A World of Difference: Media Translations of Fantasy Worlds

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Abstract

The modern consumer has access to a massively complex entertainment world. Many of the products available reveal a visible movement of popular fantasy worlds between different media. This transmedia process creates a strong link between film, merchandising and games; with all of these mediums borrowing from each other. This borrowing takes various forms, from licensed adaptations to unofficial copying of ideas, settings and characters as well as exploiting the different aesthetics and techniques of different media. Much of the scholarship on transmedia concentrates on storytelling, where a single overarching narrative unfolds over several different media. This thesis will move away from storytelling to consider how culture producers borrow the aesthetics, narratives and fantasy worlds from other sources, including computer games. This borrowing happens because it enables them to use transmedia functionality to gain market share from an already established audience who have a vested interested in, and enthusiasm for, an established world. Most of this borrowing happens around specific genres – especially fantasy, science fiction and horror. These genres are particularly wide-ranging and emphasise the possibilities of worldbuilding, making then good sources for multi-media franchises. This thesis will examine examples from these genres to examine what elements are translated to a new medium, and what is discarded. This examination will help explain how and why different media and settings work in the way that they do.

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Introduction

The modern consumer has access to what is a massively complex
entertainment world. Many of the products available reveal a visible movement of
popular fantasy worlds between different media. This movement between media is
often referred to as transmedia. The transmedia process creates a strong link between
film, merchandising and games (including various computer and console games, board-
games and tabletop role-playing games) with examples all of these mediums
borrowing from each other. This borrowing takes various forms, from licensed
adaptations to unofficial copying of ideas, settings and characters as well as exploiting
the different aesthetics and techniques of different media. In the last ten years this has
become particularly significant with the growing consumption and success of
computer games and the subsequent increase in film makers borrowing from
computer games. Most of this borrowing happens around specific genres – especially
fantasy, science fiction and horror. As Parody argues; 'the genres of science fiction and
fantasy, fictions of worlds other than our own, overwhelmingly dominate franchise
production' (Parody 2011: 5). Jenkins further explains the reason for the
predominance of these genres:

> When game designers draw story elements from existing film or literary genres,
> they are most apt to tap those genres – fantasy, adventure, science fiction,
> horror, war – which are most invested in world-making and spatial storytelling.
> Games, in turn, may more fully realize the spatiality of these stories, giving a
> much more immersive and compelling representation of their narrative worlds.
> (Jenkins 2004: 122)

These genres are the ones that are most invested in worldbuilding, which gives
a greater potential for new narratives. One of the most active areas of worldbuilding,
and one with the longest history of active adaption of other existing literary properties

is the tabletop role-playing game. We will use this form of entertainment to demonstrate how worldbuilding and adaption works in the practical sense of delivering the ability to create new narratives. The central point about worldbuilding is that a single created world can support many narratives and characters whilst a single story is limited to just one world. Transmedia narratives are a single story using more than one form of media to communicate the whole story, but they are not necessarily worldbuilding exercises.

Existing worlds are modelled in roleplaying games using sets of rules and this toolset helps the players to create further characters and new narratives in the already existing world; we will demonstrate that in the case of tabletop roleplaying games this creative process is a deliberate intention from the start among the developers and players. This process of adaption and worldbuilding was unique to tabletop roleplaying games and is today only rarely available in computer games; there are no comparable tools provided by the developers for other fan-activities. Tabletop roleplaying games may provide support for licensed products, but they may equally offer unregulated ones which are close to the original idea but which do not incur license fees.

New worlds are also created in role-playing games and these can in turn become valuable intellectual properties in their own right and be developed into other transmedia products.

This movement between films, merchandising, and tabletop games is the driver of the argument of this thesis and behind the choice of examples we have used. The argument presented in this thesis is that film makers borrow the aesthetics, narratives and fantasy worlds from other sources, including computer games. They do this because it enables the filmmaker to use transmedia functionality to gain market share

from an already established audience who have a vested interested in, and enthusiasm

for, an established world.

The in-between space

The genres and fantasy worlds that are most commonly used to make films are

frequently well established with clear conventions, narratives and characters that

provide attractive resources to filmmakers. Each medium works differently depending

on the level of social interaction and technology required so when the essential

elements of fantasy worlds are transferred to a new medium the fantasy world needs

to be translated to take advantage of the specificities of the new medium. This process

may also require changes to the fantasy world's conventions to create a commercially

successful product which is attractive to consumers in the new medium. In addition

each medium may have its own conventions that must be taken into account during

the creative process. This means that there is a balance that has to be struck in the

transmedia creative process between the existing conventions of the fantasy world

and the conventions of the media that it is being translated into. Therefore there is a

clear process of change and adaptation that happens as the properties that use fantasy

worlds are converted. We can see that during this process of change and adaption

elements are changed, some aspects are lost and new things are added. These

changes often incorporate modifications and amendments to formerly key elements

such as characterisation, narrative and genre. Geraghty argues that 'just as

adaptations draw attention to the gap between the source and the new version they

offer, so the gap between an adaption and other examples of its genre also draws

attention to the processes of transformation and performance' (Geraghty 2008: 9).

