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## FROM DISCOURSE TO MECHANICS: A FIVE-MARKEDNESS FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYZING LOVECRAFTIAN HORROR IN DIGITAL GAMES

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*The emergence of digital platforms of games marketed as "Lovecraftian" raises a question that has not yet been systematically addressed in academic discourse: how does a game that truly immerses the player in the world of Lovecraftian horror differ from one that merely borrows its visual elements? This article presents an analytical model based on a corpus analysis of three of Lovecraft's works – "The Dunwich Horror," "The Colour Out of Space," and "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" – which identifies five categories of markedness that structure the discourse surrounding Lovecraftian horror: time, fear, revulsion, strangeness/unnaturalness, and knowledge/mystery. Each of these categories is subsequently matched with its potential gaming counterpart in various digital games. The analysis reveals a clear hierarchy of transmedial convertibility: markedness associated with fear and time is converted into game mechanics with high fidelity, while revulsion is realised only partially, whilst strangeness and knowledge/mystery inherently resist conversion – the former due to the Euclidean constraints of modern game engines, and the latter due to the fundamental role of knowledge as a reward in game design. Accordingly, a four-level typology of discursive fidelity is proposed: full realisation, partial realisation, discursive enclave and aesthetic borrowing.*

**Keywords:** Lovecraftian horror, corpus linguistics, video games, adaptation studies, horror discourse.

**Ісаков А. П. Від дискурсу до механіки: п'ятизначкова структура для аналізу лавкрафтівського жаху в цифрових іграх**

*Поява на цифрових платформах ігор, що позиціонуються як "лавкрафтівські", порушує питання, яке в академічному дискурсі ще не розглядалося систематично: чим відрізняється гра, що справді занурює гравця у світ лавкрафтівського жаху, від тієї, що лише запозичує його візуальні елементи? Ця стаття представляє аналітичну модель, засновану на корпусному аналізі трьох творів Лавкрафта – "The Dunwich Horror," "The Colour Out of Space," та "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" – яка окреслює п'ять категорій маркованості, що структурують дискурс навколо лавкрафтівського*

*жаху: час, страх, огида, дивність/неприродність та знання/таємниця. Кожна з цих категорій згодом зіставляється з її можливим ігровим аналогом у різних цифрових іграх. Аналіз виявляє чітку ієрархію трансмедіальної конвертованості: маркованість, пов'язана зі страхом і часом, перетворюється на ігрову механіку з високою вірністю, огида реалізується частково, тоді як дивність та знання/таємниця за своєю суттю чинять опір перетворенню – перше через евклідові обмеження сучасних ігрових двигунів, а друге – через фундаментальну роль знання як винагороди в ігровому дизайні. Відповідно, пропонується чотирирівнева типологія дискурсивної вірності: повна реалізація, часткова реалізація, дискурсивна анклава та естетичне запозичення.*

**Ключові слова:** жахи у стилі Лавкрафта, корпусна лінгвістика, відеоігри, дослідження адаптацій, дискурс жахів.

## Introduction

As of 2023, Valve's Steam platform features over 829 games tagged "Lovecraftian" by the user community (Arasu, 2023, p. 690) – this category encompasses survival horror, roguelike, role-playing games, fishing simulators and dating simulators. In 2014, Steam officially recognised "Lovecraftian" as a permanent genre category, prioritising it over similar terms such as "space horror" or "supernatural horror", and, notably, retaining it where other tags associated with intellectual property had been removed (Arasu, 2023, p. 692). The scale and heterogeneity of this corpus highlight what neither developers nor critics have fully clarified: what does it actually mean for a game to be "Lovecraftian", rather than merely appearing to be so?

