difficult to discern between them (Montfort, “Fretting the Player Character” 144). This is certainly the case with *Nevermore*, as the player character is shown to be intimately tied to the rooms of his family home where traversal takes place. However, in *Nevermore*, the process of embodiment is not implicit but instead is made overt via unexpected changes or difficulties which restrict the player’s ability to knowingly ‘inhabit’ the player character at key moments in traversal. These restrictions simulate the unspeakable and live burial in the player’s role, a conceit which functions alongside Gothic effects for the player character to indicate the manner in which *Nevermore* interprets “The Raven.”

In this chapter I argue that *Nevermore* maintains a strong reliance on the artistic and philosophic principles which guide “The Raven.” This reliance is evident in the interactive fiction’s textual output as well as programmed allowances and restrictions in the player’s role. In addition, the Gothic

conventions of the unspeakable and live burial which illustrate metaphysical barriers for Poe's narrator are shifted in *Nevermore* to block player character embodiment and restrict strategies used in traversal. While destabilization in "The Raven" is seen in the narrator's dissolution, the boundaries to traversal created by the unspeakable and live burial in *Nevermore* lead to a complex dissolution in the player's 'relationship' to the player character. The poetics of the unspeakable separate the player from the player character via a gap in essential knowledge, but the poetics of live burial create a shared experience of restriction for the player character and player. The player's unbalanced relationship to the player character simulates the Gothic ambivalence of Poe's poem.

Poe's Philosophy and its Spatial Manifestation in *Nevermore*

The ideological basis of "The Raven" is adapted into the environment of *Nevermore* both in terms of textual representation and interactions which are part of traversal. Any examination of Poe's oeuvre will uncover his metaphysical beliefs, though it is perhaps his poetry which is best interpreted with his philosophic perspective in mind (Wilbur, "Elanora" 140). In "The Raven," the conflicting spiritual and material quality of all matter in dispersion and the spiritual unity which follows is implied as the frame for the narrator's emotional spiral downward. A similar frame is constructed in *Nevermore*, where the player encounters direct quotations from Poe's poem within an environment braided with physical associations and spiritual animism. This context is colored by the player character's loss, amplified by two different sets of room descriptions which help define the player character's past and present relationship to the setting. Through exploration of the environment in both its standard and 'remembered' forms, the player is encouraged to embody the player character in order to determine the purpose(s) of traversal.

Although it is one of the last things Poe wrote, *Eureka: A Prose Poem* describes a metaphysical philosophy of the universe which impacts all his previous writing (Harris 1). In *Eureka*, Poe argues that if the universe was created out of a unified nothing then the spiritual will of God is what separated the original unity and diffused (that is, repulsed) material throughout the universe (573). Gravity (that is, attraction) between physical bodies (both animate and inanimate) is merely the reaction to this, an effort

to return to unity (575). Thus, there is a tension between the physical attraction and spiritual repulsion in all matter, felt most keenly in the human subject whose mind may perceive these forces (575). When the physical quality of matter is negated via the death of an individual or the end of the universe, the spiritual quality remains and joins the gathering spiritual unity which Poe describes as the “re-constitution of the *purely* Spiritual and Individual God” (583, original emphasis). Whereas God is the initial and final agent of spiritual will in Poe’s universal cycle, the poetic soul, a fragment of God in dispersion, is able to conceive of spiritual release or solace from the conflict with physical attraction via what Alan Tate refers to as a combination of “angelic knowledge” and “separate and local acts of creation” (252). In other words, via the power of imagination.

The emotional crisis in “The Raven” is nested in this philosophy, apparent even in a contemporaneous review by George Pope Morris which asserts the “shadowy and indistinct implied resemblance of the material and immaterial throughout” (225). With Lenore’s body gone her soul has rejoined a growing spiritual unity or “distant Aidenn,” which is a recurring term Poe uses for his blend of Eden and Heaven (Poe, “The Raven” line 93; Levin 87). The spiritual quality of material forms is suggested in the ghosts produced by dying embers and in the raven itself, whose capacity for speech causes the narrator to view the bird as a messenger from the gathering spiritual unity (Poe, “The Raven” lines 8, 79–81; see Fisher, “Poe, Edgar Allan” 174). With this perception of the bird the narrator commands:

“By that Heaven that bends above us—by that God we both adore—
Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore—” (92–94)

The raven responds in its usual fashion with what the narrator perceives as ‘nevermore,’ and in so doing causes the narrator great distress (96–101). If the bird’s response is a mindful reply, its negative answer does not deny the possibility of unification asserted in *Eureka*, merely the narrator’s ignorance of what unification entails. Spiritual unity means that individual souls merge once again into a larger whole, into God. Claspings the individual soul of Lenore would therefore be impossible because she no longer exists separately and the narrator, upon death, will also no longer exist separately. This is perhaps not a comforting thought; there is no “balm in Gilead” for the narrator in the meantime because Lenore is lost for eternity (Poe, “The Raven” line 89).

The themes of conflict and loss resonate strongly in *Nevermore*'s environment and present an essential remediated context which indicates potential goals for traversal to the player. A direct quotation from the first stanza of "The Raven" prefaces the start of the interactive fiction and further quotations from the poem, often depicting the narrator's sorrow or isolation, appear in boxes at the top of the screen when the player explores certain rooms for the first time. For example, entering the Bedroom prompts "[b]ut the silence was unbroken, and the darkness gave no token, / And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, 'Lenore!'" (Poe, "The Raven" lines 27-28). The rooms which the player explores are described as suffused with loss as well as the spiritual and physical qualities which Poe argues exist in all matter. Physical attraction is evident in room descriptions which include tactile details or delineate contact with a physical body. For instance, the Portico is "worn by countless centuries of forgotten feet," and the desk once owned by the player character's father is described as a "relic from Byzantine days, [. . .] the first piece of furniture you touched as a child" (Study). Alongside the attraction inherent in all matter is the spiritual animism that infuses it. The stonework in the Study "broods alone, as it has for centuries." Matter formed as a living shape seems to be alive, as is clear from 'dreaming demon' qualities ascribed to the gargoyles on the four-poster bed in the Bedroom (see Poe, "The Raven" line 105) and the implied shame of the player character when looking the bust of Pallas Athena "in the face" after the events leading to Lenore's disappearance (Study). Even the tower where the player character is represented to live is detailed from an exterior perspective as "a thing of stone, not alive yet not quite dead" (On the Tower). Together, the box quotations and room descriptions depict the player character's lonely situation as the sole survivor in the environment. Since *Nevermore* does not provide a stated goal to accomplish in traversal, understanding the nuances of the simulated world helps the player conjecture as to the potential restrictions, desires and aims of the player character.³⁴ This information is relevant for traversal, given that the player must encounter this world through the player character.

³⁴ While some interactive fictions provide a very clear goal for the player, many contemporary works, including *Anchorhead*, *Madam Spider's Web* and *Slouching Towards Bedlam* only imply particular goals, if that, as the player traverses them.

Nevermore further emphasizes the player character’s emotional response to the environment through the visions produced from the use of a narcotic substance, a common theme in Poe’s oeuvre. Like the room descriptions, the effect of directing the player character to use peyote reinforces *Nevermore*’s connection to Poe’s fiction while providing indirect and direct guidance for the player who is increasingly encouraged to embody the player character. Peyote is not found in Poe’s narratives but hallucinatory substances like it produce visions intermingled with memory for some of his characters. For example, in the short story “Ligeia,” the narrator’s opium dreams of the deceased Ligeia coincide with intense memories of her (169, 170-71). In *Nevermore*, with the exception of the Courtyard, each room in the interactive fiction has two programmed descriptions: the standard room description (produced by the “look” command) and a ‘peyote vision’ which is output after the player character is directed to eat peyote. The peyote visions represent player character memories of Lenore or other events from each room. For instance, the standard description of the Bedroom as “bleak with loss [. . .] for there will be no more Lenore to share your dreams and wake you gently in the morning” is contrasted with the peyote vision where “Lenore lies on the bed, smiling up at you. Her eyes beckon like rare sunlight [. . .]” (Bedroom). This ‘doubling’ of the room descriptions provides a back story depicting both the lovers’ happy life together as well as the current bleak situation for the player character. In addition, the player may learn of the faulty alchemical ritual which caused Lenore’s seemingly fatal disappearance:

Lenore stands by your side, trembling. You draw the remaining sigils and position the vessels correctly. A darkness ascends from the pit; the invocation is complete[. . .] [F]ear seizes you. An error in your calculations! It cannot be! Behind you, Lenore screams. Blood. The pit must have its fill. She falls. Invisible air thickens, sucks her closer, hurls you away . . . (Brink of the Pit)

The peyote visions from each room give the player a more complete sense of the loss as well as the guilt embedded in the player character’s environment. Alongside this indirect benefit for traversal, the peyote visions from the Bedroom and the Portico include the specific command words necessary to complete the final phase of the alchemical ritual puzzle which is central to the interactive fiction. While the player cannot recognize the importance of these words at this point in the interactive fiction they do stand out as part of Lenore’s remembered utterances. For the player, these peyote visions

encourage player character embodiment as the primary means to determine what to do in traversal of the interactive fiction.

Both “The Raven” and *Nevermore* highlight the systemic relationship between setting and protagonist/player character. The reader’s desire to understand this dynamic in the poem parallels the player’s need to gather information about the player character’s condition and situation in the interactive fiction. However, whereas the reader’s investigation fosters ongoing interpretation, the player’s investigation, while also fostering interpretation, further determines the most fruitful moves to forward traversal. As Nick Montfort suggests for all text-based interactive fiction, understanding the player character’s relationship to the simulated world affects the way the player “reads and interprets the text that is produced” through traversal (“Fretting the Player Character” 141). In *Nevermore*, the player’s interaction with the player character’s environment creates a foundation for knowing how to guide the player character while asserting the adaptation’s connection to the original. Despite the small differences in the situations in the poem and the interactive fiction, the material/spiritual environment and drug-induced visions in *Nevermore* function to provide the player with what Linda Hutcheon describes as the “truth-of-correspondence” between the ‘world’ of the interactive fiction and the ‘world’ indicated in Poe’s poem (*A Theory of Adaptation* 14). The player’s efforts to embody the player character are therefore also informed by knowledge about Poe’s poem, his metaphysical philosophy and so forth. ‘Truth-of-correspondence’ is also visible generically in the Gothic poetics related to the power of spaces over the agents within them.

The Spatial Poetics of the Unspeakable and Live Burial

The intense interplay between space and subject in Gothic texts is frequently examined in Gothic scholarship. Often character and space are read as equivalent, as is seen in criticism which posits the Castle Otranto as the main protagonist in Horace Walpole’s originating eighteenth-century narrative (*Clery* xv). To a lesser degree, space is shown to reflect character psychology, as is apparent in Patricia Duncker’s claim that the “Gothic gives incestuous desire a local habitation and a name” in her discussion of Angela Carter’s twentieth-century fiction (330). As a genre of destabilization, tools that many scholars have employed in their investigation of this symbiosis have been metaphors of spatial and, as Duncker implies, linguistic barriers. In this

view, a character’s physical and/or communicative confinement represent(s) psychological confinement. Two barrier-centered conventions which are frequently discussed are ‘live burial’ and ‘the unspeakable,’ overlapping tropes which literally and figuratively indicate threats to human subjects.

Although the unspeakable and live burial have been heavily utilized in psychoanalytic criticism of the Gothic, the conventions do not inherently gesture toward the psychology of characters but toward constructions of human subjectivity.³⁵ In her seminal work *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick bases these conventions in the central figure of physical separation in the Gothic:

It is the position of the self to be massively blocked off from something to which it ought normally to have access. This something can be its own past, the details of its family history [. . .] a lover[. . .] While the three main elements (what’s inside, what’s outside, and what separates them) take on the most varied guises, the terms of the relationship are immutable[. . .] [T]he lengths there are to go to reintegrate the sundered elements—finally, the impossibility of restoring them to their original oneness—are the most characteristic energies of the Gothic[. . .] (12-13)

The power of these conventions is discernible in this unchanging figure of spatial restriction; live burial represents an obvious separation of the self from the world and the unspeakable indicates a barrier in the at once linguistic and spatial metaphor of communication. This framework of spatial restriction builds on the vulnerabilities human subjectivity, predominantly those conceptions of subjectivity which emphasize the body as an envelope or capsule for the self’s ‘inner’ material, such as the one put forth in Poe’s philosophy. For example, the unspeakable is threatening because it hinders the cornerstone function of bringing things from one’s inner self to the outside world via articulation, an action which Charles Taylor describes as essential to “beings with inner depths” (*Sources of the Self* 390, x). Live burial also represents a blockage at the corporeal boundary between self and world as it restricts the expression but also the physical enactment of inner thoughts, desires, impulses, and so forth. However, Sedgwick argues that these two conventions do not inherently signify *psychological* depth, but rather are valuable to the scholar as mechanisms that illuminate the poetics of extreme containment and restriction in individual narratives (12, 27-28,

³⁵ For psychoanalytic perspectives of these conventions, see MacAndrew 108-48 and Massé, “Psychoanalysis and the Gothic.” With a posthuman construction of subjectivity these conventions function differently, as is explained in chapter four.

34-35).³⁶ Sedgwick's argument is in keeping with contemporary Gothic criticism which explores local and particular constructions of subjectivity in texts rather than essentialist views of the self prescribed by much psychoanalytic theory. Disengaging the psychological overtones from the conventions of the unspeakable and live burial allows for a freer investigation of their effects on subjects in fictional works (see Mighall xi, 264). As Sedgwick claims, the unspeakable and live burial function in diverse ways depending on the "varied guises" of the narrative elements involved, which ties their diversity of expression to the diversity of individual works. As variably employed, metaphorical tropes the unspeakable and live burial provide ideal connection points for a comparative analysis of "The Raven" and *Nevermore*.

Speaking (and Reading) the Unspeakable

While in "The Raven" the unspeakable sheds light on central psychological obstacles for the narrator, in *Nevermore* this convention gives view to barriers which hinder the player from successfully embodying the player character, with the further consequence of restricting the player's ability to effectively traverse the work. The altered function of the unspeakable is most apparent in two instances of central narrative importance in "The Raven" which are remediated into situations where the player's actions may profoundly affect traversal in *Nevermore*. In the first instance the narrator's dialogue with the raven is mirrored in the player's work in commanding the player character to 'read' the books in the interactive fiction. In the second instance the poetic function of the absent Lenore in the poem is contrasted to the function of Lenore in memories and as a non-player character in the interactive fiction.

Ambiguous Utterances: Bird and Books

The unspeakable indicates a disruption in communication such as is found in the narrator's uncertain 'conversation' with the raven or the player's experience when the player character 'reads' the alchemical texts in *Nevermore*. In these works, this disruption creates a barrier between elements which profoundly affects their development in the narrative or in

³⁶ For claims emphasizing the groundbreaking and pioneering quality of Sedgwick's work in this area, see Wolfreys xvi and Horner and Zlosnik 3.

traversal. In “The Raven,” the narrator’s initial separation from Lenore is depicted as painful but endurable, so long as the possibility of seeing her again in some afterlife exits. After his verbal exchange with the raven, however, the narrator is tormented by the ambiguity of the bird’s replies to the extent that he feels permanently separated from this pleasant future. In *Nevermore*, the books containing instructions for the central alchemical ritual puzzle prove challenging to ‘read.’ Whereas these challenges seem to indicate barriers to communication, the books are, ultimately, understandable to the player. Instead, when the player commands the player character to read the alchemical texts the true unspeakable poetics restrict the player’s ability to embody the player character.

A prime factor in the tension between the narrator and the raven in Poe’s poem is the ambiguity of the bird’s single-word vocabulary. The reader wonders, does the raven understand the narrator’s demands and respond with the truth, or are the ill-omened bird’s replies merely empty mimicry? Conversely, does the narrator believe that the raven understands what it communicates or is he using the meaningless stock replies to move toward guilt-ridden self-destruction? These questions are significant because they relate to the narrator’s separation from Lenore, as well as his inner turmoil about whether he will see her again. The poem’s energy then, derives from the exchange the narrator has with the raven on whether future unification is possible. The potentially insurmountable boundary to this communication reflects the Gothic convention of the unspeakable:

“Unspeakable,” [. . .] is a favorite Gothic word, sometimes meaning no more than “dreadful,” sometimes implying a range of reflections on language. The word appears regularly enough, in enough contexts, that it could be called a theme in itself, but it also works as a name for moments when it is not used: moments when, for instance, a character drops dead trying to utter a particular name. At another remove, it is possible to discern a play of the unspeakable in the narrative structure itself of a novel that ostensibly comprises transcriptions of manuscripts that are always illegible at revelatory moments. (Sedgwick 4-5)

The unspeakable covers a wide spectrum, from taboo subjects which should not be put into words to things which are impossible to express (despite a desire to do so) to outright restrictions or disruptions in communication.³⁷

³⁷ Lloyd-Smith supports this range of unspeakable instances in his discussion of taboo, criminality and fragmentation in “Postmodernism/Gothicism.” In an extreme form, the unspeakable may be used to question the essential efficacy of language in the face of what Mighall describes as “terrors that defy description” 185.

Illegible manuscripts represent the latter type of disruption, as does speech that is potentially meaningless when it is required to be revelatory, as is the case in “The Raven.” The ‘dialogue’ the narrator has with the raven thus represents an unspeakable barrier not to the production of language but founded on the perception that there is a language when there may not be. To borrow from Sedgwick’s discussion of Thomas De Quincey and Jorge Luis Borges, what tyrannizes the narrator “is the inalienable conviction that there is meaning behind, apart from, symbolized by, what is seen [or heard]. Because the elements of the universe are so orderly they are seen as being meant to be interpreted, as being a transparent medium for a ‘meaning’” (52). The ambiguity of the raven’s replies torments the narrator doubly: either there is communication and the narrator will not see Lenore again or the raven’s replies lack intentional meaning and the narrator is kept vacillating in metaphysical uncertainty by the “never flitting,” eternally present raven (Poe, “The Raven” line 103). The barrier of the unspeakable is absolute in that it is “breached only at the cost of violence and deepened separateness,” often resulting in death (Sedgwick 16). Although the narrator’s efforts to breach the barrier fail in the poem, his recognition of its everlasting hindrance leads to his quasi-dead inertia, trapped under the shadow of the raven (Poe, “The Raven” lines 107-08).

The bird’s potentially meaningless utterances in “The Raven” are remediated into the complexity of interacting with the books which provide fundamental instructions for how to complete the alchemical ritual puzzle in *Nevermore*. Despite the disparity between the raven’s single-‘word’ vocabulary and the abundant information in the alchemical texts, the correlation I assert between bird and books derives from their cornerstone relevance for narrative or traversal in each work. As with the poem, the question of whether Lenore will be seen again in the interactive fiction rests on obtaining and understanding language—highly repetitious, ambiguous language from five volumes of lore: *Concerning Immortality*, *Principia Caelestium Mysteriorum*, *Ex Sanguine Vita*, *Arts of the Chaldean Magi* and *Inhumanities*.³⁸ For the player, the books are problematic in terms of how information is obtained as well as how that information may be interpreted.

This ultimately *unknowable* variation of the unspeakable is relevant to my analysis of the poetics of Gothic labyrinths in chapter two.

³⁸ These titles are written in a manner similar to known alchemical tomes.

Both difficulties relate to the Gothic convention of the unspeakable as it operates in *Nevermore*.

Getting complete instructions from the alchemical books puts the player through an ordeal which shares an affinity with the narrator’s dilemma with the raven. When the player commands the player character to read a book, the software outputs one passage or statement from that volume. Each book produces a different number of statements and there are thirty-three statements in total. Obtaining all of the information from the alchemical texts is difficult because the work is programmed so that statements from the books are produced randomly. Reviewer Paul O’Brian criticizes this aspect of *Nevermore*, noting that “not only can you never be sure if you’ve obtained all the information you need, you have to perform the same command over and over again, wading through dull repetitions of already-printed information” (O’Brian, “2000 Competition Game Reviews”; see Stevens, Rev. of *Nevermore*; Plotkin, Rev. of *Nevermore*). These concerns about unnecessary command repetition and the uncertainty about whether all of the information from the books has been discovered echo the narrator’s depicted frustration with the raven’s possibly random, meaningless replies in the poem and emphasize the shift of focus from character to player. However, as part of this shift, the absolute barrier to communication in “The Raven” is not wholly reproduced in the player’s interaction with the tomes. Information from the books is elusive but not unobtainable.

Instead, the absolute barrier created by the unspeakable exists not between the player and textual information but between the player and the player character. The player character is represented as having purchased (Library), read and made notations in the books (see *Concerning Immortality*) as well as having used the obscure formulae they present in the faulty alchemical ritual depicted in the back story (Brink of the Pit). In short, the player character should know exactly where to find the key information in the books, and the player ought to be able to expect as much when entering the command to read a book. Moreover, since the player character has been represented as lonely and guilt-ridden to the point of suicide, his motivation to find correct information ought to ensure a more effective means for the player to obtain all the necessary statements. The tension that develops between the player’s attempt to progress in traversal and the player character’s represented abilities and motivation creates an unspeakable rift between player and player character which cannot in any way be addressed,

given the constraints of the software. As interactive fiction author and reviewer Andrew Plotkin explains ways in which the process of reading the books may have been programmed more effectively (Rev. of *Nevermore*), the rift is not the result of a formal limitation in the interactive fiction, but may be seen as the basis for simulating the unspeakable in the player's role.

Alongside the difficulty in obtaining information from the texts, the coded, ambiguous nature of the information the player eventually receives also gestures toward the unspeakable. In keeping with alchemical practice, the instructions in all of the books are written in a metaphorical code (see Rosenheim 62). Statements in each tome are coded at the level of individual words, where standard personified synonyms such as 'king' and 'queen' are used in place of 'gold' and 'silver' in a system that represents the spiritual and material quality of all matter. This encryption, including a further connotation of 'queen' to 'moon,' is indicated by three of the statements which may be obtained from *Principia Caelestium Mysteriorum*:

"The Messenger; He glideth Quickly between the Greater Gods and Bindeth them, as doth his Earthly Substance move with Swiftnes and imitate the Moon."

"The Moon is the Queen; Hers the Metal that Shineth with Pale Light, and Accompanieth the King in all His doings."

"The Sun is the Great King of all Gods; His is the Royal Metal, that Endureth and doth not Corrupt."

Passages from the books are also encrypted at the level of discursive structure. Many of the statements in *Inhumanities* are formed as short narratives, others in *Arts of the Chaldean Magi* and *Ex Sanguine Vita* as instructions and still others in *Principia Caelestium Mysteriorum* and *Concerning Immortality* as quasi-parables. In order to understand the information in the books the player must decipher these codes, cross-reference the statements in each volume and relate key concepts to the materials found in the player character's Laboratory. While this work is exhaustive and gestures to the Gothic conceit of a story within a story within a story (see Sedgwick 19), the barrier to communication is not absolute and does not represent the unspeakable.

Once again, the unspeakable barrier to understanding the information is not between the player and the information but between the player and the player character. Whereas the player must work to decipher the dual-level encryption in the texts and then determine how to utilize that information correctly to perform the alchemical ritual—a process which includes vetting

statements which are not relevant to the ritual at all—the player character is depicted as already having done all of this work. The player character should already know the important synonyms, understand the allegorical implications of the narrative styles and realize which items in the Laboratory are required for the ritual. This restriction to player character embodiment builds on what Jeremy Douglass refers to as interactive fiction’s inherent ‘frustration aesthetics.’ Douglass describes the disorienting gap between what the player character and the player know as a key part of this aesthetic, and implies that the manner in which this “disorientation” is configured in a work may relate to generic aesthetics (“Command Lines” 235, 231). In *Nevermore*, the knowledge gap which restricts the player’s ability to embody the player character indicates the absolute barrier of the unspeakable. Had *Nevermore* been programmed without the back story that shows the player character’s knowledge and experience of alchemy, or had the work been authored to produce remembered information from the player character to help guide the player in preparing for the ritual, this division would not occur. The function of the unspeakable in *Nevermore* produces the Gothic effect of disempowering the player.

The figure of the unspeakable in the narrator’s exchanges with the bird in “The Raven” signifies a metaphysical crisis for the character: attempting to breach the barrier results in psychological immobility. *Nevermore* seems to acknowledge this language breakdown by highlighting hindrances to obtaining information. However, the force of the unspeakable is shifted from the player’s relationship to information and placed instead on the player’s connection to the player character. Potential benefits derived from the prior information and experience which the player character is shown to possess are denied to the player, creating a barrier which keeps the player from embodying the player character at a key moment in traversal. Although the player is able to guide the player character effectively after information has been obtained from the books, this renewed embodiment—developed in the course of solving the difficult ritual puzzle—is eventually blocked again when the player meets Lenore.

The Two Lenores: Absent and Unexpected

As a foundation for the narrator’s angst, Lenore’s absence is ironically a presence in the atmosphere in “The Raven.” The paradox of her absent presence is linguistically mediated in the saying of her name, which is

uttered at least six times by the narrator after his vow that it not be spoken (Poe, “The Raven” lines 28-29, 82-83, 94-95). Lenore’s essence remains but the catalytic supernatural beauty she represents to the narrator cannot be addressed or employed, which restricts the narrator from achieving imaginative release. The unspeakable barrier caused by the raven’s utterances is built upon this more crucial barrier. In contrast, in *Nevermore* Lenore speaks in the haunting peyote memories of the player character and then appears as a non-player character in the Courtyard. However, including her in the interactive fiction does not remove the threat of an unspeakable barrier as the non-player character highlights and reinforces an additional boundary between the player and player character.

In “The Raven,” the narrator’s separation from the unseen and unheard Lenore fuels his spiral into dissolution. Within Poe’s philosophic perspective Lenore represents “supernatural beauty” and, while alive, had a catalytic ability to help the poetic soul escape from the physical world (Wilbur, “House of Poe” 259). Lenore’s absence is tragic not for the female character’s sake but because of the imaginative disempowerment it imposes on the narrator of the poem. Focus is wholly on the narrator, as Poe indicates in “The Philosophy of Composition” by describing soul-elevating beauty not as a quality of the female object but as an effect in the male observer (678). The death of a beautiful woman is, for Poe, “the most poetical topic in the world” precisely because it reveals death’s ultimate power over the male poetic imagination (680). In effect, the character of Lenore is only significant as an extension of the narrator, not as a separate entity. In “Poe’s Feminine Ideal,” Karen Weeks asserts this hierarchical link when she describes Lenore as a “*tabula rasa* on which the lover inscribes his own needs” (150, original italics). Despite her enveloping proximity in the poem as its “atmosphere” and “essence” (Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition” 678), Lenore cannot be seen or heard. As an extension of the narrator her absence is keenly felt but cannot be addressed. This insurmountable barrier is the foundation of Poe’s “most poetical topic” and illustrates the Gothic convention of the unspeakable.

In *Nevermore*, Lenore’s initial absence is also portrayed as the source of extreme sorrow for the player character; the player proceeds through the interactive fiction by working to restore her. This goal is identified and indirectly reinforced by several of the software replies or output statements encountered in traversal. When the player retrieves the Laboratory key the

reply “you now have a chance to reverse the disaster you caused” harkens back to Lenore’s demise in the previous alchemical ritual, seen in a peyote vision (Stairs in Cliff). When the player looks at Lenore’s portrait the player character is represented to be examining “what—if tonight you fail—you have lost forever” (Gallery). Finally, directing the player to cut the portrait (a step in the ritual puzzle) prompts the question: “what price is not worth paying, to reclaim your love?” (Gallery). Despite this comparative (narrative) trajectory in the poem and the interactive fiction, Lenore is more of a separate entity in the interactive fiction than in “The Raven,” both in her depiction in the peyote visions (where she speaks and pursues personal interests) and as a non-player character in the Courtyard. The Courtyard is the last room a player discovers in the interactive fiction and is unique in that once the player character arrives there he may not return to any of the previous rooms and may only leave by completing the interactive fiction. Lenore’s appearance there and the effect of her spoken statements are qualified by the Courtyard’s situation at the end of traversal. Interacting with Lenore in this setting recalls the repetition and uncertainty of interacting with the alchemical books as a similar elusive quality pervades the manner and content of her speech.

Despite being programmed as a non-player character object with the ‘life’ property, Lenore’s manner of speech most directly resembles the information delivery involved in reading the alchemical books.³⁹ When the commands “ask” or “tell” are used to initiate a conversation with Lenore in the Courtyard, the non-player character responds randomly with one of ten possible statements (Courtyard). Although two of her replies are questions and a number of her statements seem to encourage follow-up comments from the player character, dialogue is impossible. Any answers or responses which the player directs the player character to provide are treated as invalid commands by the software or else only serve to prompt Lenore to utter further random comments. Given that the peyote visions and other replies in the course of traversal imply that the player character and Lenore were inseparable, Lenore’s random pronouncements, though emotional, seem out of sync with expected emotional intensity of the lover’s reunion (Courtyard).

³⁹ In the Inform 6 authoring system used to create *Nevermore*, an object with the ‘life’ property may receive “person-to-person” actions such as the commands ‘ask,’ ‘tell,’ ‘kiss,’ and so forth, according to Firth and Kesserich 267.

As with the alchemical texts, the unresponsive, one-way nature of Lenore's delivery hints at a linguistic breakdown between the player and the information source, in this case Lenore. Upon closer examination, though, the barrier is not to obtaining information but rather to the player's ability to affect how information is obtained. The non-player character's programmed random replies enforce the unspeakable by restricting the player from embodying the player character in the verbal exchange with the Lenore.

The player's embodiment of the player character is further destabilized by the content of Lenore's remarks and whom she addresses. While not encrypted like the information in the alchemical texts, many comments are nonetheless ambiguous. Lenore whispers that "[t]ime flies [. . .] [o]n raven's wings," and confesses to being afraid of something which is not readily discernible (Courtyard). For the player to determine the substance of these and other statements they must be cross-referenced, a task which is noticeably easier than it was with the alchemical texts due to the smaller number of phrases and their less obscure meaning. Still, Lenore's pronouncements provide a pivotal function in traversal which is similar to the statements in the alchemical texts because her comments contain information about concluding the alchemical process which is implied to be known to the player character but which the player must work to decipher.

Lenore's comments about completing the alchemical ritual threaten the player's understanding of the goal of the interactive fiction because of the context in which they are uttered. The Courtyard is an unexpected new location for the player who probably anticipated a reward or satisfying ending for completing the complex alchemical ritual puzzle which requires "dozens of steps and fairly precise actions" (O'Brian, "2000 Competition Game Reviews"). Admittedly, finding Lenore is an achievement since that goal has increasingly served as the player's motivation up to this point. Nonetheless, Lenore's utterances point toward further action, dispelling the idea of the Courtyard as a rewarding "Aidenn" and invalidating the assumed goal. Statements such as "[y]ou must choose," "[t]here are two of us [. . .] [a]nd but one fruit" and "I wish it were not so," indicate that the Courtyard is the final stage in the alchemical process, as symbolized by the tree and its fruit. This *arbor philosophorum* or tree of life serves as "an outward and visible sign" of the alchemical process; an alchemical scholar such as the player character should know that it is only via interaction with the tree—in this case eating its fruit—that the true goal of alchemy may be accomplished

(St. Armand, “Poe’s ‘Sober Mystification,’” 2-3; see Jung 302-08). Lenore’s statements, impossible to respond to or question, suggest that the player’s prior aim in restoring Lenore, even his or her sense that the completion of the alchemical ritual puzzle would produce such an effect, has been inaccurate. Her statements are not indecipherable but nonetheless invoke the unspeakable because they reveal the disunity between the player’s perceived purpose and the player character’s apparently withheld goal.

The player character’s goal, not likely to be understood until the player reaches the Courtyard, extends beyond restoring Lenore. The player character is represented as a life-long alchemical scholar who has inherited this proclivity from his father. In one memory from the player character’s childhood, the player character’s father is described as “pouring over obscure books” (Study). This focused attention to what are implied to be alchemical works is evident in the Library, where the player character is shown to have continued in his father’s footsteps:

The stacks of obscure volumes tower to the vaulted ceiling. Your father had eclectic tastes in literature, and you have extended his collection with your own research. Many of these manuscripts are originals, costly in both getting and reading. (Library)

In addition to this indication of devoted scholarship it is clear from statements about the player character’s “secret labor and craft” in the Laboratory that alchemy has long been an *applied* field of study. With this representation of alchemical knowledge the tree of life in the Courtyard should be theoretically familiar to and even anticipated by the player character as the product of the alchemic ritual. Lenore highlights this separate knowledge of the player character when instead of overtly explaining the situation in the Courtyard (to the player) she implicates him in its creation with the question: “[t]here were two trees [. . .] [i]n Eden. Which have you chosen?” (Courtyard). While the player character appears to have had the power to determine the tree’s quality, the player has no knowledge about the tree from the interactive fiction except what Lenore’s statements imply. Knowing about the tree suggests that the player character also can predict the effect of eating the fruit. Lenore supports this idea with the incriminating question, “[f]orever [. . .] [i]s it so long?” and the veiled assertion “[y]ou are my Resurrection [. . .] [a]nd my Immortality” (Courtyard). Although these utterances are directed to the player character in a shared confidence that may seem puzzling, the player eventually

understands that the former comment refers to the duration of the effect of eating the fruit and the latter refers to the possible outcomes of eating the fruit. It is only through eavesdropping on her comments to the player character, as it were, that the player may conjecture about the effects of the final choice. In essence, Lenore speaks to a player character who has knowledge which is never communicated to the player and whose goals are only hazily glimpsed. The player's ability to embody the player character and complete the interactive fiction with a sense of accomplishment at this point is weak. The manner and content of Lenore's speech develops this unspeakable disempowerment in the player's role just prior to the final move in the interactive fiction.

It is not unusual for a non-player character to address her remarks to the player character, of course, or for an interactive fiction to conclude with an unexpected twist. What is notable about these devices in *Nevermore* is that the effect of the player character's unspeakable alteration works in tandem with restrictions configured in the player's role in the Courtyard.⁴⁰ The player's sense of accomplishment from traversing the interactive fiction is destabilized by the abrupt change in goals, disrupted by the alchemical knowledge that the player character 'withheld' and thwarted by Lenore's divisive utterances. These factors call into question the player's previous actions in *Nevermore* and make the final choice in the interactive fiction unfounded and difficult to predict. The unspeakable hindrance to player character embodiment at this crucial juncture disempowers the player's role in a Gothic manner. Even though the player's final position seems to resemble the narrator's disempowered uncertainty in "The Raven," this is not simply a shift from destabilizing a literary character to destabilizing 'the player.' Rather, the Gothic poetics of the unspeakable in *Nevermore* affect the complex relationship between the player and the player character interface. With this relationship disrupted the player may act to achieve some sort of closure, although it is not shared with the player character.

⁴⁰ As the ending of an interactive fiction, much like a print narrative, provides the possibility for closure and a return to 'reality' for the player, it is not surprising that Gothic effects are combined in the ending to produce an uncertain sense of closure. Similar Gothic ending twists, also in isolated locations and involving limitations in the player's role, occur in complete traversals of *Anchorhead* and *Madam Spider's Web*.

Live Burial’s Modern Poetics

At the end of “The Raven,” the narrator, trapped on the floor of his room, is forcibly constricted in a manner which metaphorically represents live burial. Live burial is a recurring concern for characters in Poe’s fiction (Salomon 42, Royle 159, Punter and Byron 285) and it is relevant that it occurs in “The Raven” at the end of the poem, as endings in Poe’s work are particularly known for their hermeneutical significance (Gargano 824-25). The concluding image of live burial in the poem crystallizes the uncertainty of the narrator’s exchange with the raven and suggests a dissolutive effect on the soul of the narrator. *Nevermore*’s two endings amplify the ambiguous relevance of the conclusion of “The Raven” in that they individually and collectively ‘conclude’ the interactive fiction in an indeterminate manner. In addition, a similar restriction in a confining environment is simulated for the player in the Courtyard, the final room in the interactive fiction. In *Nevermore*, live burial constricts the configured abilities of the player’s role, stripping the player of the exploratory and manipulative power exercised previously in traversal. In such circumscribed circumstances the player’s final act is a relatively blind choice between two equally dire endings for the characters in the interactive fiction.

In terms of the space it constructs, “The Raven” is a poem about increasing containment. This containment, which is visible in other Poe fictions, is significant as it reflects the vulnerabilities of the subject presented in Poe’s philosophical perspective. Richard Wilbur contends that Poe “sees the poetic soul as at war with the mundane physical world,” a war which is simultaneously fought against the “earthly condition of his soul” (“House of Poe” 258, “Poe and the Art of Suggestion” 161-62). In Russian doll fashion, the soul is trapped within a physical body which is trapped within the physical world. According to Wilbur, everything Poe wrote relates to “these conflicts” (“House of Poe” 259); in some narratives the poetic soul manages to dream himself free of his physical body and the material world (267), in other works, such as “The Raven,” the poetic soul’s failure in this endeavor is seen in the shrinking environment. At the start of the poem, the narrator begins the poem isolated with grief in his room. Once the raven enters and speaks he wheels “a cushioned seat in front of bird, and bust and door” (Poe, “The Raven” line 68), which confines his space further. By the end of the poem he is immobile, his soul oppressed by the shadow of the raven that has become a fixture in the room (107-08).

