Recomposing Lovecraft: Genre Emulation as Autopoiesis in the First Edition of *Call of Cthulhu*

Abstract: The article examines how genre is emulated in the first edition of *Call of Cthulhu* (1981), analyzing the game's potential to answer social needs during the Reagan era. Genre is understood in the response aesthetic sense, as collections of traits sedimented from authors' and designers' attempts to meet their audiences. Similar to how software can be engineered to replace older hardware, *Call of Cthulhu* replaces the genre functions underpinning Lovecraftian stories. Previous research discusses *Call of Cthulhu* as a horror RPG, mostly referencing later editions. This article's analysis, based on systems theory, deals with the first edition and a more complex genre composition. Emulation is described as autopoiesis—a generative mechanism of simultaneous autonomy and dependency vis-a-vis an environment. The role-playing system selects genre elements through structural couplings to its surroundings, and then recombines them in a new way, giving them new affordances.

The result shows the ways in which the first edition of *Call of Cthulhu* fuses elements from the fantasy role-playing genre with elements from literary horror, detective story, pulp fiction and colonial mystery. The three most prominent characteristics of the game—the characters' mental health, the manner in which they confront Mythos representatives, and their expeditions to remote locations—are solutions to genre tensions, rather than properties of horror. Following the sociohistorical framing of the elements involved, the composite emulation allowed for the processing of perceived threats to the American way of life during the early Reagan Era. The game offered a colonial fantasy, where real but more diffuse menaces, such as the nuclear arms race of the Cold War or the Iranian Revolution and ensuing energy crisis, could be fictionalized and reconsidered from the perspective of a predominantly white Christian struggle against evil in a 1920s world.

Keywords: cybernetics, genre, Lovecraft, Reagan Era, tabletop role-playing

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1. INTRODUCTION

Call of Cthulhu is a frequently mentioned work in role-playing game research. Whether referenced in passing or in depth, it is given labels such as "successful," "highly influential," "classic," or "pioneering," and is generally considered to be a landmark in the field (Hite 2007; Rouse III 2009; Weise 2009). The game is known for conservative development and backward compatibility over its seven editions. Most research articles are version agnostic in the sense that they focus on aspects of the game found in all editions. And as the action takes place in the world of H. P. Lovecraft, the reasonable approach to *Call of Cthulhu* seems to be as a pure horror game (see, for example, Burnette 2015; Schrier, Torner and Hammer 2018).

However, the original subtitle was "Fantasy Role-Playing in the Worlds of H. P. Lovecraft" (Petersen et al. 1981). At first glance, this might appear to simply be a marketing trick, or a wide definition of fantasy. David Jara and Evan Torner (2018, 273) remark that the mentioning of Lovecraft's name in *Call of Cthulhu's* subtitle, as well as the haunted house cover art, signal a horror game. The change of the word "fantasy" for "horror" in later editions (starting with the fourth—see Hite 2007, 4) would also point in the pure horror direction. But main author Sandy Petersen's *Different Worlds* article about the design process for the first edition tells a different story:

> All the foregoing difficulties were actually minor compared to the one paramount design problem which I faced: "How can I make the mood of a fantasy role-playing game match the mood of a modern horror story?" (Petersen and Willis 1982, 9)

The quote clearly does not include horror in the definition of fantasy, or treat the latter as mere marketing. Instead, it singles out different genre moods as "the one paramount design problem." The use of the word "match" in the quote is multifaceted. There is an element of adaptation, where the moods need to be fitted together, as well as one of remediation, where modern horror stories are to be told in the game medium. But following Clara Fernandez-Vara's distinction between adaptation and transmedia storytelling (2015, 80), this is not a remediated adaptation in the sense of a movie tie-in or a game version of a well-known story. Such adaptations were made later (most famously *Beyond the Mountains of Madness,* 1999). It has more in common with Matthew Weise's "procedural adaptation" (2009, 238–239) and Ian Bogost's "procedural translation" (2007), which refer to how literary traits are moved into digital games. The stories here are yet to be told, in the form of written and played adventures. Emphasizing that the tabletop role-playing game is designed to "run" an indefinite amount of such adventures, an apposite description of *Call of Cthulhu* would be as a case of *genre emulation*, that is the attempt to re-design a fantasy game engine so that it can replace the genre functions underpinning Lovecraftian horror, making it possible to tell those new stories in the RPG medium.

The focus on "mood" indicates that genre cannot be used in the more common classificatory sense—however useful and necessary that may be in an investigation of a broad field of games (see for example Cover 2010; MacKay 2001). Mood, as used in the quote,[1] involves player and reader response—how fiction in a certain genre *feels*. And in the response aesthetic sense, genres are not classificatory categories holding individual games or literary works. They are collections of traits, which can be combined in the individual work and be interacted with in a certain way in a certain historical context (Jara 2018, 24; cf. Stenros 2004, 168). This includes both the more direct, conscious and choice oriented ergodic interaction, coined by Espen Aarseth (1997) and further developed by Marie-Laure Ryan in her studies of interactivity and narrativity (Ryan 2006, 107–122), but also the more elusive "deep attention" associated with less ergodic media and used by Astrid Ensslin in her discussion of literariness and ludicity (Ensslin 2014, 38–39). Aarseth, Ryan and Ensslin all connect to reader response in literary studies, where the human mind "working" with fiction is a reciprocal and potentially transformative process, tied to social needs (Iser 1978, x, 98). Rather than being designed tools for describing categories of fiction, genres are organic products of work–audience eco-systems, sedimented from many author and designer attempts to meet such needs (Bawarshi 2001; Miller 1984; 2015).

While it does not deal directly with actual flesh-and-blood readers and players, genre in the response aesthetic cannot be considered separately, without sociohistorical context. Genre is very much involved in the responses a work invites, and thus says something about an *implied* audience (Iser 1978; cf. Aarseth 1997 110–113; Israelson 2017, 64–68). In the first edition of *Call of Cthulhu*, genre is composite. In addition to the fantasy game genre and modern horror fiction evidenced by the cover and the author's own design notes, there are, as we shall see, distinct elements from the colonial mystery, detective story, and pulp action genres.[2] A study of composite genre emulation must thus show what genres do for the implied players and how they do it, but also account for the dependency, selection and recombination of genre elements into something new, with new affordances.

In the following, I will map this structure and show how the three most prominent characteristics of *Call of Cthulhu*—the characters' mental health, the manner in which they confront Mythos representatives, and their expeditions to remote locations—are the products of composite genre

1 Note that mood also has a precise, narratological meaning. See Marku Eskelinen's (2012, 165–179) discussion of Genette's term.

2 Lovecraft's fiction is also associated with several horror sub-genres, as well as with science fiction and weird fiction. See Smith 2011, 830.

emulation rather than properties of horror in the game medium. In turn, this allows for a reinterpretation of the game as an example of colonial escapism, answering common needs and concerns during the early Reagan era.