My thesis' examination of this gap between different media and how fantasy worlds jump that gap can tell us about how and why different media and settings work in the way that they do. It is this gap that carries meaning, as Homi Bhabhi argues: 'it is the "inter" – the cutting edge of translation and renegotiation, the *in-between* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture' (quoted in Bassnett 2002: 6). Bal and Morra describe this movement across media as intermedial translation:

> We are using the term 'intermedial translation' to mean, quite simply, translating across media. To 'translate across' is to work within discourses and practices of intertextuality, intersemiotics and interdisciplinarity, which can lead to movements across genres, media, bodies of knowledge and subjects. More figuratively, translating across is concerned with the marginal, the gaps, fissures and contradictions of working in the interstices between these various boundaries. (Bal and Morra 2007: 7)

In this thesis we are examining the in-between space where the fantasy world is renegotiated, to see what changes, what drives the change and how it changes the audience's reception of the fantasy world.

Media Translation and Transmedia: The Academic Background

The process of media translation began, for the most part, in the early twentieth century. Key examples of this process include L. Frank Bauam's *Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) which was translated between a long running series of novels, a Broadway play, toys and later a film, while Baum presented himself to his audience as an explorer mapping a new world. (Jenkins 2009a). Many of the theoretical fields that we will use to explore the translation of fantasy worlds between different media are relatively new academic fields, having been developed in the last thirty years. As such we will be considering these issues using the theoretical tools of convergence and transmedia, combined with aspects from translation and adaptation studies which also

provide the viewpoints to inform and develop my argument about how fantasy worlds are translated.

Using the theoretical tools of convergence, transmedia, translation and adaption studies, the thesis will examine how a fantasy universe is adapted to suit different media with a particular focus on the link between films and television, and, computer and tabletop role-playing games. In today's complex media world of interlinked transmedia and adaptive products this is a particularly timely question. In addition there has only been a limited amount of academic research carried out on the relatively broad field of the role-playing game to-date, and some of that research pre-dates the modern addition of advanced, internet enabled, computer games, as well as the majority of the academic work on computer games and gamers. This means that the tabletop role-playing game industry represents great potential for researchers. People that have experienced role-playing games at either or both of the tabletop or on computers number in the millions which means that research in this area would be expected to draw out significant lessons on how gamers and fantasy worlds interact with film and television. Although role-playing games both create their own worlds and use and translate established universes heavily, it is still necessary for their creators to use genres that are already familiar differently to create a successful game.

The research into role-playing games that has been done to date falls into three broad types; the psychological effects of gaming, popular culture work from ethnographic and performance studies angles, and fan-scholar work. The psychology papers look at the effects of gaming on personality and social skills, and some deal with role-playing games' connection in the popular imagination with Satanism and suicide (Carter and Lester 1998), (DeRenard and Kline 1990), (Douse and McManus

1993) and (Lancaster 1994). Fine produced an ethnographic study of players, which although detailed is now out of date because gaming has advanced significantly in the thirty years since publication because Fine collected his evidence between 1977 and 1979 (Fine 1984:xiv). This was within ten years of the introduction of the role-playing game and his work predates seminal games such as *Call of Cthulhu* (1981) and *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1992) which may have a different demographic (Fine 1984).

Lancaster and Mackay's work looks at role-playing from a performance studies perspective. Lancaster uses performance studies to look at how role-playing creates a feeling of immersion in players (Lancaster 2001) while Mackay uses a structualist approach to better understand gaming (Mackay 2001). There are many fan-scholars who are very interested in the history and theory of gaming; much of this work is independent of academia, such as Schick's catalogue of games (Schick 1991), Stackpole's work countering Pat Pulling's criticisms of gaming (Stackpole 1990) and Applegate's history of the role-playing Industry, *Designers and Dragons* (2011). The academically based collection *Second Person* also included representatives from the role-playing game industry, along with academics (Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin 2007). Examples of the notable designers and writers featured are Kenneth Hite, Keith Herber and John Tynes. Even so the coverage of the field is patchy and across nearly four decades represents what can only be described as a very small amount of research in the field, particularly when it is considered against the vast amount of research to date on other fan activities, such as slash fiction which are more marginal in both commercial impact and in numbers of users and creators.