Within much Gothic fiction and Poe's philosophic perspective the soul's encapsulation in a physical body defines a subject which may be threatened by the possibility of a breach of this essential barrier, an act which would simultaneously dissolve the boundary of the self and, in many Poe narratives, preclude the potential of spiritual escape. Increasing physical confinement implies such a threat, as is evident in the narrator's growing anguish in "The Raven." The Gothic convention of live burial depicts the poetics of oppressive spaces such as "underground passages," "terrible prisons" and "hermetic rooms," or more figuratively, spaces where the self seems merged with its surrounding environment (Salomon 42, Sedgwick 24). Sedgwick compares the dissolution of self to being submerged in water; confined, stifled, oppressed from all sides (27). In Poe's poem, qualities such as the emphasis on mourning, the reference to the final month in the year, the ghosts of the dying embers, the headstone-like bust of Athena and the inert final position of the narrator make the setting a metaphorical live burial space ("The Raven" lines 7, 8, 41, 104, 107-08). However, the penetrative weight of the raven is what collapses the space entirely upon the narrator. This weight pierces the outer boundary between the world and the physical body, understood in the narrator's call for the raven to "[t]ake thy beak from out my heart" (101). Despite the critical nature of this breach the soul of the narrator is still unthreatened. When the raven permeates the *inner* boundary of the physical body of the narrator in the next stanza, water imagery illustrates the totality of spiritual oppression: the raven's shadow "lies *floating* on the floor" and the narrator's soul cannot escape its dark envelopment (106-08, my emphasis). Merged with its surroundings, the power of the poetic soul is diluted and no longer capable of imaginative escape from earthly torments at the end of the poem. The poetics of live burial erect the central barrier between the narrator and his desired spiritual solace.

In *Nevermore*, the Courtyard and the player's actions there function in a similar manner to the final stanzas in Poe's poem to configure the poetics of live burial. The Courtyard is represented as a live burial space through its isolation from the other rooms and location in the bowels of the tower. At the apparent conclusion of the alchemical ritual, the player character is represented to step into the pit in the Laboratory and fall "into an infinity of

darkness” before appearing again in an “airy courtyard, here within the foundations of the tower” (Brink of the Pit, Courtyard).⁴¹ Once in the Courtyard, the player discovers that there are no standard exits from the room; the only way to ‘leave’ is by making a choice which ends the interactive fiction. In these respects the Courtyard reflects the immobilizing quality of the live burial space, which requires “active violence on the one hand, active magic on the other [. . .] for the instant of moving out of or moving into the dungeon” (Sedgwick 22). For the player, the “active magic” in this case is the apparently supernatural transfer of the player character from the Brink of the Pit to the Courtyard. In a similar fashion, terminating the interactive fiction with the final choice produces “active violence” in that it is shown to kill one of the characters and also results in a termination of the player’s role (as the simulation ends). The Courtyard is thus a highly restricted room which strips the player’s role of exploratory allowances utilized previously.

Alongside the abrupt restriction to movement, the player’s loss of potentially helpful inventory items further limits the player’s role and precludes the player’s ability to rely on earlier traversal tactics. In the metaphor of burial an individual’s personal effects are removed; in the Courtyard the player discovers that the possessions which the player character previously carried everywhere in traversal are now gone. Faced with the unexpected tree of life and the final phase of the alchemical process, the alchemical books, for all the frustration they may have represented earlier in traversal, may be helpful to the player. In particular, several statements in *Concerning Immortality*—which may have seemed irrelevant to the player in the initial difficult reading session(s)—pertain to the situation in the Courtyard and could help the player make an informed choice.⁴² With the core strategies of exploration and item use curtailed, the player’s agency in the Courtyard is severely restricted to prompting Lenore to speak (with the further unspeakable disempowerment that entails) and making the final choice which ends the interactive fiction. The stifling effects of live burial in *Nevermore* block the player from employing standard

⁴¹ For discussings which describe the abyss as a recurring image as well as destination for the characters in Poe’s fiction, see Wilbur, “The House of Poe” and Mooney, “Poe’s Gothic Waste Land.”

⁴² The item which would be most helpful in the Courtyard is the knife, which could divide the fruit, as is apparent in the reply to the command to ‘cut fruit’: “You would need to find some kind of blade first.” Ironically, and in keeping with the self-destructive traits of many Poe characters, the knife is missing here not because it has been ‘magically’ removed with the other inventory items but because it was destroyed in the process of completing the alchemical ritual puzzle.

traversal techniques. This extreme restriction in the player's role, represented via the player character's own limitations, indicates a *physical* facet of the 'frustration aesthetics' which Douglass attributes to interactive fiction ("Command Lines" 235). Conversely, Tanya Krzywinska argues that the effects of live burial are often simulated by increased restrictions to player agency in digital interactive works in the horror genre (209). However, both Douglass and Krzywinska are careful to note that the manner in which such restrictions are configured is unique to individual works. As it is an adaptation of Poe's "The Raven," *Nevermore* configures live burial significantly at the end of the work, in conjunction with the unspeakable. In the concluding scenario in the interactive fiction, in conjunction with the barrier to player character embodiment created by Lenore's unspeakable comments, the player is reduced to the arbiter of a somewhat blind choice.

With the player greatly constrained it is fortunate that the final choice is only between two things: the player character or Lenore must eat the apple from the tree of life. Lenore's comments indicate that eating the apple will separate the player character and Lenore forever, in that one of them will achieve resurrection or immortality. However, the player's disempowered role in the interactive fiction (due to the poetics of live burial), blocked ability to embody the player character (due to the poetics of the unspeakable) and uncertain sense of Lenore (due to her odd comments) is likely to produce a disinterest or at least uncertainty in the choice. This uncertainty has the effect of broadening the player's evaluative criteria beyond just the interactive fiction. As the separation of the player character and Lenore is faithful to the essence of "The Raven" and given the high degree of allusion to Poe's work as well as the direct quotations from the poem which appear periodically during traversal, it is likely that the player will weigh the two options in light of the characters in Poe's poem. Hutcheon notes that when we experience a work as an adaptation, we allow the adapted text "to oscillate in our memories," so that "we inevitably fill in any gaps in the adaptation with information from the adapted text" (*A Theory of Adaptation* 121). As with the final choice in *Nevermore*, the player's previous difficulties with 'reading' the alchemical texts and talking to Lenore may have also led the player to attempt to resolve those "gaps" with information from Poe's poem. Although alchemical concepts are explored directly and indirectly in Poe's Gothic fiction and females who 'return from the dead' are also prominent (see St. Armand, "Poe's 'Sober Mystification'"; Fisher, "Poe,

Edgar Allan”), these thematic alignments do not provide specific guidance for the unspeakable situations in *Nevermore*. However, the final choice of who will eat the fruit from the tree of life is distinct from the previous difficulties due to its simplicity. The player’s decision may be relevantly contextualized within knowledge of Poe’s philosophic perspective (which provides the basis for “The Raven”), his death-of-a-beautiful-woman trope, a contemporary desire to ‘redeem’ Lenore and/or an awareness of the importance of ambiguous endings in Poe’s fiction. This larger intertextual basis is partly encouraged because once the final choice is made—and the player is very likely to be aware that it is the final move in the work—the player is no longer able to affect the interactive fiction; the final replies are not evaluated in terms of their value to further play, but in terms of their value as the conclusion to the narrative which has been produced in traversal.

If the player character eats the fruit he becomes immortal and Lenore seemingly dies. This ending most strongly reflects Poe’s philosophical and artistic principles with regard to the function of Lenore. Like her supernaturally beautiful namesake, Lenore in *Nevermore* is the inspiration behind the player character’s quest for immortality. Unlike her namesake, Lenore’s absence in the interactive fiction is shown, in a peyote vision, to be the player character’s fault (Brink of the Pit). This suggests her greater alignment to other Poe narratives where “protagonist-artists” seemingly “‘murder’ their beloved and lovely women, who already resemble works of art, in order to further their perfection as *objects de vertu*” (Moldenhauer 294, original italics; see Bronfen 71). Indeed, Lenore’s status as a work of art in *Nevermore* is literal: her portrait in the Gallery causes the player character to cry, an effect in the male observer which Poe describes as the invariable response to “Beauty [. . .] in its supreme development” (Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition” 678). In addition, as her name is categorized with “life” and “love” as one of the three words of supernatural entreaty which must be spoken by the player character in the alchemical ritual, her role as a murdered and thus perfected *object de vertu* is confirmed as a necessary part of the player character’s quest for immortality. In the Courtyard, no longer absent from the player character, Lenore once again functions as a catalyst for the player character’s goal. Despite his previous fatal negligence she encourages his quest for immortality in statements like “[r]emember me” and “[i]f only you could stay,” which hint at her

willingness to be sacrificed and suggest his continued existence elsewhere. When the player character ‘eats’ the apple the player reads that “the colour fades from [Lenore’s] cheeks, she sighs once, and sags limply into your arms” (Courtyard). As no other information is provided about Lenore in the final reply this description implies her death. Her second death as a byproduct of the player character’s immortality asserts the hierarchy of the male-female relationship in Poe’s death-of-a-beautiful-woman trope.

The player character’s represented experience in this scenario thematically aligns itself with the narrator’s ending in Poe’s poem. Prior to commanding it, this choice might appear to represent a positive reworking of the ending of “The Raven” to the player. However, there is a dehumanizing twist in granting the player character the immortality the narrator is denied in the poem:

Time passes; centuries or hours, who can tell? It is all the same to you. You, who can now no longer die; you, who live forever, you whose love is gone. There are others; there are dreamers; there are changes, small and great, upon the world’s stage. Through wars and famine, plagues and golden cities you walk alone. It is all a poor charade to you, for you know that you will look upon Lenore’s sweet face - nevermore. (Courtyard)

In this brand of immortality, the player character’s disinterest in time, lack of concern for others, apathy for great developments and sorrow for the loss of Lenore all correspond to the limbo of the narrator at the end of “The Raven.” The mobility of the player character in this passage is a contrast to the narrator’s immobile submersion but does not detract from the shared implication of eternal existential isolation; in other words, live burial.

In the other ending to the interactive fiction, Lenore eats the fruit and becomes immortal while the player character is resurrected. Prior to reading the final reply this ending may appeal to the player seeking contemporary poetic justice for Lenore, but this conclusion also asserts the gendered hierarchy of Poe’s poetic and philosophical paradigms. The final text output from the interactive fiction details the characters’ outcomes:

Lenore takes the fruit from your hand reluctantly, and waits a little while as if expecting you to change your mind. At last she turns, lifts the apple to her mouth, and bites slowly into it, gingerly, as if it were poison. Tears stream down her face as she turns back to you[. . .] She flings her arms around you, and as twilight fades from your eyes, her tears and kisses fall. They fall forever, down the long and changing years; but for you they fall – nevermore. *** You have achieved Resurrection ***. (Courtyard, original emphasis)

This ending is not beneficial to Lenore but reads more like a punishment, made all the more unjust in view of the player character’s unexplained resurrection. The suffering of the female counterpart while the male character escapes any narrative judgment unquestionably shows an affinity with several Poe narratives. The player character’s chance to ‘start over’ also alludes to the cyclical process of Poe’s philosophic perspective, where “[u]niversal agglomeration and dissolution” is equal to “creation and irradiation” so that the process is of “a novel Universe swelling into existence and then subsiding into nothingness, at every throb of the Heart Divine” (Poe, *Eureka* 582). The “Heart Divine” which controls this cycle is the poetic soul’s, or as Poe puts it, it “*is our own*” (582, original emphases). The player character in this ending approaches Poe’s conception of the subject with a poetic imagination, capable of bringing worlds into existence through acts of mental creation. This ending thus implies a postmodern reminder that *Nevermore* is a constructed, fictional work, created and completed via acts of imagination.

Nevermore’s endings leave the player uncertain about his or her accomplishment in the interactive fiction. The two factors which jointly foster this uncertainty are the forced disempowerment in the player’s role just prior to the conclusion and the narrative implications of the final replies. The poetics of live burial are apparent in the restrictions to the player’s role which preclude the player’s ability to use exploration or item manipulation as strategies for traversal in the isolated environment of the Courtyard. The simulated effects of live burial work in tandem with the player character’s represented live burial so that the player and player character are similarly restricted. However, in the Courtyard live burial works in tandem with the unspeakably cryptic comments which Lenore addresses to the player character. The player’s role is thus constrained with the player character and blocked from embodying the player character simultaneously, producing an ambiguous, uncertain Gothic experience at the conclusion of the work. This uncertainty is likely to be amplified by the narrative fates of the characters. In either ending Lenore appears to suffer at the hands of the player character and he either experiences existential isolation in immortality or must come back from the dead alone. These endings appear to amplify the aesthetics and ambiguous conclusion of Poe’s “The Raven.”

The Poetics of Destabilization

The player's participatory reception of Nate Cull's interactive fiction *Nevermore: An Interactive Gothic* involves a refiguring of the essential concepts in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven." The poem's foundation on the philosophy outlined in *Eureka* and use of the death-of-a-beautiful-woman trope is reflected in the material-spiritual room descriptions, central alchemical puzzle and function of the non-player character Lenore in *Nevermore*. Furthermore, the Gothic conventions of the unspeakable and live burial depict the metaphors which engender the narrator's dilemma in the poem as well as the player's mirrored difficulties in traversing the interactive fiction. Still, the destabilization revealed by the unspeakable and live burial in *Nevermore* diverges from the metaphysical crisis illustrated in "The Raven." Absolute boundaries impel the narrator's dissolution in the poem while hindrances to traversal strategies and player character embodiment restrict the player's ability to exercise informed agency and are likely to foster a lost sense of control in the interactive fiction.

The poetics of these conventions in *Nevermore* indicate that while the player's sense of a loss of control may be significant for how a work simulates Gothic effects, the fashion in which control is restricted is variable and may reinforce the artistic elements of a particular work. As protagonists in Poe's fiction are known for their splintered, disordered personalities, it is fitting that Cull's adaptation of "The Raven" configures an uncertain split in the player's relationship to the player character. While the restrictive poetics of live burial are shown to affect the player character and simulate effects for the player, creating a shared experience of restriction, the poetics of the unspeakable separate the player and the player character. The absolute barrier of the knowledge gap between the player character and the player simulates frustration and restriction for the player which is not represented to affect the player character. The poetics of live burial and the unspeakable thus fracture and strengthen the player's formal relationship to the player character in manner which alludes to the unbalanced personality which the narrator in "The Raven" may possess and which many of Poe's narrators exhibit. This sense of recycling particular conceits but employing them in unique ways is highly pertinent to the poetics of Gothic conventions. The next chapter investigates this issue further by considering the particular poetics of one of the most well-know Gothic conventions: the labyrinth.

Chapter Two: Reading with Awe and Playing with Terror: Labyrinths in Selected Stories by H. P. Lovecraft and Michael S. Gentry's *Anchorhead*

"[. . .] postmodern Gothic is akin, in its playfulness and duplicity, to the artificialities and ambivalences that surround eighteenth-century Gothic writing and were produced in relation to the conflicts of emerging modernity" (Fred Botting, *Gothic* 157).

Michael S. Gentry's text-based interactive fiction *Anchorhead: An Interactive Gothic* may be described as a digital continuation of Gothic literature through H. P. Lovecraft's narrative concepts. In the interactive fiction, the female player character moves to the town of Anchorhead with her husband because he has inherited a mansion from a distant branch of his family shortly after the suicide of his cousin, Edward Verlac. As the player character explores the town and meets its aloof inhabitants she discovers rumors about the family, in particular the founder Croseus Verlac, which suggest incestuous practices, supernatural abilities and an evil purpose which involves bringing an extraterrestrial entity to earth. At the same time, she watches her husband become increasingly distant and secretive, eventually realizing that he is possessed by Croseus Verlac. This scenario marries a Gothic narrative of female domestic constriction in an unfamiliar environment to common Lovecraft themes of illusory surface appearances, unwholesome survival via psychic possession and forbidden knowledge of the cosmos. A central trope which mediates this marriage is the convention of the Gothic labyrinth.

In the Gothic, the labyrinth is a ubiquitous device which emphasizes the individual experience of terror and the sublime. Though the labyrinth was frequently rendered as unicursal and systematic in the medieval period, the Gothic labyrinth precludes unity and instead functions to confuse characters' fears and desires in a space which is alienating in its complexity (Doob 3; Fyhr, *De mörka labyrintherna* 343; Botting, *Gothic* 81). Emphasis on individual experience in the labyrinth nullifies the distinction between maze-like physical locations such as crypts and castles and more figurative or abstract sites such as a character's tortured psyche. Prominently featured in

Gothic fiction's long and varied history, the labyrinth is a demarcated site where oppositions depicted as needful in the narrative blur subversively. These oppositions may be conditions, states or concepts whose separation is seen as needful or essential to the coherence of the subject in the narrative. A character's confusion and struggle in the labyrinth is directly related to the collapse of these narratively constructed oppositions and may be literally or metaphorically depicted as a difficulty in navigation. Needful oppositions relate to vulnerable aspects of subjectivity, and so might be traditional, such as the general opposition between 'right' and 'wrong,' or more specifically reflect social or historical issues relevant in the fiction. For example, in Horace Walpole's 1764 novel *The Castle of Otranto*, Isabella's navigation through the dark and dangerous cloisters below the castle is a flight from the collapsed oppositions of paternal guardian and eager bridegroom which Manfred threateningly embodies (27-29). The rhetorical force of the labyrinth derives from the psychological effects such collapsed oppositions produce in the character and possibly in the reader. Characters who escape the labyrinth experience terror, a long-lasting and profound fear churned up by the troubling implications of the irrational blurring of these collapsed oppositions. In turn, terror has the power to produce sublime feelings in a reader who may, in response to observing the character's life-threatening sense of wonderment, develop a sympathetic conception of awe mixed with what Robert Miles describes as "dreadful pleasure" at viewing the fictional character's terror (14). The Gothic labyrinth's emphasis on the subjective experiences of terror and the sublime make it a multi-functional convention, especially in a genre where environment is traditionally central to the narrative.

Though widely known as an author of so-called weird fiction which features recurring themes related to threatening extraterrestrial beings, H. P. Lovecraft's narratives of terror develop from the Gothic tradition and make particular use of the convention of the labyrinth and its effects.⁴³ Written during a period from approximately the end of World War I to the beginning of World War II, Lovecraft's stories exemplify a blend of extreme realism and the aesthetic principles of the age of high modernism. This blend is evident

⁴³ While Lovecraft's oeuvre includes poetry as well as non-horrific fantasy narratives, tales of terror are predominant. In "H[oward] P[hillips] Lovecraft," Joshi acknowledges terror's dominance in Lovecraft's work when he argues that Lovecraft wished to "update" the Gothic and that it was to this task that the author "devoted the bulk of his career" 271-72.

in narratives where richly detailed realism serves as a contrastive frame for impressionistic sources of terror. One of the central, recurring sources of terror and possibly the sublime in Lovecraft's fiction is the ontological threat posed by a coexisting reality (St. Armand, "Synchronistic Worlds" 303; Joshi, *Primal Sources* 66). Governed by the poetics of the Gothic labyrinth, characters who glimpse a coexisting reality invariably experience the collapse of narratively determined needful oppositions, an experience which produces chronic fear and wonder in the character. For instance, the narrator of the short story "The Festival" encounters a terrifying blend of 'natural' and 'unnatural' forms of existence while visiting the town of Kingsport. Lovecraft's term for characters' resultant terror is 'cosmic fear,' a mixture of fear, curiosity, evil and wonder which is coterminous with the Gothic terror-sublime but nuanced to include concerns related to specific narrative contexts.⁴⁴ Lovecraft's narratives typically feature one of two distinct forms of the Gothic labyrinth. In what I refer to as the *realized labyrinth*, characters encounter another world in a place which is explicitly irrational, which eventually produces cosmic fear regarding the instability of the known world and the bleak fate of humanity. Conversely, I claim that the *unrealized labyrinth* is covert: characters glimpse a coexisting reality in what appears to be a 'real' location but which later signals its labyrinthine quality when it inexplicably vanishes. Characters who have exited the unrealized labyrinth develop cosmic fear regarding the potential 'unreal' quality of all seemingly 'real' places. In both cases, these modern concerns about the stability of spaces may produce effects of the sublime in readers.

Explicitly developed from Lovecraft's modernist terror fiction, *Anchorhead* is a postmodern interactive fiction from 1998 which also employs the Gothic convention of the labyrinth. Lovecraft's stylistic realism and impressionistic labyrinths are readily apparent in the interactive fiction. In reviews, veteran interactive fiction critic Duncan Stevens notes the evocative sophistication of Gentry's written text (Rev. of *Anchorhead*) while author and theorist Emily Short asserts that the environment "becomes almost oppressively real" for the player (Rev. of *Anchorhead*). Since *Anchorhead*'s one hundred plus rooms makes it an unconventionally large

⁴⁴ The modern narrative contexts of labyrinths in Lovecraft's terror fiction are partly discernible in his frequent use of a narrator. According to Bridgeman, while space in nineteenth-century narratives is concrete and stable, "in modernist fiction it is filtered, like time, through the perceptions of the protagonists" 56.

interactive fiction (Stevens, Rev. of *Anchorhead*), this “oppressively real,” vast environment provides a sharp contrast to the coexisting reality which the player character initially glimpses from different labyrinths. As in Lovecraft’s narratives, the poetics of the Gothic labyrinth—as *digital* poetics which additionally encompass the spatial conception, potential ‘paths,’ configured rules and allowances and player agency which are inherent to the media form—are coherently employed in *Anchorhead*’s unrealized and realized labyrinths. However, Gentry’s interactive fiction is a postmodern work in that it “manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions” it presents (Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* 1-2). Unlike Lovecraft’s typical single-labyrinth narratives of character destabilization, *Anchorhead* features two labyrinths whose digital poetics, working at times simultaneously, are only fully actuated if the player wins the interactive fiction by rescuing the player character’s husband, banishing the forces of evil from town and, of course, keeping the player character alive. The interactive fiction’s intertextuality is both ‘played’ and playful.

Though consistent in its poetics, the convention of the Gothic labyrinth can be seen to contextually develop through Lovecraft’s modern terror fiction and Gentry’s postmodern interactive fiction. In Lovecraft short stories such as “The Music of Erich Zann” and “The Call of Cthulhu,” the convention governs the unrealized and realized labyrinths, including their divergent forms of cosmic fear related to the spatial stability of perceived ‘reality.’ In *Anchorhead*, the power and threat of individual spaces is dismissed in favor of the power and threat of subjective relationships. Although the digital poetics of the unrealized and realized labyrinths are highly relevant in the interactive fiction, those poetics are not bound to single, demarcated locations. Furthermore, cosmic fears are not derived from the instability of space: the female player character is shown to be terrified by the prospect of evil lurking in familiar individuals and the sublime terror the player may experience arguably develops from an abrupt disconnection to the player character. This shift to the vulnerabilities of relationships is evident in the subjective experience which the player creates while attempting to win the ‘game’ as well as the isolating forms of cosmic fear experienced by the player character and, possibly, the player.

The Gothic Labyrinth and Lovecraft's Terror Fiction

As a narrative device, the labyrinth stands for conflicted thoughts and excessive emotion. Unlike the Gothic conventions of the unspeakable or live burial, which indicate metaphorically defined barriers to communication or movement, the labyrinth's spatial metaphor is less absolute and primarily indicates uncertainty and confusion. While it may be represented in a multitude of different forms, the labyrinth's significance lies in the subjective effects it produces, both for a character and a reader. These effects include a character's immediate sense of threatening duplicity and bewilderment while in the labyrinth, the terror that develops after exiting it and a reader's potential sublime response. These Gothic effects are visible in Lovecraft's terror fiction, where characters experience the terror of cosmic fear and readers may gain the aesthetic pleasure of contemplating the threatening implications of a potential coexisting reality. Though not traditional labyrinthine spaces, Lovecraft's unrealized and realized labyrinths nonetheless produce these experiences and represent a modern development of the Gothic convention.

The Gothic labyrinth is a demarcated, liminal space where what are presented as needful oppositions in a narrative no longer maintain separation. In the context of a narrative, Gothic characters leave the world of rationality and order, experience what Fred Botting describes as a threat to "knowing subjectivity" while in the labyrinth, and then return to a former situation ("Power in the Darkness" 249, 245). While the borders of the labyrinth are clearly marked in a narrative, frequently via spatial placement, the liminal sense of being 'between' is not spatial but derives from a collapse or blurring of conditions, states or ideas which may not be combined in the world-view of the narrative, a situation which is deeply threatening to characters.⁴⁵ For instance, the maze-like crypts and forests which characters flee through in early Gothic fiction break down oppositions between environment and character subjectivity so that characters struggle to navigate their own fears as much as the physical space. Examples of

⁴⁵ This collapse of oppositions is represented by the insecurity of the subject, in contrast to when those oppositions are safely separated and the subject is not threatened. For example, van Elferen writes that liminal spaces in Gothic fiction, such as labyrinths or deserted houses, are haunted by the "anxieties that are otherwise safely tucked away in categorised truths" 101. The concept of liminality as a sense of being between states originated in Turner's anthropological work but is frequently used as a concept to analyze dissolution and dislocation in literary criticism. See Turner, *Blazing the Trail* and "Dewey, Dilthey and Drama"; and Ortiz, "Liminality."

recurring needful oppositions which are mediated in literal and figurative labyrinths in Gothic fiction's history include life and death, good and evil, the real and the unreal (Botting, "Power in the Darkness" 249), male and female (Hogle, "Introduction" 11) and fiction and fact (Howells 108, Mighall 32). More specifically, Lovecraft's terror fiction confuses the stability and instability of locations while the opposition of familial security and insecurity is prominent in the genealogical terror of Gentry's *Anchorhead*.

The effect of the labyrinth is intense and mysterious. Unlike more immediate physical reactions to something shocking or grotesque, terror implies a profound threat which implicates comprehension's limits. The sublime, in turn, represents the awe that exists beyond comprehension. Eighteenth-century theorist Edmund Burke states that terror, which "robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning" is "the ruling principle" of the sublime, which he describes as "the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (57, 58, 39). Burke's conception of the sublime and its relationship to terror is frequently examined by literary critics (Boulton vii; Mishra 29; see Smith, *Gothic Literature* 10-13), in part because Burke claims that for terror to produce sublime effects it must be experienced "at certain distances," a metaphor which speaks to a reader's relationship to events in a narrative (Burke 40). Jerrold E. Hogle interprets Burke's distance metaphor as exclusive to fiction with the claim that terror must be "thoroughly artificial" to produce the "aesthetically worthwhile reaction" of sublime terror ("Introduction" 14). While the significance of 'distance' in the production of sublime terror predominantly relates to the reader's experience, a character also may be shown to experience sublime effects of terror after exiting the labyrinth. Botting illustrates this difference when he relates Burkean sublimity both to a reader's sense of the labyrinth's "vastness, intricacy, and indeterminacy" and to an exited character's resultant "bewilderment, perplexity," "inspiration" and "disorganization" in relation to the world ("Power in the Darkness" 250-51). The experience of the labyrinth is one of sublime terror for the Gothic character and possibly for the reader or, in the case of *Anchorhead*, the player.

H. P. Lovecraft's foundational concept of cosmic fear is a modernist version of sublime terror. In his essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature," Lovecraft describes cosmic fear as a mixture of fear, evil, wonder and curiosity and claims that to have cosmic fear in a story,

[a] certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space. (426)

This description braids essential fear of the unknown into early twentieth-century scientific concerns about the instability of Newtonian laws, the limits of the human brain and the possible contents of the universe. Unexplainable phenomena lead to dread because they encourage scientific enquiry but defeat the knowledge and understanding that such inquiry may produce. A character who experiences cosmic fear is both attracted to and repelled by the source of that fear, which may itself be explicitly evil or terrifying. Despite its modern trappings, cosmic fear as the “most terrible conception of the human brain” seemingly paraphrases Burke’s assertion that the sublime is “the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (39). In addition, the qualities of astonishment, admiration, reverence and respect which Burke attributes to sublime terror are visible in cosmic fear’s curious blend of fear and awe, a complex ambiguity which Noël Carroll relates to a “religious feeling” which restores primordial “human intuition[s] about the world” (Burke 57, Carroll 162-63).⁴⁶ Cosmic awe’s affinity with the literature of sublime terror is further emphasized by Lovecraft’s separation of the literature of cosmic awe from “mundanely gruesome” stories which employ more immediate emotional and physical reactions of disgust, a distinction which alludes to the horror/terror dichotomy proposed by the eighteenth-century Gothic novelist Ann Radcliffe (“Supernatural Horror in Literature” 426). Radcliffe contends that horror freezes and contracts the faculties of a reader while terror “expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life” (“On the Supernatural in Poetry”). Although Lovecraft does not employ Radcliffe’s dichotomous terms precisely in his writing, this allusion equates cosmic awe with terror, an effect his characters experience which may produce a sublime result in his readers.

In a similar contextualization, the poetics of the Gothic labyrinth govern the ontological threat which a coexisting reality poses for characters, a situation which is central to most of Lovecraft’s terror narratives. While a

⁴⁶ Carroll replaces the term ‘cosmic fear’ with ‘cosmic awe’ to better qualify the visionary qualities of Lovecraftian terror. I will also use the term cosmic awe as it most accurately captures the responses evoked in and by Lovecraft’s terror narratives and *Anchorhead*.

coexisting reality is dangerous because the beings or forces within it are potentially harmful to a character or humanity, the primary threat of the encounter lies in how proximity to another world in a liminal space collapses what are presented as psychologically necessary oppositions for the characters. For example, the opposition between rational, scientific knowledge and imagined, forbidden dreams blurs for the geologist narrator of *At the Mountains of Madness* when he views an inexplicable Antarctic mountain range (269-70). Characters who glimpse a coexisting reality in Lovecraft's stories are shown to experience cosmic awe because the collapse of oppositions is a paradox which prompts a sense of the relative meaninglessness, mental limitations and powerlessness of humanity. These experiences follow the poetics of the Gothic labyrinth.

The unrealized and realized labyrinths in Lovecraft's terror narratives include horrific beings at their centers who contribute to the development of distinct forms of cosmic awe in the characters. The former labyrinth type indicates an area which appears rational and logical to a character but which later inexplicably disappears; the disappearing location temporally mediates the opposition of 'real,' or stable and 'unreal,' or instable space. Characters encounter a horrific being at the figurative center of this labyrinth which mediates other needful oppositions of the narrative. Alternatively, the realized labyrinth refers to a location which is overtly irrational and contradictory to 'natural laws.' The horrific being glimpsed from the center of this liminal space of paradox does not serve as a site of collapsing oppositions, as in the unrealized labyrinth, but is rather entirely of the coexisting reality and therefore depicted as threateningly incomprehensible to characters. Characters' experiences at the center of either labyrinth are shown to prompt their immediate flight back to perceived non-labyrinthine areas in the narrative. Cosmic awe for the characters develops after they exit the labyrinth, though the form it takes depends on which labyrinth the character encountered. The reader's possible development of the sublime effects of cosmic awe may be similarly distinguishable by labyrinth type.

By rendering labyrinthine spaces and sublime terror in topical and timely forms, Lovecraft fulfills what Joyce Carol Oates terms the "tacit contract" between readers of genre fiction and the writer. The readers "understand that they will be manipulated, but the question is how? and when? and with what skill? and to what purpose?" (xiii). Given that *Anchorhead* is unquestionably a genre piece and heavily influenced by Lovecraft's work, the

questions in Oates' "tacit agreement" are particularly pertinent for anyone who plays the interactive fiction.

The Unrealized Labyrinth in "The Music of Erich Zann" and *Anchorhead*

In Lovecraft's terror fiction, the unrealized labyrinth is a location which initially appears as 'real' and stable as other locations in the narrative. While a reader may anticipate the unusual nature of the location, the character is depicted as ignorant of the site's labyrinthine properties prior to encountering the horrific being at the center of the area and experiencing the location's inexplicable disappearance. These terrifying events produce a particular cosmic awe for the character where all locations contain the threatening potential to collapse needful oppositions, given time. For the reader, the aesthetically intriguing threat of unknown forces in the everyday world may produce feelings of the sublime.⁴⁷ In *Anchorhead*, the digital poetics of the unrealized labyrinth function consistently but are delayed and dislocated across three locations in a manner which highlights the interactive fiction's transparent relationship to and distinction from Lovecraft's texts. While the Hidden Court area, a cul-de-sac in the town of *Anchorhead*, is what eventually disappears, the player character views the horrific being which signals a collapse of needful oppositions in a separate liminal area and she is shown to experience the terror of cosmic awe only once the player has guided her to *Anchorhead*'s epilogue. This postmodern extension of labyrinth poetics beyond a single location develops from the interactive fiction's authored and formal distinctions from Lovecraft's terror narratives. Featuring both an unrealized and realized labyrinth and configured to encourage player input via constant emphasis on a threatening but avoidable future, *Anchorhead* only fulfills the poetics of the labyrinth if the player achieves the correct winning ending. As the 'reward' for this accomplishment, in the domestic space of the epilogue the player character experiences a cosmic awe specifically governed by the digital poetics of the unrealized labyrinth. Although Lovecraftian cosmic awe typically indicates the epistemologically threatening instability of spaces, the player character's

⁴⁷ Examples of the unrealized labyrinth can be found in short stories such as "The Festival," "He" and the more well-known "The Music of Erich Zann."

female body and role as a wife become 'sites' of instability in the epilogue so that her depicted awe derives instead from family relationships.

Despite its otherwise rational, realistic appearance, the liminal quality of the unrealized labyrinth in Lovecraft's short story "The Music of Erich Zann" is suggested prior to the site's disappearance.⁴⁸ In this story the unrealized labyrinth is the Rue d'Auseil, which is bordered within the unnamed French city of the narrative both as a cul-de-sac and via the difficulty the character has in accessing it. The narrator describes the street as "almost a cliff, closed to all vehicles, consisting in several places of flights of steps, and ending at the top in a lofty ivied wall" (45). In addition to the area's spatial circumscription, the name d'Auseil also sets it apart as liminal. Donald Burleson argues that the word "Auseil," which is meaningless in French, might be construed from *au seuil*, or "at the threshold," a spatial condition which is synonymous with the experience of a liminal space (75).⁴⁹ With the street's disappearance indicated in the first sentence of the story, its set-apart location and telling name are likely to suggest liminal qualities to the reader. However, the narrator's descriptions of the street and the house he is shown to have lived in for several months indicate that the area was, prior to its disappearance, perceived as rational, mundane and otherwise indistinguishable from other parts of the city which the narrative presents realistically ("The Music of Erich Zann" 45-46, 48). For the character, this lack of distinction from other 'real' locations will be significant in the production of cosmic awe.

At the figurative center of the unrealized labyrinth and climax of the story, the collapse of what are depicted as necessary oppositions in the narrative occurs when the character glimpses a coexisting reality. Oppositions are blended and mediated by two framing devices which provide literal and figurative glimpses of the threats posed by the coexisting reality. The first frame is the window in the room belonging to the elderly viol player. Hoping for a panoramic view of the city, the narrator looks out of Zann's window and sees "no city spread below, and no friendly lights

⁴⁸ My arguments in this section will focus solely on "The Music of Erich Zann" as it contains an ideal example of the unrealized labyrinth.

⁴⁹ Unlike Turner's conception of a liminal space as a site of progression, Burleson describes the threshold in "The Music of Erich Zann" as a blockage or barrier where there is an anticipation of advancement but no possibility to accomplish it. See Turner, *Blazing the Trail* 49 and Burleson 75. Non-progressive liminality is endemic to the Gothic labyrinth.

gleaming from remembered streets, but only the blackness of space illimitable; unimagined space alive with motion and music, and having no semblance to anything on earth” (51). This view collapses oppositions of what are known and unknowable to the narrator. Specifically, the scene subverts a limited view with an infinite view, three-dimensional geography with an absence of geography and ‘dead’ outer space with living, moving, musical space. The narrator views this “chaos and pandemonium” in “terror,” for a moment before he attempts to clumsily back out of the room (51). The second frame which collapses oppositions is the being at the center of the labyrinth. Like the space of the labyrinth itself, Zann mediates opposing concepts and conditions. After looking out the window, the narrator blindly locates Zann in the dark room by his frenzied viol playing and figuratively glimpses with his hands “the ice-cold, stiffened, unbreathing face whose glassy eyes bulged uselessly into the void” (52). The horrifying paradox of lively death or deathly life has a powerful impact on the narrator, whose “[l]eaping, floating, flying” down the stairs and the Rue d’Auseil to “healthier streets and boulevards” is a sharp contrast to his slow and clumsy actions after the view from the window (52). This escape to the ‘real’ also suggests the narrator’s new sense of the Rue d’Auseil as a location separate from perceived reality.