2. EMULATION AS AUTOPOIESIS

There is a lot of overlap between study of interactivity in games and post-classical narratology. A functional apparatus could be fashioned in many different ways from the combination of the already cited authors—in particular from a multidisciplinary, "messy" perspective, where theoretical conflicts are regarded as beneficial (as the object of study is complex and unorderly, cf. Law 2004). For example, David Jara discusses genre, theme and mood relative to the concept of framing (2018, 120–122; cf. Fine 1983; Goffman 1961). He could be complemented with Alastair Fowler's extensive treatment of genre in a similar vein (2002). But the concepts of dependency, autonomy, selection, (re-)combination and sedimentation, which seem inevitable in a discussion of composite genre emulation, have their original habitat in cybernetics. The process of *autopoiesis*, roughly "self-generation," contains these parts and can capture the notion of emulation. It has been used previously in the study of the fantastic (Israelson 2017) and is arguably a tighter theoretical fit for the investigation.

Autopoiesis is the generative process whereby a system distinguishes itself from an environment. First introduced in the context of biology (Maturana and Varela 1980), it is a cornerstone in social cybernetics and the main idea in Niklas Luhmann's systems theory (1995). In the case of a mainstream role-playing game, the separation of what happens and what does not happen (in the game fiction) is repeated over and over again, such as when the game master or referee makes a judgment call, when a player talks in character, or when dice are used to settle whether a gunshot is a hit or miss. Cybernetically, happens/happens not is a binary *code*, and iterating it establishes the game as a system occupied with such distinctions. Simultaneously, the surroundings are established as occupied with other things. This basic perspective originally comes from George Spence-Browns formal logic (1994), and can be described very simply as a circle drawn in a plane. The circle creates an inside, a border, and an outside, and no matter how you do it, the size and character of the border will give outside and inside their respective identities, *and* describe a relation between them.

This is the logic behind the autopoietic combination of cognitive dependency and operative autonomy. While a system autonomously selects what is part and not part of its domain through the manner in which it "runs" the internal code, this also makes it dependent on a structurally coupled environment, which can irritate it to take action. In Per Israelson's study of the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic, the term *sympoiesis* is used instead of autopoiesis to highlight the simultaneity of autonomy, dependency and co-creation (2017, 41), but this concept is already there in autopoiesis, and actually predates it through the roots in Spencer Brown's logic. A system which serves as the whole outside for another system is *penetrated*, and if this condition is reciprocal, there is *interpenetration* (Luhmann 1995, 213–214). These are useful complementary terms when describing relations between subsystems, such as a narrative system being penetrated by a game mechanical subsystem.

Sedimentation in cybernetics is usually called *condensation*, and refers to stable structures and residue generated over time by one or many systems (Spencer-Brown 1994, 10; cf. Luhmann 2000, 207). An example of internal structure would be the division between game master and player found in many mainstream role-playing games. These roles are condensated through the alternate attribution of system internal communications. An example of residue would be a set of verbally agreed upon house rules, or a published ruleset. Both are condensations existing on the outside of the individual game system, which autonomously chooses what in those rules to use and disregard.

Genres, in the response aesthetic sense already described, are condensations—here from game systems and from literary systems. They can manifest themselves concretely, as an explicit section about a genre in a publication or paratext, but also in a less obvious manner as non-written megatexts affecting the expectations of the audience. The traits of a genre are components available for selection and re-combination in the individual system, where they contribute both to the internal condensation of a participant interface (like in the case of the game master and player roles), *and* to the genres they were selected from (cf. Israelson 2017, 70–71). This is how genres evolve, usually very slowly, and also how they are tied to historic contexts with specific social needs.

Against this background, composite genre emulation can be given a cybernetic working definition as the autopoietic selection and re-combination of genre elements, via the structural couplings between a role-playing social system and its surroundings. The re-combination generates a participant interface and enables the telling of new (game) stories, inviting response and meeting the demands of an implied, contemporary audience.

3. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND MATERIAL

The historical context surrounding the first edition of the *Call of Cthulhu* role-playing game were troubled times, at least in the United States. The Cold War, the energy crisis, and the Iranian Revolution were perceived as threats to the nation, to the American way of life, and ultimately to Christian faith. The nation dealt with the fresh trauma of a lost war in Vietnam, with recessions from 1979–1982 (triggered by the energy crisis), and also with continued racial tensions that had grown throughout the 1970s and resulted in major riots every year from 1977 to 1980 (Hayward 2001). Anti-nuclear protests reached an all-time high (Cortright 2008), while military expenditure saw an almost 40% increase from 1978 to 1982.[3]

On the technical side, punched card computers had been replaced by workstations, and video games entered first the arcades and shopping malls, then American homes. In 1981, the home computer revolution had still not reached its peak, but Apple, Commodore and Atari hardware, and early role-playing computer games such as *Beneath Apple Manor,* reached millions of middle class homes (Kocurek 2015). The gaps between generations and classes in regard to digital media were huge (Schulte 2008). In 1980, Ronald Reagan was elected as a voice for conservative values, presented as "common sense." In popular culture studies, the following years are known for "Reaganite entertainment," with *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981)—an explicit influence on *Call of Cthulhu*—being a prominent example. The term refers to a plot that appeases the audience by trivializing dangers, meeting their expectations, and restoring order, thereby returning things to status quo (Britton 2009; Needham 2016).

Lovecraft was a well-known author in popular culture and had been for the better part of the century. In 1980, S. T. Joshi published a major collection, *H.P. Lovecraft: Four Decades of Criticism*, defining the field of Lovecraft studies. Following Tzvetan Todorov's seminal paper from 1970, "Introduction à la litérature fantastique" (2013), academic interest in several popular genres was on the rise. In 1981, Rosemary Jackson discussed horror as a sub-genre of "the fantastic," and, borrowing terminology from linguistics, suggested fantasy as the *langue* from which different *paroles* emerged—including the works of Kafka, Maupassant and Lovecraft (4). She distinguished this meaning from the "popular sense," which denoted works by for example Tolkien and Le Guin (5). The academic umbrella term of the fantastic does not seem to have had much impact on gaming publications. The only major game to use Todorov's label was *Metamorposis Alpha* (Ward 1976), which had the subtitle "Fantastic

3 From 4.9% of GDP in 1978 to 6.8% in 1982. See World Bank Data: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=US

Role-Playing Game of Science-Fiction Adventures." Looking at other major games during the era, *Traveller* (Miller 1977) had "science fiction" on the box, whereas *Gamma World* (Ward and Jaquet 1978) was marked "science fantasy." The games that referred to "fantasy" on the cover all used fantasy in Jackson's popular sense: *Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set* (Moldvay 1981) as well as *Runequest* (Perrin et al. 1978, Bronze-Age fantasy) and *Stormbringer* (Andre and Perrin 1981, sword & sorcery).

Throughout the seventies, fear of religious cults and of brain-washing rouse in the United States, as described by Joseph P. Laycock (2015, 76–100). The disappearance and later suicide of Dallas Egbert was linked in the press to role-playing, manifolding the sales-figures of the newly released Holmes version of the *Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set* (Holmes 1978; Peterson 2021). While the ensuing moral panic dubbed "Satanic Panic" was focused on *Dungeons & Dragons*, cults, delusions, and deteriorating mental health would be heavily thematized in *Call of Cthulhu*, which also put a much greater emphasis on ritualism than *Dungeons & Dragons* ever did. The attention to historical detail, the prominence of mental health issues, and the action taking place in a fictionalized version of the real world, gave *Call of Cthulhu* a more serious and thought-provoking air than the contemporary mainstream games. In a 1982 editorial for the Chaosium Game Catalog (also appearing in *Different Worlds*), Tadashi Ehara voiced a countercultural perspective: "Role-playing demands our participation to provide us with visions of breaking through social conventions, to challenge our contemporaries, and to surround ourselves with quality" (2).