In existing academic research, this issue has been examined from several fruitful but ultimately incomplete perspectives. Garrad (2021) analyses the structural contradiction between Lovecraft's "fictions of defeat" and the logic of victory conditions that underpin game design, arguing that successful adaptations require a radical rethinking of the concept of victory. Haar (2023, p. 288) catalogues six narrative design challenges arising from the incompatibility between game conventions and those of the cosmic horror genre, identifying "tyranny of Euclidean space in contemporary game engines" as perhaps the most complex problem. Arasu (2023), drawing on reception theory, explores the practical significance of the "Lovecraftian" tag used by Steam users and finds that the mechanics of reason, tentacularity and parody are its most consistent features. Dodd (2021) examines objects and artefacts as carriers of Lovecraftian discourse in games, introducing the term "narrative archaeology" to describe Bloodborne's (FromSoftware, 2015) approach to conveying mystical knowledge through item descriptions. None of these studies provides a framework derived from the linguistic and thematic properties of the source texts themselves – one capable of determining not only whether a game

appears "Lovecraftian", but also which aspects of the discourse it successfully conveys, which it does not, and why.

This article proposes such a conceptual model. Based on an analysis of a corpus comprising three selected works by Lovecraft, five categories of expression have been identified that constitute the discursive architecture of "Lovecraftian" horror: time, fear, disgust, strangeness, and knowledge/mystery. Each category is compared with its potential gaming equivalents across a diverse range of games, the depth of each transmedia adaptation is assessed, and a typology is proposed that moves beyond the binary opposition of "Lovecraftian" versus "non-Lovecraftian" towards a more nuanced vocabulary for the field. The analysis confirms two main theses: certain aspects of Lovecraftian discourse are relatively easy to translate into game mechanics, whilst others are inherently resistant to adaptation; and this resistance is structurally determined, rather than linked to design flaws.

### **Methodological notes**

Five types of markedness: the discursive paradigm. The concept of markedness, borrowed from structural linguistics, refers to elements of the system that carry an additional, foregrounded meaning compared to the unmarked standard. In literary discourse analysis, markedness examines how authors systematically favour certain lexical, thematic and structural configurations to create characteristic aesthetic effects. Applied to a corpus of texts, this approach reveals patterns that define an author's stylistic signature – patterns which, in Lovecraft's case, are remarkably consistent across works spanning different years and circumstances.

An analysis of the corpus of three selected works – conducted through a careful examination of word and phrase frequencies and concordance patterns – reveals five categories of markedness which, together, constitute Lovecraft's discourse of horror. These categories are not independent; they form a system in which each reinforces the others. Understanding them as a system, rather than as a list of isolated features, is crucial for assessing their transmedia realisation. A brief description of each is provided below.

The distinctiveness of the temporal dimension is revealed through a constant lexical emphasis on antiquity and profound temporal depth. Frequently used markers – "old", "ancient", "immemorial", "archaic", "forgotten" – function not merely as descriptive terms, but as epistemological signals: that which is old is at once alien, pre-human, and threatens to return. Lovecraft's plots are structurally built around the investigation of past events, so that the present is always already saturated with the

past (Garrad, 2021, p. 22). Horror is not what is approaching; it is what has always been here. As Lovecraft (1927/2009) himself asserted in "Supernatural Horror in Literature", the most potent fear stems from the combination of the unknown with the immeasurably ancient.

The intensity of fear in Lovecraft's texts functions not as an isolated instance but as an ontological state. Analysis of the corpus reveals a consistent lexicon of involuntary psychological reactions – trembling, madness, hysteria, fainting – which cannot be overcome by action. This sharply distinguishes Lovecraftian fear from the fear found in Gothic horror, where confronting the threat remains at least conceivable. In Arasu's (2023, p. 693) words, this is "cosmic fear" – a reaction to "contact with unknown realms and forces" that renders any rational resolution of the situation entirely impossible. The "fight or flight" impulse, which kicks in within the Lovecraftian context, simply has nowhere to go.

The intensity of the feeling of revulsion is conveyed through detailed descriptions of physical decay, bodily degeneration and the blurring of the boundaries between the human and the non-human. The most vivid example of this is the story "The Shadow over Innsmouth": degenerate inhabitants, hybrid "Deep Ones", ruinous architecture and, ultimately, the gradual transformation of the protagonist himself – all serve to mobilise revulsion as an epistemological tool. In Lovecraft, the repulsive is always also a revelation – a sign of cosmic contamination that has disrupted the categories by which the human world maintains its integrity. Lovecraftian horror arises precisely from the collapse of taxonomic systems: clean/unclean, human/non-human, living/dead, which normally make the world habitable.