The power of the labyrinth as a Gothic convention lies partly in the immediate horror at its center but primarily in its ability to generate sublime terror. The key catalyst of cosmic awe in the unrealized labyrinth is its disappearance, because this temporal change is shown to permanently blur the known and unknowable for the narrator. Structured as a narrative frame for the events in the Rue d’Auseil, the narrator’s description of consulting maps, interviewing individuals and exploring the city in an attempt to relocate the street introduces and concludes the story (45, 52). What is terrifying for the narrator in “The Music of Erich Zann” is the prospect that other places may also be horrific liminal spaces.⁵⁰ In this sense, mapping and walking the city signifies two attempts to quell this terror. First, the narrator’s efforts to locate the Rue d’Auseil may be seen as an act to reestablish the oppositions collapsed there, either by coming to understand

⁵⁰ Morgan implies that Lovecraft’s fiction most readily represents this Gothic “rhetorical practice” of subverting the realism of specific locations. For subjects in a narrative, the effect of this subversion is that “the assurance afforded by real place dissolves” 217.

the fantastic elements of the location and thereby making the unknowable known or by discovering that the location is indistinct from other places in the city and thereby establishing a reassuring boundary between the empirically known and the imaginative unknowable. Second, the narrator's cartographical actions also represent an attempt to reinforce the scope of the known by ensuring that there is no trace of the unknowable in other areas of the city. The latter attempt is futile, given the depicted impossibility of determining the unknowable in the Rue d'Auseil prior to its disappearance, and with the street gone the narrator cannot ultimately accomplish the first goal. This dilemma produces cosmic awe. The narrator's unassuageable curiosity and wonder, evident in the psychological humiliation he is shown to feel at not finding the street, is tempered by the fear which is reflected in his contrary assertion that he is not sorry about this failure (45, 52). The sublime terror of the unrealized labyrinth for the narrator is that all places have the future potential to collapse needful oppositions.

For the reader, this quandary is the potential source of a sublime experience. The opposition of the known and the unknowable which the narrative questions derives from central lacunae for the reader: why did the Rue d'Auseil disappear? Is the narrator's account unreliable or did the street really vanish? Questions about the narrative reflect potential uncertainties in the reading experience. Carroll describes the appeal of experiencing this sort of Lovecraftian uncertainty as a confirmation of "a deep-seated human conviction about the world, viz., that it contains vast unknown forces" (162). Paraphrasing Lovecraft, Oates details a more specific appeal to western readers of the last ninety years when she posits that cosmic awe is a product of "an age that has ceased to believe collectively in the supernatural while retaining the primitive instinct to do so, in eccentric, atomized ways" (xiv). Both scholars emphasize that Lovecraft's Gothic narratives produce an aesthetic pleasure related to core human apprehensions. At the same time, Oates' juxtaposition of collective belief and eccentric instinct implies that this pleasure is a guilty one, or at least highly personal. Such an instinctual yet subjective experience reflects the effects of the Burkean sublime.

In *Anchorhead*, the Hidden Court area is an unrealized labyrinth. As with the Rue d'Auseil, the area is demarcated as a liminal site for the player prior to its disappearance but otherwise is described as rational and realistic to the player character. Consisting of two rooms which include Hidden Court and a new-age trinket shop called The Cauldron, the Hidden Court area is

conceptually a cul-de-sac in the town and proves difficult to access. The area is entered via the Twisting Lane room, a challenging space both in terms of its description and allowable player character movement. In the Twisting Lane,

[t]he lane narrows here to little more than a badly cobbled sidewalk as it wends its way up through a series of tortuous bends and switchbacks. In some places, the street is so steep that steps have been cut into it, worn down over the years and slick with moss. Your progress is blocked at the top of the street by a blank brick wall.

While the player character is shown to be confused by this spatial arrangement, the description of this steep street alludes to the access to the Rue d'Auseil and may signal the potential temporal alterity of this area for a player who has read Lovecraft's story.⁵¹ Movement in the area creates a further distinction between the player character's logical confusion and the player's illogical difficulties. With forward progress blocked by the brick wall, retreating from the Twisting Lane room proves unexpectedly challenging. Since the player character 'moved' northwest into the room, the player may be surprised to discover that commanding the player character to exit the room by moving southeast only produces a description of the player character's ineffective, confused wanderings. Once the player guesses the correct direction for exiting the room, the space is only confusing at the level of description. A similar separation of the player's likely suspicion about the liminality of the area and the player character's sense that the location is indistinguishable from other realistic areas in town occurs once the Hidden Court area becomes accessible on the second day the player character is in *Anchorhead*.⁵² At this point the brick wall is no longer blank but contains a graffito of an arrow indicating a passage to Hidden Court which the player character has "never noticed before" but which the player will probably regard as a new passage (Twisting Lane). Since the player character is represented as having just moved to *Anchorhead* at the start of the interactive fiction it is reasonable that she be bewildered by the Twisting

⁵¹ Further allusions to "The Music of Erich Zann" may occur in the interactive fiction, including an occasional addition to the room description which describes the sound of violin music in the area as well as the proprietor's referential comments about the violin on display in The Cauldron. Though the viol in Lovecraft's story is not a violin, in *The Thing on the Doorstep and Other Weird Stories* Joshi notes that it is a common mistake to assume that it is 377, note 3.

⁵² Progress through *Anchorhead* is divided into three 'days.' Each day is completed not via the passage of time but via the completion of specific actions.

Lane. In addition, the two rooms in the Hidden Court area are described with realistic details which are appropriate to the late 1990s time period of the interactive fiction setting and they function like standard rooms in the work. While the bordered, allusive and liminal qualities of the Hidden Court area may hint at a labyrinth for the player, the player character is not shown to distinguish the area from other standard areas in the interactive fiction's setting.

Unlike Lovecraft's unrealized labyrinth, the figurative center of the Hidden Court area in *Anchorhead* does not provide a horrifying glimpse of a coexisting reality, nor does it include the collapse of needful oppositions or a being who mediates such oppositions. Instead, these aspects of the unrealized labyrinth convention are delayed and dislocated to the area which functions as the realized labyrinth. The extension of labyrinth poetics is seemingly acknowledged in *The Cauldron* when the proprietor of the shop dismisses a symbolic Lovecraftian gateway to another world and issues cryptic warnings about the future. If the player commands the player character to ask the proprietor about the tarot cards on display, the non-player character's reply is:

"The cards are actually very delicate, thinly sliced ivory. Almost transparent." [. . .] He leans toward you, offering you a salesman's conspiratorial wink. "They say," he whispers, "that this very deck was used and endorsed by the infamous medium –" he frowns. "Not Blavatski; the other one. What was her name? Anyway, it is said that by shining a light through the cards and projecting the image onto a wall, you may open gateways to other worlds. Frankly, I don't buy it." (*Cauldron*)

Two allusions to Lovecraft appear in this description: Madame Blavatsky is credited as inspiring Lovecraft's conception of the hidden meanings in everyday environments (Fyhr, *Död men drömmande* [*Dead But Dreaming*] 140) and the "gateway" to a coexisting reality is reminiscent of Zann's window.⁵³ To borrow from Linda Hutcheon's discussion of how the postmodern develops from the modern, the overt intertextuality of this scene, including the proprietor's off-hand dismissal of Blavatsky and gateways to other worlds, signals *Anchorhead's* postmodern "reliance, however ironic, on tradition" (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 27). The proprietor's description of the tarot cards, like the allusions to "The Music of

⁵³ Examples of other Lovecraft works which feature literal or figurative window 'gateways' include "He," "Polaris" and "The Moon-Bog."

Erich Zann,” may therefore ironically suggest poetics of the labyrinth to the player who is familiar with Lovecraft’s work, though not, apparently, to the player character as she does not respond. Similarly, if the player commands the player character to question the proprietor about various topics his replies are full of oddities and warnings which communicate separate messages to the player and player character. The Verlac family are “a sticky-tendriled bunch,” Croseus Verlac is dramatically likened to the devil and although Edward Verlac’s children were murdered the proprietor believes “it might have been so much worse.” In addition, the proprietor’s assertion that the player character’s husband Michael will need help facing the “dark times” ahead and his explication of a tarot card which represents “catastrophic change, disaster, an overturning of all you once knew” indicate potential future collapsing oppositions (Cauldron). Although these enigmatic statements represent possible threats for the player character, who is shown not to respond to them, they symbolize ‘future’ challenges in the interactive fiction for the player to overcome or avoid. The focus on future possibilities also suggests the extension of labyrinth poetics.

Terror’s extension out of the unrealized labyrinth is attributable to the configuration of Gentry’s interactive fiction in contrast to Lovecraft’s printed narratives. As a digital media form which is ‘played,’ interactive fiction encourages player involvement by providing possible or potential ‘paths’ through the work. The byproduct of this support structure for traversal is an emphasis on an uncertain future which may be altered in the eventual narrative produced, a formal distinction from concerns for the reader of a printed narrative. Specifically, Gentry’s work diverges from two typical narrative trends in Lovecraft’s fiction. First, whereas most Lovecraft terror narratives end with a character’s sense of fatalistic futility in the face of the supremacy of a coexisting reality (see Punter, *The Literature of Terror 2: 40*), *Anchorhead* is configured to encourage and allow the player to overcome the primary threats from the other world.⁵⁴ Second, most Lovecraft narratives climax in the center of a single labyrinth, with the character’s terrified escape and eventual cosmic awe serving as the conclusion. *Anchorhead* features two Lovecraftian labyrinths which exist

⁵⁴ The range of possible simulation endings includes several scenarios of premature death for the player character, ‘losing’ scenarios at the climax of the work and two ‘winning’ scenarios, of which only one allows access to the epilogue.

well prior to climactic events in the story produced by the interactive fiction. Taken together, the media form's emphasis on an uncertain future and *Anchorhead's* configuration as a winnable, multi-labyrinth work influence the delay and dislocation of labyrinthine poetics to match the narrative which the player creates in traversing the interactive fiction.

The extended effects of the unrealized labyrinth are evident in labyrinthine areas encountered later in the interactive fiction. The horrific being who mediates the collapse of needful oppositions at the center of the unrealized labyrinth is dislocated to the area of the realized labyrinth in *Anchorhead*. This being is glimpsed through the series of spy holes in the Narrow Corridor area, a secret passage in the Verlac mansion. As the player character 'looks' through each hole to view a different room in the house, the software's replies provide increasing evidence that the supernatural figure of Croseus Verlac has possessed the player character's husband Michael. In the Children's Bedroom Michael acts strangely upset at not finding an item in an old jewelry box and touches the crib "as if visiting old memories," despite the house being as new to him as it is to the player character. In the next room the player character surveils the Sitting Room "directly through the eyes" of the portrait of Croseus Verlac which hangs there. As Michael regards the portrait with odd familiarity, the player character reaches the "sickening realization" that his expression is one of pleasure, admiration and "vanity," as if he were "preen[ing] himself in a mirror." Finally, in the Wine Cellar, the collapse of the narratively opposed figures of Michael and Croseus is confirmed when the player character views the "crazed, red-rimmed eyes" on Michael which are unmistakably linked to Croseus Verlac in several other places in the interactive fiction.

The oppositions of youth and (extreme) age, love and hate, good and evil and known and unknowable collapse in this mediated figure and produce horrific effects in the player character.⁵⁵ Discovering Michael's vanity in the Sitting Room, the player character "nearly jerk[s] away from the spyhole [sic], heart pounding wildly," while the image of the being with the red-rimmed eyes in the Wine Cellar produces a stronger desire to "recoil" from the sight in alarm. These physical reactions gesture toward the desire to flee

⁵⁵ Croseus Verlac is depicted as a sinister being with unexplained supernatural abilities who has existed for more than four hundred years by occupying the bodies of male Verlac descendants from every second generation. The pattern for this form of survival is cyclical: towards the end of one of his physical lives, Croseus impregnates his current daughter and then jumps into the new body of his son/grandson at birth.

which the narrator fulfils in leaving the Rue d'Auseil, but their diminished effect signals that it is not possible to immediately escape to a Lovecraftian 'real' because in *Anchorhead* the player character's 'reality' is grounded in her relationship to her husband, not a particular place. As the player can command the player character to rescue Michael and banish Croseus to another dimension later in the interactive fiction, the final elements of the poetics of the unrealized labyrinth are further delayed and dislocated until after those actions have been accomplished.

The crucial element in the poetics of the Gothic labyrinth is its ability to engender sublime terror outside the labyrinth. In the domestic environment presented in *Anchorhead*'s epilogue, the cosmic awe which the player character experiences is specifically related to her female body and role as a wife. Based on the room description supplied when the epilogue begins, the player character is in the upstairs of her home with Michael waiting downstairs on this "momentous event" (Home). Michael occasionally calls to the player character in excited anticipation while the player character is described as eager to bring him the "wondrous news" of a positive pregnancy test (Home, Your Bathroom). Despite the happy excitement of this scene, however, the player character's fear is evident in random replies which appear as the player guides her through the epilogue. She experiences a "cool wave of uneasiness" without knowing why and is gripped by a "nameless, formless apprehension" which leaves her short of breath and questioning why she is so frightened "on what should be such a joyous occasion" (Home). When the player character is directed to examine the labyrinthine framing window of the home pregnancy test, she experiences 'horror' at the possible evil she sees:

You stare down at the little plastic indicator, and an inexplicable horror seizes you as you recall Edward Verlac's last words: *And besides; who could say whether the crafty devil Croseus might not concoct some new way to enter the world, through a new body -- through that of one of my daughters, perhaps? The ritual has always demanded a grandson, but Croseus was never one to let such a trivial inconvenience stop him. He would find a way. He always returns to his blood.* The window is pink. The test is positive. (Your Bathroom, original italics)

With her baby a potential vessel to be possessed by Croseus, oppositions once again collapse and the evil source of her curiosity, wonder and fear is provided. As the wife of a man with supernatural evil in his bloodline and future mother to potential evil, the incessant unease and uncertainty of terror is very specific to the player character's female body and family

situation. This emphasis on domestic, corporeal terror marks a notable shift from what Oates describes as Lovecraft's "asexual," virtually women-less tales where environmental terrors may be figured internally for human subjects only via mental agitation or dreams (Oates x). Though the shift from male to female character suggests a possible political critique of Lovecraft's narratives, *Anchorhead* nevertheless adheres to traditional Gothic conceptions of female terror. Anne Williams notes that marriage-related terror is prominent in Gothic fiction and Carol Clover suggests that the sexuality of the female body, especially as a vessel or portal for evil, is central to the history of the genre (135-36, 330-31). *Anchorhead's* overt shift to a female narrative subject arguably impacts the broader shift from spatial sources of terror in Lovecraft's fiction to relational sources in the interactive fiction.⁵⁶

In spite of the dislocated extension of the convention, the cosmic awe based on family relationships which the player character is shown to experience is specifically governed by the digital poetics of the unrealized labyrinth. The threat of Croseus possessing a child was anticipated in the proprietor's veiled comment that Edward's children were better off dead, suggested in Michael/Croseus' attention to the crib in the Children's Bedroom and reinforced with the player character's remembrance of Edward's worry in the epilogue. With this familial web of threat tracing the initial functions of the unrealized labyrinth, the player character's implied cosmic awe is recognizable as the fulfillment of the convention's poetics. For Lovecraft's characters, the effect of the unrealized labyrinth is that all places have the future potential to collapse needful oppositions. In *Anchorhead*, as a postmodern work using and subverting Lovecraft's labyrinthine form, this broad fear of what time may bring is personal rather than spatial. The player character is suggested to be afraid for her fetus, for herself as the incubating body and possibly for her husband. Directly following the reply describing the positive pregnancy test, the player character overhears Michael telling himself: "Oh, I hope it's a little girl [. . .] I've always wanted to have a little girl" (Your Bathroom). What may be read as a well-meaning statement of fatherly excitement seemingly becomes a dark echo of Croseus' incestuous actions in this context. This implication is reinforced by the fact that it is the

⁵⁶ A similar focus on the anxieties of family relationships is developed in my analysis of *Madam Spider's Web* in chapter three.

last reply prior to ending, presumably leaving the player character to experience cosmic awe generated by relational sources in the unrealized labyrinth.

The unrealized labyrinth in *Anchorhead*, while coherent with the poetics of the Gothic labyrinth, demonstrates both a development from and undermining of the same narrative device in Lovecraft's "The Music of Erich Zann." Lovecraft's unrealized labyrinth functions in a single, powerful location and fosters fear and wonder in the character regarding the potential future collapse of oppositions in places. In turn, readers may experience an instinctual sublime related to modernist tenets such as existential isolation in an unknown, potentially fragmented physical world.⁵⁷ Conversely, the dislocated and delayed poetics of the unrealized labyrinth in *Anchorhead* reflect contextual issues for traversal as well as a transparent, subversive use of Lovecraft's trope. Although the player character exhibits fear and wonder following the Lovecraftian form of cosmic awe from the unrealized labyrinth, the potential future collapse of oppositions is figured not through spaces but through her unborn child, self and husband. In this sense, Gentry's interactive fiction presents a postmodern relationship to Lovecraft's fiction which is nonetheless coherent with traditional Gothic conceptions of female terror.

The Realized Labyrinth in "The Call of Cthulhu" and *Anchorhead*

Distinct from the covert unrealized labyrinth, the realized labyrinth in Lovecraft's Gothic stories is a demarcated area which overtly collapses needful oppositions for characters. As part of its poetics, cosmic awe from the realized labyrinth completely undermines a character's world view as well as the means through which he is able to conceive of the world itself. For the reader, this labyrinthine collapse is reflected at the level of narrative form and may produce imagined epistemological contradictions on a vast scale which gesture toward the sublime.⁵⁸ In Gentry's postmodern interactive fiction, the digital poetics of the realized labyrinth reflect the

⁵⁷ Though Lovecraft's antiquated literary aesthetics are also evident in his fiction, the author's modernist influences are documented by Gayford in "The Artist as Antaeus" and more fully explored by Fyhr in *Död men drömmande*.

⁵⁸ Examples of the realized labyrinth can be found in the short story "The Call of Cthulhu" and the novella *At the Mountains of Madness*.

poetics of the convention in Lovecraft's work, albeit once again in a dislocated, extended form as the player is an active agent in fulfilling those poetics. Through successful player character embodiment over the course of the work, the player creates an investment in the narrative events in the interactive fiction which serves as the contrastive foundation for a forced distance to terror in the epilogue. While the player character is shown to experience cosmic awe derived from the unrealized labyrinth, the player encounters the basis for the realized labyrinth's cosmic awe in the formal interactive fiction procedures which create a critical split between the player character and player.

In Lovecraft's terror fiction, the realized labyrinth excessively represents its demarcated, liminal and contradictory qualities upon discovery. In "The Call of Cthulhu," the realized labyrinth is located on an uncharted island in the Pacific Ocean.⁵⁹ Discovered by a group of sailors, the island city of R'lyeh collapses the boundary between certainty and uncertainty in a manner that is immediately frightening to the characters (166). The sailor Johansen's account of finding the island includes a description of "elusive angles of carven rock where a second glance shewed concavity after the first shewed convexity" and other empirically-challenging discoveries in which "all the rules of matter and perspective seemed upset" (166, 167). Alongside the blend of fixity and fluctuation in a mineral substance or the equally disturbing conflation of reliable and unreliable perception, the "titan oozy blocks which could have been no mortal staircase" which the sailors clumsily ascend indicate a breached distinction between what is perceived as earthly and unearthly size (166). The contradictions of the realized labyrinth mediate contact with a coexisting reality upon first discovery.

As an entity from the coexisting reality, the horrifying being glimpsed through a framing device in the center of the realized labyrinth collapses oppositions to the extent that its very existence is shown to be a psychological and physical threat to the characters. The narrator who retells Johansen's account of finding the island city of R'lyeh describes the emergence of Cthulhu through an immense carved door:

It lumbered slobberingly into sight and gropingly squeezed Its gelatinous green immensity through the black doorway[. . .] Poor Johansen's

⁵⁹ My arguments in this section will focus solely on "The Call of Cthulhu" as it features an ideal example of the realized labyrinth.

handwriting almost gave out when he wrote of this. Of the six men who never reached the ship, he thinks two perished of pure fright in that accursed instant. The Thing cannot be described—there is no language for such abysses of shrieking and immemorial lunacy, such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order. A mountain walked or stumbled. (167)

While the area of R'lyeh confuses perceived certainty and uncertainty, this being affects oppositions which are portrayed as essential in the human world view. With empirically known, describable human reality subverted by inconceivable, impossible to describe alien existence, Cthulhu represents a psychological threat so extreme that two characters die at the sight. The magnitude of these collapsed oppositions is demonstrated in language, which is not merely too limited or undeveloped to fit the task, but wholly “alien to the reality being expressed” (see St. Armand, “Synchronistic Worlds” 303). Such irreconcilable incompatibility underpins the totality of the threat which Cthulhu represents for the characters as it implicates the limits of the human cognitive processes which have produced language in the first place. This profoundly horrifying paradox prompts the sailors’ frenzied retreat from the island and back to known ‘reality.’

Like the unrealized labyrinth, the intense terror which Cthulhu inspires is secondary to the cosmic awe which characters experience in the narrative setting’s familiar reality. This distance to terror is figured literally for the sailor Johansen after his return to Norway and figuratively for Thurston, the narrator of “The Call of Cthulhu” who, as part of his project to research Cthulhu, reads Johansen’s account. As Johansen’s tale gives proof to the ontological threat which other material collected by the narrator only hints at, Thurston expresses his own persistent wonder and terror when he claims: “I have looked upon all that the universe has to hold of horror, and even the skies of spring and the flowers of summer must ever afterward be poison to me” (169). Thurston’s fear and dislike of this knowledge is visible in his attempt to contain and forget it by placing all of his research into a tin box which he hopes his executors will keep hidden. In the very next paragraph, however, the chronic irritation of cosmic awe is apparent in Thurston’s contradictory curiosity about the fate of Cthulhu, who undoubtedly “waits and dreams in the deep,” and condemnation of this curiosity with the exclamation: “I must not and cannot think!” (169). Focus on “the deep” demonstrates that cosmic awe from the realized labyrinth, while undoubtedly spatial, does not create a worry about the hidden threats of seemingly real places, as the unrealized labyrinth does. Instead, the sublime

terror of the realized labyrinth is that knowledge of the full alterity of the coexisting reality psychologically undermines the nature and grounds of the character's knowledge of the world as well as the means through which he apprehends it. In this awe-filled, mental double bind the character is rendered powerless to act.

For the reader, the narrative's questioning of epistemological limits and the allure of the unknowable Cthulhu may provide an experience of the sublime. The bottom of the ocean and the depths of space represent unknown frontiers of human knowledge which might effectively engender fearful, imaginative meditations of the known and unknown. Oates describes this appeal as an inherent part of the recurring fantasy of stories such as "The Call of Cthulhu," where "an entire alien civilization lurks on the underside of our known world, as a night-gaunt may lurk beneath a child's bed in the darkness, or as mankind's tragically divided nature may lurk beneath civilization's veneer" (xii). Such imagined yet immediate terrors indicate a vast overturning of the everyday world which may be alluring in its force and scope. More directly, the breakdown of language in "The Call of Cthulhu" implicates the narrative itself as broken or ineffectual for the reader, a meta-reflexive function of the collapsed oppositions of the Gothic labyrinth which Hogle and Botting have argued as central to its poetics ("The Restless Labyrinth" 163, "Power in the Darkness" 249-50). For a reader, the linguistic dilemma of the narrative might seem to aesthetically mirror the uncertainty of the characters' terrible encounter in a way which may heighten an emotional response. The reader's potential cosmic awe derives both from the narrative's content and its form.

While not as remote as the island city of R'lyeh, the Narrow Corridor area of the Verlac mansion in *Anchorhead* is nonetheless a set-apart location which overtly collapses oppositions for the player character and the player. Conceptually on the periphery of what is depicted as a standard space in the interactive fiction environment, the Narrow Corridor area is a series of six rooms which make up a hidden passage behind the fireplace in the Study. In the interactive fiction it is suggested that Croseus Verlac built the passage to secretly observe particular rooms in the house and also track the course of an extraterrestrial entity via a telescope-like device. Upon entering the area, the player character's confusion is evident in the room description: "The passage, no more than two feet wide at its widest point, bends and twist [sic] at confusing angles, making it hard to tell which direction you're heading in."

Though not expressly threatening, this collapse of navigational certainty and uncertainty which the player character experiences may allude to the ‘elusive angles’ on R’lyeh for the player, especially as s/he attempts to navigate through the rooms. Contrasted to standard rooms in the interactive fiction which typically have unique names and separate descriptions, nearly all the rooms in the Narrow Corridor fail to indicate or facilitate player character advancement. Instead, five of the rooms have the same room name (Narrow Corridor) as well as the same room description. An effect of this is that if the player character is commanded to move from one of the Narrow Corridor rooms to another one the player is likely to be unsure whether movement occurred, which demonstrates a blurring of the player’s perception between movement and stasis. In three of these five seemingly identical rooms one additional statement about a spy hole in the wall is added to the room description, but rather than acting as a landmark this additional statement is also repeated exactly in each of the three rooms. Room descriptions in the Narrow Corridor area collapse needful oppositions for the player character and player.

Alongside this contradiction of the praxis of how standard rooms in the interactive fiction are identified, the realized labyrinth’s allowable movement patterns collapse oppositions between certainty and uncertainty for the player. In particular, moving the player character in an intentional direction is impossible as the rooms are not connected in the same conceptually logical manner as standard rooms. Standard rooms in the interactive fiction may be represented on a simple map which the player can use to move the player character in an intentional direction. Allowable directions, typically described as exits in room descriptions, include compass directions such as north, south, east, and so forth, as well as up and down. Once directions between rooms are established it is easy to back track to a previous room by entering a sequence of opposite directions. In the Narrow Corridor rooms, however, no room exits are listed and allowable movement in one direction does not entail the usual consequence that movement in the opposite direction will return the player character to the previous room. For example, from the first Narrow Corridor room, if the player commands the player character to go west then she comes to a Narrow Corridor room with a hole in the wall. If the player character is then commanded to move east she will not return to the previous room, but will instead encounter a new room with a hole in the wall (although the room descriptions are identical, which may

confuse the player). As this undermines player-learned, rational navigational procedures, the realized labyrinth is likely to make the player react with caution and even irritation.

The Narrow Corridor area presents one final contradiction of standard interactive fiction rules which designates it as a threatening liminal space for the player. Conceptually, the rooms in this area are frustrating to represent on a map, based on the directions of allowable movement. For instance, one successful path through the Narrow Corridor area consists of the following movement commands (with the player character beginning in the Study): southwest, west, east, northwest, southwest, southeast, southeast. For the player, this path indicates the collapse of the distinction between two-way, 'straight line' connections and one-way, 'curved line' connections between rooms.⁶⁰ A more pronounced collapse of needful oppositions is apparent in the spatial relationship between one Narrow Corridor room and the Children's Bedroom. The spy hole in the Narrow Corridor room is located "half way up one wall," but in using it the player character is described as looking "straight down at the bed from the middle of the ceiling" in the Children's Bedroom. This paradox abolishes the distinction between horizontal and vertical, adding to the other specific collapsed oppositions which signal a melding of certainty and uncertainty in the realized labyrinth. As a space which explicitly confuses the player character and contradicts learned player spatial apprehension and movement strategies, the altered interactive fiction rules and procedures in the realized labyrinth hint at a possible coexisting reality in the interactive fiction environment.

Like Cthulhu, the horrifying being glimpsed through a framing device in the center of the realized labyrinth collapses oppositions which are so fundamental that the player character is shown to experience a psychological shock. This highly Lovecraftian entity wholly of the coexisting reality is glimpsed via the telescope-like device in the aptly named sixth room of the Narrow Corridor area, the Observatory. Ialdabaoloth (the being) is described as a "comet [. . .] streaking toward Earth" which is paradoxically "ALIVE,

⁶⁰ All of the features described so far are common aspects of an interactive fiction 'maze.' The maze convention is often seen as a cliché due to its long usage, and tends to be negatively viewed as dull and repetitive in interactive fiction design discourse. See Granada, "Where Mazes Came From"; and "Maze." Many interactive fiction reviewers make it a habit of warning players if a maze appears in a work, as Short does in her review of *Anchorhead* when she refers to the Narrow Corridor maze as "gratuitous but mercifully small." Short's criticism is qualified, however, by her professed disinterest in Lovecraft or horror; the Narrow Corridor maze is not gratuitous but coherently reflects the poetics of the (Lovecraftian) Gothic labyrinth.

[with] tendrils that must be hundreds, thousands of miles long streaming before it, reaching out to grasp and strangle and devour whole worlds.” Oppositions of mineral and animal substance as well as earthly and unearthly size collapse in this description and the player character is represented to pass out at the sight. The psychological impact of witnessing Ialdabaoth is evident in the player character’s later inability to comprehend the being:

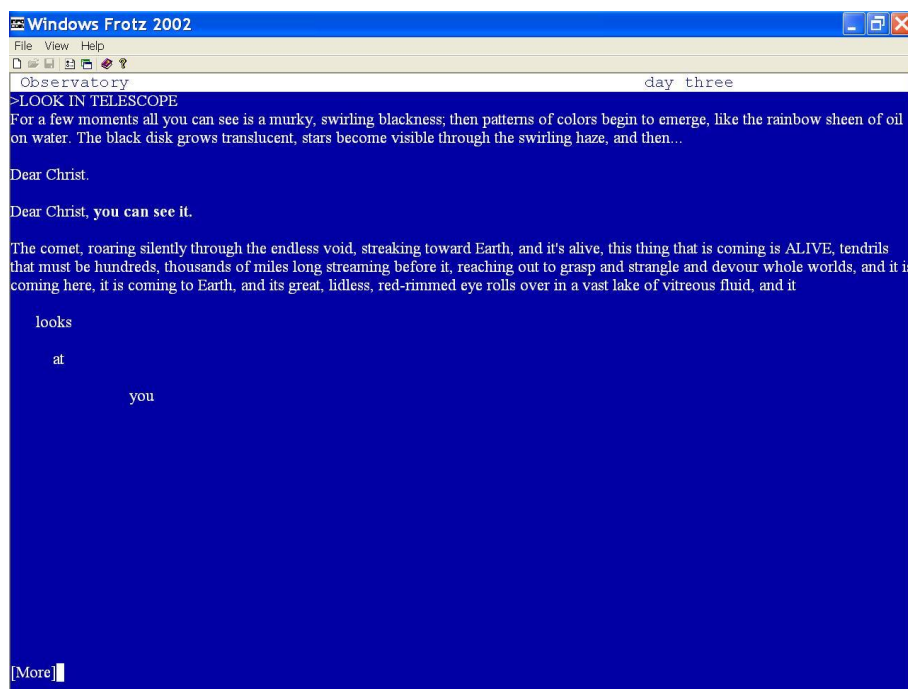
You’re not sure what, exactly, you just witnessed; whether it was a genuine astronomical phenomenon, or a hallucination, or the actual form of some Dark God from the Outer Reaches, come to devour the world. You’re not even entirely sure you remember what it looked like. (Observatory)

Empirically known, describable experience and inconceivable, indescribable alien existence collapse in the player character’s inability to remember details about the being or distinguish it as a scientific, imaginative or religious object. Unlike the immediate proximity of Cthulhu in Lovecraft’s short story, Ialdabaoth is viewed as a distant, potential, future threat in the winnable interactive fiction. Despite this distance, the enormity of the threat which the being poses for the player character is evident in her loss of consciousness.

The being in the realized labyrinth also simulates a threat to the player as the reply describing the entity disrupts basic formal structures of the interactive fiction. In “The Call of Cthulhu,” the narrator’s complaint about the inadequacy of language reflects a potential fragmentation at the level of narrative. In *Anchorhead*, a text-based interactive fiction, language and the software interface are symbolically threatened by Ialdabaoth.⁶¹ The reply which introduces the being demonstrates this in two ways. First, the description of the entity is markedly different from all prior replies in the work. While the description begins with the usual block paragraphs, individual words in the sentence at the end of one paragraph are spread out down the screen of the graphic user interface. This distributed sentence, including the isolated words rendered here in italics, reads “[. . .] its great, lidless, red-rimmed eye rolls over in a vast lake of vitreous fluid, and it *looks at you.*” The graphical scattering of these three words emphasizes the

⁶¹ Like ‘Cthulhu,’ the name ‘Ialdabaoth’ is emblematic of an alterity which is threatening because it is not easily appropriated into human linguistic systems. For discussions of how the name Cthulhu indicates otherness or more explicitly signifies a break from known human worlds, see Jackson 39-40; St. Armand, “Synchronistic Worlds” 303; and Joshi, *A Subtler Magick* 128.

potential impact of each word while indicating a ‘slow-down’ in the player character’s comprehension and ability to explain what is happening. For the player, the collapse of the previously necessary opposition between complete, consistently structured textual response and incomplete, inconsistently arranged textual response may signify a threat to the systematic running of the interactive fiction.



In this screenshot of Michael Gentry’s *Anchorhead*, the disruptive threat which Ialdabaoth represents to the player character is formally indicated to the player via the suddenly fragmented presentation of output text.

Second, standard interactive fiction output procedure is also altered. Normally, once the player types and enters a command, the command and the program’s reply move upward on the screen. In this manner the textual record of recent exchanges constantly fills the screen, and as the player enters further commands at the bottom, the record disappears off the screen at the top. When the player commands the player character to look in the telescope, this pattern is subverted in an arresting manner. The initial change is that the reply occurs not immediately above the command prompt but at the very top of the screen, with the isolated words trailing down to

approximately the vertical midpoint. The bottom half of the screen is blank except for the notation “[MORE]” in the lower left corner which indicates that the player may only press a key to continue. As this has not happened before during traversal, the threat implied when Ialdabaoloth gazes upon the player character, the unexpected amount of blank screen and the promise of more happening on the next screen make this a potentially thrilling, puzzling and unnerving moment for the player. Pressing a key sends the description of Ialdabaoloth off the top of the screen and brings up a new screen which is blank except for a short description at the very bottom. This is the description of the player character’s confused recollection, prefaced by an indication that she passed out. These blank screens are disruptive to traversal because they obliterate the record of previous exchanges which the player usually relies on when entering new commands. The collapse of the needful opposition between expected, textually-rich, player-steerable procedural routine and unexpected, textually-nullifying, player-limiting progression through the work gestures towards an ending or even a shut down in the interactive fiction. As the linguistic limitation in “The Call of Cthulhu” implies a potential narrative breakdown for the reader, the altered output procedure implies the Gothic labyrinth’s meta-reflexive fragmentation of *Anchorhead* for the player. Within this suggestion of fragmentation the player character’s conceptual distance to Ialdabaoloth remains significant, as an immediate interactive fiction shut down is exactly what happens if the player fails to avert the being’s coming to earth towards the end of the interactive fiction. In the realized labyrinth Ialdabaoloth stands for an incompatible force which is represented as psychologically and physically threatening to the player character as well as a symbolic obstacle to the running of the interactive fiction.

As with the unrealized labyrinth, the digital poetics of the realized labyrinth are not confined to one area but extended through the interactive fiction. Programmed to emphasize a range of future possibilities as a means of encouraging traversal, *Anchorhead*’s Narrow Corridor area and the horror of Ialdabaoloth are steps in the poetics of the realized labyrinth which do not produce the effects of sublime terror until much later, after Ialdabaoloth’s guiding beacon has been destroyed, Croseus has been defeated and the player character is moved to the domestic space of the epilogue. The process required to reach the epilogue can be interpreted as progressively removing uncertainty in the course of traversing the interactive fiction by effectively

governing the player character interface. The time and investment spent traversing the work to this point represents the player's contribution to and experience of the narrative. Helping to foster this artificial media form provides the player with a relational perspective which is both invested in and at a certain distance from the player character's terror in the epilogue, a position specific to *Anchorhead* as an *Interactive Gothic* which literally simulates and may generate distinct Burkean sublime terror for the player.