First edition *Call of Cthulhu* was released in December 1981, after a development period of some two years. It followed a line of products based on Chaosium's *Basic Role-Playing* rules (stand-alone booklet by Stafford and Willis 1981), originally developed in 1979 for *Runequest* and also included in first edition *Stormbringer*. Shortly after the *Call of Cthulhu* release, the BRP booklet would also be in *Worlds of Wonder* (Perrin et al. 1982) and *Elfquest* (Perrin, Petersen and Chodak 1984). The idea was that BRP provided basic rules mechanisms, which the individual game then modified and built on in order to suit its setting. In the cases of *Call of Cthulhu* and *Worlds of Wonder*, this also applied to genre. While "Fantasy role-play" was initially defined in BRP in a very general manner, all the examples, equipment, monsters, rules in the booklet unanimously pointed to a medieval/Renaissance fantasy world. The rules that *Call of Cthulhu* are known for—such as the sanity mechanism or the monster specific rules (both described later in the article)—were all in their own, thicker booklet. The same went for *Worlds of Wonder*, which had separate booklets for the superhero genre, the science fiction genre, and for extension of magic to the BRP fantasy rules. While horror components, character sanity, and Lovecraft's mythos are represented in a few earlier publications, perhaps most notably in the later omitted sections on Lovecraft and Moorcock mythoses in the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* supplement *Deities & Demigods* (Ward and Kuntz 1980), the contents of the specific Cthulhu booklet in *Call of Cthulhu* were largely unique on the market.

First edition *Call of Cthulhu* came in a box set, rich with content both for its time and by modern standards. The box contained three stapled books, dice, a crayon (to fill in dice numbers), character forms, a world map, character silhouettes, an introductory letter describing the hobby, a product catalog from Chaosium, and a customer response card. In the deluxe edition, equipped with a deeper box, the *Shadows of Yog Sothoth* campaign was also included. In the two years following the release, this campaign was released separately (Carnahan et al. 1982), as was three additional products: *The Cthulhu Companion* (Chodak et al. 1983), *The Asylum & Other Tales* (McCall et al. 1983), and the aforementioned *Different Worlds* special issue about the design of the game. This concludes the first edition publications. The second edition of the game was published in 1983.

4. EMULATING SANITY

Humankind's encounter with cosmic evil, and the ensuing madness, are prominent features of Lovecraft's horror fiction (Smith 2011, 835–836), mainly dealt with in *Call of Cthulhu* through the sanity mechanism. The rules for sanity are iconic for the game, but also emanate from a problem in genre emulation.

The rules dictate that when a character encounters something horrid, a certain amount of sanity points must be removed from their sanity value, also known as SAN (Petersen 1981, 23). If too much sanity is lost, the character goes insane, and if the value reaches zero, this state becomes permanent. Sanity can be increased if the character is victorious in the fight against creatures from the Cthulhu mythos, or if the character receives treatment, such as therapy in a mental institution (27). However, the sanity value is also tied to the character's knowledge of the Cthulhu mythos. Each skill point in the latter reduces the maximum possible sanity the character can achieve. If a character's Cthulhu Mythos skill has value 16, their sanity can never exceed 83 (99 - 16 = 83). In this way, knowledge and sanity are balanced; note, however, that sanity can decrease without a corresponding increase in Mythos skill. (23–28).

The sanity mechanism is mentioned in just about every article discussing the game (see, for example, Burnette 2015; Herber 2007, 4; Leavenworth 2007, 1). Jon Peterson points out that it was developed from similar mechanisms in other games, and mentions a Lovecraftian version of *Tunnels & Trolls*, published in 1980 (Rahman and Rahman 1980; cf. Peterson 2020, Epilogue; also acknowledged in Petersen & Willis 1982). Tyler Burnette (2015, 47) connects the mechanism to genre and shows how it tracks the mental development of the characters in a way that is typical of Lovecraftian horror: the heroes in Lovecraft's stories usually go mad when they see their insignificance compared to the size, age, and utter evil of the universe and the unearthly creatures that surround them.

While very reasonable in themselves, these perspectives do not discuss the particular combination of game and literature that was present in the design process and explicitly discussed in *Different Worlds*, where Sandy Petersen noted the effects of an early SAN version without a recovery mechanism:

> This made for a very fatalistic or depressing game, as the players watched for their precious Sanity go down, and down, and down . . . In many was this matched the stories' mood perfectly, but it often made for a feeling of hopelessness in a game. . . The current sanity rules are quite good, I feel, and still give a feeling of hopelessness to the players at times, though in actual play it is usually possible to overcome the handicaps of having a poor Sanity. The whole concept of Sanity permeates the game and makes it what it is. (Petersen and Willis 1982, 11)

As the quote makes clear, genre emulation gets into trouble when it results in a game that is true to the Lovecraft stories but is not fun or rewarding to play. The quote also stands out in relation to Laycock's research (2015, 76–81). As the connection between sanity and the fear of cults was firmly established in the historical context years before the Satanic panic and connection to role-playing games, Petersen's problem bleeds into the real world. A "very fatalistic or depressing game" means more than people not wanting to play it. The conundrum, including the social dimensions, could be described as a kind of collision or tension between genres, as player expectations are not only Lovecraftian, but also based on the "fantasy role-playing" game genre.

In 1981, the most common case would be expectations originating in previous *Dungeons & Dragons* experiences, based on the dungeon crawling game genre (cf. Gygax and Arneson 1974; Holmes 1978; Moldvay 1980). This genre was condensated from other sources than *D&D* as well.

Sword & sorcery fiction (such as by Robert E. Howard or Fritz Leiber) and roguelikes had strong elements of dungeon crawling, not to mention the prominence of this feature in ancient myth.[4] Dungeon crawling means going on adventure into some kind of underworld, hopefully emerging richer or wiser than before. This characterization has been developed by many game studies scholars (see for example Barton 2008; Peterson 2012, 81–108, 605–632; Craddock 2015), but it should be pointed out how the game genre is both catabatic and colonial. In the former case, it lets the players identify with a character who explores the underworld in order to grow in knowledge, wealth and power (Fletcher 2019, 44–47). In the latter case it lets the player relive the status of white supremacy from the colonial age: the characters travel to distant and exotic lands, kill representatives of cultures they do not understand, and return to "civilization" with their riches—all in the conviction that they are themselves good while others are evil.

Emulation of this genre element is shown in Figure 1. The structural couplings are given an uppercase identifier, as well as a lowercase annotation designating the type of coupling; all couplings also involve observation, however. The types are listed in the legend. Looking at the coupling (Ac), the identifier *A* has a *c* annotation, meaning that the game system condensates its own rules. Looking at the coupling (Bp), the identifier *B* has a *p* annotation, meaning that the game system penetrates the story system. In this manner, the figure is a map of the emulation *Call of Cthulhu*, showing the entities and their relations and kinds in systems theoretical terms. Figure 1 will be developed in two additional steps, the final map—a part of the article's result—being Figure 3.