The markedness of strangeness encompasses a cluster of terms – "strange," "queer," "odd," "peculiar," "uncanny" – which do not simply serve a descriptive function, but serve as systematic indicators of ontological instability, emerging at those moments when the narrative system of cause-and-effect relationships begins to break down. Haar (2023, p. 278) defines this as a central feature of Lovecraft's cosmos: "things are not as they seem, and underneath lies a deeper and more terrible reality". Importantly, this strangeness is often expressed through spatial and geometric language – the non-Euclidean architecture of R'lyeh, described in "The Call of Cthulhu" as "anomalous, non-Euclidean, and hideously reminiscent of spheres and dimensions different from our own" which suggests that strangeness, at the deepest level, is a challenge to spatial cognition itself.

The markedness of knowledge/mystery is perhaps the most structurally distinctive of the five. Corpus analysis detects a high-frequency cluster of epistemic

terms – "curious," "unknown," "unseen," "forbidden," "nameless," "mad" – which reflect a consistent trajectory: curiosity leads to inquiry, inquiry leads to forbidden knowledge, and forbidden knowledge leads to madness or death. The word "know" occurs 125 times in the three selected works, and its usage consistently marks moments of destabilisation rather than reinforcement. Forbidden books, mysterious manuscripts, and esoteric rituals are not instruments of power but factors of destruction – a trajectory that overturns the standard narrative logic, in which knowledge enables action and problem-solving.

These five categories reinforce one another at every level. Time and knowledge are structurally intertwined: the ancient past is also a repository of what ought not to be known, and the exploration of the past is the primary means by which characters encounter that which destroys them. Knowledge and fear mutually reinforce one another: it is the very acquisition of forbidden knowledge that gives rise to the deepest Lovecraftian horror, as it exposes the cosmic insignificance of human existence. Fear and revulsion coexist in descriptions of physical contact with cosmic contamination. The uncanny acts as a mediator between all four, marking the boundary beyond which ordinary cognitive frameworks cease to function. The most authentic Lovecraftian games, as the following analysis shows, are those in which several categories of the uncanny are simultaneously activated, mutually reinforcing one another.

## **Results and Discussion**

Reflecting the five levels of marking in game mechanics: time and the archaeology of the past. Translating temporal marking into game mechanics faces a structural problem: games place players in an experiential present. The past must be actively recreated by players, rather than passively perceived as a narrative burden. However, this is not an insurmountable obstacle – in fact, it is a moment in which game mechanics can create a richer, Lovecraftian-style immersive analogue of temporal experience than mere prose narrative.

The most direct gaming equivalent is the investigation or archaeological search mechanic, in which players reconstruct past events based on fragmentary evidence. This is well illustrated by the game *The Sinking City* (Frogwares, 2019): the protagonist must personally visit archives, peruse newspapers and police reports, and visit psychiatric hospitals to piece together a story that is not only hidden but could also cause real harm to those who discover it. *Mind Palace* – in which the player collects fragments of documents to draw conclusions – is a procedural embodiment

of an epistemic situation in the spirit of Lovecraft, where every archival discovery deepens rather than dispels the sense of fear (Read, 2023). *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware, 2015) achieves temporal expressiveness through what Dodd (2021, p. 10) calls "narrative archaeology": the game's story is conveyed primarily through descriptions of objects that must be read, compared and interpreted to construct a coherent picture of the world. Director Hidetaka Miyazaki described the game as depicting "a world like that which is gradually being eroded away by Cthulhu-style horror" (Dodd, 2021, p. 16), and this temporal complexity is embedded not only in the game's aesthetics but also in its mechanics. *Darkest Dungeon* (Red Hook Studios, 2016) takes temporal marking to another level: the narrator presents each expedition as a descent into something old and wrong, something that should have remained buried, whilst the manor – inherited, decayed, built upon the site of something older and worse – embodies the Lovecraftian premise that the present is always already tainted by a turbulent past. Bourassa noted that his exposure to Lovecraft's audiobooks, narrated by Wayne June, years before the game's development, sowed the seeds for this approach (Sigman & Bourassa, 2015). The Dunwich Building location in *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008) offers a striking peripheral example: a buried cult sanctuary and evidence of rituals that predate the game's post-apocalyptic setting by centuries create an undeniable sense of temporal marking – yet this content exists as an enclave within the protagonist's journey, which ultimately neutralises its impact.