In the epilogue, *Anchorhead* contributes to a player's experience of cosmic awe by comprehensively subverting the player's ability to embody the player character. Subversion is evident in that the player character's perception of the environment seems divided from the player's and the player's agency is severely limited. The epilogue's initial description conceptually presents a bathroom to the north, a bedroom to the east and a downstairs area. Despite the room exits supplied and implied in the description, an attempt to move the player character to the bedroom is blocked with a response that there is "nothing important" in there and a command to go downstairs is hindered by the player character's desire to wait until she "has something to tell Michael" about the pregnancy test (Home). Restrictions to movement based on the player character's decisions occur so infrequently in the interactive fiction prior to this point that the player is likely to regard this as odd and possibly frustrating.⁶² In addition, the epilogue's initial room has the strangely too-broad title of "Home," despite the fact that other rooms in the home are conceptually attached to it, and the description of Your Bathroom as an "ordinary [. . .] normal, safe, familiar place" overemphasizes security in a fashion which is distinct from other room descriptions in the interactive fiction. With the domestic connotations of 'home' expanded and Your Bathroom described with subjective qualities, the player character's perspective of the environment seems emphasized. Aside from the unusual restrictions to movement, the player's inability to share in this perspective is demonstrated by the lack of choices presented in the epilogue. Able to do little except move the player character to Your Bathroom, pick up the pregnancy test and examine the window, the player is reduced to a severely limited role in guiding the player character forward. Given the player character's stated apprehensions and the

⁶² In his review of the work, Stevens implies that player character emotions and reactions are so sparingly depicted in *Anchorhead* that they will likely stand out for the player.

player's possible knowledge of Lovecraft's narrative endings, this hindrance to player character embodiment occurs when the player character, an entity the player has a developed investment in, appears to be most threatened. In creating this division in the primary relationship in the interactive fiction, *Anchorhead* locates the player alongside characters in Gothic fiction and Lovecraft narratives who are isolated, passive witnesses to terror (Fyhr, *De mörka labyrintherna* 89-91; Joshi, *A Subtler Magick* 164; Dziemianowicz 182). Simultaneously, the player's forced passivity initiates a distance between the player character and the player which paves the way for the sublime.

While the player character is shown to experience cosmic awe from the unrealized labyrinth, the cosmic awe manufactured and possibly felt by the player is the result of the realized labyrinth. In Lovecraft's realized labyrinth, knowledge of the coexisting reality psychologically undermines the character's knowledge of the perceived world as well as the means through which he apprehends it. In *Anchorhead*, the player's simulated alienation from the player character interface reflects the alteration of the player's perception of the environment and also reduces the player's agency in apprehending the world depicted in the interactive fiction. However, once the player character reacts to the positive pregnancy test the interactive fiction ends, cancelling the role of 'player' and with it, the relationship to the player character. This ending, anticipated in the arresting threat of Ialdabaoth in the Narrow Corridor area, fully divides the player from the player character at a critical moment. The effect of this abrupt ending is twofold. First, like Thurston in "The Call of Cthulhu," the player's mind may be full of possible imaginings, wonderings and worries, all impossible to actualize. Second, as the failure of language in Lovecraft's tale suggests a fragmented narrative, the interactive fiction's ending represents a similar breakdown for the player. To borrow from Catherine Spooner's discussion of *House of Leaves*, Gentry's interactive fiction "enables the [player] to re-enact the disorientation it describes" ("Gothic in the Twentieth Century" 45). The player's potential experience of relational cosmic awe derives from the descriptive and formal means through which the interactive fiction manufactures it.

The coherence of sublime terror is evident in the realized labyrinths of Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu" and Gentry's *Anchorhead*. As an epistemological threat, cosmic awe from Lovecraft's realized labyrinth is

modernist in emphasizing the terror of a subverted human world view for the character and the dissolutive loss implied by a fragmented, disunified narrative form for the reader (see Klages 164-66). Though the subversion and fragmentation may work to produce a sublime effect in the reader, such destructuring is given a negative connotation in the narrative. In contrast, *Anchorhead*'s focus on relational rather than spatial concerns is evident in the postmodern manner in which it installs yet undermines conventions regarding the "representation of the subject" (Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* 13). While Lovecraft's narratives figure the relationship between character (that is, "the subject") and reader via language, the interactive fiction's human subject is at least partly symbiotic as the player must embody the player character in order to achieve a winning ending.⁶³ Although the media form inherently provides a basis for this relationship via language (output and input) and other interactive fiction routines, *Anchorhead* specifically encourages the player's increasing mastery over the player character interface as a contrast for the manufactured terror when that relationship is restricted and then abolished in the epilogue. The fulfilled digital poetics of the realized labyrinth produce a foundation for the player's experience of cosmic awe which derives from the complex quality of *Anchorhead*'s subject. This interactively enabled cosmic awe is likely to generate emotions of the Burkean sublime, or at least the mental recognition of it in the player.

Reading with Awe and Playing with Terror

Initially a narrative device in the Gothic novels of the eighteenth century, the convention of the labyrinth proves highly adaptable to modern narrative contexts. In Lovecraft's Gothic narratives such as "The Music of Erich Zann" and "The Call of Cthulhu," contact with a coexisting reality is governed by the unrealized and realized labyrinths. While both of these forms point to modernist questions regarding existential isolation (in the universe), the limits of a human world-view and the stability of locations, they nonetheless do so in contained, liminal spaces where oppositions which are presented as needful in the texts are collapsed for the characters. This fictional experience of terror may create a sympathetic yet enjoyable experience of awe in the

⁶³ For an extended examination of how a posthuman, information-based conception of subjectivity alters the relevance of this symbiosis, see chapter four.

reader, especially when the narrative form itself is implicated as fragmented or incomplete.

The poetics of the Gothic labyrinth prove coherent across media forms as well. In Gentry's *Anchorhead*, a work based on yet critical of Lovecraft's terror fiction, contact with a coexisting reality also occurs in unrealized and realized labyrinths. However, Gentry's interactive fiction requires that the player successfully complete the work in order to fulfill the digital poetics of the labyrinth forms, a participatory production of narrative which provides rhetorical weight for the collapsed oppositions and subjective effects of the Gothic labyrinth. Through traversal, *Anchorhead* proves playfully duplicitous: despite transparently adhering to the poetics of Lovecraft's labyrinthine tropes and body-in-universe construction of subjectivity, the interactive fiction's main character is female rather than male and cosmic awe is relational rather than spatial. Both of these overt changes designate the interactive fiction as a postmodern Gothic work.

The female player character adaptation suggests a late twentieth-century resistance to Lovecraft's male-centered terror fiction. However, this act of resistance is ambivalent. *Anchorhead's* female player character is represented as a champion outsider, like an archetypal chivalrous knight or stranger on a white horse. Impervious to the male Verlac curse and outside the sway of the cult-like townfolk, she is positioned as the only character able to defeat evil (twice) and save her husband. At the same time, she suffers sex-based, marriage-bound terrors as a result of the labyrinth that liken her to eighteenth-century Gothic heroines. Within this context the player character seems to exemplify Stéphanie Genz' description of a "postfeminist housewife," a figure who is "inscribed with multifarious significations, vacillating between patriarchal scripts of enforced domesticity and postfeminist reappropriations that acknowledge agency and self-determination" ("I Am Not a Housewife, but . . ." 50). *Anchorhead's* female player character simultaneously demonstrates the persistence of Gothic conventions, illuminates the asexual, male bias in Lovecraftian narrative tropes and, ironically, suggests that only a female character can be the tragic hero of the work.

The interactive fiction's emphasis on relational rather than spatial concerns is also a qualified critique of Lovecraft's early twentieth-century basis for cosmic awe. Known, 'real' or linguistically definable space is important and therefore threatened in Lovecraft's terror narratives. In

Anchorhead, the player character's situation demonstrates that individual relationships are central to the representational content encountered and narratively produced via traversal. In addition, a formal yet programmed 'relationship' is crucial to progress through the interactive fiction, as the role of player only exists in a participatory symbiosis with the player character interface. Relationships on representational and formal levels are important aspects of subjectivity and therefore threatened in the Gothic poetics of *Anchorhead*. This shift from threatening the 'real' to threatening subjective relationships implies a contemporary critique of the seeming desire for a grand narrative in Lovecraft's printed fiction, a rejection of essentialist modern conceptions of anxiety in favor of localized, contextualized, postmodern terror. However, while Gentry's interactive fiction indubitably emphasizes the constructedness of individual narratives, it does so in a manner which asserts the generic force of literary tradition, especially the power of the labyrinth convention.

Chapter Three: Family Destabilization and Monsters in Traversals of Sara Dee's *Madam Spider's Web*

The inherent fragmentation of Sara Dee's 2006 interactive fiction *Madam Spider's Web* allows for the production of distinct Gothic narratives. Broken into three phases which do not follow the chronological order of events, the player traverses a surreal phase in a house ruled by a giant spider, a realistic phase driving a car down a highway and a final realistic phase in a hospital. In the spider's house the amnesiac, child-like player character must perform chores in order to avoid the spider's maternal, and possibly monstrous, disapproval. In sharp contrast, in the realistic phases the adult player character, Colleen, drives down the road as she struggles to process a recent family trauma, swerves off the road and then 'recovers' in a hospital. Any traversal of *Madam Spider's Web* primarily involves the surreal phase, a rich environment consisting of eleven rooms and two non-player characters (the spider and a rat), while the realistic phases seem to be less significant, consisting of only one room each. Disjointed narrative congruence, a ruptured chronological sequence and the predominance of the first phase make correlation between the surreal and realistic phases difficult to establish. Instead, the player who traverses all three phases of *Madam Spider's Web* produces incongruous narratives.

The disjunction in Dee's work is negatively criticized in reviews which typically support prescriptive values in the discourse surrounding interactive fiction design, an evaluative stance which diverges from literary, Gothic and digital media analytical perspectives on fragmentation as a relevant device in contemporary fictional forms. Within the contemporary interactive fiction community, prescriptive notions about 'best practice' in interactive fiction design can be found on websites such as *The Interactive Fiction Wiki* and *The Interactive Fiction Archive*, in authoring guidebooks such as Graham Nelson's *The Inform Designer's Manual* and in reviews of individual works, especially works entered into one of the annual competitions, as is the case

with *Madam Spider's Web*.⁶⁴ Although reviewers of Dee's work are generally positive with regard to the surreal phase (Horvath; Maher, "IF Comp 2006"; Plotkin, "Reviews: IF Competition 2006"; Shiovitz; Devlin; Snyder; Mitchelhill), the interactive fiction is strongly criticized for the incongruity between the surreal phase and the realistic phases (Shiovitz; Carrey; Horvath; Menke; Maher, "IF Comp 2006"; Mitchelhill). The perceived problem is not the fragmentation of the work but rather that the fragmentation does not function as a 'puzzle' to be solved. For instance, Matthew Carrey writes off *Madam Spider's Web* as an exercise in "hiding critical facts from the player," while Jimmy Maher notes the intriguing sense of deeper layers to the work but ultimately admits "I'm not quite sure what those deeper layers actually *are*" ("IF Comp 2006," original emphasis).⁶⁵ However, these design 'shortcomings' in Dee's interactive fiction make the work an interesting subject for contemporary criticism. Fragmentation may be seen as a means of questioning normative structures or conventions in an expressive work. For example, Linda Hutcheon implies that narrative structures enable "sense-making" regardless of whether they are followed or subverted, so the "refusal to integrate fragments [. . .] is a refusal of the closure and telos which narrative usually demands" (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 121). Similarly, digital media scholar N. Katherine Hayles and Gothic scholar Catherine Spooner separately argue that the reader's progress through Mark Z. Danielewski's postmodern Gothic novel *House of Leaves* is relevantly affected by the fragmentation which obscures coherent meaning in the work ("Saving the Subject" 795-97, 803; "Gothic in the Twentieth Century" 45). With these distinct design-focused and analytical perspectives on fragmentation in mind, my analysis of *Madam Spider's Web* investigates how employed and subverted practices valued in design discourse variously contribute to the work's Gothic characteristics.

In order to highlight the significance of fragmentation in Dee's interactive fiction, this chapter is organized to follow the player's traversal through and 'experience' of the work. In the first section of this chapter I examine the surreal phase separately, as played for the first time, and in the second

⁶⁴ *Madam Spider's Web* was entered into the 12th Annual Interactive Fiction Competition, in 2006.

⁶⁵ While several reviewers react negatively to the shift from surreal to real in *Madam Spider's Web* because they see it as an over-used device, the primary focus of their concern is the unresolved fragmentation.

section I consider all three phases in a complete traversal.⁶⁶ In support of this traversal-focused organization, this introduction provides only a brief presentation of the terms and concepts which form the foundation for overall claims for the chapter, though some of those terms may not be relevant in both sections. While unorthodox from a literary studies perspective, this disposition is pertinent to an investigation of the unique qualities *Madam Spider's Web* as a Gothic work and digital media form. Contemporary Gothic horror scholarship is understandably concerned with reader (and thus player) responses to texts (Heiland 185). Reader/player reception is particularly relevant to many digital media scholars as well; in *Writing Machines*, Hayles argues for media-specific analyses of works whose reception is tied to their material forms, and in “How Do I Stop This Thing?” J. Yellowlees Douglas makes a similar point when she performs four analytical yet subjective readings of a hypertext. With my focus on the reception of *Madam Spider's Web*, I construct several arguments in which player reactions and interpretations are fundamental to the Gothic expression of the work.

Initial traversal of the first phase involves a traditional Gothic scenario of female terror in which the player character's child-like, uncanny constrictions in the domestic environment contribute to the destabilization of the mother-daughter roles within the ‘family.’ The uncanny entails an unsettling realization that a frightening thing which appears alien or other is actually known, or the opposite: that what is familiar and certain is actually disturbingly threatening or uncertain (Royle 1, Punter and Byron 283). In traditional Gothic fiction the uncanny is inherently linked to the threatening ambivalence of domestic spaces, especially for female characters who frequently are shown to experience both authority and imprisonment in family environments. In the surreal first phase of *Madam Spider's Web* the uncanny operates via the player character's odd memories of the supposedly alien domestic environment. For the player, despite the fact that interactive fiction design principles are followed, this phase is categorized by difficulties interpreting the apparently symbolic yet ultimately nonsensical descriptions of the environment as well as unmotivated restrictions to creative or ‘free’ play. These difficulties have the potential to induce attempts to transgress

⁶⁶ In this chapter, a ‘complete traversal’ or ‘completing the interactive fiction’ includes having played it to all five possible conclusions.

the strict rules of the environment or else elicit a comic, hybrid reaction to horrific elements. Acts of transgression in traditional Gothic fiction only serve to reinforce the limits, rules or boundaries, usually related to paternal legitimacy and authority, being crossed (Botting, "Aftergothic" 282). The hybrid reactions of humor and horror produced by traditional Gothic fiction indicate not a marring of the 'seriousness' of a text and its ideas but rather the complex means through which ambiguous emotions contribute to the development of narrative concepts (Horner and Zlosnik 12-13). While the paternal metaphor is replaced by a maternal one in *Madam Spider's Web*, the player's potential act of transgression and humorous reactions to the 'evil' spider only serve to reinforce the ambivalent, subordinate position of player character and the similar 'role' configured for the player.

Considered in completion, however, the interactive fiction functions as a postmodern Gothic-grotesque which reveals 'interior' monsters. The grotesque as a trope in Gothic literature relates to the "grotesquely metamorphic body" which may combine divergent elements (such as spider and human) in an excessive physical form which physically interacts with its environment (such as a web or house) (Hurley, "Abject and Grotesque" 140). The grotesque also indicates a disruption of order and, in particular, a hierarchical inversion where 'high' things are brought 'low' or degraded, a transgression against rules which carries both positive and negative connotations (Russo 7-10, 62-63). With the surreal phase situated after the realistic driving phase in the actual chronology of events, the adult Colleen's divergent degradation to a child and extension into the form of the grotesque *Madam Spider* in the surreal phase amplifies and makes apparent the self-perpetuating constrictions of loss and guilt she experiences in her realistic domestic environment in the driving phase. Colleen's bodily projection into the maternal monster in the surreal phase functions to identify hidden fears as a means of giving them shape and confronting them, a common narrative strategy in contemporary female Gothic fiction (Moers 142, see Becker 33, 41). In turn, the extreme contrast in the allowances configured for the player from the surreal phase to the realistic phases highlights the artificiality of the player's role in the work, a contradiction of the illusion of control favored in interactive fiction design discourse. This grotesque disruption of supposed player-governed order is most apparent in player actions in the surreal phase which inexplicably have a profound and, odds are, negative effect on the player character in the third phase. Specifically, the player's actions of

sympathy, indifference or violence toward what appears to be an insignificant item in the surreal phase—a food sac containing a live ‘snack’ left by Madam Spider in a closet—can be linked to particular effects on the player character. However, the cause or significance of these effects is ultimately uninterpretable, a postmodern exclusion of meaning which reflexively shifts attention to player actions and effects (see McHale 102-03). In traversal, the player blindly simulates his or her own monster within.

Traversal of *Madam Spider's Web* produces distinct traditional and postmodern Gothic narratives which revolve around effects of the hidden. While interactive fiction design principles support the production of traditional Gothic devices in the first phase of the work, the postmodern Gothic-grotesque qualities in the three phases of the completed interactive fiction develop instead via a subversion of prescriptive design principles. Despite these distinctions, first-phase and complete traversals of *Madam Spider's Web* can be said to involve an extended encounter with the effects of obscured things. In the first phase, hidden traumas in the domestic environment destabilize the player character and a lack of cohesive rules keeps the player from determining a basis for ‘free’ play. In completion, hidden constrictions in the realistic domestic environment govern the player character’s discovery of her monster within in the grotesque form of Madam Spider, while the player’s blind (in)action in the first phase inexplicably has profound consequences in the final phase, metaphorically constructing the player’s own monster within. In *Madam Spider's Web*, the monster within is not an identifiable evil other but rather is inherent to the ‘self’ and is known only by its unwitting and underived effects.

The Traditional Gothic in Madam Spider's House

When played for the first time and without continuing to subsequent phases, the initial phase of *Madam Spider's Web* presents a scenario in which the player character occupies the role of surrogate child to a monstrous guardian in a surreal domestic environment. Within this traditional Gothic scenario the female roles of mother and daughter, and with them the stability of the family house, are paradoxically reinforced and destabilized by the uncanny player character. At the formal level of design and within the Gothic environment, the player’s role is configured to approximate the player character’s subordinated and infantilized position via the restrictions imposed on agency and interpretation. Interactive fiction design conventions

function to further traditional Gothic elements. The player may transgress or challenge the 'rules' of the family house but the subordinate and dominant positions defined by those rules are only reasserted by such actions. Considered together, the player character's horror and the player's likely amusement underscore the Gothic hybridity of *Madam Spider's Web* while demonstrating the perpetual instability of the family home.

The Uncanny Player Character: Destabilizing the Family

In the home environment of the first phase, Madam Spider and the player character perform the roles of mother and female child. In the scene presented at the start of the interactive fiction, the player character is implied to be a disobedient child. As she stands before the giant arachnid, who is knitting in a rocking chair, the player character is "chastised once again" and then repeatedly admonished to "listen" or pay attention to instructions regarding her chores (The Parlor). The parent-child relationship suggested by this scene is reinforced by the "child" moniker Madam Spider frequently applies to the player character as well as the player character's 'cognitive' problem with "forgetting important things" related to her chores, "like where [Madam Spider] keeps the cleaning supplies and how she likes her dinner cooked" (The Parlor). Conceptually, the player character has a childish physical stature, apparent in her inability to reach the top shelf in The Kitchen without climbing the shelves as well as a similar problem reaching the pull cord for the attic door set into the ceiling in The Children's Room when she is standing on top of a set of bunk beds.

This mother-child relationship is characterized by conditional surrogacy. Madam Spider's maternity derives from absence. References to her children, now absent, appear in the description of The Children's Room which was "cheerful" when occupied but is now "desolate" and the rat's obvious concern that Madam Spider misses her children (The Attic). Sorrow subsumes pride in the arachnid's own description of her offspring: "Only two survived once they emerged from the egg sac,' she says somewhat sadly. 'But the twins are a fine pair, strong and intelligent. Excellent spinners. I just wish that they would write home a little more often'" (The Parlor). In this environment of loss, the player character functions as a surrogate child, albeit an indentured one. The condition attached to being the spider's surrogate 'child' is established early in the interactive fiction when the player character learns the fate of the girl she replaced: "The last girl couldn't keep things straight

either[. . .] She turned out to be delicious” (The Parlor). With the potential threat of being eaten operating as a whip and the possibility of maternal care functioning as a carrot, the player character occupies an unstable and ambivalent position in the family structure. The anxiety of this position is reflected in the player character’s view of Madam Spider as “at once hideous and beautiful” (The Parlor). Loss is perpetually inscribed in the ambivalent mother-daughter relationship.

Appropriate to being a stand-in or doppelganger for Madam Spider’s absent children, the player character’s knowledge of herself and the domestic environment is uncanny. In his seminal essay from 1919 entitled “The ‘Uncanny,’” Sigmund Freud examines this condition, termed *das unheimliche* in German (literally translated as ‘the unhomely’), as an aesthetic related not to beauty but to “qualities of feeling” (219).⁶⁷ Freud states that the uncanny “is that class of frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar,” or, to put it another way, “the uncanny is something which is secretly familiar” (220, 245). For instance, a ghost of a dead loved one is uncanny because it is familiar and yet inexplicable and irrational to the point of threatening epistemological beliefs about the afterlife. The complexity of this feeling lies in the uncertainty surrounding what is familiar or known. David Punter describes the uncanny as:

a feeling which relates to a dialectic between that which is *known* and that which is *unknown*. If we are afraid, then more often than not it is because we are experiencing fear of the unknown: but if we have a sense of the uncanny, it is because the barriers between the known and the unknown are teetering on the brink of collapse. (“The Uncanny” 130, original emphases)

Punter’s description illustrates the large spectrum of uncanny possibilities which trouble the barriers of the known and the unknown, a hinterland which directly relates to Gothic writing’s preoccupation with “boundaries and their instabilities” (Horner and Zlosnik 1). The uncanny is a ubiquitous trope in Gothic criticism which, while particularly pertinent to instances of domestic terror in its connotations as ‘the unhomely’ (Lloyd-Smith, *American Gothic Fiction* 75), may also be relevant for a myriad of narrative

⁶⁷ Freud’s development of the term has led to an abundance of Gothic criticism which privileges a methodology based on psychoanalysis. For claims about the limitations of employing a Freudian or psychoanalytic perspective in criticism, see Sedgwick 141 and Horner and Zlosnik, 2-3. One limitation with the Freudian perspective is that it suggests a somewhat static, essential view of human subjectivity. For this reason, my investigation of the uncanny will be limited to textual and simulated effects related to the conception of the subject in the interactive fiction.

events.⁶⁸ In the first phase of Dee's interactive fiction, the uncanny is apparent in player character anxieties related to unexpected unfamiliarity and surprising familiarity.

The player character's unfamiliarity with aspects of the domestic environment and herself reinforces her dependent relationship to Madam Spider. Although the interactive fiction's prologue indicates that the player character is already cognizant of her duties and the threat of being eaten if she fails, the passage concludes with the player character wondering, "[b]ut where to begin? And why does it all feel so unfamiliar?" (The Parlor). The uncanny gaps in the player character's knowledge of the environment negatively affect her perceived competence (as surrogate), which in turn implies an increase in her fear of being eaten. In addition, the player character is strangely unfamiliar to herself. If directed to examine herself she remembers only vague details about her appearance. If directed to ask Madam Spider the interactive fiction produces the following reply: "You can't stand it any longer; you must know. 'Who am I, Madam Spider? How did I get here?' She inhales deeply before responding. 'There are some things that are best left alone for the time being'" (The Parlor). The significance of this existential question for the mother-child relationship is evident in the player character's inability to "stand it any longer" and the spider's deep inhalation before replying. It is uncanny that knowledge which should be familiar to the player character is displaced to the entity that she fears. Like a parent, Madam Spider's implied knowledge of the player character's essential 'identity' asserts her power in the mother-child relationship.

Juxtaposed to the strange absence of essential knowledge, the player character's odd familiarity with past qualities of the domestic environment threatens her self-coherence. In several uncanny instances the player character responds to spaces or objects with underived knowledge or an emotional reaction. The Music Room is described as follows: "The paneled music room may once have been full of song and laughter (for some reason you do not doubt this), but now everything is quiet, still. Even the air around you carries a certain staleness." While awareness of the past is indubitable, the parenthetical insert demonstrates that the player character is perplexed

⁶⁸ The uncanny is examined in more criticism than would be possible to list here. For an overview of the term as "an instrument of literary criticism," see Punter and Byron 283. For studies which explore the poetics of the uncanny in depth, see Royle, *The Uncanny* and Castle, *The Female Thermometer*.

by the source of her certainty. A similar comment about her memory of the piano keyboard shows the player character's increased anxiety regarding the provenance of her memories: "(And from what deep, dark corner of your memory did this information originate?)" (The Music Room). Finally, although it is not described as threatening, the open attic door causes the player character to feel "a little rush of fear. Why are you doing this? You're not sure, but [. . .] you are filled with the certainty that there is something up there that you need" (The Children's Room). The player character's unfounded certainty develops here to include an emotional reaction and even preclude the need for her presence in the space which triggers it. These uncanny incidents suggest the disturbing possibility that the player character has memories which foreground her responses but which are unavailable to herself, a condition which would indicate a potentially threatening loss of self-coherence. Punter links lost self-coherence to profound absences in an environment with his contention that "the uncanny, at root, suggests the uncontrollable nature of memory, of trauma, of haunting" ("The Uncanny" 136). The player character's strange memories suggest that the past is unexpectedly invoked in the present in such a manner that the loss inherent to the domestic environment is entwined with the player character's loss of self-coherence. The figurative 'dark corners' of the house are congruent with the "dark corners" of the player character's memory, a dissolution of the boundary between self and environment which designates the player character as an inherent component of the trauma of the domestic space.

Intrinsic to the uncanny domestic environment yet a conditional surrogate in the mother-child relationship, the player character represents a perpetual threat to family stability and individual roles within it, a scenario which aligns the first phase of *Madam Spider's Web* with traditional Gothic fiction. Narratives of "domestic unease" have a long history in the Gothic and houses, in particular, feature as sites which articulate "the sense of loss and disappointment of those within them" (Lloyd-Smith, *American Gothic Fiction* 94; Spooner, "Gothic in the Twentieth Century" 41). In traditional Gothic fiction where the house is represented as a female domain, the family home is often a paradoxical space of power and confinement for female

characters.⁶⁹ In *Madam Spider's Web*, the relationship between Madam Spider and the player character is a necessary foundation for both the maternal authority of the spider and the player character's position of 'daughterly' dependency. However, disappointment and loss in the domestic space render this mother-daughter relationship uncertain. While Madam Spider's absent children are an initial cause of this uncertainty, the player character's lost self-knowledge and inherent connection to the haunting memories of children in the environment make her a constant reminder of previous disruptions to maternal stability. Although the vulnerability of children is a common problem for the stability of family 'houses' in inheritance-focused, eighteenth-century Gothic fiction (Cavallaro 142), the plot device is employed in Dee's interactive fiction to emphasize the threat to the individual roles of mother and daughter within the family home. As the surrogate child, bound to Madam Spider via her own lost memories and to the home via uncanny familiarity, the player character occupies an ambivalent role which chronically destabilizes the primary family relationship.

Subordination and Transgression: The Ambiguous Role of the Player

Following interactive fiction design discourse, *Madam Spider's Web* utilizes a common design convention to configure a subordinated, infantilized role for the player in the surreal phase which is congruent to the player character's. At the level of media form, the player is put into the familiar position of encountering the world for the first time, the metaphorical position of an infant or young child. Conventionally, it is common for an interactive fiction to begin with the player "dumped ignorant" into a scenario in which the player character has 'amnesia' in order to avoid knowledge discrepancies between the player character and player (Short, "The Act of Misdirection"; Montfort, "Fretting the Player Character" 141; Douglass, "Command Lines" 235). In interactive fiction design discourse this blank foundation is positively regarded as an equalizing starting point from which the player is to develop through learning to effectively 'play' the work.

⁶⁹ For an extended study of the domestic terror of female characters in early Gothic narratives, see Ellis, *The Contested Castle*. Domestic spaces, including the Verlac family mansion and the 'home' in the epilogue, are also relevant for the female player character's terrors in *Anchorhead*.

Learning, in this sense, typically involves 'recovering'/discovering player character self-knowledge as well as ascertaining and using "commands, tools or actions special to the setting" in order that "the player has a feeling that time spent on the game is time rewarded" ("Amnesia"; Nelson 377). In Dee's interactive fiction, the player character's 'amnesia' configures the player as a 'child' in the sense that s/he must learn about the environment through exploration and trial and error via the player character's child-like position within it. Employing this recognizable interactive fiction convention to configure the role of the player to that of a fellow 'child' creates a blank foundation, but also encourages player expectations regarding the ability to develop.

The player's role as a child is maintained, however, by the perceived absence of a systematic set of rules and organization of meaning in the domestic space. The confusing incoherence of the surreal environment is suitably Gothic and also frustrating for the player, who is nevertheless likely to expect coherence later in the interactive fiction. In particular, the curious 'logic' of the two primary puzzles in the house prohibits learning by precluding the player's ability to plan ahead when solving the puzzles. The two chores which Madam Spider gives the player character include "tidying up [. . .] the bathroom and the music room," a verb phrase which suggests activities to do with cleaning or ordering (The Parlor). However, meanings are not fixed; if asked for clarification Madam Spider will describe the bathroom chore as 'extermination' and the music room chore as putting things back in place (The Parlor). This shift in meaning is demonstrated by The Bathroom puzzle's solution, which involves killing the snake in the bathtub with an acid-like substance referred to as 'cleanser,' despite the fact that the more logical tool for extermination is suggested in the umbrella's "dangerously sharp tip." In addition, in the larger context of behaviors in the first phase of the interactive fiction the snake is a contradictorily silent victim in a house where the other living animals are anthropomorphic, speaking or communicating agents which the player character is shown to respect as living beings. The snake puzzle is particularly confounding because it does not seem to provide any tangible reward or information which is relevant to discovering more about the domestic space or the player character.

In The Music Room puzzle, the meaning pair 'tidying up'/'putting things back in place' takes on a spectrum of additional meanings as it involves

several steps related to a curious piano which appears antique, has only five remaining keys yet features a digital readout. The necessary steps include: bartering with the rat in *The Attic* in order to obtain and then return a porcelain Dalmatian figurine to its rightful place next to the pig and bear figurines on the sideboard in *The Music Room* (which inexplicably turns on the piano), determining the correct sequence of keys in order to play a ‘song’ on the piano (which consists not of notes but of various noises which are associated with the figurines) and finally removing the one-handed ladybug alarm clock once the ‘song’ opens the piano’s lid to reveal that it is actually a “hidden safe” (*The Music Room*). While some of these steps clearly conform to ‘tidying up,’ as with the snake the player is unable to preconceive a strategy for solving the puzzle as each step in the process provides the context for the next.

Considering both of the chore puzzles in hindsight, the internal cause and effect logic of the tasks (such as why the cleanser killed the snake or why the figurine turned on the piano) hinders the player’s development of a cohesive system of meaning and the reason for performing them is notably not made relevant to the player character. The adult Madam Spider provides little qualification of the chores themselves other than her approval once they are accomplished (*The Parlor*). In short, in completing the two primary puzzles of the initial phase of the interactive fiction the player remains childishly unaware of systems of rules or patterns of meaning. In this sense, the player is made to maintain her or his role as an unlearned child who does not know or understand the adult, “rigid codes and fixed patterns of meaning” in Gothic narratives (Cavallaro 135). However, the situation is likely to be frustrating for the player. The emphasis on ‘completion’ and ‘solution’ in interactive fiction design discourse relates to puzzles in context; the player should be able to develop a “working understanding” of an interactive fiction “world” to the extent that s/he can explain “why the puzzle works the way it does” (“Solution”; see Nelson 365). The inexplicable snake and piano puzzles in Dee’s interactive fiction are thus likely to generate a greater expectation of systematic meaning and the ability to play with forethought later in the interactive fiction when more of the ‘world’ is revealed.

The player’s traversal through the domestic environment may be primarily described not as free investigation and creative problem solving but rather as a series of restrictions or unexpected denials. Although this experience metaphorically replicates a child’s encounter with the adult

system of codes and meanings common to much didactic children's literature, the player's constant difficulty interpreting the surreal environment and purposefully guiding the player character is likely to create frustration and an increasing sense of disinterest in the work. In the first phase of the interactive fiction, standards of exemplary conduct are literally and figuratively enforced by Madam Spider. If the player character does something to alert and irritate Madam Spider, such as picking up figurines in The Music Room or sitting in the divan in The Parlor, the player cannot get the player character to do it again. More figuratively, the player character's desire to 'behave' correctly is apparent in negative replies to several player commands. Dinnerware cannot be removed from the china cabinet because the player character feels "[i]t wouldn't be worth the trouble," a desire to avoid hassle or punishment from a more powerful source which is echoed in the response to an attempt to open the umbrella: "It's unlucky to open an umbrella in the house!" (The Dining Room). Further evidence of Madam Spider's pragmatic influence on the player character appears in the reply denying use of the oven: "[y]ou have no need to cook right now" (The Kitchen). These restrictions to traversal strategies negatively define adult codes and meanings in isolated instances, which keeps the player from determining the coherent pattern which governs them. Without such a pattern, the player is incapable of hypothesizing strategies for free or creative play, a restriction which makes embodying the player character difficult and has the potential to limit player investment in the domestic scenario. This disinterest is evident in reviews which complain that the player "wanders around looking at things but not really accomplishing anything important" (Shiovits) or which emphasize the lack of investment directly: "I didn't like it as much as I kept feeling I should" (Whyld). This distance keeps the player's role configured to that of a child in the family, and further reinforces the player's expectation of coherent interpretation and relevant accomplishment later in the work.

Subordinated by limitations to interpretation and steered by restrictions to agency, the player's 'oppression' by the contextual and formal rules in the first phase of *Madam Spider's Web* may provoke a desire to attack the oppressor. Programmed as a possibility in the interactive fiction, attacking Madam Spider allows the player to transgress the adult codes and meanings which implicitly define the stability of the family house. The necessity of the family relationship(s) for the adult is apparent in Madam Spider's empty

threat; although the arachnid indicates a willingness to eat the player character as punishment, the player cannot make the player character do anything to make this happen, even via the ‘annoying’ repetition of something Madam Spider dislikes (The Parlor). On the other hand, the player can get the player character to ‘kill’ Madam Spider. This act appears to be a transgression of conceptual as well as simulated limits, as accomplishing this requires contextually non-typical command iteration and is strongly discouraged in replies. The first reply to a command to attack the spider indicates hesitation: “something holds you back from delivering the blow.” The reply to the repeated command embellishes on this idea: “one minor detail is nagging at you: Madam Spider has never harmed you, as far as you can remember” (The Parlor). If the player enters the same command for the third time, an iterative tactic which is markedly ineffective in other situations in the house, the player character attacks Madam Spider. Within the context of the family, this ‘matricide,’ if carried out, asserts the player’s role as a subordinated child who profoundly transgresses the codes of the parent-child relationship. Rather than ‘freeing’ the player, her or his subordination is immediately reemphasized. Destroying Madam Spider results in the ‘punishment’ that the child-like player character suffers what is presumed to be eternal captivity in the house and the interactive fiction immediately ends with the line: “[y]ou have been caught in the web” (The Parlor). ‘Web’ here functions as a synonym for ‘home’ as well as its established equivalent in Gothic fiction, ‘family stability.’ At the level of media form, the disinterested player who performs this action is also ‘punished’ by the interactive fiction’s abrupt ending. Like plots in traditional Gothic fiction which confuse the boundaries of reason and rationality only to reinforce their stability in the end (Horner and Zlosnik 1-2; see Botting, *Gothic* 7), Dee’s interactive fiction provides the player with the potential for transgression, arguably even the impetus for it, only to reassert the power of the adult codes and meanings which maintain the house. The possibility of killing Madam Spider is configured as a traditional Gothic transgression for the player.

Limited player investment in the initial phase may lead to less profound challenges to Madam Spider’s dominance or other ambivalent responses which nonetheless underscore the structures of authority and subordination in the family house. In contrast to the player character’s fear of the giant arachnid and troubling self-fragmentation, the player’s reception of

recognizable fictional elements in the surreal domestic phase is likely to generate tragicomic responses. As an intelligent and physically large monster, Madam Spider represents a well-known human phobia developed via familiar Gothic excess. Placing the player character in a perplexing environment controlled by the monster/guardian/parent is also a relatively traditional Gothic trope. Player meta-awareness of this sort can be seen as an effect of what Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik describe as a “deconstructionist turn” in Gothic fiction:

the orthodox account of what is Gothic does not seem to capture the hybridity of most Gothic novels, which includes their juxtaposition of incongruous textual effects. Such incongruity opens up the possibility of a comic turn in the presence of horror or terror. In this way, Gothic's tendency to hybridity makes possible a mixed response to the loss of transcendence that characterizes the modern condition. (3)

The player's reception of the clichéd elements of the initial phase of *Madam Spider's Web* are incongruously juxtaposed to the player character's subtext of fear and self-fragmentation so as to create a hybrid reception of the work as both humorous and horrifying. Familiar conceits in the formulaic Gothic genre are a catalyst for what critics have identified as increasingly ambivalent responses to contemporary Gothic texts (Botting, *Gothic Romanced* 22; Horner and Zlosnik 17; Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic* 155-56). Regardless of the player's emotional identification with the player character, the familiar intertextual qualities of the interactive fiction support a comedic turn in the Gothic work.