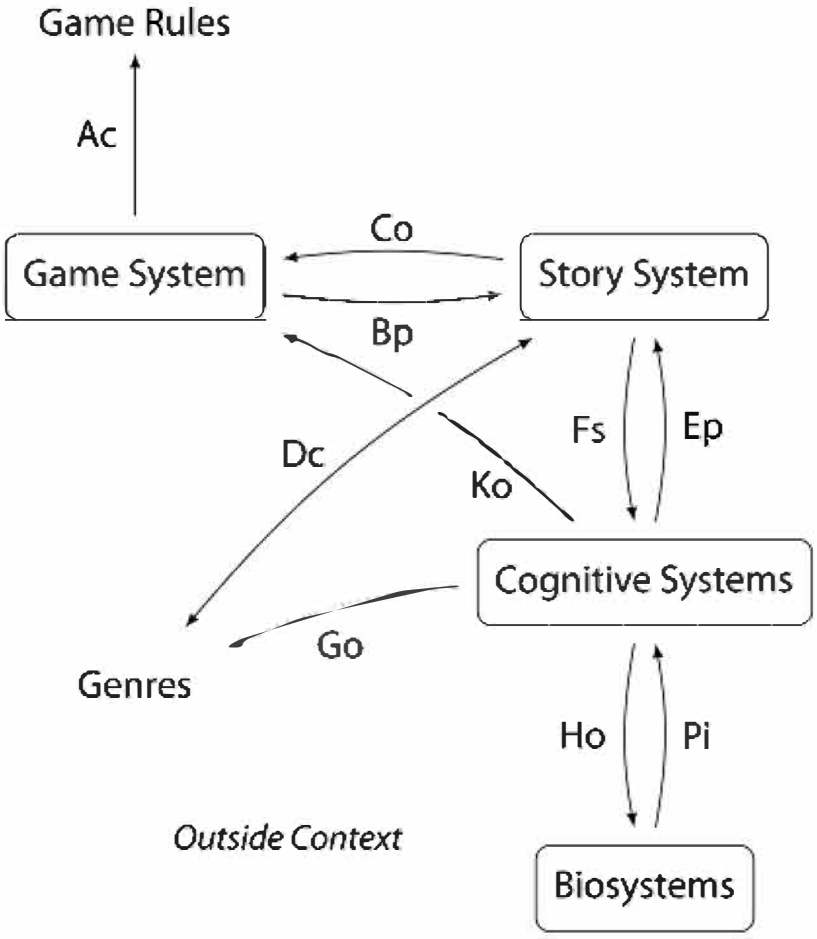
- **The Game System:** This system deals with rolling dice, keeping track of stats, etc. Through the (Bp) penetration coupling, it observes the Story system for utterances that irritate it and that it may act upon. For example, "Jonna Doherty attacks with her shotgun" or "My character reads the Necronomicon" are interesting, but "Can I have the last slice of pizza?" is not. The system also condensates (Ac) its own rules, but may refer to the rulebook as a previous condensation.[5]
- **The Narrative System:** This is a social system that narrates the game story. It selects (Fs) the verbalized thoughts from the Cognitive System (relayed as sound through a biosystem),[6] turning them into narrative communications. It also observes the Game System through (Co), *and* genres through (Dc), in order to know what it is allowed to select. Out of place expressions or events are not selected, but filtered out from the narrative.

4 Arguably, the genre also appears in modern fiction. In *Ready Player One* (Cline 2011) is not only an explicit part of episodes where the protagonist plays some game (for example chapters 8 and 23), but an organizing principle for the whole novel. The plot structure in *Ready Player One* as a whole is that Wade, the protagonist, goes into a fantasy realm (e.g. virtual reality) and explores layer after layer of mystery until confronting a final boss and getting a reward.

5 Much like late Wittgenstein sees rules as secondary language game abstractions which do not govern the games but may be used for guidance, so are *programs*—the way a system's code is run—condensated from the evolving system. Thus they only govern the system, which is operatively autonomous, to the extent that its structural couplings allow it. This is easily seen in a role-playing game, where a gaming group might decide to consult a rule in one case, but disregard it in another.

6 To be exact, the cognitive system irritates the biosystem to produce sound, which the narrative system selects. It is feasible that the thoughts of the cognitive system are very different from what is produced as a communication in the narrative system.

Figure 1: Structurally Coupled Systems and Genres in a *Call of Cthulhu Game* (Version 1)



o → Observation. The system sees the outside, waiting to be irritate
c → Condensation. The system repeats similar activities, and more stable elements result from repetition.
p → Penetration. A system serves as outside for another system.
i → Interpenetration. Two systems serve as each other's outsides.

- **The Cognitive Systems:** These systems are the minds of the participants, i.e. what they are thinking. The cognitive systems observe *all* the other systems and have thoughts about it. They also observe genres, and interpret what goes on in the other systems in genre terms. A failed sanity roll when confronted with dread Cthulhu is expected to be imagined by the player in horror terms. But that is not the only possible way. The player's cognitive system could *also* think about what the encounter *would* have been like if the character was a *Dungeons & Dragons* hero, or if the roll been a success instead. In this way, any sentiment of disappointment over a hero's Lovecraftian development (as related by Petersen in the above quote) also comes about through genre, when the horror and *Dungeons & Dragons* genres collide.

- **The Biosystems**: These systems observe the cognitive systems only, responding through increased heart rate, sleepiness, etc. Naturally, both the Game System and Story System depend upon the biosystems for sounds, thrown dice, etc. This is not shown in Figures 1–3.

These systems are also related to the context in which the game takes place. These contexts may include other minor social systems (such as a gaming café), and will inevitably include major systems such as the religious, mass media, scientific, and political systems, which are all but omnipresent. Each such system also remembers its own evolution, for example the ideas and circumstances of the 1920s or the reports of cults and brain-washing. This means that communications originating in some other system may be selected through their affinity with late-colonial history or news reports about Dallas Egbert. Conversely, actions and sounds that are not selected as communications in *Call of Cthulhu* may well be selected by another system (like in the above pizza example).[7]

The figure shows in detail how the sanity mechanism is activated by the game system due to an irritation from the story system. The story system observes the sanity results from the game system in order to be able to communicate in accordance with the genre. This in turn is observed by the cognitive systems, who respond based on genre expectations. If the narrative style is genre-compliant with Lovecraftian horror only, the cognitive systems are likely to be dissatisfied, as they also have expectations based on previous experiences with the dungeon crawling game genre. Only by recombining elements both from Lovecraftian literary horror and from fantasy dungeon crawl, can the story system irritate the cognitive systems into feeling satisfied with the character development and, consequently, also with the game.

Two things are particularly notable here. One is how the subsystems differ in their genre couplings: the cognitive systems simply take more genres into account—any that a participant thinks of—even if these thoughts are not verbalized and selected by the story system. The other is how the sanity mechanism's selected and recombined genre elements were originally meant to meet very different needs. The loss of sanity in Lovecraftian literary horror invites the reader to process fears and questions about humankind's insignificance in the face of the vastness of space and time, while the recovery of sanity is part of the dungeon crawling genre's triumph, with both catabatic (increased knowledge) and colonial (increased richness and power compared to others). Both these affordances can meet contemporary needs to process the contemporary moral panic about faith and mental health.