Of the five categories of expressiveness, "time" demonstrates a high degree of transmedial fidelity, combined with investigative mechanisms that transform historical reconstruction into an active process with a chain of consequences. The Lovecraftian past, in Garrad's (2021) words, is one in which "plots are characterised by investigation of prior events, and the consequences of those investigations becoming intertwined with the further consequences of investigation," and games that incorporate this recursion into their mechanics most fully realise this dimension of discourse.

Fear and the collapse of subjectivity. Fear has received the most attention in academic research on Lovecraftian games (Arasu, 2023, pp. 696–697), and it is for this category that the most sophisticated game equivalents have been developed. This is partly because fear is the most directly conveyable of the five dimensions – it can be created through sound design, visual effects and the pace of encounters, regardless of deeper thematic content. However, the most important are those implementations

that manage to convey Lovecraftian fear itself: not the shock of a sudden fright, but a prolonged, ontological dread of a being that is simply impossible to defeat.

The core mechanic of this adaptation is the sanity meter, which originated in Sandy Petersen's tabletop role-playing game *Call of Cthulhu* (1981) and has since been adapted and refined in numerous video games (Arasu, 2023, pp. 696). *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (Frictional Games, 2010) is the most consistent embodiment of this mechanic. The game is entirely devoid of combat, rendering the player unable to resist the creatures pursuing them – this is a direct procedural analogue of Lovecraft's state of radical vulnerability. Sanity levels decrease in the dark and when approaching the supernatural; this decline causes visual distortions, auditory hallucinations and increased motor disturbances. The game's mechanics at the player's experience level emphasise precisely that "insignificance and powerlessness on a cosmic scale" which Haar (2023, p. 278) identifies as central to cosmic horror. *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (Silicon Knights, 2002) extends the mechanics of sanity into a realm that no game before or since has explored with such ambition: its effects blur the boundary between the diegetic world and the player's own reality. The effects include simulating the deletion of saved game files, simulating the "blue screen of death", displaying a fake welcome message stating that the game is a demo version, and simulating the television switching off (Silicon Knights, 2002). As Dodd (2021, p. 14) notes, such "sensibility" mechanisms "take control of objects away from the player," temporarily breaking down the protective distance between the observer and the observed object. Nintendo patented *Sanity System* in 2002; the patent expired in 2021, opening up scope for design and expanded application (Read, 2023). The Insight mechanic in *Bloodborne* offers a formally elegant variant: accumulated supernatural knowledge increases the player's vulnerability to damage from madness, whilst revealing entities and details that were previously invisible – encoding Lovecraft's equation that more knowledge breeds more fear, not less.

An important caveat must be applied to all these interpretations. Dodd notes that the mechanics of reason are "an unreliable basis for analysing non-human identity" (Dodd, 2021, p. 14), since every game ultimately faces the challenge of depicting the indescribable – and, in depicting it, risks domesticating it. The extent to which the mechanics of sanity generate genuine Lovecraftian horror depends largely on whether the source of this horror is ever fully represented, or remains on the edge of representation. *The Affliction system* (Darkest Dungeon Red Hook Studios, 2016) approaches this problem from an interesting angle. The developers deliberately avoided the "madness" model typical of Lovecraftian games: "Although Lovecraft

clearly influences us in terms of tone, we never actually viewed things through the strict "madness" filter applied by many games in the Call of Cthulhu series" (Sigman & Bourassa, 2015). Instead, the system models a nuanced human response to prolonged stress – characters become selfish, paranoid, hopeless and aggressive. Although the game's vocabulary is not so directly linked to Lovecraft's work, it arguably reflects Lovecraft's central idea more accurately: cosmic horror destroys not through sudden shock, but through accumulated, overwhelming psychological pressure (Sigman & Bourassa, 2015).