Although details which imply Madam Spider's threatening power over the player character can be interpreted as amusing and trite to the player, this Gothic hybridity only reinforces the arachnid's dominance in the family relationship(s). In the configured role as a fellow subordinated 'child,' the player's amusement challenges the authority of the monster/mother, and through her, the adult codes and meanings which govern the domestic space. For example, the otherwise physically imposing spider is humorously ill-adapted to the rocking chair, a symbolic seat of maternal power which she occupies for most of the initial phase of the interactive fiction. Madam Spider hunches “over in the high-backed rocking chair, her lower legs firmly planted on the floor to keep her from careening forward” (The Parlor). With this slapstick image of physical violence the ever-knitting spider becomes a symbol of potential humor rather than of potential aggression. In counterpoint to the subtext of fear experienced by the player character, the

player's humorous appraisal of Madam Spider's awkward corporeality functions as a subordinate's subjective devaluation of the adult's symbolic source of power. Despite the hybridity of these responses (fear and mocking humor), their needful *emotional* bases are indicative of the spider's dominant power. Player mirth at the spider's familiar villainous qualities reinforces her authoritative role in the scenario while highlighting its constructedness. The malicious threat inferred in Madam Spider's willingness to laugh at the player character's potential harm may be a recognizable trope which is regarded with humorous derision by the player. If asked for clarification regarding what to do in the bathroom, the spider's reply is: "There is a problem that needs. . . exterminating.' She chuckles a little. It is a horrible wheezing sound." If the player character discovers the snake and asks for further clarification from Madam Spider, the reply reads: "Be a dear and take care of that for me,' she says, with humor in her voice" (The Parlor). In both instances, Madam Spider's amusement at the physically dangerous task signals the character's intertextual association with villains in popular fiction and media.⁷⁰ The arachnid's 'evil laughter' characterizes her as a stereotypical villain and makes the player less likely to regard her as uniquely menacing and more likely to chuckle in familiarity at her standardized behavior. Divergent player character and player responses to Madam Spider nonetheless function jointly to reinforce her dominance in the domestic environment.

In contrast to the challenging or identifying act of laughing at Madam Spider, the player's laughter at the player character emphasizes the ambivalence of the subordinate position in the family relationship(s). Player laughter at the 'adult' spider is a mild defiance of the rules and codes of the adult world, a laughter which may be 'shared' with the player character. On the other hand, laughing directly at the player character, either from the configured perspective as a fellow subordinate or considering the work at a distance as a narrative scenario, involves a collusion in or at least recognition of the player character's uncertain, surrogate role in the primary family relationship. In her investigation of comedy among 'subordinates' in a dominant power structure, Audrey Bilger suggests the term "violent comedy" to describe a:

⁷⁰ The 'evil laugh' of a villain is a clichéd yet popular device in contemporary fiction. For discussions of this trope, see "Evil Laugh," *Wikipedia* and "Evil Laugh," *Television Tropes and Idioms*.

mode in which brutal and painful events are described in a setting or tone which invites laughter. Even when violence is not an element [of the text], [. . .] such humor itself does violence to the reader by asking her or him to laugh at something that would ordinarily cause pain[. . . .] [V]iolent comedy treads a fine line between humor and horror. (189-90)

Violent comedy elucidates a work's tendency towards formal deconstruction through the depiction of the shared, highly ambivalent condition of the 'subordinates' who are necessary to sustain the dominant power structures which govern the narrative. Bilger's work focuses on eighteenth-century narratives of females in dominant patriarchal systems, while the dominant power structures which govern the player character and player in the domestic environment of *Madam Spider's Web* derive from the 'adult' spider. In the interactive fiction, the player is invited to laugh at the threat of represented violence to the player character when she looks in a pan in the refrigerator:

Gingerly, you lift the lid from the top of the roasting pan. And stare. A pair of bulbous red eyes stares back at you. It is the head of a fly (and it must've been a giant) resting in a pool of mucky red liquid. You let out a small shriek and drop the lid back on the pan, which clangs loudly. "Let that be for now," Madam Spider calls from the next room. "It needs to marinate for another hour or so." You take a few deep breaths and wait for your heart to stop racing. (The Kitchen)

While the player character is disturbed by her discovery, the passage presents a number of comedic images. First, the "small shriek" and dropped lid are exaggeratedly dramatic actions from the player character which border on melodrama. Second, Madam Spider's comment functions to abruptly change the potential meaning of the fly head from item of threatening, macabre gore (symbol of the spider's aggression) to practical foodstuff, an anticlimax approaching bathos. These relatively straightforward comedic responses provide a foundation for the anxious ambivalence of violent comedy. Once it is understood that the fly is food, the repetition of the word "stare" creates an absurd tableau of the player character locked in a staring contest with food, a symmetrical image which is humorous but also reminds the player that the player character is potentially 'food' for the spider. While the player character's physical, horrified reaction is brief, the incident is most likely to provide the player with a tragicomic sense of the player character as both object of mirth and pity. Unlike the Gothic hybridity which reinforces Madam Spider as dominant source of terror and humor, the player's mirth and pity at the player character's fearful predicament designates the ambivalence of the subordinate surrogate

position and underscores the chronic destabilization of the primary family relationship.

Traversal of the initial phase of *Madam Spider's Web* produces a traditional Gothic tale of domestic horror. As a surrogate 'child' for Madam Spider, the female player character is troublingly alien yet inherent to the environment and herself. In this position, she perpetually fulfills the necessary role as subordinate child to Madam Spider's dominant mother while simultaneously highlighting the uncertainty of the relationship, as well as the positions within it. The player's traversal of this phase is further characterized by the ambiguous but ultimately fixed position of the subordinate. Unable to discern a pattern of rules or system of meaning which may be relevant for strategic traversal, the player's infantilized role provides a simulated experience of subordination in the family house. From this position, or from a more disinterested consideration of the formal aspects of the work, challenges to the dominant power structures which are programmed within the work nonetheless follow traditional Gothic poetics. By the end of the first phase, the anxiety of the subordinate position in the family house remains fixed; the player is likely to be as uncertain of her or his role within the surreal environment as the player character is depicted to be.

The Postmodern Gothic-Grotesque in *Madam Spider's Web*

In terms of both coherence and structure, there is an inherent fragmentation between the initial, dominating surreal phase of *Madam Spider's Web* and the subsequent realistic phases which follow it. This resistance to unity is contrary to the prescriptions of interactive fiction design discourse and is therefore likely to be seen as a puzzle or challenge which the player may address by either playing the work again or considering the work (as a text) in a hindsight interpretation. From this perspective, the adult player character Colleen's grotesque degradation in the surreal phase functions to highlight the (hidden) constriction she experiences in her 'real' domestic space in the driving phase, an amplification and explication of her self-constructed fears and anxieties which aligns Dee's interactive fiction with contemporary, female Gothic works. As part of this move to the explicit, Madam Spider is understood as a grotesque projection of Colleen, a split-self intimately connected to her own domestic space. As Colleen's 'monster within,' Madam Spider is the figurative representation Colleen's fears as well

as her potential power to overcome them, which makes the maternal spider an object of desire. In terms of traversal, the Gothic-grotesque works via a contradiction of principles valued in interactive fiction design discourse to destabilize the role of the player. The removal of player agency in the realistic phases counteracts the player's already limited sense of accomplishment in the surreal phase. In addition, in a complete traversal of Dee's interactive fiction the seemingly irrelevant food sac encountered in a closet in the surreal phase is understood as a 'puzzle,' albeit an inexplicable one, which forces the player to unknowingly affect the player character in profound, potentially harmful ways. These estranging, Gothic-grotesque configurations highlight the postmodern, explicitly constructed role of the player in the interactive fiction. Similar to the player character, the discovery of self-constructed threat as well as potential empowerment is simulated for the player in *Madam Spider's Web*.

Played to one of the three 'complete' conclusions for the first time, Dee's interactive fiction lacks coherence and is likely to preclude any overall sense of accomplishment for the player, factors which create a desire for subsequent play and/or hindsight interpretation of the work as a text. One difficulty is the convoluted chronological sequence of the three phases of *Madam Spider's Web*. Although traversal orders the work into the surreal spider's house phase, the driving (and accident) phase and then the hospital phase, these situations transpire in the following order: automobile accident, surreal phase (as a 'dream' while in the hospital), hospital. The different levels of perceived 'reality' make the interactive fiction's non-chronological progression more complex for a player to decipher. This fragmented narrative, as well as the lack of scoring and few puzzles in *Madam Spider's Web* makes the work an example of what Daniel Keller refers to as contemporary, 'experimental' interactive fiction (287). Despite the freedom implied by this term, however, in interactive fiction design discourse experimental works are valued only if they also provide a sense of unity and coherence. Experimental techniques such as player character identity fragmentation and disruptive narrative chronology are generally regarded as puzzles to be solved in design discourse, a perspective which emphasizes closure and completion as positive goals ("IF Cliches"; Short, "The Act of Misdirection"). Thus, the lack of unification with regard to the disparate elements in *Madam Spider's Web* is commented upon in reviews which claim that "the pieces just don't fit together" or more specifically criticize the

“too sketchy” connection between the dream phase and the realistic phases of the work (Horvath; Carrey; see Maher, “IF Comp 2006”).⁷¹ Despite the many corresponding details which create associations between the three phases, the player is likely to complete an initial traversal of the interactive fiction with only a fragmented sense of the ‘story’ and unfulfilled sense of accomplishment regarding actions taken to further play. The promise of meaningful closure suggested in the many corresponding details and perhaps a desire to feel like something has been achieved will likely cause the player to revisit the work.

The relationship between the predominant dream phase and the realistic phases of the interactive fiction suggests that the dream phase functions according to the poetics of a Gothic, grotesque inversion. The principles of the grotesque derive from Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of carnivalesque social inversions in pre-Romantic European carnivals, Wolfgang Kayser’s investigation of the Romantic and post-Romantic, interior, uncanny qualities of the grotesque and Gothic fiction’s appropriation of the transgressive, excessive qualities from both. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin contrasts the period of carnival to official feasts in the Middle Ages:

carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. (10)

Bakhtin’s carnival, as a model for the grotesque, is politically equalizing, celebrates ambivalence and emphasizes the material body in all of its cycles. The essential tenet of the grotesque is “degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level” (19-20). Although Bakhtin traces the historical literary development of the grotesque themes of degradation (that is, hierarchical inversion) and the body, his work is prominently focused on the positive, social ‘becoming’ of the grotesque in the Middle Ages (see 28-29, 37, 46; Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic* 66-67). From a different perspective, Kayser’s *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* examines the themes of the grotesque

⁷¹ Reviewers Carrey and Horvath compare *Madam Spider’s Web* to Adam Cadre’s *Photopia*. *Photopia* is presented as a positive example of experimental interactive fiction which, while employing a non-linear narrative sequence and confusion regarding player character identity, fulfils interactive fiction design discourse concerns regarding unity and coherence. For examples of how Cadre’s work is valued for these traits, see Short, “The Act of Misdirection”; Stevens, Rev. of *Photopia*; and O’Brian, “1998 Competition Game Reviews.”

related to “ominous, nocturnal and abysmal features” which create lonely fear and profound epistemological doubt (18). Whereas degradation is positive in its potentiality for Bakhtin, Kayser describes grotesque inversion as a “disintegration of order” which leads to an individual’s uncanny estrangement from the world (67, 184).⁷² Within Kayser’s sinister sense of the grotesque, the body, a human form of cyclical renewal for Bakhtin, is associated with hybrid monsters who exhibit an “unnatural fusion of organic realms” (such as the anthropomorphic Madam Spider) or animals which he categorizes as vermin (such as the snake, rat and spider who feature prominently in the dream phase) which may suggest “abysmal ominousness” to a human (183, 182). In literary criticism investigating the grotesque, the “comic grotesque” has come to be associated with Bakhtin, while “the grotesque as strange and uncanny” is associated with Kayser; however, these types of grotesque are not mutually exclusive and each type is recognizable as a form of transgression (Russo 7, 10).

As transgressions, the two types of grotesque feature regularly in Gothic fiction. Kelly Hurley claims that “Bakhtin’s idea of a joyous, rejuvenating ‘carnavalesque’” is reconciled to the more Kayserian “relentless negativism” in Gothic horror through the genre’s “*gleeful excessiveness*” (“Abject and Grotesque,” 142, original emphasis). Gothic works repeatedly deal with excess and exaggeration as a means of troubling needful boundaries for characters and creating emotional reactions in readers/players. In modern literary contexts, a renewed emphasis on physical bodies suggests to Spooner a revival of Bakhtin’s folk grotesque in contemporary Gothic which she calls the “Gothic-Carnavalesque” where “the sinister is continually shading into the comic and vice versa” (*Contemporary Gothic* 68-69). Spooner relates the Gothic-Carnavalesque to Horner and Zlosnik’s idea of the hybrid, comic turn in Gothic fiction, and it is clearly relevant for Hurley’s discussion of the ‘gleeful excessiveness’ of modern Gothic forms. Considered in the context of the completed work, the initial phase of *Madam Spider's Web* is governed by a similar Gothic-grotesque mixture which emphasizes the themes of degradation and the grotesque body.

⁷² Degradation as a tenet of the grotesque describes an inversion of hierarchical order. Any negative or positive connotations applied to such an inversion derive from perspective, as Kayser and Bakhtin demonstrate, and/or context, such as a Gothic narrative. In this regard the term is distinct from the negative, morally degenerative connotations of the word as it is used today.

Degradation and the Monster Within: Self-Constructed Fear and Desire

The player character is degraded in psychic and familial hierarchies in the dream phase of *Madam Spider's Web*. In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White build partly on precepts of the grotesque when they argue that the “human body, psychic forms, geographical space and the social formation are all constructed within interrelating and dependent hierarchies of high and low” which are fundamental to “mechanisms of ordering and sense-making in European cultures” (2-3). Degradation within these hierarchies brings high things low. In the interactive fiction, the hierarchical structure of the symbolic domain of the player character’s “psychic form” is inverted; the dream phase in which the player character is ‘unconscious’ (low) is the focus of the bulk of the work, while the realistic phases where the player character is ‘conscious’ (high) are exceedingly brief.⁷³ This inversion of the player character’s psychic hierarchy accompanies the inversion of her role in the “social formation” of her family. In the realistic phases the player character is identified as “Colleen Kemp, antiques dealer, wife, 36-year-old mother of two” (*Driving Down the Highway*, December 28th). Colleen’s independent profession and authoritative roles within her family indicate that she occupies a high position of power and decision in familial hierarchies. The high and low ordering of the player character’s psychic form and social formation relates to governing dominant and governed subordinate positions, or as Stallybrass and White contend, degradation “attacks the authority of the ego” (183). Although traversal of *Madam Spider's Web* suggests that the player character moves up rather than down on psychic and familial hierarchies, the actual chronology of events in the narrative which is produced—the ‘solution’ to the puzzle of the disruptive chronology in the work—emphasizes her movement from Colleen in the driving phase to surrogate child in the dream phase.

The player character’s psychic and familial degradation is Gothic, however, in that moving low entails not freedom but uncanny constriction in a gendered domestic space. Brought low, the female player character’s fragmented meld with the family home in the first phase is an excessive,

⁷³ The term ‘psychic’ here is broad, as Stallybrass and White use it to designate the abstract, aesthetic, psychological, spiritual, imaginary or otherwise intangible qualities of the mind 2-3, 26, 193-194.

explicit projection of Colleen's contemporary domestic curtailment, a 'narrative' strategy of visualizing fears which aligns *Madam Spider's Web* with contemporary female Gothic fiction. While the adult player character, Colleen, is never seen in her house, the driving phase of the interactive fiction indicates congruent familial constrictions in a contemporary 'domestic' space. The family automobile, an "old station wagon" which Colleen can drive "without paying any attention at all" because it is "second nature" to her, is a contemporary site of maternal authority in the American setting of the realistic phases of interactive fiction (Driving Down the Highway, December 28th).⁷⁴ For Colleen, the car is a restrictive family space both physically and mentally. Family concerns govern driving destinations and Colleen's piloting performance. The implied typical behavior of ferrying her boys involves specific destinations and cautious driving which Colleen, as an individual, dislikes: "[n]ormally, with the kids dropped off, you'd put the pedal to the metal, but recent snowstorms have iced over the roads these past few days making driving conditions less than ideal" (Driving Down the Highway, December 28th). In this phase, Colleen is travelling north to attend her grandfather's funeral instead of a "second honeymoon" she has planned with her husband, which is further evidence of the family's commandeering influence on the domestic space's destination. Relationships with the male members of her family determine Colleen's use of the car.

Alongside these physical effects, the player character's mental and emotional awareness of her family is prominent and inhibiting while she is driving. Colleen's children, sister-in-law, husband, grandfather and sister are noted in this short phase, all in relation to social constraints such as a favor owed or a promise not kept (Driving Down the Highway, December 28th). In particular, Colleen is upset by her own lack of concern for her grandfather:

How could it have been so long since you'd last been to visit him? The man who had taught you how to play the piano, the man who had built you a treehouse in his backyard. The one who had made you a pecan pie (still your favorite) every year for your birthday until you had stopped caring about such things. You imagine your grandfather with his thick glasses that made him look like Orville Redenbacher, and your heart breaks anew. You have to swallow the lump in your throat. (Driving Down the Highway, December 28th)

⁷⁴ References to topical details, American English word preferences and North American spellings suggest that *Madam Spider's Web* features an American setting.

These memories are framed by what is implied to be Colleen's guilt for not driving north to visit her grandfather, that is, her perceived failure to use the domestic space effectively. Notably, the same pain and guilt surrounding this loss of a family member are immediately reflected onto Colleen's children, who represent a potential future loss. The reply which follows this memory reads: "[a]nd then leaving the twins behind [. . .] it hurt to have to leave them now" (Driving Down the Highway, December 28th). Pain is once again related to a loss incurred by managing the domestic space: the children have been ejected and are increasingly farther away. Colleen's sense of guilt for this act is suggested by the next reply: "No matter, no matter, you tell yourself. You're only doing what you have to do" (Driving Down the Highway, December 28th). This statement reinforces Colleen's role as authoritative and responsible mother but also, as it is meant to override her apparent individual feelings of guilt, indicates the emotional dilemmas induced by her conflicting roles within the family. Colleen's guilty dilemmas derive from her management of the domestic space in relation to (male) family relationships, in particular the actual or feared loss of those relationships. This contemporary version of traditional domestic constriction is mirrored and visibly amplified in the dream phase, where the actual and feared loss of children, including another set of twins, is woven into the physical environment as a foundation for the destabilization of the unusual family. In Colleen's automotive domestic environment her respective roles as granddaughter, mother, wife and individual are legitimized by her governance of the vehicle. However, when these roles are viewed collectively, use of the domestic space creates subtle conflicts between roles which destabilize her position. In contrast, in *Madam Spider's house* the legitimacy and destabilization of the individual roles of anthropomorphic spider-mother and surrogate daughter are overtly, excessively uncertain. This transition to explicit excess, to making unseen fears seen, aligns *Madam Spider's Web* with contemporary female Gothic narrative traditions in which the grotesque functions in conjunction with visual representations of a female character's fears (Moers 142, see Kahane 243-44). Colleen's grotesque degradation in the dream phase involves 'occupying' a body intertwined with the realm of the fears and guilt she experiences related to her roles within her primarily male family.

In the amplification of fears which the dream phase represents, Colleen's inversion involves a split: while the child player character is Colleen

degraded, Madam Spider is a grotesque projection of Colleen the adult, and as such is inherently an object of sympathy. As a “cultural projection of an inner state,” the grotesque body “is never entirely locatable in or apart from the psyche which depends upon the body image as a ‘prop’” (Russo 9). The grotesque Madam Spider, simultaneously of and external to the player character, forms a multiple or split self with her. Both Madam Spider and Colleen are mothers of twins, live surrounded by antiques, are fond of music (listening to the radio is Colleen’s only individually fulfilling pastime in the car) and find themselves constricted by deeply-felt loss, both actual (of children, of grandfather) and feared (of surrogate, of children). Alongside her possession of the player character’s self-memory, the giant arachnid also seems to ‘remember’ Colleen’s automobile accident. The ‘song’ the player character plays on the piano consists of sounds from the accident. If asked about the song, Madam Spider notes “that song brought back memories” (The Parlor). Finally, Madam Spider is most clearly presented as a corporeal projection of Colleen if the player character ‘kills’ the arachnid. Immediately prior to the player character’s attack, “Madam Spider seems to read your mind” and offers no resistance. After being stabbed the spider tells the player character, “[y]ou have made a grave mistake,” disappears, and the player character, trapped in the house with no doorknobs and unopenable windows, solemnly “take[s] a seat in her rocking chair and reach[es] for the needles . . .” (The Parlor). As this ‘murder’ of the being who has knowledge of the player character’s thoughts and memories ends the interactive fiction, Madam Spider’s inherent symbiosis with the player character as mother to child, as projection of the adult Colleen, or as monster within is emphasized. Contrasted to the child player character’s threatening sense of the adult arachnid in first traversal of the initial phase, Madam Spider becomes a contemporary Gothic monster: a site of sympathy (Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic* 69), self-recognition and identification which negates any sense of self and other (Botting, “Aftergothic” 286). As part of Colleen and yet distinct from her, Madam Spider provides a shape for the fears and possibilities of Colleen’s individuality in the context of family relationships.

Madam Spider’s grotesque openness makes explicit the self-created family bonds which define the domestic environment. Foreshadowed in the hidden self-memories the player character ‘discovers’ in the house and implied in the organic-mechanical interplay between Colleen and her automotive domestic space, Madam Spider, as a grotesque projection of the

player character, is inextricably bound to the house. A grotesque body is “always conceiving,” according to Bakhtin (21) and “is never closed off from either its social or ecosystemic context” (Stallybrass and White 22). Grotesque bodies are open in the sense of being receptive and unfinished, a quality which is usually indicated by orifices which take things into the body such as a gaping mouth or protrusions which seem to “go out beyond the body’s confines” (White 170, Bakhtin 316-17). Madam Spider has two body features which designate her openness. One is her mouth, an object which threatened destruction to the player character in first traversal of the initial phase but which, as part of Colleen’s multiple self, represents only a possible ‘joining’ of parts in hindsight interpretation. The other notable orifice in the spider’s body is not directly described, but its productive, extended effects are highly evident. As no description of yarn or other appropriate source material is provided, the ever-knitting arachnid presumably uses silk spun from her own spinnerets.⁷⁵ Her corporeal openness is evident throughout the house which she claims to have “built from the ground up,” as it is consistently likened to a web (The Parlor). For example, the beaded curtain in The Music Room is “composed of strands of ivory rondelles” and the wallpaper in The Parlor is a ‘Toile’ print, a word which ambiguously refers to an ornate style of wallpaper but also, as *toilé*, to an inwrought pattern in lace-making (“Toilé”). Knitting, then, is a metaphorical act of re-conceiving the house/web, of managing and forming the domestic space in a manner which reflects Colleen’s piloting management of her own automotive domestic space. More specifically, knitting creates metonymic associations to Madam Spider’s troubled family relationships. Most of her offspring died after emerging from the silken egg sac, the disappointingly non-communicative twins are nonetheless “[e]xcellent spinners” and the surrogate ‘child’ player character is given a blanket knit by the arachnid at the end of the dream phase (The Parlor). As a projection of Colleen, the grotesquely open Madam Spider is inextricably bound up in the creation of the destabilizing, dilemma-inducing family relationships which define the domestic environment.

Madam Spider is simultaneously distinct from Colleen, however, in that she represents a desired authority or power which the player character does

⁷⁵ Though this part of Madam Spider’s anatomy is not directly represented in the interactive fiction, spiders typically have more than one spinneret.

not seem to possess in 'reality.' As a monster/mother, Madam Spider functions as an object of desire which contests the foundation of Colleen's dilemma-ridden position in her primarily male family. Madam Spider's role as mother is evident from all her relationships to lost, absent or surrogate offspring, and the significance of that role is indicated by the centrality of mother-child hierarchies established throughout the interactive fiction. The triangle of identities represented by the 'child' player character, Colleen and this monstrous mother traces a common narrative structure in what Susanne Becker describes as feminine forms of Gothic fictions: the "subject-in-relation with a gothic figure like the 'monstrous-feminine' [. . .] posits a radical attack on the constraints of 'Woman': the feminine ideal in a specific cultural, historical context" (41). In *Madam Spider's Web*, the feminine ideal being contested is arguably the dilemma-free spectral figure who is capable of perfectly fulfilling the roles of granddaughter, mother, wife and individual which Colleen finds difficulty juggling in her contemporary, American, automotive domestic space. Madam Spider, as similarly entrapped in a web of domesticity, but one of her own making, is a sympathetic yet powerful Gothic figure who represents not an antithesis of Colleen but a comrade of sorts, albeit one with perceived authority and self-realization. Colleen has a sister as well as a sister-in-law, but in her 'thoughts' about her family and her grandfather, no mention is made of her parents and, in particular, her mother. In Gothic fiction, the "dynamics of lack and alienation in the generic gothic isolation and in the motherless situation of the gothic heroine constitute a typical ground for desire," especially desire for "another woman or for a female community" (Becker 52). While Colleen has a "female community" in her sister and sister-in-law, the more relevant object of desire is a guiding mother. Although Diane Long Hoeveler suggests that what is desired in female Gothic fiction is the "reconfiguration of the parental figures [. . .] as ambivalent psychic and emotional constructions of power and powerlessness combined" (23), it is the desire for such ambiguous *authority*, rather than for a distinct father and mother, which is central. Madam Spider, who suffers a powerlessness similar to Colleen but also enjoys a power which Colleen lacks, represents an explicit possibility for individual authority in Colleen's web of fears. The adult player character's monster within is a role model for navigating the web of family constrictions.

The Disintegration of Order: Configuring the Player's Monster Within

Unlike the parallel 'child' roles of the player character and player in initial traversal of the first phase, the player's programmed roles in the three phases of *Madam Spider's Web* do not match the player character's grotesque inversion and self-fragmentation. However, the poetics of the grotesque emphasize the player's 'embodied' sense of control in the first phase in contrast to the regulated and 'distanced' role of the player in the latter phases. Players value what theorists have described as the 'illusion' of participatory control when playing (or replaying) interactive fiction (Sloane, *Digital Fictions* 76; Keller 289). Despite limitations and restrictions to play produced by the interactive fiction author via authoring software such as Inform 6, the 'participatory' agency and reading involved in playing an interactive fiction provide players with a sense of control. Considered simply, reading the interactive fiction involves not just identifying and comprehending words on the screen but also being able to interpret the information presented within the context of texts and procedures in the interactive fiction, while agency involves the player's ability to make decisions and enter commands which affect the player character's situation or the narrative environment in a significant fashion (see Ryan, *Avatars of Story* 128). Notably, while both agency and reading are significant for traversal, agency is presented as much more important than reading for the player's sense of control in interactive fiction design discourse. Several pages on *The Interactive Fiction Wiki* emphasize as fundamental the player's ability to actively determine the actions of the player character (see "Rails, being on," "Agency"), while others indicate the negative connotations of excessive reading in a work (see "Textdump," "Cutscene"). In *Madam Spider's Web*, the illusion of control granted by player agency is greatest in the dream phase, where it is possible to 'embody' the player character to the extent of commanding her to perform corporeal actions in the house.

In contrast, the realistic phases involve extensive reading but very little agency, a programmed configuration which contradicts interactive fiction design discourse and constricts the player's programmed role in a Gothic-grotesque manner. In the driving phase, possible commands are limited to non-physical actions such as looking/examining, thinking/remembering or listening. In addition to this 'disembodied' configuration, player commands are shown to be irrelevant to the progression of predetermined narrative

replies (Driving Down the Highway, December 28th). The player's agency is removed completely in the hospital phase, where the narrative about what happens to Colleen after the accident is primary and the player is limited to pressing a single key to view more text (The White Room). The grotesque inversion of agency and reading in the player's programmed role functions to reveal the *illusion* of control which the player may have experienced upon initial traversal of the first phase of the work. A lack of control in the 'realistic' phases of the interactive fiction implies a lack of control in the real world for the player. Relegating the player to an agency-less reader goes against interactive fiction design discourse, but is grotesque in the emphasis it places on the overt fabrication of the player's role and the estrangement or distance it creates between the player and the work.⁷⁶ The grotesque highlights the "relativity of prevailing truths and authorities" for Bakhtin (11), an illumination of the artificiality of prescriptive authority which Kayser correlates to "the confusion, the incongruence, the whirling heterogeneity of modern life" (Hurley, "Abject and Grotesque" 141). Configured to essentially 'read' the work at a distance in the driving and hospital phases, the albeit limited illusion of control the player enjoys in the first phase is highlighted and questioned. This Gothic destabilization of the player's role points to the chaotic threat implicit in the grotesque. Like the player character, the greatest constriction for the player, as a reader without agency, occurs in the contemporary, realistic settings of Dee's interactive fiction. For the human subject constructed by the interactive fiction, there is an overt loss of control in "modern life," especially when it comes to family relationships.

Alongside the Gothic-grotesque destabilization of the player's role in successive phases of *Madam Spider's Web*, the inexplicable relevance of the cornerstone object in the arachnid's house undermines the positive value of player 'control' in the dream phase. The three possible endings for a complete traversal of *Madam Spider's Web* are governed by the indiscernible cause-and-effect sequence related to the fate of the web-encased beetle found in a closet in the house. When asked, Madam Spider provides no instructions regarding the food sac and its relevance to the player character is also unclear as it may not be taken or otherwise employed in completing

⁷⁶ Although her arguments relate to the representation of spaces in console-based video games, in "Not of Woman Born" Taylor suggests that interactive Gothic works "excel in disrupting" typical normative practices in design as well as the cultural values which underpin those conventions or practices 111.

the two 'chore' puzzles. The limited interpretive speculation the player may conduct in the initial phase suggests that like the marinating fly head, the food sac ought to be ignored as Madam Spider's property. However, this results in Colleen being partially paralyzed from the automobile accident when she wakes up in the hospital in the third phase. Alternatively, stabbing the beetle with the umbrella results in a hospital ending where Colleen, as a hovering spirit, views her dead body from above. Finally, freeing the beetle from the food sac produces an ending where Colleen survives the accident with only a few superficial bruises. In all three scenarios, the relationship between the player's actions toward the beetle and Colleen's 'health' is not addressed by replies in any phase.⁷⁷ This lacuna is critiqued by one reviewer, who argues that it "makes no sense to arbitrarily award a happy ending in one story for actions in a different story entirely," and contends "without looking at the walkthrough, one would never realize that one's behavior in phase one had *any* relationship whatsoever to what happens in" the latter phases (Maher, "IF Comp 2006," original emphasis). The cause-and-effect lacuna is also contrary to the prescriptive guidelines of interactive fiction design discourse because it directly affects player progress in a covert fashion ("Unprompted Actions," "Illogical Actions"). However, these critiques derive from normative design practices favoring logic and coherence; qualities often subverted in contemporary Gothic works. The irrelevant, hidden significance of the food sac further destabilizes the player's 'control' in the dream phase by calling into question the perceived freedom of unprovoked actions. The unexpected, primarily negative ramifications for the player character which develop from the player's apparent 'freedom' indicate that the player is an unknowing threat to the player character.⁷⁸

As the central interactive component which unifies the narrative connection between the first and final phases of *Madam Spider's Web*, the food sac with its cause-and-effect lacuna designates the interactive fiction as a grotesque, postmodern Gothic. For Kayser, the disintegration of order in

⁷⁷ Upon first traversal the player will almost certainly be confused as to why s/he achieved a certain ending, and may, in fact, have little sense that the ending is in any way connected to the food sac. Even if the player determines that distinct actions toward the food sac produce different endings and possibly even ascribes a speculative meaning to the food sac in some of those endings, the overall symbolic meaning or significance of the food sac in the completed work will remain uncertain.

⁷⁸ Krzywinska makes a similar claim for horror video games. When a work overtly shatters a player's illusion of control it should not be seen as a "game flaw" because losing control is central to the experience of interactive horror 217.

grotesque degradation creates a situation where “apparently meaningful things are shown to have no meaning,” a description which aptly describes the paradoxically crucial food sac (61). In initial traversal of the dream phase the food sac is an apparently insignificant object, but when the player discovers the centrality of the object in bridging the gap between the distinct first and third phases it becomes highly symbolic, yet also inexplicable. This uncanny, estranging effect is common to grotesque fiction where “the reader is affected by the incomprehensibility of the phenomenal world which is strange and dreamlike” (Kayser 147). The threatening lack of meaning which Kayser associates with the grotesque is also apparent in Gothic fiction generally, but the particular dynamics of the food sac point to the postmodern Gothic. Andrew Smith describes a skepticism toward grand or master narratives in postmodern Gothic fiction.

In a contemporary, postmodern age one can no longer believe in coherent, universal, claims to truth[. . .] Such a world is defined by the absence of absolute meaning, and in literature this becomes manifested through stylistic play in which narrative forms are run together to create synthetic worlds which foreground issues about representation[. . .] In other words, postmodernism seems to be peculiarly suited to the Gothic because it questions the notion that one inhabits a coherent or otherwise abstractly rational world. (141)

The formal fragmentation and uncertain details of *Madam Spider's Web* demonstrate this resistance to abstract rationalism, but the food sac makes the work's postmodern concern with representation central. Similarly, in an article investigating the overlap between certain forms of the Gothic and postmodernism, Allan Lloyd-Smith suggests that both “engage the reader's desire to create meaning, only to frustrate it and leave us with obscure but significant fragments that engage and yet short-circuit affectivity” (“Postmodernism/Gothicism” 12). This aptly describes the function of the food sac in *Madam Spider's Web*, as it invites and rejects cohesive interpretation in order to produce grotesque, postmodern Gothic effects for the player.

In relation to the food sac, the player's role is configured to allow for the performance of certain actions which simulate postmodern Gothic effects. The frustrated “desire to create meaning” becomes reflexive; if the food sac is uninterpretable then the player character's actions toward it take on greater significance for the player. This shift in focus indicates the postmodern, participatory fabrication of the events in *Madam Spider's Web* (see McHale 100), but also implicates the player as a primary, (unknowing) threat to the

player character. This configuration aligns Dee's interactive fiction with postmodern Gothic texts which are "more self-consciously Gothic than any 'original' Gothic novel," and tend to function as simulacra for the reader (Spooner, "Gothic in the Twentieth Century" 44, 45). The player's role is programmed so that s/he must deal with the Gothic effects of the symbolic meaning of the food sac object without comprehending, or having a means to comprehend, its meaning. Specifically, the player's (lack of) interaction with the food sac produces an uncanny, underived effect where the unknown, threatening or saving force turns out to be the player her or himself. These simulated effects function in the work regardless of whether the player determines the link between the food sac and Colleen's 'health,' though realization is likely to produce a more Gothic 'experience' for the player. In short, *Madam Spider's Web* simulates what Punter and Byron contend as central to contemporary Gothic works: "the potential for corruption and violence lies within all, and the horror comes above all from an appalling sense of recognition: with our contemporary monsters, self and other frequently become completely untenable categories" (266). Like the player character's amplified self-constriction and potential empowerment in the form of Madam Spider, the player 'experiences' the uncanny sense of culpability which comes from a self-constructed threat but also possesses the 'power' to rescue the player character.

In a hindsight interpretation of *Madam Spider's Web* and/or in subsequent play, the poetics of the Gothic-grotesque indicate the ambiguities of the postmodern monster for the player character and the player. In contemporary texts monsters are "already inside—the house, the body, the head, the skin, the nation—and they work their way out," so that it is "the facade of the normal" which becomes "the place of terror within postmodern Gothic" (Halberstam 162). Despite the apparent difficulties of her childish inversion in the dream phase, Colleen's true site of Gothic constriction in the interactive fiction is her contemporary domestic space where the difficulties surrounding family constrictions and her unrealized power over them is hidden by the "facade of the normal." The dream phase functions as a grotesque inversion to this, a potential site of release which is threatening because it explicates the bonds and fears of her own domestic space but also provides a desired model self in the similarly constricted but also powerful Madam Spider. For the player, the grotesque signals an increasing lack of control over the interactive fiction, seen in both the constrictions to player

allowances in the realistic phases and in the Gothic effects of the player's (in)action regarding the food sac. Considered in completion, the illusion of control which the player likely enjoyed in first traversal of the dream phase is a postmodern "facade of the normal" which enables Gothic effects. Dee's interactive fiction highlights the artificiality and dangers implicit in this facade by counteracting preferred practices in interactive fiction design discourse in order to simulate the postmodern 'experience' of a monster working its way out. The player's role is programmed so that s/he is made unwittingly culpable in harming or unknowingly responsible in helping Colleen, an ambiguous potentiality of the postmodern monster-self dynamic which mirrors the player character's position.