5. SHOTGUNS & PULP

The rules for character Sanity are not the only examples of where the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG needs to recombine elements from Lovecraftian horror into something new with different affordances. Another example can be found in how the rulebooks and the 1920s sourcebook deal extensively with different weaponry, weapon skills, and damage; in *Different Worlds* #19, these parts of the game design process are highlighted as particularly important and hard to get right (Peterson and Willis 1982, 11). Meanwhile, in the collected works of Lovecraft, pistols, shotguns, revolvers, and rifles are mentioned very briefly and only a handful of times.[8] The attention to detail in this area originates from somewhere else.

7 It also means that the same sounds uttered during a game may be picked up and turned into communications in another system. For example, if a player has her character make a prayer and this results in an argument about beliefs in the 1920s, the discussion may have the meaning of a disturbance in the game system but the meaning of an important and interesting discussion in the religious and science systems.

8 A single *grep* search (grep is a small c-program preinstalled on all Unix-like operative systems) can quickly find out the prevalence of weapons in Lovecraft's collected works. For example, the simple search "grep -Ec ' pistol | shotgun | revolver | rifle ' complete-lovecraft.txt" reveals that the listed firearm words were used a total of 18 times, 8 if you only count the stories listed as important in the beginning of the rulebook (Petersen 1981, 5).

The pulp genre, which is generally much more action-oriented than Lovecraft's fiction, is an obvious source, especially since Lovecraft's work was almost entirely published in pulp magazines. An additional source would be other role-playing games, in which horror traits—such as monster hunting, violent encounters with unknown creatures, and thwarting the evil intrigues of cults—were core to several games before 1981. The first ever RPG adventure was written for *Dungeons & Dragons* and published in the *Blackmoor* supplement (Arneson 1975). It was titled "The Temple of the Frog" and had the characters fight an evil cult of amphibians. In *Villains & Vigilantes* (Dee & Herman 1979, a superhero game) and *Gamma World*, battles against unknown creatures constitute significant parts of the action. In addition to these influences on the contemporary audience's expectations, at least two violent and relevant films were produced in 1980 and released in 1981 before *Call of Cthulhu*: Stephen Spielberg's pulp action blockbuster *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and the zombie movie *The Evil Dead* (Raimi 1981).

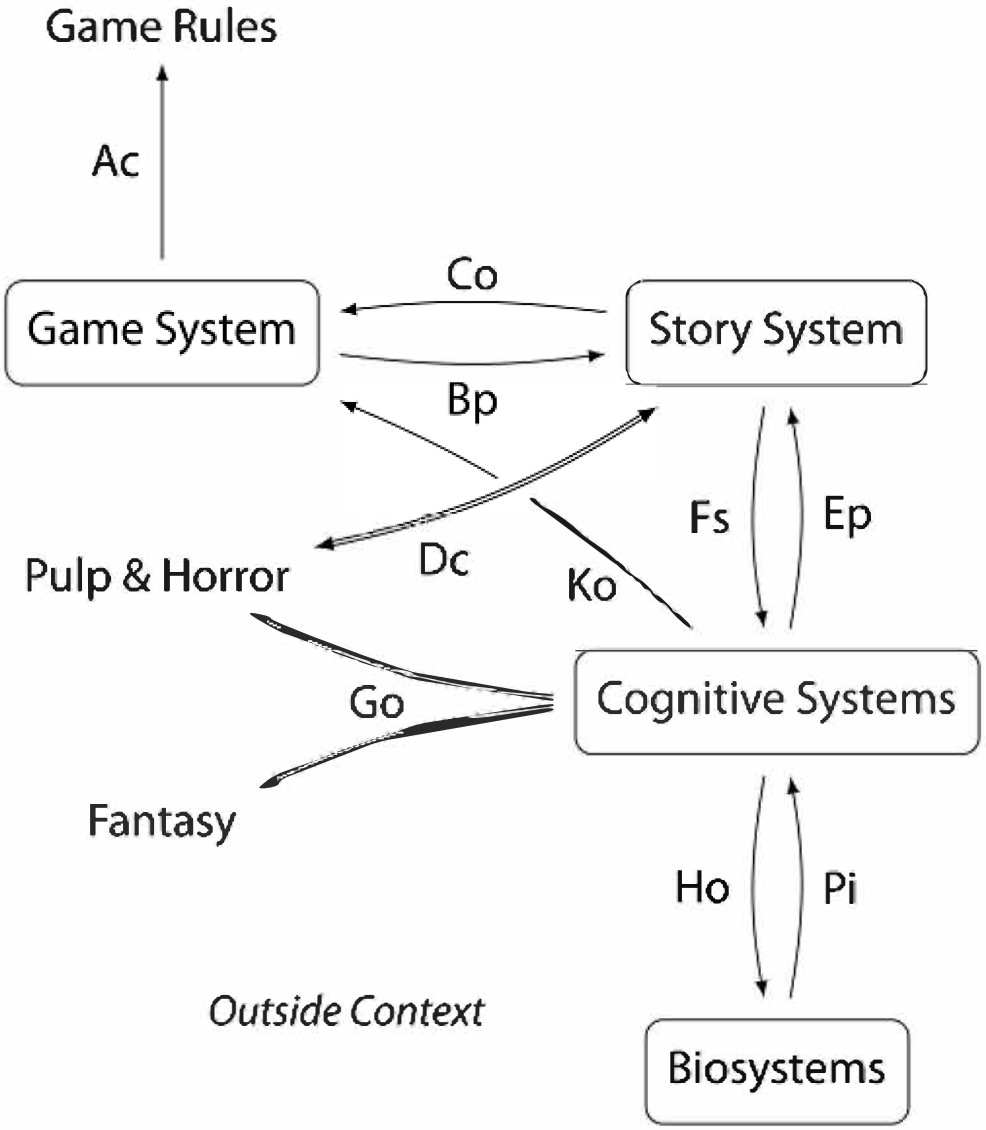
Given the above, it can be assumed that the target audience of the role-playing game *Call of Cthulhu* expected their characters to defend themselves against threats to a much greater extent than that possible in Lovecraft's fiction. Sarah Lynne Bowman remarks that "players often recreate heroic quests" and "perform heroic deeds" even in horror role-playing games (Bowman 2010, 146). On the other hand, there is also the possibility of *playing to lose*, as discussed by David Jara (2018, 266). Jara's description gives this play style a cathartic quality, where the misfortunes of a character can be recognized but also safely followed from a narrative distance. This is arguably a possibility in *Call of Cthulhu*, despite the game predating the trend by more than 20 years. But it is also somewhat counteracted by the catabatic and colonial aspects of the dungeon crawl genre: the idea is that the hero shall survive, reemerge, and at least in some way be better off than before.

In the historical context, the nuclear threat and the lost war in Vietnam can be emphasized here. The urge to fight back and have at least some kind of victory, as well as the need to process an all-encompassing but looming threat, are prominent features in the early Reagan era. The ending of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* restores order and gives the audience comfort and reassurance: the Nazis have been beaten; the ark has acknowledged the righteous and wise character of the hero; and the US army have "safely" re-buried the weapon of doom in a secret state storage. The needs reflected in the movie's success, which are inescapably also tied to genre, posed a potential dilemma for the game's design, similar to that of Sanity. In Lovecraft's short stories, the protagonists are often helpless in the face of the Old Ones and their minions, which in turn lays a good part of the reason for the horror and dread incited in the readers. How do you include the ability to fight back without destroying a core element of cosmic horror?