Of the five categories of expressiveness, fear demonstrates the highest level of cross-media fidelity. The risk is real – reducing fear to a controllable resource weakens the effect – but it is precisely those implementations that most consistently deprive the player of any means of overcoming it that most faithfully recreate the "Lovecraftian state".

Disgust and the limits of visibility. Translating disgust into visual form may seem straightforward: games are a visual medium, and the grotesque images of Lovecraftian horror – hybrid bodies, physical decay, biological contamination – can be reproduced with considerable accuracy using modern graphics technology. However, structural tension complicates this apparent advantage. Lovecraft's texts create an effect of horror primarily through indirection: the horrific object is approached through description, hesitation, and the narrator's inability to fully articulate what has been seen. A complete visual realisation risks what Arasu (2023, p. 699) defines as "monstrous containment through commodification" – the reduction of cosmic horror to a recognisable visual object that can be catalogued, targeted and defeated.

The game *Scorn* (Ebb Software, 2022) represents the most radical attempt to portray revulsion as a state of the environment rather than a localised object. Its world is entirely constructed from organic, biomechanical material – channels of calcified internal organs, mechanisms of fused bones and muscles, landscapes of a frozen biological catastrophe. There are no "monsters" in the traditional sense here, as the distinction between environment and entity has been systematically blurred, which directly corresponds to Lovecraft's logic, according to which horror is cosmic rather than concrete. *Bloodborne* achieves this expressiveness through its transformation mechanics: the game's central storyline involves the gradual transformation of Yharnam's population into beasts, and many of the most unsettling encounters occur with creatures that are recognisably human in origin but are in a state of significant biological decay. The horror born of revulsion is inextricably linked here to the

horror of realisation – to understand what these creatures are is to realise what the player's own character might become. In *Dead Space* (Visceral Games, 2008), revulsion is embodied through the design of the Necromorphs – grotesquely mutated human corpses, whose form is determined by the physics of violent rearrangement rather than any evolutionary logic. The third game expands this into a cosmic revelation, establishing that the *Marker artefacts* (Visceral Games, 2008), which are the driving force behind the series' horror, are the instruments of an ancient, indifferent intelligence that predates human civilisation by millions of years – integrating revulsion with the weight of time and knowledge.

However, there is one constant limitation. When game objects, particularly encounters with monsters, are reduced to what Dodd (2021, p. 15) calls "commodified consumables with marketised value", the effect of repulsion is weakened, as such an encounter becomes a transaction rather than a confrontation with the fundamentally alien. Disgust achieves moderate transmedia fidelity; its most successful embodiments distribute disgust across the entire environment rather than localising it to specific objects, and maintain indirectness rather than full visibility.

The strangeness and tyranny of Euclidean space. Strangeness is technically the most complex of the five categories of markedness to implement in games. As Haar (2023, p. 288) rightly notes, "the tyranny of Euclidean space in contemporary game engines is perhaps the biggest obstacle to anyone making Lovecraftian games. Game engines are specifically designed to model a comprehensible world". Lovecraftian strangeness is, in essence, a property of space, geometry and causal structure – an experience of a world in which the usual coordinates of perception and logic no longer apply. Implementing this in an environment whose technical infrastructure demands consistent geometry, reliable physics and predictable cause-and-effect relationships requires either circumventing these limitations through narrative means, or directly utilising the interaction between the game environment and the player.