Gothic Narratives of Relationships and the Monsters Within Them

In traversal, Sara Dee's fragmented *Madam Spider's Web* produces traditional and postmodern Gothic narratives which overlap but nonetheless remain distinct. The predominance of the first phase and its adherence to the principles of interactive fiction design discourse supports the possibility that the player dismiss the brief, realistic phases which follow it, a position which favors that phase's traditional, recognizable Gothic scenario of domestic destabilization. On the other hand, interactive fiction design discourse also values fragmentation as a puzzle; the player's desire for closure may make dismissal of the realistic phases (and what they imply) difficult, except perhaps as a design flaw. From a critical position, fragmentation, unresolved details and missing information are central to the postmodern, Gothic-grotesque aspects of the work. In addition, this traversal encompasses the traditional Gothic reading because it acknowledges the interactive fiction's ability to construct multiple "fictional objects and worlds" in postmodern collaboration with the player (McHale 100-01).⁷⁹ As interactive fiction design discourse does not favor the illumination of a work's construction if such construction limits the player inexplicably, design principles appear to support traditional Gothic narrative strategies but contradict postmodern Gothic devices in *Madam Spider's Web*.

⁷⁹ McHale suggests that postmodern fictions project 'zones' where multiple, often mutually exclusive worlds may be accommodated 43-45. This postmodern aesthetic is an explicit possibility in interactive fictions. For claims about how traversal may simulate or project multiple worlds in a work, see Douglass, "Command Lines" 130 and Montfort, "Generating Narrative Variation in Interactive Fiction" 42-43.

Despite the divergent Gothic narratives produced in Dee's postmodern interactive fiction, the theme of female constriction in a domestic space remains central. The initially produced traditional Gothic narrative about the instability of the family home and individual roles within it explicates the hidden constrictions and uncertainties related to Colleen's contemporary, automotive family space in the context of the postmodern narrative. In both narratives, the instabilities and uncertainties which trouble the female player character are viewable as threats to the corporeal stability of the human subject. Aside from reasserting the prominence of female constriction in domestic spaces in contemporary Gothic fiction, *Madam Spider's Web* underscores the ambiguity inherent in a meta-awareness of gendered domestic anxiety by linking Colleen's symbolic outcome in the hospital to the player's unwitting actions. Although the connection is ambiguous, the player's bodily actions toward the food sac (stabbing the beetle, leaving it trapped, freeing it) also underscore the vulnerability of the human subject as the effect on the player character is corporeal. The potential to determine the outcome is, in turn, linked to the figure of the contemporary monster in the work.

Although the monsters in Dee's interactive fiction reflect arguments about sympathetic and self-contiguous contemporary or postmodern monsters in Gothic critical discourse (see Botting and Townshend, Introduction, *Gothic: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, 4: 9), the player character's and player's monsters are distinct in that they are identifiable primarily by the underived effects they produce as a result of hidden things. *Madam Spider* illuminates the problems hidden in Colleen's realistic family situation and provides the potential for greater constriction as a monster or else self-empowerment as a mother (both of which derive their power from the body), but the root of Colleen's problems remains hidden. The player's metaphorical monster demonstrates the troubling or beneficial relationship between the player's actions toward the food sac and Colleen's health but the significance of the food sac also remains hidden. However, the monster within constructed by the player's actions is unique from *Madam Spider* in that it does not *mean* anything, it has no referent like the player character's monster. In this regard it is what Gary Farnell describes as a meaningless thing of the Gothic, "beyond all reference" yet which "resists and provokes symbolisation" (113). Whereas *Madam Spider* represents the ambiguous figure of a mother, with all the benefit and threat

implied in such a female authority figure, the player's monster is figureless; actions take on monstrous effect without an essential referent. The food sac's lack of meaning reflexively highlights the player's blind action as solely responsible for Gothic effects, disconnecting any quality of intention or represented value from the monster figure. In *Madam Spider's Web*, contemporary monsters function to varying degrees via what is hidden in order to underscore the Gothic ambiguity and potential resolution of narratives of female constriction in a domestic space. The postmodern Gothic problematic of hidden threats to subjectivity will be more fully explored in the next chapter.

Chapter Four:

Cybergothic Threats to Posthuman Subjectivity in Star Foster and Daniel Ravipinto's *Slouching Towards Bedlam*

"[. . .] the rough beast that now slouches toward the next century is not monstrous simply by virtue of its status as a non-species: posthuman monstrosity and its bodily forms are recognizable because they occupy the overlap between now and then, the here and the always: the annunciation of posthumanity is always both premature and old news" (Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston, *Posthuman Bodies* 3).

A constructed relationship between 'the past' and 'the present' forms the central nexus for formal, ideological and generic concerns in Star C. Foster and Daniel Ravipinto's text-based interactive fiction *Slouching Towards Bedlam* (2003). In the work, the player follows Bethlehem Hospital superintendent Dr. Thomas Xavier as he re-examines the strange fate of Cleve Anderson, an enigmatic asylum patient. As the player guides the player character in traversal, s/he learns that Cleve's affliction developed as a result of a mystical-technological communication with the 'Logos,' a powerful entity which is alternatively depicted as a divine presence or a destructive infection. The Logos forms a symbiotic relationship with Cleve and spreads to other people via his speech in a viral manner. As it becomes evident that Xavier, through his contact with Cleve, is also infected with this word virus, the player must evaluate the situation and take action. A large number of textual 'documents' underscore the uncertainty of what the Logos represents to the characters, as do many of the formal facets of the work, so the player is forced to perform an interpretive evaluation of events (in essence creating a narrative understanding of the Logos) and then act based on that evaluation in order to achieve one of the five endings. Although the work is set in Victorian London, this representation of the past is related to the present by the inclusion of several anachronistic mechanical apparatuses which more readily allude to contemporary, twenty-first century digital technology. The concept of a word virus is similarly pertinent to present-day information networks.

The fictionalized past environment in the interactive fiction develops from descriptions and interactive situations which contain abundant historical 'facts' and yet are overtly constructed, a paradox which makes the

work a prime example of historiographic metafiction, a postmodern narrative form. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Linda Hutcheon defines historiographic metafiction as self-reflexive yet historical:

In most critical work on postmodernism, it is narrative—be it in literature, history, or theory—that has usually been the major focus of attention. Historiographic metafiction incorporates all three of these domains: that is, its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic metafiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past. (5, original emphases)

The overt construction of *Slouching Towards Bedlam*'s fictional past setting renders the past uncertain, but more importantly provides a foundation for “rethinking and reworking forms and contents” of the present. Although Hutcheon’s investigation of this category focuses on the novel form, many aspects of historiographic metafiction, both in terms of narrative content and formal structure, readily apply to contemporary works of interactive fiction (Douglass, “Command Lines” 33). In *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, the constructed relationship between nineteenth-century technology and modern communication technology provides a frame for examining the particular powers of a Gothic ‘monster’ from the past who continues to imperil humanity in the present. From the player’s perspective, the interactive fiction also functions as a work of historiographic metafiction structurally in that traditionally authoritative components of the work, including the paratexts and ‘solved’ form of the narrative produced upon traversal, function to undermine any sense of credibility and closure.

A similar historical lens is central to understanding the interactive fiction’s primary characters, as they are depicted as posthuman subjects. Like the underlying message of historiographic metafiction, forms of human subjectivity are *constructed* in literary texts which simultaneously relate to the discursive contexts of a period. Views of human subjectivity from of the nineteenth century are fundamentally understood from what is taken to be its essence: the body. With corporeality assumed as primary, the human subject’s identity is based on physical features and supported by networks of (blood) relatives. Also, *metaphysical* concerns retain a corporeal locus: the soul and cognition are seated within the encapsulated, autonomous material form. This foundational image of the human subject, discernable in the various depictions of subjectivity presented in my analyses of *Nevermore*, *Anchorhead* and *Madam Spider’s Web*, may arguably be said to represent

the traditional liberal view of what it means to be human. In contrast, posthuman subjectivity is less consistently defined. Although there are many varied definitions of the posthuman subject (Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* 283; Badmington, "Introduction" 10; Lister et. al 253), one of its more popular conceptions is the one formulated in parallel with the development of cybernetic and then digital (essentially machine-based) environments (Clarke 3). In this conception of posthuman subjectivity, information rather than the body provides the most typical paradigmatic foundation (Botting, *Gothic Romanced* 198; Ingvarsson 92-93). Technology is frequently a frame for understanding how patterns of information are significant to this subject, and while fiction has provided more extreme examples in the form of cyborgs and cylons, daily life in Western societies also indicates the informational basis for constructing posthumans. For example, individuals today are likely to access digital communication technologies such as email, personal data assistants, mobile telephones and the internet on a daily basis, be 'recognizable' or 'known' by their blog posts, homepages and social networking profiles and, should it be necessary, be medically identifiable to the nth degree by their DNA code. Technologically mediated information is also central to the characters in Foster and Ravipto's interactive fiction.

In *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, the shift to a form of information-based posthuman subjectivity is indicated in Cleve's manner of contacting the Logos, which he initially believes to be a deity. Unlike the low-tech or no-tech relationships to deities which human subjects are typically depicted to experience, Kabalistic cryptography in combination with complex technological apparatuses are required for Cleve to mediate contact with the Logos. Similarly, Xavier epitomizes a posthuman, networked entity by virtue of his collection of information technologies: he records his diary orally on one device, employs a telephonic apparatus which functions 'wirelessly' and is shown to rely heavily on a mechanical contraption which functions both as an information storage unit and computational machine. Notably, Xavier's infection with the Logos is mediated via yet another communication device. The player's programmed role also simulates the posthuman paradigm as the actual textual interface for the interactive fiction software is presented as if infected. The player's actions are thus not directed towards finding a corporeal source of the problem but toward sifting through distributed information in order to discern how to combat a virus which spreads via

information. Within the dual Victorian and contemporary focus in *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, however, the problematics of the posthuman subject are explicitly related to the problematics of the human subject, as is evident in the work's Gothic poetics.

The ideological and epistemological upheaval of the paradigm shift from human to posthuman subject produces fundamental Gothic overtones. In *How We Became Posthuman*, N. Katherine Hayles repeatedly describes the alternative perspectives of pleasure or terror, dream or nightmare which the posthuman subject portends both as it is developed in literature and in scientific discourse (1-5, 283-91). This promise of pleasure and/or threat of terror duality inherent in the ideological upheaval which the posthuman subject represents for the established human subject is coterminous with the effect provided by postmodern Gothic. Jerrold E. Hogle contends that twenty-first century Gothic works “provide us with the terror *and* the promise of ourselves as ‘monstrously’ othered, at once revealed to and disguised from ourselves as we really are” (“The Gothic at Our Turn of the Century” 173, original emphasis). In spite of this duality, the anxiety about “ourselves,” about the fate of the human subject’s body, is more often than not seen as a negative potentiality rather than a positive one. For example, the devaluation of the body signals a downplaying or negation of “questions about subjectivity that involve the issues of sexuality and sexual identity” (Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 160), a highly political move whose repercussions are challenged by theorists like Donna Haraway in “A Cyborg Manifesto” and Anne Balsamo in *Technologies of the Gendered Body*.⁸⁰ Further epistemological and political repercussions are easily imaginable in conceptions of the posthuman which level “binaries like human and inhuman or good and evil” (Duda 22). However, in the face of such political concerns and other fears about the posthuman signaling the end of “the age of the human,” it is important to recognize that the concept of posthumanity is not fixed and most negative reactions to it do not, to quote Hayles, “exhaust the meanings of the posthuman” (*How We Became Posthuman* 283). The posthuman subject is constructed, and central to its essence is its distinction from and thus relationship to the traditional construction of the human subject.

⁸⁰ For discussions about the tenuous moral politics of certain forms of posthumanism, see Shaviro 73, 136.

The continued effect of the past acting on the present is a cornerstone concept in the Gothic which becomes uniquely pertinent in the cybergothic subgenre, as it specifically explores the vulnerabilities of information-based posthuman subjectivity. As a cybergothic work, *Slouching Towards Bedlam*'s presentation of posthuman subjectivity is contextualized in various narrative genres and forms. Cybergothic derives its name from the same cybernetic foundation as cyberpunk, a science fiction subgenre characterized by "a fascination with how everyday life is inseparable from high technology" (Badmington, *Posthumanism* 164), and which is therefore "concerned with the social and cultural valence of information" (Rosenheim 107). As cyberpunk plots typically involve futuristic or alternative realities, characters tend to be explicitly posthuman in their identifying reliance on and constant access to information networks and other technologies which downplay the personal supremacy of the human body. Cybergothic, described simply, is concerned with the vulnerabilities of distributed, information-based conceptions of subjectivity.

Cybergothic may be basically defined by its development in cyberpunk fiction but the subgenre is also relevant in postmodern works like *Slouching Towards Bedlam* which employ a mixture of forms. The Victorian setting and occasional steam-based apparatus in the interactive fiction align the work with a steampunk, a genre ideologically similar to cyberpunk but which emphasizes a past setting and technologies "of the time" (Crandall 39).⁸¹ However, I contend that the work reflects elements of both '-punks' since technologies in the interactive fiction are simultaneously indicative of contemporary technology (cybernetic) and technology of the time (mechanical). While information-based posthuman subjectivity lies at the heart of the work's cybergothic poetics, the overtly authored relationship between an imagined past and contemporary society visible in the technologies and other elements of the work suggests that historiographic metafiction provides a more inclusive analytical framework for my investigation than an approach solely via cyberpunk or steampunk. Furthermore, the constructed relationship to the past is significant because posthuman subjectivity is inherently bound to the paradigm of the human

⁸¹ For descriptions of the work as a steampunk, see Douglass, "Command Lines" 316; O'Brian, "2003 Competition Game Reviews"; and Bond, Rev. of *Slouching Towards Bedlam*. The authors also describe their work in this manner; see Foster and Ravipinto, Interview, "Magic Words."

subject: “we are always already living within a society that has a certain humanist ideology from which we cannot ever successfully escape” (Duda 22). This relationship is also relevant for Gothic fiction, as the past is frequently evoked in order to examine the present (Hogle, “Introduction” 16; Milbank 147; Spooner, “Gothic in the Twentieth Century” 43). With all of this in mind, cybergothic may comprehensively be described as relying on ‘past’ Gothic instantiations—often in the form of ancient specters such as a ghost or vampire—to try to describe the distributed threats (often from the future) which besiege the information-based, posthuman subject.

Threats to the posthuman subjects in *Slouching Towards Bedlam* are cloaked in the past Gothic form of the quintessential vampire: Dracula. The interactive fiction’s past and present narrative is similar to Stoker’s novel both formally and in its presentation of the nebulous Logos via figurative elements similar to the Count’s. The figure of Dracula represents a danger (from the past) to human subjects and yet also possesses qualities which are figuratively dangerous to posthuman subjectivity. In Gothic literature from the nineteenth century the most prominent Gothic villain is the vampire, an ancient, viral being whose undead, immortal agency endangers the corporeal human subject. As Fred Botting and Dale Townshend assert, the bodily concerns of “[s]exuality, the psyche and the home provide the main focus for Gothic writing in the nineteenth century, the vampire both their fictional and literary-critical avatar” (Introduction, *Gothic: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* 3: 1). While a number of vampire novels and serials were produced in the nineteenth century, the figure of Count Dracula from Bram Stoker’s novel *Dracula* is undoubtedly the central representative vampire from this, or indeed many other, literary periods (Warwick 35; Botting and Townshend, Introduction, *Gothic: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* 3: 1; Hughes 143).⁸² In the novel, Dracula provides a

⁸² In “Stoker’s Counterfeit Gothic,” Hogle contends that in nineteenth-century England, France and Germany the vampire tradition was widely popular and developed in many artistic forms 213. Although “the vampire had firmly established itself as a literary trope” by the time *Dracula* appeared, Stoker’s character has nonetheless become the archetypal vampire in contemporary Western cultures, according to Miller, Introduction xxiv. In “*Dracula*,” Miller further asserts that the centrality of the figure is apparent in the vast cultural legacy of Stoker’s novel, as conceptions of the Count have spread to “breakfast cereal, t-shirts, video games, posters, comic books, ‘Sesame Street,’ postage stamps, TV ads, musicals, ballets,” films and many other aspects of society 341. While I do not deny the vast ecology of the vampire tradition, I contend that the vampiric threats to posthuman subjects in the interactive fiction relate specifically to Stoker’s textual conception of Dracula, and so my arguments about vampiric qualities in this chapter will derive from the nineteenth-century novel.

unique threat to human subjects in the late Victorian urban setting as his telegraphic abilities correspond to developing technology such as phonographs and cameras which are beginning to provide ambivalent and potentially troubling conceptions of vocal and visual disembodiment. In *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, the Logos' powers also correspond to developing technologies which have the potential to unseat the stability of posthuman subjects. While the interactive fiction is highly intertextual in that it makes specific references to historical events and places, quotes Biblical scriptures, cites famous lines from W. B. Yeats' poem "The Second Coming," includes sayings from Seneca the Younger and makes clear allusions to other interactive fictions, no direct reference to Stoker's novel is provided. Nonetheless, *Slouching Towards Bedlam's* structural emphasis on the interpretation of several textual 'documents' further aligns the work to Stoker's text. Stoker's readers, like the interactive fiction's players, are encouraged to create a narrative of the Gothic threat from several disparate strands of information as they progress through the work.

As a work of historiographic metafiction, *Slouching Towards Bedlam* employs *Dracula's* nineteenth-century conception of the vampire to indicate the revolutionary danger which the Logos represents to networks of information in contemporary, posthuman society. Ironically, this reliance on a past narrative focusing on the human subject helps establish the interactive fiction as a work of cybergothic, a subgenre which relies on traditional narrative conventions despite its generic interest in the vulnerabilities of posthuman subjectivities.⁸³ Although not present in the interactive fiction, *Dracula* is a key figure in metaphorically mediating the past and present threats to posthuman subjects from the Logos. The player's role is constructed so that traversing the work simulates an infected, posthuman scenario. As a predominantly readerly interactive fiction which exhibits formal qualities similar to Stoker's novel, *Slouching Towards Bedlam's* five possible endings do not function as paths for the player to choose from but rather as goals in a recursive meta-narrative. This meta-narrative, in which the player lacks choices and performs a role which always simulates infection

⁸³ Vampirism's relevance to posthuman subjectivity is evidenced in several contemporary genres related to the cybergothic mode. For an investigation of the vampirism of viruses, see Dougherty, "The Biopolitics of the Killer Virus Novel." For several discussions of the parasitic and viral qualities of language in 'information narratives,' see Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*. For an interesting exploration of the virus metaphor as a "nonliving" entity, "infiltrating foreigner and alien invader," see Wald 158, 170.

with the Logos, indicates the contemporary anxieties surrounding the vulnerability of posthuman subjectivity.

Dracula and Slouching Towards Bedlam: The Logos as Vampire

Narrative elements and the vampiric word virus in *Slouching Towards Bedlam* are similar to narrative elements and the vampire in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The Logos resembles Dracula in that its preternatural powers are metaphorically related to the capabilities of communication technology of the period(s). In addition, the Logos also reflects the vampire in terms of its ambivalent portrayal as either plague or act of providence. The revolutionary change to subjectivity and the world represented by either of these possibilities is furthermore linked to the messianic yet threatening new world order suggested by W.B. Yeats' poem "The Second Coming," from which the title of the interactive fiction derives.

Although the connection is only implicit, *Slouching Towards Bedlam* consistently develops from narrative and formal elements of Stoker's novel. Like *Dracula's* Dr. Seward, asylum superintendent Dr. Thomas Xavier records journal entries on a phonograph, and these phonograph entries chronologically document the player character's growing obsession with one particular patient. Dr. Seward's object of obsession, R. N. Renfield, is a sort of spiritual follower of Dracula who misguidedly enables the vampire's activities in London, especially his ingress to Mina (Stoker 248-50). Similarly, Xavier's patient, Cleve Anderson, initially calls forth the Logos in an act of religious devotion and unwillingly functions as the means through which it spreads. Formally, *Dracula* is an epistolary novel, a "narrative patchwork made up out of the combined journal entries, letters, professional records and newspaper clippings [. . .] [which are] collated and typed by the industrious Mina" (Wicke 32). Although not epistolary in format, *Slouching Towards Bedlam* is also largely composed of multiple recorded documents which the player, like Mina, must read and organize in order to interpret what the Logos may be prior to acting on that interpretation. Aside from the four phonographic journal entries, the player has access to the medical files on three patients of the asylum, Cleve's diary, a letter he wrote to the mysterious group of cypherists, and various types of texts which appear as appendices, individually made available in relation to respective endings. These narrative and formal connections between Foster and Ravidpinto's

interactive fiction and Stoker's novel provide the context for the Logos' vampiric qualities.

More specifically, the Logos' powers, like Dracula's, resemble the mystical abilities provided by period-specific, developing communication technologies. In literature from and set in the latter half of the Victorian period, developing or 'new' technologies, such as the phonograph, frequently provide a basis for character belief in mysticism, spiritualism or evidence of the supernatural (see Wolfreys xv, Spencer 309).⁸⁴ The contextual significance of this connection is apparent in *Dracula*. In "Vampiric Typewriting: *Dracula* and its Media," Jennifer Wicke contends that "the social force most analogous to Count Dracula's as depicted in the novel is none other than mass culture, the developing technologies of the media in its many forms" (32; see Rickels 11, 52). Wicke compares the vampire's powers both to the telegraph, "an equivalent to the telekinetic, telepathic communication Dracula is able to have with Mina after sealing her into his race with her enforced drinking of his blood," and to the disembodied voice produced by the phonograph, analogous to Dracula's ability to "insinuate himself as a voice in the heads of his followers, or call them from afar" (37; see Kittler 79). Similarly, *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, set in 1855, highlights the Victorian and, for the player, contemporary contexts of the relationship between developing technology and mysticism in the communicative qualities of the Logos. The Logos manifests as a result of Cleve's desire to prove his worth to a mysterious society referred to as the "cypherists," an order built on the tenets of "the recognition of information as an entity rather than an idea, the embrasure and development of new technologies to unlock the mysteries of the Universe itself" (Cleve's Letter). Cleve initially views these beliefs and practices as a "holy calling," and in order to ingratiate himself with the cypherists he secretly works to achieve contact with the "mind of God" (Cleve's Letter, Cleve's Diary). He accomplishes more than he expected: Cleve is able to contact and unexpectedly *awaken* the vampiric Logos by "connecting the [cypherists'] engines," setting "the gears and knobs" correctly and "aligning the energy" to match specific calculations (Cleve's Diary). In a corollary to Mina's inclusion in Dracula's "race" via blood transfusion, Cleve's contact with the Logos occurs via an exchange of

⁸⁴ Castle thoroughly examines the significance of this pairing in nineteenth-century society and literature in the chapter "Phantasmagoria and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie" in *The Female Thermometer*.

words “echoed” but “not unchanged,” so that in the end he is “spoken” by the Logos in a symbiosis not unlike the vampiric embrace: “I and Logos touched and were one . . .” (Cleve’s Diary). The Logos is then depicted as a telegraphic, phonographic presence in Cleve’s head. However, like contemporary media technologies which handle packets of information covertly through computer code, such as email, cellular telephones and wireless internet access, information is not merely received but also, often unwittingly, transmitted by the receiver. Cleve writes in confusion about speaking “words I have never heard and cannot understand. My throat is stripped dry. Is this the Logos? Still with me? Does it speak [. . .] through my lips?” (Cleve’s Diary). Like Dracula, the Logos’ vampiric powers are inherently connected to communication technologies, turning those infected into conduits for communication.

The Logos is also comparable to Dracula with regard to the revolutionary change to humanity it portends, either as plague or religious transcendence. While several critics assert Dracula’s impure, infectious qualities as commentary on historical social concerns with moral, mental and physical hygiene in populous London (Carroll 29, Pick 291, Brewster 289), these viral qualities are offset by religious overtones. The vampire’s means of survival in Stoker’s novel ironically literalizes the Christian association between blood and life, a connection made prominent by the discourses of Dracula’s opponent, the witch-doctor scientist Van Helsing (Wicke 40; Punter, *The Literature of Terror* 2: 16; Stoker 213-14). While this equivalency carries connotations of Messianic renewal in consumptive rituals such as the Eucharist, the exact phrase “the blood is the life” is from Deuteronomy 12.23, where humanity is ordered *not* to eat the blood of living things. The ambiguous encouragement and taboo surrounding the consumption of blood is personified in Renfield, the spiritual follower of Dracula and mentally unstable asylum patient, who specifically refers to the phrase from Deuteronomy twice in the novel but in such a manner so as to assert the spiritual benefits of consuming blood (Stoker 129, 209). While the dangerous, viral aspects of Dracula are clearly dominant in Stoker’s text, the plague or providence perspectives both signal the potential for profound, apocalyptic change.

Similarly, in *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, the Logos is an ambivalent harbinger of a new world order, much like the “rough beast” which “[s]louches towards Bethlehem” of Yeats’ poem (lines 21-22), as it may be

interpreted both as a force of God and a virus. Parallel to *Dracula's* ironic use of 'the blood is the life,' the Logos spreads via verbal exchange and its name comes from the phrase Cleve uses to describe his initial contact with it: '[k]ai theos en ho logos,' Greek for 'and God was the word,' from John 1.1 (Cleve's Letter).⁸⁵ In support of this Christian perspective, the Logos is called and awakened by Cleve's utterance of the cypherists' motto, a paraphrase of the Lord's description of a united humanity in Genesis 11:6.⁸⁶ However, as with *Dracula*, the spiritual perspective of the Logos is offset by its corrupting, viral qualities. Cleve's contact with the Logos occurs in a "joyous, horrible moment," and while he muses that the unknown language he finds himself speaking may be that of the angels his doubt is apparent in his query, "[b]ut if this is as angels speak, why am I so afraid?" (Cleve's Diary). This joyous yet horrible sense of the Logos mirrors the connection between "apocalypse" and "genuine spiritual revelation" in Yeats' "The Second Coming" (Watson 52), a poem whose title suggests messianic return but whose verse indicates profound systemic upheaval. Although it describes "a new era of thinking brutally," the poem only provides this description as a "diagnosis" or, alternatively, a "revelation," and refrains from presenting the coming upheaval as a certainty (Hall 73-74). The ambivalence and potential underlying the bleak vision in "The Second Coming" is reflected in the interactive fiction. While the player is encouraged to interpret the Logos as pestilential or providential prior to determining how to act towards it, as with *Dracula* (and the 'rough beast') the Logos is more frequently presented as a malignant "infection" in *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, deteriorating the health of the characters who have been exposed to it and spreading threateningly without the need of human agency (Patient File F6A142). As with Renfield's ultimate attempt to stop *Dracula* when he realizes that the vampire is harmful, Cleve commits himself to arresting the Logos by allowing himself to be quarantined in the asylum and adopting a vow of silence (Stoker 248-50, Cleve's Diary). Regardless of which perspective the

⁸⁵ The 'Logos' implies additional meanings of course, usually derived from this Christian conflation of God and word. For a brief examination of how the "search for a fundamental Truth or Logos" has been central to Western philosophy, see "Hélène Cixous" 2037. For a specific conception of what the logos may represent, see Jung 40. While many of these conceptions underscore the governing, overruling qualities of the Logos they also, in their multiplicity, contribute to the ambivalent uncertainty attributed to it in the interactive fiction.

⁸⁶ The phrase is 'nothing will be restrained from them which they have imagined.' Notably, if the player interprets the Logos as divine and chooses to spread it, it is this same Christian phrase which must be broadcast via the magnetophone (a wireless broadcast machine) in order to accomplish one of the endings.

player chooses (as the basis for her or his actions), the profound change to humanity which the Logos brings aligns the work with the threat in *Dracula* and indicates a Gothic new world order similar to that signified in Yeats' poem.

Historiographic Metafiction and Threats to the Posthuman Subject

Slouching Towards Bedlam's allusion to *Dracula* is reinforced contextually by the interactive fiction's highly detailed, historically 'accurate' Victorian London setting and the vampiric presentation of the Logos' supernatural, media-like powers. However, as the credibility of historical details is also undermined and the Logos' powers are shown to be relevant for the posthuman subject, the relationship between past and present, *Dracula* and Logos, categorizes the interactive fiction as an example of both historiographic metafiction and the cybergothic subgenre. In this confluence of categories the past continues to be a Gothic threat to the present in that the viral, mutable, 'thingness' of the vampire metaphor rhetorically destabilizes to the posthuman subject.

As a work of historiographic metafiction, *Slouching Towards Bedlam* depicts a richly detailed Victorian setting whose 'factual' authenticity is undermined by overt fictionalization. The historical context is partly established via locations; functional buildings of the period such as Bethlehem Hospital and Newgate Prison are part of the environment, as is the prominent London location Fleet Street. In addition, there are references to laws passed at the time such as The Insane Prisoner's Act of 1840, high-profile criminals such as Daniel McNaughton (Xavier's Journal, March 2nd), widely discussed social concepts such as Urquhart and Bentham's Panopticon Plan (Xavier's Journal, January 8th), and historical figures such as alienist Sir John Charles Bucknill (Appendix E). However, despite the developed historical context created by these and many other details, *Slouching Towards Bedlam* is not merely a historical interactive fiction as the certainty of many details is also contested. Hutcheon notes that in historiographic metafiction "certain known historical details are deliberately falsified in order to foreground the possible mnemonic failures of recorded history and the constant potential for both deliberate and inadvertent error" (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 114). Examples of potentially deliberate 'inaccuracies' or "error[s]" of this sort in the interactive fiction include the

‘incorrect’ idea that Bethlehem Hospital is built on the Panopticon Plan and the ‘faulty’ assertion that Robert Hooke, the architect who designed Bethlehem Hospital, also created the statues of Melancholy and Mania which flank its entrance (Courtyard).⁸⁷ As further evidence of the work’s constructed sense of the past, a real person is included in fictional events. With a well-documented nineteenth-century career as Governor of Bethlehem Hospital and noted expert on mental health, it is fitting, though not historically ‘accurate,’ that Bucknill is seen to interact with some of the characters in the interactive fiction (“Sir John Charles Bucknill, M.D., F.R.S.”). Although some of these ‘inaccuracies’ may not be immediately apparent to the player, traversal of the work, especially to several endings, reveals more blatantly fictionalized elements, such as the technologies, which increasingly suggest the unreliability of the ‘factual’ details. This overt fictionalization of historical elements indicates that the past as presented in *Slouching Towards Bedlam* is deliberately constructed as an ambivalent context for events encountered in traversal.

More critically, the anachronistic technology found throughout the historiographic metafiction elucidates how the work constructs a relationship between nineteenth-century vampiric technologies and the contemporary communication technologies which correspond to the Logos. This emphasis on the past and its relationship to the present is an example of what Hutcheon refers to as “deliberately doubly coded narrative [. . .] [which is] historical and contemporary” (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 68). The anachronistic technology in *Slouching Towards Bedlam* is primarily communicative or otherwise relates to information, and includes the phonograph, a Panopticon surveillance device with viewing screen and listening tubes, a portable ‘personal analytical engine’ called the Triage, a magnetophone which allows the player character to call people via the ‘aether,’ an archival system where files are retrieved by a mechanical spider and an automaton executioner (who ‘speaks’).⁸⁸ These apparatuses point to

⁸⁷ Bethlehem Hospital features a linear ward arrangement which is antithetical to the Panopticon Plan’s central surveillance tower surrounded by circular wards design. For a brief description of Bethlehem Hospital’s linear architecture, see Pidcock 97. For the authors’ perspective on creating fiction from history, see Foster and Ravipto, Interview, “Magic Words.” For the provenance of the statues *Raving Madness and Melancholy Madness* flanking Bethlehem’s entrance in its early history, see “Hospital Museum” and “Caius Gabriel Cibber.”

⁸⁸ While the phonograph is perhaps the most historically plausible of these devices, it is also anachronistic in that it existed only as an experimental device called the phonautograph in the mid nineteenth century. For a

the present as they broadly suggest contemporary equivalents, but they also point to the past as they reference technology of the Victorian period—much of which is analogous to Dracula’s powers in Stoker’s novel. For example, the magnetophone, labeled as the product of the “Wheatstone/Cooke Aether-Magnetophone Company,” may be said to represent the wireless communication technology of today but also the Victorian telegraph which Charles Wheatstone and William Cooke were instrumental in producing and developing in the first half of the nineteenth century (2D; Oslin 10, 23).⁸⁹ Another example of technology which encompasses the past and the present is the Panopticon surveillance device. Based on the popular Panopticon concepts of the early nineteenth century and utilizing probable techniques of the time such as air-based listening tubes, the Panopticon surveillance device is also akin to modern electrical surveillance technology as it features a historically inexplicable viewing screen (Circular Chamber). Even the most obviously contemporary devices in the work employ historically plausible elements in their construction; the Triage’s ‘screen’ is not a lit projection but a mechanical grid of individual symbols which rotate and flip, the archival system’s remarkably autonomous robotic spider nonetheless must physically retrieve paper files from an immense bank of cabinets and the executioner automaton, while capable of emitting a recorded speech, otherwise ‘performs’ the simple task of releasing the trapdoor on the gallows via steam pressure (Triage Operator’s Manual, Archives, Platform).⁹⁰ The dual present and past significance of anachronistic communication technology in *Slouching Towards Bedlam* underscores the link between the nineteenth-century technologies which are entwined with the powers of vampirism and contemporary technologies which are enmeshed with the powers of the Logos.

Within the context of this relationship between the past and the present, *Slouching Towards Bedlam* constructs a posthuman subject which is markedly different from depictions of the human subject. Although centuries of fundamentally similar conceptions of human subjectivity suggest an

discussion of this and the assertion that the phonograph was not widely available for public use until after 1890, see Rosen.

⁸⁹ 2D is the name of a room in the interactive fiction.

⁹⁰ The automaton’s admonition is also an example of fictionalized history as it is part direct quotation and part paraphrase of the admonition, given from the eighteenth century onwards, which was traditionally delivered to condemned criminals as they passed St. Sepulchre’s church wall on their way to execution at Newgate. For presentations of this admonition, see Shanafelt and Clark.

essential belief about what it is to be human, it is important to point out that any conception of the human subject, including its ideological and epistemological nature, is governed by the discourses which produce it (Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 158-59). Human and posthuman subjects can therefore be seen as “historically specific constructions that emerge from different configurations of embodiment, technology, and culture” (Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* 33). As it is represented in the interactive fiction, the posthuman subject is distinct from the human subject in two ways. First, unlike the human subject whose epistemological and ideological frame is the physical body which encapsulates a consciousness and a soul, the posthuman subject’s conceptual basis develops primarily from patterns of information. The human body remains relevant but not significant to the subject. This shift in perspective is visible in scientific discourses from the past fifty years which have affected and been affected by literary discourses: the move from human to posthuman represents an “ontological shift whereby the corporeal body is turned into an information system, a purely discursive network of signs” (Dougherty, “The Biopolitics of the Killer Virus Novel” 1-2; see Waldby 228-29). The body does not disappear in this shift, rather “the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life” (Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* 2). Embodiment remains necessary but is less relevant and unique than the informational capabilities of the subject.

In *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, a view of the subject which values information over materiality is apparent in the Triage’s categorical classification of characters. The Triage is able to “visually analyze a given subject,” such as a device or a character, and provide taxonomical information as to the subject’s physical category, utility (function) and identifying particulars (Triage Operator’s Manual). When prompted to scan non-player characters such as Xavier’s assistant James Houlihan or the head cypherist Alexandra Du Monde, the Triage categorizes them as living humans of respective genders whose sole utility is described as “COMMUNICATION POSSIBLE BY SPEECH OR WRITTEN WORD”

(Lobby, Du Monde's).⁹¹ Alongside this prioritizing of communication as the primary function or utility of human subjects, the Triage also dispels the unique significance of the human body. Able to "follow its identified operator of its own accord, utilizing path-finding and obstacle-avoidance algorithms," the Triage follows the player character everywhere Xavier is directed by the player, including up and down steps and into and out of hansom cabs without any difficulty, even, in the latter case, "gracefully" (Triage Operator's Manual, Courtyard, Outside 2D, Smithfield Market). In addition, even the solemn human acts of saying a Christian admonition to a condemned criminal and acting as executioner are performed by an automaton outside Newgate Prison in the interactive fiction. Although the inclusion of the admonition suggests a conception of the soul-in-body human subject, a shift to the information-based posthuman subject whose body is merely a functional form is evident in the pre-recorded, impersonal, automatic delivery of the message. Like the soul, the body is similarly devalued as it is this same impersonal, inorganic machine which has the function to kill the posthuman subject's valuable but merely functional physical form (Platform).