Figure 2 features a slightly updated version of the graph from the previous section, taking pulp action into account. Here, the story system is coupled (Dc) with the pulp and horror genres (contributing to some tiny degree to their condensation), as are the cognitive systems (without condensation), but the latter are also coupled with the fantasy role-playing game genre (Go). These connections are marked with double lines in the graph, meaning that the story system does not have a direct coupling with the fantasy genre; it only works through the cognitive systems, who can think about the *Call of Cthulhu* story while at the same time comparing it to a fantasy role-playing game.

The core mechanism for calibrating combat in the tradition of basic role-playing is the use of hit points, a mechanism borrowed from *Dungeons & Dragons* (which borrowed it from *Chainmail*, cf. Peterson 2012, 320–341). In *Dungeons & Dragons*, this resource is mostly derived from a character's level and class, while in *Call of Cthulhu*, it is derived from a character's constitution and size. When a character is hit by an attack, the weapon's damage is randomized and then subtracted from the target's hit points, after considering protection such as armor or cover. As soon as the hit points reach zero, the target is out, in most cases dead (Stafford and Willis 1981, 10).

Figure 2: Structurally Coupled Systems and Genres in a *Call of Cthulhu* Game (Version 2).



Such genre comparisons may not be explicitly verbalized, but they still generate communications in the story system, e.g., "I want to fire my shotgun and kill Great Cthulhu" (because in a pulp story or a fantasy role-playing game, you frequently attack huge monsters) and, subsequently, "This game is impossible! I died again!" (because in a pulp story or mainstream fantasy game, you do not die as easily once you have passed a certain level). Through (Bp), exclamations such as these trigger the game system to take action: it is also coupled with the rulebook (Ac), which has attack rules as well as advice on how a Keeper[1] should handle enemy strength (Petersen 1981, 70–72). However, there is no guarantee that the rules will be followed. A Keeper's course of action could be to say, "Look here, it says in the book that Cthulhu's stats are . . . ," but it could just as well be to fudge a roll or create a house rule on the spot. In any case, the game system will have some sort of reaction, and the game clearly benefits from being aware of genre collisions.

1 The Keeper in *Call of Cthulhu* is a "keeper of secrets"—what other games would call a Referee, Game Master, or Dungeon Master.

In *Call of Cthulhu*, hit points vary greatly between the many types of creatures, and this allows the characters—who are more often the academic type than the action-oriented type—to fight back. You can defend yourself against other humans, animals, and smaller mythical creatures, as they only have a few hit points. The larger Cthuloid creatures, on the other hand, have far too many hit points for this to be feasible, especially since they may also have regenerative abilities, armor, immunities, etc. For example, a player character has 11 hit points on average, while Great Cthulhu has over 150 hit points (Petersen 1981, 10, 37).

Because of the variations in hit points, encounters with the truly unknown are much more Cthuluesque than more mundane encounters, in the sense that the rational strategy is to let the character run from the horror, not to fight it. Frequently in the adventure texts—like in *Shadows of Yog Sothoth* (Carnahan et al. 1982, 2)—it is also mentioned that player-characters who fight against Cthulhu are very likely to die. The need for such remarks substantiates that in the early 1980s, it was quite common for players to choose fight instead of flight, even when their characters were pitted against larger opponents, and to sometimes be annoyed with the almost inevitable result.

In the section titled "Fantasy Worlds and the World of Daily Lives," Laycock draws on research on religion and social systems to show a duality in role-playing games, where they are reflections both of and on reality (2015, 186). On the one hand, they are products of their historical contexts, but on the other hand, they also allow for the participants to see the world in new light (186). The structural couplings between the cognitive system and the narrative system are interesting in this regard: what can the mythic creatures represent, consciously or subconsciously, for a participant? The features of the monsters, as they are represented in the narrative system, which is in turn penetrated and supported by the game mechanical system, form the contours of a space, to be filled in by a player's fears and needs. The unknown abilities of the monster, its overwhelming size, its life-changing effect on the protagonist, civilization at stake—when put together, these things have the potential of metaphorically representing perceived threats in the historical situation. For example, Great Cthulhu as presented in the *Shadows of Yog Sothoth* campaign is not only a representation of Lovecraft's monster. To a player infused by popular culture, he also has many of the qualities found in the distinctly nuclear-related Godzilla. But just like a direct fight against the looming Cold War missile arsenals or energy crisis recession is impossible or futile, so is the direct confrontation with the Great Old Ones. Their plans need to be thwarted, and the fight be brought to one against their lesser minions. This is how emulation in *Call of Cthulhu* and its re-combination of genre elements allows for the processing of the contemporary historic situation.

Call of Cthulhu quickly got the reputation as a "deadly" game, a notion which likely served just as much as promotion as a warning. Some players identify strongly with their characters and experience the game story through this focus. If the characters often die, such a player's experience of the game may be unsatisfactory. *Call of Cthulhu* solves this problem by making character generation quick and easy, and by pointing out that the game stories of the published material can be experienced through multiple characters and viewpoints. In addition to its affinity with the play to lose style, it is reminiscent of the Forge concepts of author vs. character stance that would emerge 20 years later

(Edwards 2001). You can see this starting with *Shadows of Yog Sothoth*, but it carries over into all the major *Call of Cthulhu* campaigns (see for example *Masks of Nyarlathotep*, Ditillio and Willis 1984, 5, 12).

6. THE HORROR! THE HORROR!

An additional and related problem follows from the collision between fantasy and horror and the influences from the pulp genre: in literary Lovecraftian horror, there are not that many different opponents

that the protagonists encounter and fight. Consequently, it is difficult to meet the players' expectations in this regard, when those are both influenced by games and media with a more diverse monster fauna, and may have a deeper need to fight back successfully, at some level. Again, this is explicitly mentioned in *Different Worlds* #19:

> I pored through the all the stories written by Lovecraft and a great number written by his imitators and picked out all the hideous abnormalities that seemed to be at all consistent from story to story. The total was surprisingly low, and I had to dredge up monsters from quite obscure stories and collaborations in order to have a respectable number of creatures to smite the players. (Petersen and Willis 1982, 9)
>
> In trying to make the game itself have the feel of a horror story, I first set up the monsters such that almost any single monster was more than a match for a single character, and some monsters were even beyond the capabilities of even a well-organized party. (Petersen and Willis 1982, 11)

As the quotes show, creatures had to be scavenged from a larger body of text than the stories that had been identified as being core to the game. But, in particular, it became clear that most combatants would actually have to be humans. In systems theoretical terms, the story system is cognitively dependent on its surroundings, and needs to establish a structural coupling to a genre where people can consistently serve as monsters in the game. In *Call of Cthulhu*, the choice falls upon colonial mystery.

This genre is very much present in Lovecraft's work, but in the game, the colonial aspects are enhanced and put in the foreground. Together with the pulp attitude towards fighting, this creates a different kind of horror than was likely intended. The expression "colonial horrors" usually refers to the *deeds* of the colonizers, not to their experiences or to the colonized. The most iconic example is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), in which the ivory trader Kurtz gradually turns from a naïve idealist into the epitome of a cruel and corrupt colonialist, ruthlessly using and abusing the African natives. As he dies on a steamer down the Congo, his famous last words are, "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad 1899, 86). Marlow, the story's narrator, interprets the utterance as referring to Kurtz's own crimes.