*Eternal Darkness* (Silicon Knights, 2002) achieves the most radical realisation possible within the constraints of modern technology precisely because it completely bypasses the game world and influences the player's interaction with the game system. The effects described above that affect the psyche – false glitches, simulated memory erasure, the television switching off – create a sense of strangeness not by altering the diegetic world, but by undermining the reliability of the player's own interface. Formally, this is analogous to Lovecraft's textual strategy, which consists of undermining the reliability of the narrator's perception: in both cases, it is the medium of transmission that becomes the site of ontological instability. *Gray Dawn*

(Interactive Stone, 2018) employs a similar strategy through an unreliable visual narrative: the player experiences events that later turn out to be hallucinations, and the game returns them to a previous point without clearly indicating what was real – procedurally embodying Lovecraft’s narrator trope, who, as Haar (Haahr, 2023, p. 278) notes, must distance themselves from the experience through negation. The Insight mechanic in *Bloodborne* addresses the theme of the uncanny in its characteristic indirect manner: the creatures of Amygdala clinging to the spires of Yharnam are invisible to a character with a low "Intuition" level and become visible as it accumulates (FromSoftware, 2015). Reality itself is multi-layered; ordinary perception omits most of what exists – this is a direct in-game translation of Lovecraft’s premise that "the thin veil of human sense-making through which we ordinarily perceive the world is inevitably destroyed through a confrontation with a deep and terrible truth" (Haahr, 2023, p. 276).

*Skyrim: Dragonborn* (Bethesda, 2012) deserves a mention as an example of thematic realisation without mechanical support. The Apocrypha – the extra-dimensional library of Hermeus Mora – extends in directions that are impossible from a dimensional perspective, and Mora himself embodies cosmic indifference with remarkable precision: he is a being entirely devoid of moral orientation, interested in knowledge and in the player solely as a means of acquiring it. The thematic content is Lovecraftian; the mechanics are not. The player retains complete freedom of action, draws strength from the encounter rather than losing it, and never experiences the uncertainty of perception which, on a mechanical level, constitutes Lovecraftian strangeness.

Of the five categories, the bizarre achieves the lowest level of transmedia fidelity. The only consistently effective solution is to utilise the contractual relationship between the game and the player – by subverting the player’s expectations regarding what constitutes reliable behaviour of the game system – and this is a seriously under-explored area of design.

Knowledge/mystery and the paradox of progress. The translation of the "knowledge/mystery" trope creates a paradox that touches upon the very essence of what games are. Games are, in essence, learning systems: they reward players for acquiring knowledge, developing skills and gaining understanding (Haahr, 2023, p. 284). This logic is not secondary – it is constitutive of this medium. Lovecraftian knowledge operates according to a completely opposite logic: the acquisition of forbidden knowledge is a condition for the protagonist’s destruction. A game that fully adhered to this principle would punish players for progress, reward ignorance,

and inevitably lead to an ending in which the player's character is destroyed by the very information that brought them there. As Haar (2023, p. 283) notes, the most effective approach is to "decouple narrative defeat from gameplay victory" – to allow the player to experience the satisfaction of completing a mechanical challenge, whilst simultaneously experiencing the narrative consequences of that completion as destruction.

*Bloodborne* (FromSoftware, 2015) offers the most perfect embodiment of this paradox. Insight embodies the destructive power of cosmic knowledge directly within the game's mechanics: acquiring it increases vulnerability to madness, reveals previously hidden threats, and gradually transports the player from the familiar Gothic horror of the game's opening hours to its later sections, which are openly inspired by Lovecraft's work. As Dodd (2021, p. 17) argues, the player who seeks knowledge most thoroughly – by reading the description of every item and exploring every optional location – achieves the fullest understanding of the game's cosmic horror. However, this understanding is in itself a revelation of human insignificance. The game's secret third ending, in which the player's character becomes an infant of the Great One, can only be unlocked through maximum engagement with the mechanics of knowledge acquisition; its essence lies in the dissolution of human identity. In the game *Call of Cthulhu* (Cyanide, 2018) implements a partial version of this inversion: the player's mental health level, which is affected by contact with cosmic knowledge, determines which dialogue options and actions become available – this is a mechanical embodiment of the trajectory of forbidden knowledge, albeit one that does not go so far as to make the knowledge truly self-destructive. Knowledge of the Markers in *Dead Space* (Visceral Games, 2008) functions similarly: characters who interact most deeply with the Markers gradually lose touch with reality, and the series' plot demonstrates that understanding the Markers' purpose is not a path to defeating them, but to being consumed by them.