Second, the cognition of the posthuman subject in the interactive fiction is not contained but distributed. In contrast to the autonomous, 'thinking I' of the human subject, the posthuman subject's cognition is not delineated by the body's brain but extends beyond the (merely functional) body in information networks. Stephen Dougherty states that unlike the holistic unity of consciousness with the human subject, "the cognitive functions of posthuman subjectivity are dispersed among a complex network of interrelated systems and subsystems (modules) responsible for receiving and interpreting data" ("Culture in the Disk Drive" 86; see Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* 3-4). Dr. Xavier demonstrates this posthuman concern for multiple data inputs in *Slouching Towards Bedlam*. When he describes moving to London he notes that it "probably says something profound about me that I set up the magnetophone first[. . .] As I feared, I found no signal

⁹¹ Du Monde's "utility" is phrased slightly differently, with the final four words framed by parentheses. In *Slouching Towards Bedlam*'s graphic interface, reports from the Triage are arranged so as to represent its mechanical display. Text is presented in a square format consisting of eight lines of sixteen characters, with all letters capitalized and periods in between each word or abbreviation. As the precise layout of the Triage's output is not always relevant for my arguments I will not usually indicate these formatting details, aside from the use of capital letters, when I quote from it.

whatsoever” (Xavier’s Journal, January 22nd). Xavier’s core need to connect to an information network is further reinforced by his use of the Triage as a database of information with analytical functions. Aware of having been infected with something (not yet identified as the Logos), he secures “knowledge of these events within the mechanical assistant” in the hope that “it would allow me to see the situation from a new perspective, and help me discover the key to my salvation” (Xavier’s Journal, March 16th). The extension of Xavier’s cognition which the Triage represents is made especially explicit to the player. The Triage, which follows Xavier everywhere automatically, functions as a second and at times necessary means of interpreting events, solving complex Kabbalistic codes and suggesting how Xavier should interact with devices (6D, Attic Flat, Archives), making it, according to one reviewer, a secondary tool for “comprehension [. . .], the ideal thing to have along in a text adventure” (Knoch). Of course, as the player guides and controls the player character (who is shown to react in compliance with or rejection of commands), the distributed cognition of *Slouching Towards Bedlam*’s posthuman subject is implicit in interaction with the software. Developing from the nineteenth-century corporeal human subject, the interactive fiction’s construction of posthuman subjectivity devalues the body and champions the subject’s information-based, distributed ‘self.’

Gothic threats to the posthuman subject derive from Dracula’s challenge to the human subject in three ways. First, like the vampire’s viral blood which occupies and alters its host body, the Logos is implied to occupy its host’s primary information center (the brain) and commandeer its host’s communicative functions. Although the Logos is only transmittable to organic human forms, which arguably underscores its similarity to the blood of Dracula, its effects are linguistic rather than corporeal. In *Dracula*, the virulent vampire is primarily threatening because he is “contagious—able to induce physical transformation in the bodies of others” (Warwick 35). The Logos is similarly contagious, capable of spreading quickly and inducing communicative transformation in the posthuman subject’s informational capabilities. For example, when Xavier first enters the Lobby he has a conversation with James, notably unprompted by the player, in which Logos statements are all that Xavier speaks. Xavier’s Logos utterances are excerpted here in the following four lines:

/(reachgrabfeel|possibility|probability)\
 /(actionpositiveaffirmative|destroyingfrictionbreakinggrowth|positiveyes)\
 /(livinggrowthfrictionfurtherspreadingoutwardstretchingvestouchingyes)\
 /(yesdoneyes)\⁹²

Like the vampire's undead blood, apparently similar to human blood yet indubitably distinct, utterances produced by the Logos are recognizable as communication yet fundamentally different. When read, with some effort, these lines describe the process of the Logos' insistent, organic, penetrative, even orgasmic (yesyesyes) transmission from Xavier to James, a sexual and viral transmission similar to the erotically charged blood transfusions in *Dracula*.⁹³ However, this transmission is also indicative of non-sexual memetic posthumanity. As a linguistic disease, the Logos functions like 'memes,' self-replicating units of data which are suggested to govern the posthuman subject in a speculative area of cognitive science called memetics. In Dougherty's critical examination of posthumanity and the highly problematic idea of the meme in "Culture in the Disk Drive," the meme is compared to a virus, a form of possession and a Dracula-esque phantom of new information technologies (89, 99, 100). Memeticists posit that memes are produced every time someone speaks and it is impossible to compel oneself to stop thinking because there are millions of memes competing for space in one's brain (96, 94). This function recalls Dracula's telegraphic and phonographic ability to get inside the heads of his followers, but with a multiplied, continuous quality which points to the twenty-four hour a day information delivery of contemporary wireless networks. Once Cleve is infected with the Logos he complains about the noise in his head: "[t]he words . . . the words . . . they never stop coming," and perceives that the only means to arrest the Logos is to cut himself off from networks of information by never speaking again and allowing himself to be locked away in Bethlehem Hospital (Cleve's Diary). Like the followers who are significantly changed by Dracula's telegraphic and phonographic abilities, Cleve is not merely overwhelmed by information but profoundly altered by it. In the

⁹² All Logos utterances are formatted in this manner.

⁹³ Modern criticism on *Dracula* and other male and female fictional vampire figures is preoccupied with sexuality and eroticism. For considerations of these trends in scholarship see Mighall's chapter "Making a Case: Vampirism, Sexuality, and Interpretation" in *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction*; Hughes, "Fictional Vampires in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries"; and Wisker, "Love Bites." As sexuality is only hinted at in *Slouching Towards Bedlam*'s presentation of the vampiric Logos, I do not discuss it in depth.

same passage where he describes the onslaught of words he also notes that his mind, body, time and “the world” have “fallen apart,” implicitly sketching the personal and epistemological upheaval which results from contact with the Logos (Cleve’s Diary). The viral qualities of the Logos recall the penetrative, organic, transformative threat of vampiric blood while challenging the needful function of distributed information networks for the posthuman.

Second, like the vampire’s ability to transform or mutate its physical form, a particular ideological hazard to the corporeal integrity of the human subject, the Logos’ viral mutations imperil the stability of linguistic forms and communication channels which are central to the information-based, distributed posthuman subject. Dracula exemplifies the late Victorian danger of the “abhuman,” a “not-quite human subject” whose “morphic variability” threatens the “ruination of the human subject” (Hurley, *The Gothic Body* 3). One aspect of the menace Dracula represents derives from his ability to adopt false corporeal forms to camouflage his own undead presence. For instance, throughout *Dracula*, characters frequently hear or see what they perceive as a bat or a wolf when in fact these are only Dracula’s disguises (Stoker 124, 131, 144, 214). Similar to this endangerment to the stability of the human body, the Logos threatens the stability of linguistic communication central to the posthuman subject through disguises of its own. When James hears Xavier’s Logos utterances his confused yet coherent attempts to respond to them imply that the Logos statements are nonetheless some form of recognizable communication. More tellingly, the Logos’ mutative ability is apparent in Xavier’s notes on Cleve’s nocturnal outbursts (eventually understood as Logos utterances): “while some of the words (some English, some Greek, some Latin?) seemed understandable, I believe what I was listening to was, in fact, glossolalia—random phonemes and syllables which my mind tried forming into some meaning” (Patient File F6A142).⁹⁴ Xavier’s description underscores the weakness exploited by the vampiric threat of the Logos: while human subjects expect corporeal forms to be what they represent, the posthuman subject expects an informational transmission to be communicative.

⁹⁴ Xavier’s explanation of glossolalia provides a perspective of the Logos utterances as a disease; however, the term also carries connotations of religious devotion (in reference to ‘speaking in tongues’), and so further emphasizes the uncertain plague or providence qualities which the Logos represents.

Another aspect of the mutative danger Dracula represents to the stability of the human subject is his ability to ‘hop’ taxonomical categories by transforming into non-living, non-corporeal forms such as “elemental dust” or mist (Stoker 214, 248-50; see Botting, *Gothic Romanced* 144; Warwick 35). Like Dracula, the Logos is suggested to develop the ability to cloak itself in new communication categories or channels in *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, threatening their ‘purity.’ With the Logos initially only affecting spoken language, the infected Cleve and later an infected Xavier refuse to speak but both are happy to engage in written communication with others (Patient File F6A142, Appendix E). However, the Logos’ ability to adapt to new linguistic channels is implied when Xavier, as a patient at the asylum in one ending, breaks off a sentence he is writing to stare at the “pen and the hand that held it as though it were an enemy,” prior to writing the instruction “BURN THESE PAPERS[. . .] WE CAN’T GIVE IT THE WORDS” (Appendix E). The mutative qualities of the Logos imperil the stability of information and channels of communication across networks, a threat to the posthuman subject’s ideological basis which parallels Dracula’s mutative endangerment of the human subject’s body.

The third danger which the Logos represents to the posthuman subject also develops from the vampire’s taxonomical classification, but in this case the hazard lies in being made a vampire or being infected with the Logos. The vampire’s undead condition troubles biological taxonomical classification in that it is not a human, not a beast, not a corpse but a thing (Hurley, *The Gothic Body* 30; see Hogle, “Stoker’s Counterfeit Gothic” 206). This problem imperils the human subject’s epistemological perspective and effectively negates the idea of individuality for those humans, like Lucy, who become vampires. As a former suitor, Seward’s description of seeing Lucy the vampire, described as “that thing that was before us,” indicates how quickly and intensely this change occurs: “[at] that moment the remnant of my love passed into hate and loathing; had she then to be killed, I could have done it with savage delight” (Stoker 189-90). This dehumanizing change to the human subject is the result of vampiric infection, as viruses have the ability to render human subjects into things. This Gothic effect is evident in killer virus novels where “the reign of the *who* is suspended—the reign of the liberal, autonomous subject, the counterpart to the organic self—and the *what* threatens to take over” (Dougherty, “The Biopolitics of the Killer Virus

Novel” 9, original emphases). Viral infection is central to this transition from who to ‘what’ or ‘thing.’

In *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, the infected posthuman subject’s thingness is not related to the inapplicability of corporeally-based taxonomical classification, as with humans turned by Dracula, but to the inapplicability of a classification system based on function.⁹⁵ A posthuman subject’s primary function is communication. One example of this is Cleve, who rejects (communication with) society in favor of isolation because, as he later insists to Xavier, he is not Cleve, “NOT WHO,” but rather “SOMETHING NEW” as a result of “INFECTION” (Patient File F6A142). More subtly, if the Triage is directed to scan Xavier, who is infected from the start of the interactive fiction, it produces the following report:

```
CAT:LIVING.....  
*CATASTROPHIC.ER  
RROR.Ao42.CATEGO  
RY.INDEX.OUT.OF.  
RANGE.STACK.OVER  
FLOW*PART:ID=DR.  
THOMAS.XAVIER=CU  
RRENT.OPERATOR..
```

Hypothetically, if this were a classification of Lucy the vampire in *Dracula*, the ‘living’ quality and name-based identification would be absent to indicate her thingness. However, as the body is not central to the posthuman subject’s identity, Xavier’s mortal condition (“CAT: LIVING”) and physical identification (“PART:ID [. . .]”) appear in the Triage’s classification. Instead, Xavier’s inexplicable ‘thingness’ is indicated by the Triage’s failure to describe his primary utility or function. Recalling that the utility of James and Alexandra is their ability to communicate by speech or written word, the error message where Xavier’s communicative function should be described suggests not just the removal of that posthuman ability—that is, the absence of communication—but a ‘communication’ which is wholly unclassifiable as such. As this is the only instance in the interactive fiction where the Triage is unable to produce a report due to an internal error, Xavier’s unknowable utility may be seen as a threat to his posthuman identity and to his

⁹⁵ This shift from form to function is not unlike the two types of the monster within in *Madam Spider’s Web*. The distinction between the figured monster within for the player character versus the monster within which is only ‘visible’ in the player character’s actions also delineates a quality of Gothic thingness which depicts postmodern anxieties.

distributed, cognitive bond with the Triage. Like the vampiric infection which turns living bodies into undead things in *Dracula*, the Logos infection turns networked posthuman information conduits into things through uncommunication.

As a historiographic metafiction and cybergothic work, *Slouching Towards Bedlam* employs traditional Gothic conventions, including *Dracula*, in postmodern ironic fashion. In cybergothic, traditional narrative devices which represent affliction to the human subject “are used and erased [. . .] flipped into something entirely and unstoppably machinic” (Botting, *Gothic Romanced* 194). The vulnerability of the distributed, information-based posthuman subject is still based in traditional notions of Gothic instability, but these conventional Gothic dilemmas are “flipped” or inverted. For example, in chapter one I examined ‘the unspeakable’ and ‘live burial,’ Gothic conventions which indicate negative constrictions to the communicative and corporeal freedom of human subjects. In *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, these traditional Gothic conventions are inverted to act as potentially beneficial strategies for the posthuman subjects. Cleve and Xavier attempt to restrict their speech as a means to stop the spread of the Logos and both commit willingly to self-burial in cells in the asylum. Xavier even acts more literally on these constraints in two endings where he is directed to commit suicide.

Unlike these inverted conventions, *Dracula*’s consumptive, viral qualities are relatively unchanged in the interactive fiction as they prove metaphorically dangerous to posthuman subjectivity. The image of the vampire provides a bridge between the past and the present, the human subject and the posthuman subject, because it is a symbol for consumption in all its forms (Botting, *Gothic Romanced* 74; Punter and Byron 269). As the ideal parasite of systems (circulatory, informational), the vampire’s function as a metaphor for infection and replication is visible in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century folklore and literature from the nineteenth-century to the present (Heiland 106, Williamson 1-2). Viruses and information are represented as multivalent and ubiquitous in the networked systems of contemporary society, which makes them, if developed in Gothic excess, ontological threats to themselves. Vampirism govern such excess, as Dougherty points out in his investigation of contemporary killer virus novels when he argues that “the virus is like a vampire, or rather, the vampire is like a virus” (“The Biopolitics of the Killer Virus Novel,” 25, note 12). More

particularly, the virus masquerading as a vampire is a typical component of cybergothic, which uses “Gothic forms” such as vampires and other familiar monsters as “camouflage for an invasion from the future” (Botting, *Gothic Romanced* 150, see 59). Since the Logos is more idea than form, a nebulous entity of uncertain boundaries, the vampire Dracula provides a familiar cloak for the danger it represents. As the vulnerability of the posthuman subject has its origins as much in technological portents of the future as in a tenuous epistemological relationship with the human subject of the ‘past,’ Dracula functions literally and figuratively as a specter for human and posthuman subjectivity. In *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, posthuman subjectivity is destabilized from both the past and the future.

Interpretation and Unity in the Production of Narratives

Formally, the factors which enable the production of a cohesive, purposeful, unified narrative in *Slouching Towards Bedlam* resemble corollary factors in *Dracula*. Like Stoker’s vampire narrative, the interactive fiction develops through excessive character and player (reader) interpretation. Whereas the human characters in *Dracula* slowly construct a *master* narrative out of diverse pieces of information (for the reader) which identifies the vampire and also indicates the means for his defeat, the interactive fiction overtly encourages the player to create a totalizing *meta*-narrative (alongside the posthuman characters) from interpreted textual material in order to identify and deal with the Logos. However, unlike the conventional, progressive narrative produced by reading *Dracula*, this meta-narrative dissolves the possibility of choosing between the five endings and instead asserts their inclusion, however contradictory, in a recursive, non-linear chronology. The player thus simulates the role of an infected posthuman in traversing the interactive fiction, and in line with the anxieties of cybergothic is unable to avoid infection or defeat the Logos.

In traversing *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, the player’s programmed role is similar to the posthuman characters’; from the beginning, the player is already ‘infected’ with the word virus and construed as a ‘thing.’ First, the player’s meta-level commands ‘save’ and ‘restore’ are linked to a temporal power granted by the Logos infection. Cleve may, like the player, “‘save’ moments, as if in a delaying glass” so that he may ‘restore’ them as he wishes, “reliving the past/present/future” (Patient File F6A142). This ability is explicitly linked to Logos infection for the player. When the player uses

meta-level commands to create a save point or restore an earlier point in traversal, the interactive fiction confirms these respective actions with Logos utterances:

```
/(pointrememberingSAVEstoresafekeep)\
/(yesunfoldingbackwardsRESTORErenewpointinspace)\
```

These statements indicate that the player, via linguistic interaction with the software, is ‘infected’ with the vampiric word virus (from the very beginning). Second, the lack of any form of address for the player character in output statements helps construe the player as a *what* rather than a *who*. Co-author Daniel Ravipinto notes that while Xavier is the focal point of most output text, the interactive fiction “never once uses the word ‘you’” in order to emphasize the uncertainty of the player character’s ‘identity’ (Foster and Ravipinto, Interview, *SPAG*). This conceit affects the player as well, as the majority of interactive fiction works employ the second-person or ‘you’ form of address in statements produced by the software as a means of encouraging player participation and developing a sense of immersion (Douglass, “Command Lines” 141, 32).⁹⁶ Although the ‘you’ in such statements addresses the player character entity rather than the player, as I contend throughout this dissertation, critics assert that players instinctively experience this second-person format as if they were being directly addressed (Douglass, “Command Lines” 144-45; Aarseth 113). The ‘you’ form thus functions as a means of addressing the player character and player as two parts of the same distributed *who*. In *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, the player character’s (and, reflexively, player’s) infected posthuman subjectivity as a *what* is represented by the absence of this, or in fact any, form of personal address in statements output by the software. Construed as a *what* rather than a *who* by the lack of direct personal address in output statements and implied to be infected due to the presence of the temporal powers of the Logos, the player’s pre-programmed role simulates that of the infected posthuman subjects in the work.

Parallel to the reader’s progress through the diverse documents in *Dracula*, traversal of the interactive fiction requires substantial *textual* interpretation of seemingly disparate details and texts. *Dracula*’s epistolary form impels the reader to interpret several letters, diary entries, newspaper

⁹⁶ For a more developed consideration of how the textual second-person perspective employed in many interactive fictions encourages player immersion, see Douglass, “Enlightening Interactive Fiction” 134-35.

clippings and other textual sources which together comprise the novel. Interpretation is necessary as these textual traces indicate illogical, strange and seemingly irrelevant details which point to initial mysteries surrounding Dracula in the Carpathians and eventual perplexity concerning strange events in London. From Jonathan Harker's very first journal entry describing the hotel owners' odd responses to his queries about the Count to the unusual unmanned landing of the Russian schooner *Demeter* (whose sole cargo consists of crates of clay and an immense dog which immediately disappears into the countryside), events in the narrative consistently invite interpretation and speculation from the reader (Stoker 11-12, 72-82). *Dracula* offers "multiple, partial accounts that the reader must try to integrate" (Garrett 126), so that to read the novel "is to absorb and reproduce narratives" (Brewster 287). The large number of such intriguing details, including descriptions of strange bats and wolves, Lucy's unknown affliction and Renfield's 'insane' behavior encourage the reader to interpret potential significances of these concerns in tandem with the characters as more and more of the events appear to share a connection to Dracula.

For *Slouching Towards Bedlam*'s player, interpretation may be said to be implicitly expected as part of interactive fiction's conventional emphasis on puzzles, but Foster and Ravipto's work specifically impels the player to interpret textual output, including several disparate 'documents,' primarily in order to determine their core narrative relevance. As with *Dracula*, the player's interpretation of events is encouraged from beginning to end(s). For instance, in the journal entry which is playing on the phonograph at the start of the interactive fiction, a voice (soon understood as Xavier's) is 'heard' to cryptically remark: "I dread to say it, but I believe I am going mad. The--*moments*--come more frequently now. I fear that I have found what I have sought, and I shall now pay the price for it" (Xavier's Journal, March 16th). Aside from the developing conundrum surrounding Xavier's illness and problematic 'moments,' further details whose relevance is implied but not certain include the mysterious disappearance of both Cleve and previous Bethlehem superintended Dr. Brand (Lobby; Xavier's Journal, March 2nd; Xavier's Journal, January 8th); presumed Kabalistic inscriptions on Cleve's cell wall (6D); conflicting accounts of Cleve's actions and personality (Cleve's Letter, Du Monde's); strange notes regarding Cleve's unwillingness to speak, persecution complex and nighttime glossolalia (Patient File F6A142); the weird utterances produced whenever Xavier meets a non-player character;

and the veiled references to the shadowy purpose and power of the cypherists.⁹⁷ Interpretation of these particulars is underscored by the gradually developing sense that many of these details (including seemingly insignificant pieces of information) are related, a move toward a narrative sense of cohesion that is notably different from a puzzle-based need for interpretation. This distinction between the conventional function of player interpretation in an interactive fiction and *Slouching Towards Bedlam* is evident in two commentaries on the work. One reviewer complains that “infodumps” (that is, non-interactive textual passages) in the work overshadow his ability to manipulate objects effectively or take strategic action (Bond, Rev. of *Slouching Towards Bedlam*). Conversely, in the ‘solution’ or walkthrough to the interactive fiction (which may be downloaded from the same location as the work itself), the “vast amount of backstory” in the work is emphasized alongside the player’s primary purpose, which is “reacting to the backstory” (Martin). As with *Dracula*’s reader, the player must interpret textual details from many disparate perspectives as a primary function of traversing the work.

In both *Dracula* and *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, the interpretation required of the reader and player respectively functions alongside chronological and plot-based conceits which encourage the reader/player to expect a totalizing narrative. In *Dracula*, aside from the increasing vampiric relevance of seemingly diverse details as the narrative progresses, the reader is encouraged to expect an encompassing, closure-providing master narrative by the end of the novel in part due to the chronological progression of texts. The structuring, closure-providing significance of chronology in narratives is stressed by narrative theorists David Herman (9-11), Marie-Laure Ryan (“Toward a Definition of Narrative” 29) and Teresa Bridgeman, who specifically contends that “[o]ur sense of climax and resolution, of complications and resolutions, the metaphors we use for the paths taken by plots are constructed on spatio-temporal patterns” (64). *Dracula*’s structural use of chronology is explicit as dates sync ‘present’ events to a linear progression, beginning with Jonathan Harker’s opening journal entry dated

⁹⁷ Contrary information also provides the basis for multiple interpretations of events. For instance, corrupt practices in the criminal justice system are implied to be relevant for Brand and Cleve’s disappearances in Xavier’s journal recording from March 2nd. In addition, it is possible to infer that Xavier’s illness may be the result of his own unorthodox scientific methods based on details in the journal recordings from March 2nd and January 8th.

“3 May” and ending with Mina Harker’s entry dated “6 November” (Stoker 9, 329). This ‘current’ chronology extends into the past with the presentation of both the Count and Jonathan’s ‘back stories’ in the four journal entries from Harker which introduce the novel (9-54). Similarly, immediately following Mina’s final entry at the end of the novel an epilogue moves the reader seven years into the ‘future’ in order to provide a summary of the lives of the characters since the vampire was vanquished (335). The narrative thus functions as a history of events, a chronological progression of information formed into a narrative about Dracula’s actions and eventual defeat. The reader’s interpretive progress through this narrative parallels the character’s efforts to construct a totalizing account of Dracula from disparate bits of information in order to track and eventually eradicate the “vampiric incursion” (Wicke 38; Botting, *Gothic Romanced* 4). In particular, Mina takes on the (literal) task of creating this master narrative by transcribing information on her typewriter. Beginning with Jonathan’s shorthand journal accounts, Mina is encouraged as to the value of her transcriptions by Van Helsing’s praise, and soon after offers to transcribe Dr. Seward’s recorded journal entries because they are also “part of the terrible story, a part of poor dear Lucy’s death and all that led to it; because in the struggle which we have before us to rid the earth of this terrible monster we must have all the knowledge and all the help which we can get” (Stoker 165-69, 199). This desire for a totalizing narrative which may effectively be used to fight Dracula relies, as Mina later comments, on chronology: “dates are everything, and I think if we get all our material ready, and have every item put in chronological order, we shall have done much” (200-01). The in-story and formal creation of a chronological narrative in *Dracula* produces coherence and closure for the characters and reader via the effective defeat of the vampire.

A chronological framework also governs and provides a motivation for totalizing narrative development in *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, as does the player character’s interest in producing a meta-narrative from a computational database. Like *Dracula*, which opens with Jonathan’s four dated journal entries, the interactive fiction begins with Xavier’s most recent journal entry, dated “March the 16th,” playing on the phonograph. Access to ‘past’ events in Xavier’s back story is available if the player chooses to ‘listen’ to the three remaining journal recordings from March 2nd, January 22nd and January 8th. This initial emphasis on chronology is maintained via the dated

documents and historical details which the player encounters during traversal, both as they indicate events in the back story and as they relate to contemporary events in the interactive fiction. In addition, the five subsequent endings emphasize a movement forward to the ‘future’ as they provide a summary of characters’ lives and relevant developments following the player character’s last action. The narratives produced by the interactive fiction are, like the narrative in *Dracula*, histories of events, ‘closed’ stories mapped onto a historical period for the player. In addition, the formal emphasis on a totalizing narrative is also reinforced by the player character Xavier’s attempt to use a unified narrative form in order to understand and defeat the Logos. As Mina types the vampiric narrative, Xavier attempts to use the Triage for a similar purpose and enters all the relevant details of events into the unit in the hopes that it may suggest a cure to his malady (Xavier’s Journal, March 16th). However, Xavier’s use of the Triage is distinct from Mina’s use of the typewriter; while she records information for the group of humans to share, Xavier expects the Triage, as part of his distributed cognition, to analyze the situation and suggest a course of action. Despite the Triage’s failure to produce a ‘solution,’ the desire for a totalizing narrative, albeit of a different sort than that created by Mina, is clearly reinforced by Xavier’s actions. His interest in the archival, analytical Triage lies in its ability to generate a potential meta-narrative that he is unable to discover on his own, a reliance that illustrates his posthuman subjectivity. For the player, this impetus to have a form which includes all relevant information indicates a similar desire for totalizing closure as the typewritten narrative in *Dracula*.

Despite the value ascribed to a totalizing narrative in the novel and the interactive fiction, the paratexts in both simultaneously assert and undermine the authority and unity of the narratives produced. The authoritative credibility of the narrative in *Dracula* is reinforced by the epigraph to the novel, in which an unknown figure claims to have edited and organized “these papers” (presumably Mina’s typewritten transcripts) so that as a “history” they may “stand forth as simple fact” for the reader. This anonymous assertion of the veracity of the narrative is countered by the epilogue in the form of ‘note’ written seven years after events by Jonathan Harker. Although he describes past experiences as “living truths,” Jonathan also admits that “in all the mass of material of which the record is composed, there is hardly one authentic document; nothing but a mass of type-writing”

which cannot be said to constitute “proofs of so wild a story” (Stoker 335). The assertion and subversion provided by the paratexts function as part of the novel’s Gothic purpose: the threat Dracula represents to the human subject lingers, or as Rickels puts it, the existence of the vampire is neither proven nor disproven, as the texts which make up the narrative are “all citation” (63; see Garrett 123-24). With the mediated narrative lacking original authority, the credible cohesion of the master narrative remains problematic.

The paratexts in *Slouching Towards Bedlam* also assert and subvert the authoritative unity of the narratives produced in the work. While the interactive fiction shares *Dracula*’s uncertain presentation of the threatening vampire/Logos, the self-contradictory function of the paratexts also indicate that the work is a historiographic metafiction. Paratexts like the preface, epigraph, footnotes, afterword, epilogue and so forth create an authoritative and objective frame for texts with pretensions to scientific accuracy or objectivism, such as historiographic texts. In contrast, historiographic metafiction uses “the paratextual conventions of historiography (especially footnotes) to both inscribe and undermine the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations” (Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 123). *Slouching Towards Bedlam* employs two significant paratextual conventions: appendices and the hint menu. The five appendices which the player may view correspond to the five possible endings, and each appendix represents an authoritative, external perspective on the narrative produced via traversal. These perspectives include a summary from a 1975 historical investigation of secret societies like the cypherists (Appendix A), a presumably future-dated communication from the Logos itself (Appendix B), a final, phonographic journal entry from the immortal entity that used to be Xavier (Appendix C), a clipping from a pamphlet dated 1855 about the need for reform in Britain’s lunacy asylums (Appendix D) and the Bethlehem Hospital patient file for Thomas Xavier, written by the new superintendent Sir John Charles Bucknill (Appendix E). Despite the ‘final comment’ provided by these appendices, their credibility is undermined in various ways. The provenance of the sources in appendices A and D is unreliable, the date given by the Logos in appendix B is inexplicable, the suggestion that there may be an audience for the final journal entry in appendix C contradicts the image of a world unified by the Logos presented in the ending just prior to it and appendix E blurs the boundaries of history and

fiction by including a historical figure, Bucknill, in the description of Xavier's treatment. These appendices provide formal and, to some extent, fictional closure to the narratives produced in traversal but they simultaneously indicate the ambivalence and uncertainty of these narratives.

The hint menu, a paratextual convention of the interactive fiction media form employed in *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, also provides the player with a frame of authority and certainty which is nonetheless subverted. In interactive fiction written with the authoring system Inform 6, hints are typically provided in a separate graphic interface than that used to traverse the work. The menu format of this interface consists of increasingly specific questions and answers related to a particular puzzle or difficulty. Answers in the hint menu generally provide 'necessary' information for traversal or 'correct' solutions to puzzles, and in this sense function like footnotes or epilogues in terms of the authoritative relationship they have to the events produced in traversal. The design goal with hints is to avoid "giving away too much information" or producing 'spoilers,' which are the "premature divulgence of an important plot point" ("Hint System," "Spoiler").⁹⁸ The idea that the player could have "too much information" or else have his or her traversal 'spoiled' underscores the uninterpretable, 'truthful' stamp on information provided in hint menus. Rather than being understood as providing one possible interpretation of what may be regarded as an important plot point or what may be considered too much information, hint menus function authoritatively to communicate 'the definitive explanation' behind information and events which the player encounters in traversal. *Slouching Towards Bedlam* supports this conventional perspective on the authority of the information in the hint menu with sub-menu topics such as "OK. Spoil me. What the heck is going on?" "What's with the ending? The Appendix?" and "How do I win?" However, while the successive answers a player may receive in these sub-menus do include some needful information, they also undermine the authority with which that information is given and shift responsibility for interpretation back to the player. For example, a large number of the answers ask questions of the player in return such as "Do you stop the Logos? Is it worth the cost? Or do you help it to grow?" or "Cleve

⁹⁸ Discourse surrounding interactive fiction design supports the authority of paratexts (including hint menus, walkthroughs and author commentary) to an extent which greatly resembles the perceived verisimilitude of paratexts in historiographic texts.

made his choice. What will yours be?” Other hints are evasive (“How do you define ‘winning’ anyway?”) or simply deny responsibility or authority (“Sorry—we can’t answer this one”). The player’s desire for a totalizing closure is both increased and frustrated by the hint menus.

Despite encouraging the player to actively interpret information and make decisions, traversing *Slouching Towards Bedlam* ultimately generates a postmodern meta-narrative which encompasses the multiple spatio-temporal event paths leading to all five endings. This pluralistic form aligns with narrative structures in postmodernist fiction in which “different spaces multiply and merge” or more excessively include “incompatible and irreconcilable versions” of events in temporally recursive structures (Bridgeman 56, Richardson 48). However, the foundation for the seemingly contradictory meta-narrative in *Slouching Towards Bedlam* is not the dissolutive force of fragmentation (Gothic or postmodern) but a plot conceit which actually unifies the diverse narrative strands. The player who traverses the work to multiple endings simulates the posthuman subject already infected with the viral but also *temporal* powers of the Logos. Cleve’s and the player’s ability to save and restore moments derives from a polychronic sense of time which, while still fundamental to structuring the narrative, allows for the generation of a meta-narrative freed from a traditional linear, sequential chronology. Without linear time the five endings are collectively allowed as part of this recursive narrative and together create a postmodern sense of closure for the player.

With the Logos’ unique relationship to time as a foundation, *Slouching Towards Bedlam* encourages the player to replay the work to all five endings via several conceits. First, replay is encouraged at each of the five endings via the unexpected appearance of Logos statements. While typical endings for interactive fiction written in Inform 6 finish with final replies such as ‘The End’ (or something similar) prior to asking if the player would like to ‘restart,’ ‘restore’ or ‘quit,’ the five endings of *Slouching Towards Bedlam* present these conventional replies and directive options in Logos-speak, suggesting that the Logos has infected the system. Second, after the reply which indicates ‘The End’ for each ending, the player reads the additional Logos statement “possibleprobablyonlyoneinofmany,” which indicates that other endings are possible and serves to potentially encourage the player to discover them. Third, the connection between the multiple endings is underscored by the Logos’ alteration of the directives offered to the player

upon completion. Rather than indicate the usual quality of erasure and beginning again, the command ‘restart’ is presented as “?? RESTARTperiodfirstrevisit ??,” which suggests that restarting involves going back to a point in time which already exists. As Douglass puts it, all “restarting and restoring, all outcomes and all explored alternatives are anticipated and explained as part of the experience of the infected Dr. Xavier” (“Command Lines” 319), a plot dynamic whose logical consequence is that information gleaned in previous traversals is included in the meta-narrative. Finally, the formal expectation that the player replay *Slouching Towards Bedlam* is evident from the ending where Xavier is commanded to jump out of his office window prior to talking to anyone. This ending may be accomplished at the start of the work with the player’s very first command and is only logical and likely if the player has already completed a previous traversal of the work.⁹⁹ In essence, the five endings of *Slouching Towards Bedlam* represent a series of narrative strands in a fragmented meta-narrative which the player produces via her or his simulated role as an infected posthuman.

In the production of this postmodern meta-narrative the player is not provided with choices but rather with a series of narrative goals to accomplish which together form a unified, recursive narrative structure. While the player must obviously make choices in traversal, the autonomy of those choices, while significant for the player in the moment, are increasingly shown to be non-choices as they do not represent a rejection of other possibilities. Instead, possible programmed actions are non-mutually exclusive so that they all factor into the five endings which collectively indicate the recursive temporality of a posthuman subject infected with the Logos. The desire for replay and the lack of plot resolution provided by individual endings speaks to the implicit quality of the type of closure provided by this narrative structure. The player is encouraged to do everything, to discover all information, in order to accommodate an excessive, contradictory, fragmented meta-narrative. As an example of the interactive fiction’s ability to foster this desire for ‘complete’ information,

⁹⁹ In contrast, *Nevermore*, *Anchorhead* and *Madam Spider’s Web* require several commands prior to the first opportunity for an ending. Furthermore, all of the endings which may be reached so quickly describe the abrupt death of the player character in such a manner as to indicate an incomplete traversal of the work rather than, as with *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, a suggestion that this was a valid ‘choice’ for the player character.

one reviewer complains that “I wish that the hints system [. . .] had given explicit instructions for seeing all of the endings, because I never got to see what Appendix-A and Appendix-E said” (Wheeler). Wheeler’s concern for viewing information points to the distinction Janet Murray draws between traditional narrative resolution and the ambivalent type of closure offered by a postmodern, computational narrative form. Database-generated structures which allow for the production of different paths related to a meta-narrative may leave “readers/interactors wondering which of the several endpoints is *the end* and how they can know if they have seen everything there is to see” (87, original emphasis). As Murray implies, closure relies not on the resolution of a story but on access to all information, to the various resolutions available.¹⁰⁰ However, closure is nonetheless ambivalent because of the incongruity between endpoints which subverts any authoritative conclusion and places the burden of final interpretation on the reader/player. In this regard the recursive, meta-narrative form aligns with historiographic metafiction, which “incorporates, but rarely assimilates” historical data so that a character and/or reader/player is given the task of collecting material and attempting to “make narrative order” (Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 114). Making “narrative order” in *Slouching Towards Bedlam* involves finding all of the endings in order to produce the meta-narrative.

Although not a work of historiographic metafiction, *Dracula* functions somewhat similarly. The master narrative is produced from Mina’s transcriptions of events, a series of documents which are implied to be the basis for the novel, encouraging the reader to be a node for narrative interpretation up until the ending. In the historiographic metafiction *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, Xavier’s early attempt to upload extensive information on events into the Triage becomes a similarly parallel behavior to the player’s interpretive production of a meta-narrative via traversal to all five endings. While closure for Mina and the reader develops partly from the resolution provided by Dracula’s destruction, closure for Xavier and the player develops from the experience of and access to all narrative strands. Regardless of these narrative distinctions, the master and meta-narratives

¹⁰⁰ For further discussions of the reader’s desire to discover all of the information in a computer-generated work, see Douglas, “How Do I Stop This Thing?” 164; Aarseth 113-14; Ryan, “Beyond Myth and Metaphor”; and Sundén 286.

conclude ambivalently; in *Dracula's* case the potential uncertainty of the textual evidence of events is due to Gothic convention, in *Slouching Towards Bedlam's* case such uncertainty is due both to its postmodern, formal underpinnings and to cybergothic convention.