The average opponent in *Call of Cthulhu* is not a monster, but a cultist. And it is not just someone in a sect, but frequently a cult member of color, in a remote part of the world (from an American point of view). The racist and colonial aspects of Lovecraft's work are well known (see for example Kneale 2006), easy to see in the short story that gave the game *Call of Cthulhu* its name. In the short story, the culprit causing the death of the narrator's relative—thus initiating the story—is a "nautical-looking negro" (Lovecraft 2008, 202). The first Cthulhu statuette is found in the "dark cult" in the "blackest of the African voodoo circles" (208). The second trace mentioned in the narrative comes from "degenerate Esquimaux" (210) until, finally, the trend reaches a crescendo in the following quote:

> Examined at headquarters after a trip of intense strain and weariness, the prisoners all proved to be men of a very low, mixed-blooded, and mentally aberrant type. Most were seamen, and a sprinkling of negroes and mulattoes, largely West Indians or Brava Portuguese from the Cape Verde Islands, gave a colouring of voodooism to the heterogeneous cult. But before many questions were asked, it became manifest that something far deeper and older than negro fetishism was involved. Degraded and ignorant as they were, the creatures held with surprising consistency to the central idea of their loathsome faith. (Lovecraft 2008, 213)

In the above, the word "creatures" is combined with "loathsome"—a common combination in Lovecraft's fiction, also found just before the finale of the short story, where Cthulhu and his "hordes" sleep in R'lyeh, a city built by "loathsome shapes" (Lovecraft 2008, 222). This establishes a strong connection between the non-human Cthuloid monsters and people who are not white Christians.

Such blatant racism was never in the game *Call of Cthulhu*, but there are still places where colonial perspectives and othering are evident in the 1981 first edition:

> Example: Professor Anderson sees a swarthy man swagger down the street and into a bar. Anderson has an Anthropology skill of 75%, and succeeds on his skill roll, so he can tell that the character was a Dravidian Indian by ethnicity and probably a Hindu by religion. The professor then attempts his Anthropology roll a second time to make a prediction or deduction about that individual (Professor Anderson is allowed to do so because he once spent a semester in India observing the natives), and he can tell that the character observed is probably devout because of various caste marks, and that such an individual should not be going into a bar, as members of his sect are teetotalers. He can also tell that the scarf around the man's neck is a sign of the secret sect of Thuggee, a band of assassins. (Petersen 1981, 17)

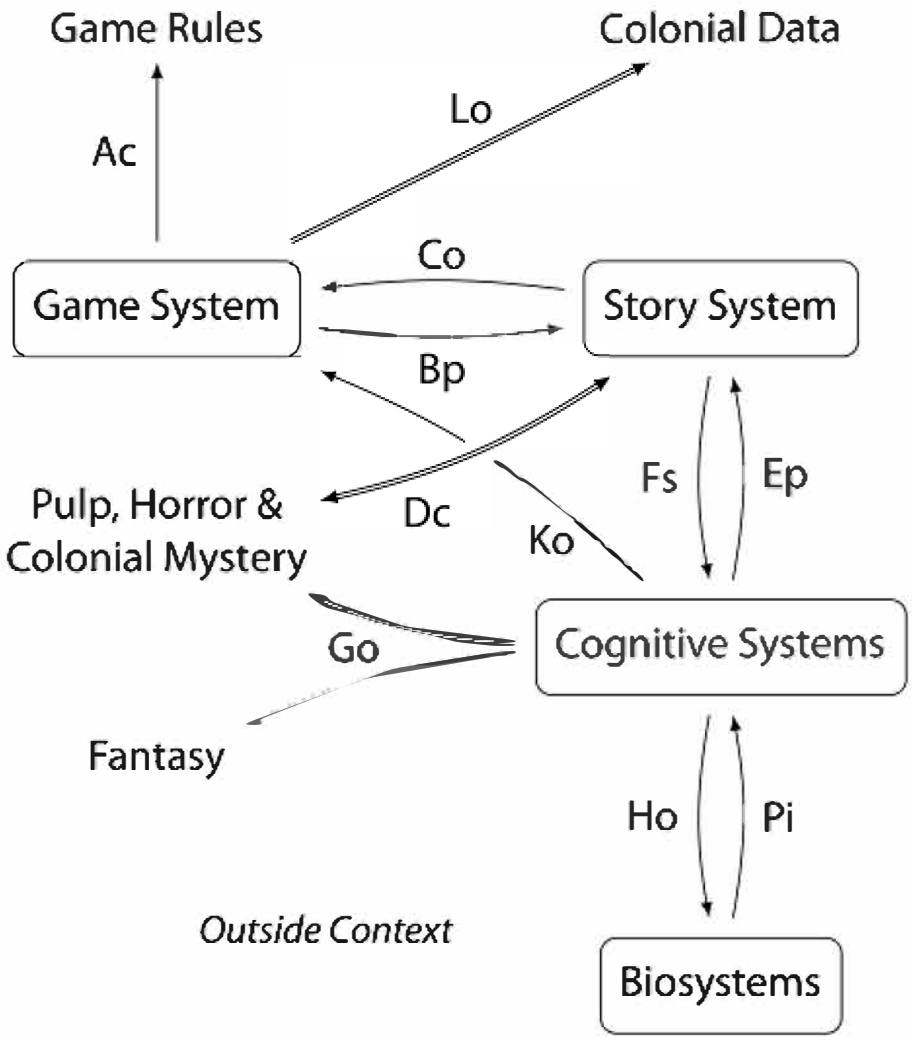
This quote is completely structured around a white, colonial gaze—or, in cybernetic terms—produces the object of observation in a narrative system governed by a colonial way of running the happens/happens not code. There is a professor bearing a Scandinavian name, who "spent a semester in India observing the natives." He is now watching a "swarthy" man who "swaggers" into a bar. Through his superior education, the professor can confirm the suspicions aroused by the combination of swaggering, the character's complexion, and the bar: it is a cult assassin up to no good.

The final version of our structural coupling graph can now be produced, as shown in Figure 3. It should again be noted that while the game and story systems are in a state of penetration (i.e. the story system is the game system's outside, as in (Bp)), the story system is structurally coupled to the cognitive systems (Fs), which in turn cannot escape their surroundings when making selections for their thoughts. The historical context in which a game takes place is ever present in this way, and can irritate the narrative system to produce a story with a strong colonial flavor—not just in its environments and presence of historical characters and events, but also in its perspectives. The racial tensions of the period leading up to the first edition of *Call of Cthulhu* need to be factored into the response aesthetic perspective on the game text. Regardless of authorial intent, it emerges as a non-innocent response-inviting structure in its historical context.