The side storylines in *Mass Effect* (BioWare, 2012) are instructive precisely because of their structural incompatibility. The *Leviathan* expansion (BioWare, 2012) introduces beings whose true nature, when revealed, retroactively renders the entire history of the universe alien and horrific – thereby establishing precisely that "denied primacy" of humanity which Haar (2023, p. 277) identifies as the central theme of cosmic horror. However, the player receives this knowledge as a resource for the series' final conflict. Knowledge destroys no one; it empowers. Lovecraftian content exists as a discursive enclave within the structure of the hero's journey, neutralising its consequences – a pattern repeated in *Dishonoured*, where the Outsider's character

carries the thematic content of knowledge/mystery, but his gifts transform the cosmic encounter into a fantasy of power rather than a breakdown of the self.

The expressiveness of knowledge/mystery achieves moderate to low transmedial fidelity, limited by the fundamental incompatibility between Lovecraftian logic of destructive knowledge and the logic of game design, which rewards the acquisition of knowledge. The most successful implementations make the consequences of acquiring knowledge progressively more valuable.

A typology of discursive fidelity. The analysis reveals a clear hierarchy of transmedia adaptability. Fear and time are transformed into game mechanics with considerable fidelity, underpinned by established design patterns – sanity systems, investigation boards, and narrative through the environment – whose formal properties naturally align with the corresponding Lovecraftian discourse. Loathing achieves moderate fidelity, most successfully when it is distributed throughout the environment rather than concentrated on specific hostile objects. Strangeness and knowledge/mystery exhibit the greatest structural resistance: the former due to the Euclidean constraints of game engines, the latter due to the constitutive role of knowledge as a reward within the logic of game design. This hierarchy explains (Haahr, 2023, p. 277), at a structural level, a pattern empirically observed in existing academic research: most Lovecraftian games achieve a superficial, rather than a deep, discursive engagement with the source material.

On this basis, a four-level typology of discursive fidelity is proposed.

Type I – full discursive realisation – describes games in which three or more categories of markedness are realised through integrated mechanical and narrative means that mutually reinforce rather than contradict one another. *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware, 2015) realises time (through narrative archaeology and historical layering), fear (through the Insight mechanic and the gradual revelation of cosmic horror), disgust (through the aesthetics of transformation and the design of bodily horror) and knowledge/mystery (through the Insight paradox). *Darkest Dungeon* (Red Hook Studios, 2016) embodies time (through the structure of the ancestral estate and the descent into deep dungeons), fear (through the "Affliction" system) and disgust (through the Gothic aesthetics of decay and corruption). *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (Frictional Games, 2010) embodies fear (through complex vulnerability mechanics) and strangeness (through the unreliability of the environment and the absence of combat). *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (Silicon Knights, 2002) embodies time (through a historical structure spanning two millennia with twelve characters), fear and strangeness (through mind-disturbing effects that break the

fourth wall) and knowledge/mystery (through the gradual revelation of ancient entities and their influence on human history).

Type II – partial implementation – describes games in which one or two categories of expressiveness are deeply realised, whilst others remain at an aesthetic level. In the game *Scorn* (Ebb Software, 2022), a deep realisation of revulsion is achieved, but there is minimal interaction with other categories. *Dead Space* (Visceral Games, 2008) realises time and knowledge/mystery through its Marker mythology, whilst the action mechanics largely neutralise fear as a vulnerability in the Lovecraftian spirit. *The Sinking City* (Frogwares, 2019) realises time and fear with considerable precision through its investigation mechanics and mental health system, whilst the combat mechanics partially undermine these achievements.