The lack of choice programmed into the player's role supports the 'beyond the point of return' quality of the danger in the cybergothic interactive fiction. Whereas the autonomous human subject in traditional Gothic fiction such as *Dracula* usually has a chance to subvert the new threat in some manner, and often succeeds, in cybergothic fiction such as *Slouching Towards Bedlam* the threat to posthumanity is already in place and, more importantly, impossible to avoid. It is always too late for the posthuman characters, a situation which is simulated in the player's role. Xavier is infected from the start of the interactive fiction and Cleve, although able to save and restore moments in time, notably is unable to go back to a point prior to infection "when he was simply Cleve" (Patient File F6A142). Like the characters, infection is simulated for the player also at the start as any directive ('save,' 'restore,' etc.) entered as the very first command produces a reply in Logos-speak.

The 'too late,' world-changing danger of the Logos is specifically simulated in the player's role via direct allusion to revolutionary images from W. B. Yeats' poem "The Second Coming." The player cannot avoid the peril which the Logos represents to the posthuman subject's distributed cognition in networks of information because it is impossible to eradicate the Logos. Two of the endings are accomplished by the player via the extermination of every infected carrier. Although the descriptive summaries provided at the close of these traversal paths suggest that the Logos has been defeated, the content and format of the lines from Yeats' poem "The Second Coming" which are interwoven with the summaries suggest otherwise. Yeats' poem indicates the 'arrival' of a curious beast which heralds a revolutionary new world order. As a harbinger of this new world order the qualities of the beast are significantly anomalous and uncertain but the momentous change it brings is assured (Morgan 96, Grene 105), much like the pestilential or providential Logos in the interactive fiction. In each of the five endings these lines are presented consistently in Logos-speak format, as is visible in these excerpts:

/(and what rough beast)\
/(its hour come round at last)\

/(slouches towards)\
/(bethlehem)\
/(?behlehem?)\
/(BEDLAM)\
/(to be born?)\

In this corrupted citation the shift from the central corporeality of the human subject to the devalued corporeality of the posthuman subject is further implied in the beast which slouches as if it lacks physical integrity. With the last two lines of the poem broken up, presented in Logos-speak and altered (the spiritual ‘Bethlehem’ changed, via a destabilizing misspelling, to chaotic ‘bedlam’), the continued existence of the Logos and the new world order it brings are asserted in *every* ending. As cybergothic fiction investigates a danger from the future, it is always “too late to be afraid, very afraid” and too late to put up any “resistance” to the revolutionary change represented in threats to the posthuman subject (Botting, *Gothic Romanced* 204, see 58). In *Slouching Towards Bedlam*’s highly problematized meta-narrative chronology, the future and the dangers it brings provide a model example of Nick Land’s description of the ‘too late’ quality of cybergothic: “Time produces itself in a circuit, passing through the virtual interruption of what is to come, in order that the future which arrives is already infected” (82). The player’s role simulates the posthuman subject in a cybergothic narrative where the Logos is always already a destabilizing presence which the player nonetheless must attempt to deal with in every potential traversal.

Master Vampires and Meta Viruses: The Posthuman Problematic

In *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, cybergothic tensions are situated in the network of relationships between what is constructed as the past and present. The essential textuality of these relationships between the past and the present is significant for several reasons. First, the intertextual connections to historical details and other texts in the interactive fiction provide the basis for a questioning of the authority of textual traces while simultaneously asserting their connectedness, in keeping with the tenets of historiographic metafiction. Second, the narrative qualities of the work drastically alter play so that exclusive choices are eliminated, information is amassed and interpretation is brought to the fore; changes which simulate a ‘readerly’ uncertainty with regard to events for the player. Finally, it is the inherent textuality of *Slouching Towards Bedlam* which provides the

ontological foundation for the simulation of the Logos infection and, taken a step further, implies the dangers of the digital networks of information in contemporary society.

As represented by characters in *Slouching Towards Bedlam* and as simulated in the player's role, information-based posthuman subjects are endangered from all chronological 'directions,' both already and eternally. Contextualized with the fictionally dominant human subject, the information-based, distributed posthuman subjects presented in the interactive fiction are inherently unstable when encountered in traversal or depicted in narrative form. This difficulty is extended when considering the Gothic threats to their subjectivity. A cybergothic work such as *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, as a result, is structured in recursive temporal loops like a Möbius strip, and implicitly employs corporeal, past dangers such as Dracula metaphorically in the future-present in order to 'embody' complex concepts such as viral information. While the Victorian setting of the interactive fiction distances it from our contemporary sense of 'enlightenment,' it also provides the player with a familiar and menacing view of the vampire as 'other,' distinct from the vampires in contemporary fiction who function like members of a social minority. Dracula's figurative prevalence in the interactive fiction suggests that Gothic threats to human subjectivity remain relevant, alongside the excessive threats to posthuman subjectivity. The inconclusive, eternal meta-narrative in the interactive fiction thus alludes to the uncertain tensions between constructions of human and posthuman subjectivity in contemporary society and to the Gothic anxieties which trouble them. The Logos, the 'rough beast' of this meta-narrative, indicates that the approaching paradigm shift to posthuman subjectivity is certain; however, the cybergothic specter's ambivalent pestilential or providential nature and the promise or threat it portends depend, like perspectives of posthumanism, on how it is viewed/constructed.

Conclusion

In this study I have argued that literary Gothic conventions, tropes, elements and effects not only continue to function but are significantly developed in four works of contemporary interactive fiction. I have performed media-specific, in-depth analyses of *Nevermore*, by Nate Cull (2000), *Anchorhead*, by Michael S. Gentry (1998), *Madam Spider's Web*, by Sara Dee (2006) and *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, by Star C. Foster and Daniel Ravipinto (2003). Specific conclusions regarding particular expressions of the Gothic have been presented in each of the four preceding chapters. In this concluding chapter I consider the four works collectively in order to indicate returning themes and larger arguments related to my investigations of how the Gothic is expressed in these interactive fictions.

Although a number of broad conclusions may be suggested regarding the evolution of the Gothic in contemporary interactive fiction, these conclusions must not be seen as comprehensive for all interactive fiction in the genre but as tendencies or potentialities suggested by the works studied. My analyses demonstrate that the particular expression of the Gothic in each work, as with print fiction, derives from how it depicts and configures subjectivity. Three conclusions may be drawn from my analyses. First, vulnerabilities related to female bodies and gender roles are prominent for the stability of character subject boundaries. Second, the stability of subjects is connected to the player's sense of agency or control; Gothic effects frequently derive from restrictions or changes to this control. These two conclusions indicate that the construction of the central subjects in these works is complex, as the player implicitly or explicitly forms an extension of the player character subject. An essential quality of subjectivity is thus the player's 'relationship' to the player character, her or his ability to knowingly function via the player character interface. With this relationship in mind, my final conclusion is that threats to communication are a primary difficulty for the compound subjects in these works, as such threats jointly affect the player character and player.

Gothic Anxieties for Female Characters

Human subjects in *Nevermore*, *Anchorhead* and *Madam Spider's Web* indicate the relevance of female bodies and gender roles in producing Gothic effects. When gender concerns are emphasized, the works seem to support

critical claims about distinct male and female gender discourses in Gothic fiction. However, traditional conceptions of especially female terror scenarios are modified so that the female characters also exert (or have the potential to exert) powerful control over their situation. Although the three interactive fictions reinforce the dangers and confinement of domestic environments for female characters, they nonetheless employ this traditional scenario for different purposes.

Lenore's strong presence in *Nevermore* may be seen as a qualified critical response to the nineteenth-century, male gender bias in Poe's writings. Based on his philosophical view of the soul-trapped-in-body human subject, Poe's poetic trope of 'the death of a beautiful woman,' expressed via Lenore's absence in "The Raven," turns on the male subject's loss not of a kindred subject but of an object of spiritual inspiration. Though clearly a 'subservient' wife to the player character in the interactive fiction, Lenore's separate, subjective position in the work is asserted by the player character's memories of her as she is occupied with individual thoughts, as she romantically beckons the player character to bed, her actual 'presence' in the work and the significant metaphysical knowledge she is implied to possess in the Courtyard. Communicative attempts to discover Lenore's important metaphysical knowledge about the tree and the fruit produce only cryptic remarks, difficult to decipher, which additionally imply that the player character has knowledge about the situation which is kept from the player. Lenore's remarks foster the poetics of the unspeakable and underpin destabilization in the player's role. Functionally, Lenore occupies the same powerful role as potential messenger from an afterlife that the raven holds in the poem, which gives her influence over the ultimate fate of the player character. However, while Lenore's presence and power in *Nevermore* indicates a positive contrast to her absence in Poe's poem, Lenore in the interactive fiction still performs a function *relative* to the male player character.

In *Anchorhead*, a more assertive critique of a masculine construction of subjectivity is developed alongside a complex image of postmodern feminism. Lovecraft's terror narratives usually feature spatially-minded, asexual, scientific male narrators who represent model micro-versions of imperiled humanity. The lonely narrator of "The Music of Erich Zann" is troubled by the sudden disappearance of the Rue d'Auseil because without it he cannot confirm or deny the epistemologically threatening events which

happened there, and the narrator of “The Call of Cthulhu” experiences cosmic awe as a result of the physical and psychological destruction which Cthulhu may inflict on humanity. In contrast, the interactive fiction centers on a female player character whose anxieties relate to her body and role as a wife. In keeping with Lovecraft’s themes, the player character is exposed to epistemologically damaging visions of spatial disruption with the disappearance of the Hidden Court cul-de-sac and universal destabilization as threatened by Ialdabaoloth’s approach to Earth. However, despite these threats the player character’s worries are personal and relational as they consistently revolve around her strangely affected husband throughout traversal and eventually develop into anxiety surrounding her pregnancy. Although her terrors unswervingly derive from heterosexual marriage bonds, she is nonetheless the savior of her husband, the town of Anchorhead and the planet and seems therefore capable of averting the potential for infant possession threatened in the open ending. Postmodern complicity and critique is apparent in *Anchorhead* as the player character adheres to and, in a winning scenario, contests patriarchal stereotypes.

Domestic threats to female subjectivity are overtly rendered in *Madam Spider’s Web*, where the player character’s roles as mother, sister, wife, granddaughter and surrogate daughter are fraught with guilt and confusion. These roles entail conflicting responsibilities and desires, indicated by a series of changes brought about by her grandfather’s unexpected death. The player character’s romantic plans for a second honeymoon with her husband are put on hold due to this event, and her guilt at not visiting her grandfather enough prior to his death is transferred to motherly guilt for having to leave her children behind when she attends the funeral. The player character’s self-fostered constriction as a result of these conflicting roles is made visible and explicit as a means of addressing it in female Gothic fashion in the surreal first phase of the interactive fiction. In the surreal domestic environment of the first phase, the player character’s projected counterpart is the motherly, grotesque, corporeal and environmentally bound figure of Madam Spider. However, although the giant arachnid is perceived as threatening, the player character’s monster within also represents domestic empowerment for the player character in her contemporary relational dilemmas.

Although gender concerns retain Gothic relevance for the human subjects encountered in these three interactive fictions, traversals of these works and

the narratives they produce downplay essentialist heterosexual gender divisions in favor of ambivalent images of threat and empowerment which may be said to reflect contemporary social conditions. Although *Nevermore* is arguably the least progressive with regard to subverting female stereotypes, Lenore's presence in the work, in contrast to her necessary absence in "The Raven," gestures toward a more developed postmodern critique. On the other hand, the seemingly contradictory 'feminine' and 'feminist' player characters in *Anchorhead* and *Madam Spider's Web* suggest individual conceptions of female subjectivity which are related to contemporary perspectives of feminism. Through their ambivalent relationships to domesticity as something to take power over and yet fear, represented forcefully in the dualistic images of monster/husband and monster/mother, the player characters in these postmodern works indicate that complicity and critique are intertwined in a potentially postfeminist and/or third wave feminist fashion (see Genz, "Third Way/ve" 339; Owen, Stein and Berg 123-24). The complexity of these female subjectivities underscores the ambivalence of the Gothic threats in these works. As my own exploration of these gender perspectives has been limited, further research investigating the manner in which these female characters relate to contemporary critical discourses is called for.

Gothic Anxieties in the Player's Role

As postmodern Gothic narratives often simulate 'experiences' for their readers, the works in this study lift the narrative poetics, themes and concepts which would typically affect characters in print fiction to the player's level so that the role configured for the player is a prominent locus for Gothic effects. Although each interactive fiction simulates effects differently, Gothic qualities in the player's role seem to derive from the player's (sense of) control. Ironically, the hindrances and oclusions which limit player control in these interactive works represent contemporary modes of Gothic excess by restricting the player rather than enabling greater agency.

In *Nevermore* and *Anchorhead*, changes to control configured in the player's role are subtle and allow the player to maintain an illusion of agency. In the former work, the restrictive poetics of the unspeakable highlight the knowledge gap between the player character and player, while the poetics of live burial negate the possibility of employing previously beneficial strategies

for traversal. In the latter work, the restrictions which the player experiences in labyrinths parallel the player character's restrictions. In short, the hindrances in both works are likely to prove frustrating for the player, but they do not drastically alter the purpose of the player's role in either work. Instead, the Gothic effects simulated via such restrictions remain complicit with the fictional situation and allow the player to maintain an illusion of control.

In contrast, the formal Gothic effects simulated in *Madam Spider's Web* and *Slouching Towards Bedlam* emphasize an overt lack of control in the player's role from the beginning of traversal. In these more aggressively postmodern works, the purpose of the player's role is profoundly changed during traversal. Restrictions to player agency are highlighted in *Madam Spider's Web*, as the player's traversal through the three phases may be described as a transition from 'player' to 'greatly restricted player' to 'reader,' with uncertainty a major factor in each function. In both interactive fictions, Gothic narratives are primarily produced through withheld information and unknowing agency. As a result of these restrictions and occlusions, the player is centrally responsible—more so than just as an agent for narrative production—for amplifying threats to the characters and possibly even causing particular harm to them. The player's actions in *Madam Spider's Web* have a direct though illogical impact on the player character and in *Slouching Towards Bedlam* the player is, in four of the five endings, culpable in unknowingly spreading the word virus across London and possibly beyond. As the fatal dynamic of such lacunae is eventually revealed to the player in both works, though not in a manner which provides enough information for comprehensive interpretation or knowing choice in replay, the purpose of the player's role is drastically altered. This transformation is excessively designed to simulate a destabilizing Gothic experience.

In these four works the player's control is strategically configured to simulate subject vulnerabilities such as restrictions to agency, confusion, the production of unintended effects and profound change. Play is not about making informed choices and exerting needful control but about being controlled throughout traversal in order to simulate and produce the Gothic effects which take precedence over any sense of accomplishment. Although it is possible to categorize the restrictive issues in these works based on whether they maintain or dispel the player's illusion of control, this study provides only an initial glimpse of this trend. Further research examining the

diversity of ways in which player control is related to constructions of subjectivity in interactive fiction would be beneficial for Gothic studies, particularly in comparison to works in other interactive media forms.

Gothic Anxieties for Communicating Subjects

Fundamental to subjectivity, the player's relationship to the player character is relevant for the poetics of Gothic expression in all of the works examined in *The Gothic in Contemporary Interactive Fictions*. Specifically, vital qualities of the subjects are disrupted or troubled by imperiled communication. In this regard, these digital works reflect the same thematic focus on communication as centuries of Gothic print fiction. This thematic alignment derives from the genre's literary heritage but may also be due to the fundamental *textuality* of these interactive fictions, signaling a threat to the medium used to produce narrative. As the subjects in these works are implicitly or explicitly symbiotic entities comprised of the player character's fictional representation and the player's actions, communication worries are evident at various levels in each work. In the context of human constructions of subjectivity, communication provides the means for establishing a connection with another subject. Figuratively, communication may be conceived of as a spatial metaphor for bridging the gap between two corporeally-bounded selves. Within posthuman contexts communication may serve a similar purpose or it may be 'internal'; an aspect of the posthuman subject's distributed cognition (in networks of information). While human subjects are threatened by a breakdown of communication channels or the spaces which enable them, posthuman subjects experience an inverted difficulty related to what communication enables.

In the overtly intertextual *Nevermore*, communication difficulties for the subject develop from poetics in the foundational print texts. In "The Raven," the unspeakable barrier to communication derives from the uncertain potential for meaning in the raven's repeated replies to the narrator's metaphysical questions. This unspeakable hindrance produces profound anxiety for the narrator, and as a result he ends up on the floor in a position indicating the constrictions of live burial. In *Nevermore*, the raven follows the player character around as an insignificant companion. The poetics of unspeakable are instead transferred to the player's difficulties cross-referencing and deciphering pertinent information from alchemical texts which the player character is known to have previously read. A similar

reflexive intertextual shift occurs with live burial. In Poe's poem, live burial is a result of the unspeakable. In *Nevermore*, live burial only serves to emphasize the unspeakable barrier. The unspeakable knowledge gap between the player and player character is further highlighted in the live burial environment of the Courtyard when the player attempts to glean information from Lenore. These communication hazards serve to divide the player from the player character, perhaps in a manner not unlike Poe's narrator's destabilization, and in so doing negatively indicate that communication is essential to the human subject depicted and simulated in *Nevermore*.

Although it features a related intertextual foundation, barriers to communication function differently for the human subject in *Anchorhead*. Rather than indicate a disruption to the subject's fundamental relationship, communication hazards jointly affect the player character and player. In Lovecraft's terror fiction, unspeakable communicative barriers take on epistemological qualification. For example, the narrator's retelling of the sailor's account of seeing Cthulhu on the labyrinthine island of R'lyeh emphasizes the failure of language. Cthulhu is indescribable because language is inadequate to communicate what he represents within the world-view presented in the narrative. In *Anchorhead*, the communication disruption of the 'unknowable' also occurs within a labyrinth. When the player character witnesses Ialdabaoth in the Narrow Corridor area she passes out, and later is unable to recall exactly what she saw. This unknowable threat is configured for the player in unexpected changes to textual output in the graphical user interface. With words 'falling' out of paragraphs and the textual evidence of previous 'moves' replaced by predominantly blank screens, the narrative produced during traversal is implied to be fragmented and flawed. Although likely to be surprising and potentially frustrating, this apparent falter in the flow of information thematically reflects Lovecraft's ellipsis-ridden, second- and third-hand accounts of Cthulhu in the tale which bears his name and so may well be familiar to the player. The communication hindrances which threaten a profound destabilization for the subject in *Anchorhead* gesture to the threats of the unknowable.

Madam Spider's Web indicates a hindrance not to acts of communication, as with *Nevermore*, or the efficacy of language, as with *Anchorhead*, but to the hidden relationship between thing (signifier) and

meaning (signified). The uncanny relevance of memories triggered by unfamiliar environments, such as the memory of past joys in the now lonely Children's Room, creates anxiety in the player character during the first phase of the interactive fiction. The player character's sense of identity also depicts this symbolic breakdown as she has no memories of herself or how she got to the giant arachnid's house. For the player, the occluded relationship between item and meaning which causes anxiety for the player character functions at the formal level to block any confident sense of the relationship between phases (during traversal) or narrative fragments (in hindsight). In addition, the hidden meaning of the food sac, which is somehow related to the player character's health in a latter phase, makes the player unwittingly but illogically culpable in the potential harm done to the player character subject. This overt lacuna, along with increasing limitations on command input during the realistic phases, simulate a loss of communicative control in the player's 'reality' which is similar to the player character's. Unlike the first two interactive fictions, this work does not emphasize a communicative hindrance to the subject via a division or a joint restriction of the player character and player, but instead suggests that symbolic disconnections affect both parties in different ways. These disconnections negatively imply that symbolic meaning is central to the human subject in *Madam Spider's Web*.

Slouching Towards Bedlam's posthuman construction of information-based subjectivity presents a reconceptualization of the Gothic poetics of communicative blockages. Rather than view non-communication or a breakdown in communication as negative, *Slouching Towards Bedlam* suggests that excessive, uncontrollable communication is potentially most threatening to the networked, distributed subject. Uncontrollable communication is evident in the unprompted Logos utterances which issue from the player character. Traditional Gothic conventions of barriers to communication, such as the unspeakable and live burial, are positively inverted in this cybergothic scenario as they theoretically provide the means through which the spread of the information virus may be stopped. Like Xavier's unintended utterances, the player's actions in a quest for information—standard practice in traversing a work—are likely to unknowingly spread the virus to James, the cabbie and Alexandra Du Monde (three individuals who are shown to spread the virus onwards in concluding summaries). Similar to the player character, the player's only combative

choice is to shut down the work, an act which terminates the linguistic interaction through which the simulation operates. However, enforcing the unspeakable or shutting down the work only function theoretically. The infection already exists in the subject's 'reality' and cannot be stopped. For the posthuman subject in the work, unsullied, non-excessive communication is negatively presented as vitally important, but also entirely unobtainable. The implication that a paradigm shift has occurred, a point of no return, mirrors the paradigm shift from human to posthuman subject. As the posthuman subject is always defined in relation to the human subject, some of the posthuman subject's inherent vulnerability relates to what has been 'lost.' The desire for a communicative situation 'prior' to infection suggests that the posthuman subject in *Slouching Towards Bedlam* derives some of its vitality from values related to human subjectivity.

The distinct expressions of communication hazards evident in the unspeakable, the unknowable, disconnected symbols and excessive information delivery indicate the vulnerable aspects of the subjects presented in these works. Given this variety, further research examining communication difficulties for subjects in Gothic (interactive) fiction may prove fruitful. In addition, as the language-based medium for these works may be relevant for the centrality of this theme, there would be value in comparative analyses investigating how communication is relevant to constructions of subjectivity in non-textual forms of media.

The Gothic in Contemporary Interactive Fictions

This study suggests that the individual analysis of Gothic interactive fictions forwards both a broader understanding of the diversity of digital poetics in electronic literature and a more sophisticated perspective on the development of the Gothic genre in contemporary fictional forms. Although a lack of shared critical knowledge with regard to terminology and media form poetics has previously hindered close examinations of individual works, this study joins those few brief analyses which have been produced in demonstrating that interactive fiction scholarship benefits from the precise insights of in-depth investigations, and that genre studies provide a means of considering a work's relationship to discourses typically aligned with print fiction. Specifically, while approaches at the level of media form are valuable, the careful investigation of an individual work indicates its idiosyncratic expressiveness and allows the researcher to consider how electronic literary

expression functions separately from, though obviously in connection with, preferred or normative design practices in an artistic community. Analyses of the four interactive fictions in this study indicate that the Gothic operates, in postmodern fashion, with and against such design practices in order to indicate the fundamental vulnerabilities of particular subjectivities.

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Sammanfattning

I denna avhandling undersöks hur centrala teman, konventioner och troper i genren gotisk litteratur ombearbetas, remedieras och utvecklas i utvalda exempel av nutida interaktiv fiktion. Gotiken visar på vad som på ett grundläggande sätt problematiserar uppfattningar om mänsklig subjektivitet, inbegripet posthumanistisk ('posthuman') subjektivitet, och kan därför sägas beröra epistemologiska, ideologiska och ontologiska gränser. Genren är ett särskilt intressant studieobjekt i litterära och kulturella diskurser då konstruktioner av subjektivitet i nutida fiktion i allt högre utsträckning framställs som oprecisa. Detta fenomen kan till viss del ses som ett resultat av teknologier och sociala praktiker vilka tonar ned betydelsen av den mänskliga kroppen, sedan länge hörnstenen för liberalismens syn på subjektivitet (se Hall 118, Genz och Brabon 107). Likaså är interaktiv fiktion relevant för litterära och kulturella diskurser då man i dessa texter kan studera förhållandena mellan tryckt litteratur och moderna former av datormedierade och datorgenererade berättarformer kan studeras. Med 'interaktiv fiktion' avses inom ramen för denna studie en helt textbaserad form av datormedierad simulation med vilken en spelare interagerar genom textkommandon. En spelares väg genom en text benämns 'genomkorsande' ('traversal') och som ett resultat av genomkorsandet producerar mjukvaran en eller flera berättelser. Även om det är möjligt att se tryckta och digitala materiella former som separata (Hayles, *Electronic Literature* 3-4), kan skapandet och mottagandet av nutida interaktiva texter visa på de många aspekter de delar med tryckta skönlitterära texter (Douglass, "Command Lines" 33; Keller 295). Eftersom interaktiva texter är del av samma diskurser som andra samtida berättelser, innefattande gotikens genrediskurser, är det relevant att undersöka hur centrala aspekter av den litterära gotikens troper fungerar i dessa digitala verk.

De interaktiva verk jag studerar har producerats av en grupp nutidsförfattare som delar ett intresse av fiktionsskrivande. Primärkällorna i denna avhandling är *Nevermore: An Interactive Gothic* av Nate Cull (2000), *Anchorhead: An Interactive Gothic* av Michael S. Gentry (1998), *Madam Spider's Web* av Sara Dee (2006) och *Slouching Towards Bedlam* av Star C. Foster och Daniel Ravidpinto (2003). Tillsammans med andra författare, spelare och recensenter utgör dessa författare vad som kan kallas en gemenskap ('community') vars entusiasm inför formen tydligt syns i årliga

tävlingar, tidskrifter, ett flertal nätbaserade diskussionsfora och, naturligtvis, arkiv från vilka texter fritt kan nedladdas, främst *The Interactive Fiction Archive*. Några författare till mina korpustexter är programmerare, men författarna i den interaktiva fiktions-gemenskapen saknar i allmänhet formell utbildning i datorvetenskap eller programmering (Wardrip-Fruin 79). Denna brist på programmeringsexpertis hindrar inte författarskapet, eftersom de flesta interaktiva verk är skrivna i program vars språk är så formaliserade att fokus ligger på att skriva och strukturera den fiktiva världen snarare än på att skapa eller utveckla program eller programmeringsfunktioner (79; se Douglass, "Command Lines" 129). De texter jag analyserar speglar detta intresse för fiktivt berättande.

Via detaljerade, mediaspecifika analyser och med hänsyn tagen till sätten på vilka mjukvaran framställer den fiktiva världen undersöker jag hur gotiska litteraturkonventioner och troper hanteras och utvecklas i dessa fyra verk. Min analytiska metod resulterar främst i slutsatser angående de individuella verken men även i mer generella påståenden. För det första inkluderar omarbetningen av gotiska troper och konventioner i dessa interaktiva verk ett beaktande inte bara av meningsskapande textstrukturer utan även av simuleringsstrukturer. De digitala strukturerna i varje verk analyseras individuellt, en analytisk metod som står i kontrast till tidigare kritiska läsningar vilka företrädesvis har undersökt element hos interaktiv fiktion som mediaform. För det andra är spelarens programmerade roll avsedd att simulera effekter vilka är relaterade till, men inte alltid samma som, den osäkerhet, förvirring och sorg simuleringens karaktärer drabbas av.¹⁰¹ För det tredje, och relaterat till simuleringens centrala roll, hävdar jag att dessa fyra verk, i den ordning jag analyserar dem, exemplifierar en postmodern utveckling av det gotiska, vilken i allt större utsträckning sammankopplar vad som händer i texten med mer formmässiga effekter. Dessa aspekter avspeglar de farhågor som återfinns i de fyra verken och är kopplade till subjektivitetskonstruktioner.

De postmoderna uttryck jag identifierar i *Nevermore*, *Anchorhead*, *Madam Spider's Web* och *Slouching Towards Bedlam* bidrar till modern forskning om den litterära gotiken, forskning som i allt högre grad berör

¹⁰¹ Karaktärerna i dessa fyra interaktiva verk inkluderar spelarkaraktärer och andra karaktärer vilka inte kan styras av spelaren. Spelarkaraktären är i varje verk den centrala figur spelaren leder genom den simulerade världen.

formella grepp och läsarens (eller spelarens) erfarenhet av tryckt litteratur. Under de senaste två decennierna har intresset ökat för frågor som rör gotisk estetik och reception av gotiska texter (Heiland 185). Detta beror delvis på ett perspektivskifte från essentialistiska till kontextualiserade läsningar. De interaktiva verk jag analyserar uppvisar specifikt gotiska drag som avspeglar postmoderna tendenser till självmedvetenhet, platsers och subjektiva gränzers obestämbarhet, jagets splittring och cirkulära berättarstrukturer vilka även sammankopplas med 'cybergotiken,' en subgenre som utforskar den posthumanistiska subjektivitetens sårbarhet.

I kapitel 1 analyserar jag Nate Culls *Nevermore*. Som en bearbetning av Edgar Allan Poes kanoniserade dikt "The Raven" är *Nevermore* i sig ett självmedvetet verk där reflexiviteten även omfattar den remedierade användningen av gotiska konventioner så som de fungerar i Poes dikt, specifikt 'det utsägliga' ('the unspeakable') och 'det levande begravda' ('live burial'). I Poes dikt sörjer berättaren sin förlorade kärlek, Lenore. Korpen försvarar förståelsen av sammanhanget genom vad som kan läsas som ett försök att till berättaren ge en inblick i Lenores situation i livet efter detta. Den potentiella kommunikationen mellan korpen och berättaren är obestämbar till sin natur. Genom ångesten detta skapar leder korpens tal till berättarens alltmer växande figurativa instängdhet. De metaforiska gränserna för kommunikation och plats indikerar både det utsägliga och idén om att bli levande begravd, gotiska konventioner som belyser en störande sårbarhet för en subjektivitet där själ och kropp är ett (Sedgwick 12-14). I *Nevermore* är korpen mindre mystisk och fungerar snarare som spelarens färdkamrat genom rummen, en påminnelse om intertextualitet. Den störande, självreflexiva aspekten av det utsägliga förflyttas istället till läsandet av en serie alkemiska böcker. De slumpvis presenterade textavsnitten och den krypterade texten i dessa svårlästa böcker gör informationen svårtillgänglig, och kommunikationen blockeras eller betvivlas. Dessutom involverar berättarens levande begravning i dikten ett krympande fysiskt utrymme och en alltmer orörlig position i ett rum, medan spelarkaraktärens levande begravning i den interaktiva fiktionen medför en mystisk förflyttning till ett isolerat rum. Väl där kan spelaren inte få spelarkaraktären att lämna rummet och därmed lämnas spelaren med ett slutgiltigt ambivalent val. Inom ramen för diktens estetik och filosofi, används i *Nevermore* konventionerna kring det utsägliga och levande

begravning för att på strategiska vis minska spelarens kontroll i simulationen.

En annan gotisk trop, labyrinten, remedieras i Michael Gentrys *Anchorhead*, som diskuteras i kapitel två. Den gotiska labyrinten fungerar som en plats där motsättningar, vilka beskrivs som av nödvändighet binära i texten (såsom liv och död eller naturlig och onaturlig), suddas ut på subversiva vis. Detta utsuddande försvårar karaktärens navigerande mellan motsatta tillstånd eller föreställningar. I H. P. Lovecrafts modernistiska gotiska fiktion fungerar labyrinten som en plats där epistemologiska gränser relaterade till rummets stabilitet och kunskap om universum upplöses. I *Anchorhead* tas utsuddandet av gränser till sin ytterlighet då de sammanstörtade motsättningarna inom labyrinten inte återställs då karaktären lyckas fly därifrån. Labyrintens funktion i *Anchorhead* visar att den postmoderna gotiken är mindre förmögen att återställa gränser (Botting, "Aftergothic" 281) både för spelarkaraktären och spelaren, till skillnad från i gotiska verk från tidigare perioder såsom modernismen. Där den traditionella gotiska fiktionen tillfälligt placerar läsaren i en tvetydig situation vad gäller rädsla i texten, upprätthåller postmoderna gotiska fiktioner såsom *Anchorhead* motstridighet i spelarens roll genom att ifrågasätta vissheten om alla gränser—till och med då läsaren (eller spelaren) kommit till slutet av verket.

Fragmentisering och sönderfall är vanligt förekommande troper i gotiska verk. I de splittrade narrativ som produceras i genomkorsandet av Sara Dees *Madam Spider's Web*, som jag diskuterar i kapitel tre, visar spelarkaraktärens självfragmentisering, gestaltad i drag av det kusliga ('the uncanny') och i det gotiskt groteska, en destabiliserad idé om mänsklig subjektivitet. I ett bisarrt hus kontrollerat av en gigantisk spindel, upplever spelarkaraktären oväntade minnen som hon inte kan sammanfoga med sitt eget förflutna. Den kusliga tropens funktion i gotiska texter är just att göra det välkända okänt, och den är relaterad till farhågor om hur gömda ting kan framkalla en osäker identitetsuppfattning (Royle 1-2). I de till synes orelaterade berättelserna som produceras i genomkorsandet av den interaktiva fiktionen tydliggörs spelarkaraktärens självfragmentisering, delvis i minnen kopplade till det kusliga, delvis i form av Madam Spider. Jag hävdar att Madam Spider är spelarkaraktärens 'inre monster' eller hans/hennes monstrosa föreställning om jaget, även om spindeldjuret aldrig identifieras på detta sätt av spelarkaraktären. Madam Spiders väsen är

sammanflätat med huset både konceptuellt (som en spindel i ett nät) och som en öppen grotesk kropp som är påtagligt sammanfogad med dess omgivning (Bakhtin 316-17). Genom kombinationen av mänskliga och jättelika spindellika former sammankopplas Madam Spider med det groteskas komiska och hotfulla former (Russo 7). De senare formernas ambivalens är viktig eftersom spelarkarakters postmoderna sympati för monstret kombineras med en rädsla för henne (se Tracy 39). Spelarens roll involverar en liknande konstruktion av monstrositet. Olika handlingar utförda gentemot skenbart oviktiga objekt i huset får oförutsedda effekter. Dessa effekter relaterar på ologiska vis till spelarkarakters öde i fiktionens olika slut, och genom handlingarna iscensätts hans eller hennes eget inre monster.

Star C. Foster och Daniel Ravipintos *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, som jag analyserar i kapitel fyra, illustrerar tydligast de simulerade effekterna på spelarens roller. Genomkorsandet av detta verk producerar en serie berättelser som fungerar på postmodernistiska, cykliska vis. Även om kroppen är en byggsten i *Slouching Towards Bedlams* posthumanistiska konstruktion av subjektivitet, kommer spelarkarakters identitet från hans förhållande till informationsteknologi. Den interaktiva fiktionen utspelar sig i det viktorska London men innehåller beskrivningar av ett antal fantastiska maskiner som associeras med nutida cybernetiska teknologier. *Slouching Towards Bedlam* använder sig på detta vis av ett konstruerat förhållande mellan ett föreställt förflutet och en samtid vilket gör verket till ett exempel på historiografisk metafiction (se Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 5). I detta konstruerade förhållande kommer hoten mot den posthumanistiska subjektiviteten inte från det förflutna, vilket är vanligt i den traditionella gotiken, utan från nutiden och framtiden. Även om känslor av ångest hänförs till framtiden, finns starka kopplingar till andra postmoderna gotiska verk eftersom dessa ångestkänslor förkläds till ett välkänt monster (se Botting, *Gothic* 163). Jag hävdar att det ordvirus som infekterar och hotar att ta spelarkarakters i besittning är specifikt kopplat till det hot Bram Stokers vampyr Dracula utgör mot det mänskliga subjektet. Den interaktiva fiktionen är därför ett tydligt exempel på det cybergotiska, en subgenre av gotiken i vilken framtida farhågor relaterade till det posthumanistiska subjektet behandlas. Eftersom hoten kommer från framtiden (maskerade som hot från det förflutna) i cybergotiken är det alltid

för sent att avvärja faror i den interaktiva fiktionen, både för spelarkarakteren och för spelaren.

Ett antal allmänna slutsatser kan dras avseende gotikens utveckling i dessa interaktiva fiktioner. I *Nevermore*, *Anchorhead* och *Madam Spider's Web* pekar föreställningar om mänskliga subjekt mot olika former av kroppsligt sårbarhet. I *Slouching Towards Bedlam* understryks de inneboende farorna med oundärliga informationsnätverk genom den överbelastning av information som hotar posthumanistiska subjekt. I verken illustreras vanligen problem angående subjektets funktion genom hot mot kommunikationsformer. Kommunikationssvårigheter avspeglas även på verkens yttre nivå via postmoderna effekter simulerade för spelaren. Denna studie visar således att de analyserade interaktiva fiktionerna utvecklar gotiken på sätt som är relevanta för förändrade föreställningar om subjektivitet i nutida texter.

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Umeå Studies in Language and Literature

Publicerade av Institutionen för språkstudier, Umeå universitet
Published by the Department of Language Studies, Umeå University

Redaktion/Editors: Heidi Hansson, Per Ambrosiani

Distribuerade av/Distributed by: eddy.se ab
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