The above quoted paragraph stayed in the game in the second and third editions, but disappeared with the fourth in 1989 (Petersen et al. 1983; Petersen 1986; Petersen 1989). However, this does not mean that the colonial aspects of *Call of Cthulhu* can be dismissed as artifacts of a bygone era. The quote is a symptom of the game's inherent perspective, which is motivated not only by the imitation of Lovecraft's fiction, but also by ludic concerns. The story and game systems rely on player character agency and common adversaries, which are both qualities provided by the game's colonial setting. By enhancing the colonial aspects of Lovecraft's fiction and putting them in the foreground, *Call of Cthulhu* gains a number of ludic advantages, generated diegetically through the setting:

- The player-characters can have a lot of funds for hiring help and getting equipment in remote parts of the world.
- The player-characters can travel anywhere.
- The player-characters can be given access to most middle- and upper-class institutions.
- The player-characters speak English in the British Empire/Commonwealth era.
- Their skin color, social class, and (usually) Christian faith make them the norm;
- . . . and, consequently, others become *others*, beneath them in social hierarchy—observable, peculiar, and ultimately kill-able.

Figure 3: Structurally Coupled Systems and Genres in a *Call of Cthulhu* Game.



In the first edition material, these aspects are easiest to see in *Shadow of Yog Sothoth* and in the 1920s source booklet. The campaign follows the premise of the short story "Call of Cthulhu" very loosely and takes the player-characters to different American locations, but also to Scotland and to Easter Island (see the chapter introductions in Carnhan et al. 1982). All great *Call of Cthulhu* campaigns would later come to imitate and enhance the pattern of remote expeditions, and the above privileges are what makes this both diegetically and ludically possible. The source booklet's whole *raison d'être* is to facilitate this kind of play. It is structurally coupled to the game system (Lo) and contains things like

references to famous (mostly upper class) 1920s contemporaries, timetables for middle- and upper-class global travelling, and remote locations—culturally othered—that the characters can explore (Chodak et al. 1981, 18, 19). While an exceptional publication (in a role-playing game context) in its great attention to detail and historical accuracy, it is also a cornerstone in a colonial style of play.

Going back to the initial comparison between a colonial and a mythic perspective on the game stories produced by *Call of Cthulhu*, the "descent" into the unknown regions in the 1920s constitutes a mythical catabasis, in the sense that the characters gradually learn more about the Cthulhu Mythos and the reality of humanity's precarious situation and utter insignificance in the cosmos. But the colonial reading is just as important for the game, given the agency it gives the player-characters. It is also very much a design *choice*—part of the answer to Petersen's question about how to combine fantasy *Dungeons & Dragons* framework with literary horror. The difference between the two perspectives does not have to be that great, either. In *Heart of Darkness*, the colonial and the catabatic are united in Marlow's reflection on Kurtz's last word, and the two are also explicitly fused in the beginning of the novel:

> The best way I can explain it to you is by saying that, for a second or two, I felt as though, instead of going to the center of a continent, I were about to set off for the center of the earth. (Conrad 1899, 27).

Establishing a structural coupling (Dc) to the colonial mystery genre as per the above is both desirable and easy for the game and story systems, because they are connected to the cognitive systems of the participants. As remarked by Petersen (Petersen and Willis 1982, 12), the colonial era was not such a distant time for players in 1981. A participant in his mid-twenties (a highly likely case for this game), would have met, talked to, and, in many cases, grown up with people born around the turn of the century, who remembered the Roaring '20s first hand. Similarly, many of the technological concepts that are quaint or distant today—such as wired phones, transistor radios, mechanical typewriters, and completely analogue communications—were everyday occurrences only starting to disappear with the home computer revolution. For the implied participant, the colonial era had a nostalgic potential. It offered an escape from the rapid technological changes and general fascination with electronic devices, cheap plastic and digital displays in the early 1980s. It also offered an escape from racial tension—albeit to a point in history where white rulership was undisputed.

7. CONCLUSION

The structural part of the analysis result can be seen in Figure 3. The division into subsystems and the different kinds of structural couplings between them, to the surrounding environment and to genres, provide a detailed map of the composite genre emulation in the first edition of *Call of Cthulhu*. As is the core idea in response aesthetics, this structure also invites response, and it implies a group of players in the historical context of the game. The direct interface for participation is to be found in the (condensated) Keeper and player roles of the narrative system, but the cognitive systems using it are also dependent on things outside the game—such as the political, economic, and religions systems; their backgrounds and ethnicity; their social situations, etc. Any actual response to the response inviting mechanisms and structures, will entail selections from these surroundings. In other words, the analysis of a space is inevitably also a description of potential, an indication of things that might fit in it.

Laycock's duality, where a game both reflects and sheds new light on reality, depends upon this

quality. The composite genre emulation in *Call of Cthulhu* allowed the players to process the changes and dangers of the early 1980s. The investigator facing the incomprehensible age, vastness, and evil of the Cthulhu mythos is analogous to the player facing the risk of nuclear war, also unfathomable in its consequences. But instead of succumbing to depression in the real world, the player could watch his investigator go mad (and recover). Instead of getting lost looking for a way to fight the more diffuse threats in the real world, such as perceived challenges to the American way of life, the player could identify with an investigator who fires away at distinct and very tangible enemies. Instead of dealing with the technological revolution, economic recession and social and ethnic divides in the 1980s, the player could dream away to the enormous privileges of being a white ruler of the world in the colonial era.

Core to Reaganite entertainment, the successful campaign where the characters thwart the Elder Gods is a restoration of order and, ultimately, the maintenance of status quo. However, this interpretation of *Call of Cthulhu* as a work inviting a conservative response can be moderated to some degree. The game's more serious air makes it appear less Reaganite than *The Adventures of Indiana Jones Role-Playing Game*, released just a few years later (Cook 1984). The publication context described in the background also affords a countercultural aspect, where the characters' dealings with religious cults highlight the cult-like nature of a predominantly Christian culture starting to target role-players. Similarly, while the racial injustices of the game world are exploited ludically, the accentuation of white privilege also has the potential to bring this topic to the foreground of the players' critical attention, if it was not there before.

In this double-edged understanding of escapism, the first edition of *Call of Cthulhu* can be seen as a colonial fantasy answering a mix of player needs. This is possible mainly due to the three most prominent features of the game—sanity, alien encounters, and remote expeditions—all produced through genre tensions rather than a singular horror focus. By selecting genre elements from fantasy role-playing Lovecraftian horror, pulp fiction, detective stories and colonial mystery, and then recombining these elements so that they end up working differently and together, emulation not only replicates a lot of the functions these genres fill, but also gives them new affordances. The subtitle "Fantasy Role-playing in the Worlds of H.P. Lovecraft" means that the fantasy game genre can be used for modern horror, but also that the cosmic horror genre gets a cure for madness and the possibility of a few happy endings. The supportive genres also appear changed in the emulated genre composition. The detective story becomes distinctly catabatic. While pulp remains largely the same, there is an accentuated use of therapeutic violence, arguably giving it greater depth. The colonial mystery genre is represented in the game medium, where it yields very tangible ludic advantages—while also staying deeply problematic.

In present day editions of *Call of Cthulhu*, the inequalities of the 1920s era have been toned down, and the most blatant examples of the colonial gaze have been removed. But the colonial era remains the game's default, and the iconic campaigns remain popular: you still fight cultists of color from remote parts of the world. The moderated sanity mechanism and the exaggerated weapon focus (relative to Lovecraft) also remain. Perhaps the more interesting question is not how *Call of Cthulhu* has been adapted to our time, but how our time relates to the early 1980s.

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