Type III – discursive enclaves – describes games in which Lovecraftian discourse is present in specific, identifiable elements – DLC content, individual story arcs, specific locations – within a broader framework that is structurally incompatible with Lovecraftian horror. The *Mass Effect: Leviathan* (BioWare, 2012) DLC realises knowledge/mystery through the revelations of the Leviathans, but embeds this within the structure of the hero's journey. The *Skyrim: Dragonborn* (Bethesda, 2012) DLC realises time and knowledge/mystery thematically through the Apocrypha and Hermea Mora, without mechanical support. "Dishonoured" realises aspects of strangeness and knowledge/mystery through the Outsider, transforming its power into the player's action. Dunwich House in *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008) realises time and strangeness within the broader framework of a post-apocalyptic adventure.

Type IV – aesthetic borrowing – describes games that utilise a Lovecraftian visual lexicon – tentacled monsters, ancient ruins, forbidden tomes – without resorting to any of the five categories of thematic or mechanical marking. These include action RPGs where tentacled enemies can be defeated through skilful combat, or games in which ancient gods are the targets of the player's violence. These games are "Lovecraftian" in the sense that they utilise the iconography of the myths, but do not replicate their discourse.

This typology clarifies the phenomenon that Arasu (2023, p. 690) identifies in his analysis of tagging on Steam: the label "Lovecraftian" is applied to a wide range of games that have very different relationships with the original discourse. One methodologically significant case deserves a separate comment. *Darkwood* (Acid Wizard Studio, 2017), which features in critical lists of "Lovecraftian" games (Read, 2023), was developed by creators who explicitly stated that they had never read

Lovecraft (Read, 2023). Nevertheless, the game achieves Type I realisation in several categories of markedness: its temporal structure of the spread of an ancient infection from below, the mechanics of vulnerability, and the systematic decay of the environment function discursively, not merely aesthetically. This suggests that the five categories of labelling have attained a certain level of transmedial autonomy – they circulate within the cultural sphere as inherited narrative conventions that can be reproduced without direct reference to the original source, and which the audience recognises as "Lovecraftian" even in the absence of the author's original intent. This aligns with Arasu's (2023, p. 692) observation that the "Lovecraftian" tag on Steam reflects community perception rather than the author's intent.

### **Conclusions and prospects**

The five-level system of marking–time, fear, horror, strangeness and knowledge/mystery is employed as an analytical tool for assessing the discursive fidelity of games in the "Lovecraftian" horror genre. This system makes two main contributions: firstly, a hierarchy of transmedial convertibility, where fear and time are most easily translated into game mechanics, whilst strangeness and knowledge/mystery are the most resistant due to structural factors; secondly, a four-level typology – full realisation, partial realisation, discursive enclave and aesthetic borrowing – which allows for a more precise distinction between degrees of Lovecraftian engagement.

For academic research, this conceptual model opens up promising avenues of inquiry. Studies of player perception could investigate whether the subjective experience of "Lovecraftian" horror correlates with the number of categories of markedness mechanically implemented in the game, or whether certain categories are particularly salient to players' perceptions. Narrative studies could examine the relationship between the implementation of markedness and the problem of agency, which Garrad identifies as central to the challenge of adaptation (Garrad, 2021, p. 24). Comparative media studies could extend this conceptual framework to cinema, graphic novels or tabletop role-playing games to test whether the hierarchy of convertibility holds under different media constraints.

In the field of game design, the most significant yet under-researched areas are wonder and knowledge/mystery. The expiry of Nintendo's patent on the Sanity System in 2021 (Read, 2023) opens up new opportunities for innovation that have been largely inaccessible for two decades. The knowledge/mystery paradox – the design of games that reward ignorance rather than knowledge – remains one of the

most conceptually challenging problems in Lovecraftian game design, and the solutions discussed here are preliminary rather than definitive. Ultimately, this conceptual model demonstrates that Lovecraftian horror discourse imposes specific structural demands on narrative, mechanics and gameplay that often conflict with the formal properties of games as a medium. The most successful Lovecraftian games have found meaningful, albeit partial, ways of meeting these requirements.

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