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A useful body of work to help and visualise and understand the movement between media is translation studies. This emerged as a major field of academic interest in the 1970s. Although originally focussed on the process of translation, including issues of fidelity and the job of the translator, the field opened up to look at a range of related issues. Among these was an examination of the nature of movement between media. Translation relates to creative rewriting in that as a created world is translated to a new media certain aspects need to be rewritten, which is an aspect of the task of the translator who, in the modern world, does not simply repeat exactly what is written, but instead engages in a creative process to clarify and improve the communication of the ideas that are being transmitted.

Bassnett argues that translation uses three major approaches relating to the methods and style that the translator chooses to use, using their professional skill and judgement. In essence these approaches are about the level of visibility of the translator in the story or media that they are working for:

> Three recurring stratagems: a redefinition of the terminology of faithfulness and equivalence, the importance of high-lighting the visibility of the translator and a shift of emphasis that views translation as an act of creative rewriting. (Bassnett 2002: 6)

Translation studies and transmedia engage with considering the process of moving between media with the aim of understanding how as strong and meaningful a product as possible can be delivered in the new media or language. Jenkins calls this 'transcreation', one step beyond translation (Jenkins 2006: 111). Translation differs from transmedia in its approach to the movement as it examines a single narrative and focuses on language, rather than visual or other aesthetic considerations.

This is highly relevant for translation between media as it means that there are questions that will always be applicable about the actions of the translator and the visibility or otherwise of the translation.

> Translation, it is argued, ensures the survival of a text. The translation effectively becomes the after-life of a text, a new 'original' in another language. This positive view of translation serves to reinforce the importance of translating as an act both of inter-cultural and inter-temporal communication. (Bassnett 2002: 9)

Lefevre developed the initial translation model into a more complex form which included the idea that translation could result in an altered product:

> Lefevre first developed his idea of translation as refraction rather than reflection, offering a more complex model than the old idea of translation as a mirror of the original. (Bassnett 2002: 8)

This modification through translation meant that the translator's role had to be considered closely in any translation exercise. As a novel or other language based product is developed by the translator it inevitably is altered:

> Translation... is now rightly seen as a process of negotiation between cultures, a process during which all kinds of transactions take place mediated by the figure of the translator. (Bassnett 2002: 6)

In the case of transmedia storytelling this negotiation also occurs but does not take place between cultures, but instead between media. In addition both the creator and the fan have translation roles in the transmedia process. Translation studies relies on a lead negotiator in the form of the translator, whilst transmedia storytelling can be more flexible and bottom-up because each different media and product requires different people to work on different parts, even if the product is within a single franchise, and this division of labour is before considering the impact of fan transmedia activities which are outside of the control of anyone other than the fan themselves.

> Texts, he argued, have to be seen as complex signifying systems and the task of the translator is to decode and re-encode whichever of those systems is accessible. (Bassnett 2002: 8)

In the transmedia work the translators task is more generalised, as any one is capable of providing decoding and re-encoding work rather than it requiring a specialist translator. This is particularly true when we consider how modern technology has enabled fan activities such as discussion, art and videos to be made and freely communicated worldwide without the requirement for specialist skills or any financial transaction.

As translation is not a simple mirror this means that in any translation work there is a significant issue, for the translator, with the language that they choose to use to use to either describe or replace the original term. In essence this is because words also have significant cultural concepts behind them and the successful translator has to meet the requirements of bridging the two cultures. Lefevre describes these as textual and conceptual grids which must be aligned for the end product to make sense (Lefevre 1999: 75-78). This is significant in transmedia studies as it is clear that translated items do not map perfectly onto one another and there is a conscious effort of will required to make them understandable between different media. Adaption has a similar issue when it comes to aligning the different textual and conceptual grids.

Stam argues that 'the text feeds on and is fed into an infinitely permutating intertext, which is seen through ever-shifting grids of interpretation' (Stam 2000: 57). As the text develops through a series of interpretations over time and through different cultures there is a complex narrative of interpretation which occurs as each adaption is created and considered. Stam suggests that this is infinite and therefore there is no end state for any adaption or translation: 'Every text forms an intersection

of textual surfaces' (Stam 2000: 64). Each text is a never ending series of examinations which form an interlinked set of discussions that give the text its value.

In general, adaptations are translations – between semiotic systems and not between languages. As Hutcheon explains:

> In many cases, because adaptions are to a different medium, they are re-mediations, that is, specifically translations in the form of intersemiotic transpositions from one sign system (for example, words) to another (for example, images). (Hutcheon 2006: 16)

The critical thing to note with Hutcheon's point is that the remediation is a controlled process that is decided upon by the adaptor acting like a translator, or the team of adaptors in the case of films. Hutcheon's description of remediation differs from that of Bolter and Grusin who use the term to describe the reuse of something from one media to another; 'it is that which appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them in the name of the real' (Bolter and Grusin 2000:65). What is most important to Bolter and Grusin is the attempt to make a medium that is more realistic, rather than the attempt to translate semiotic material between different media. The creation of a more realistic medium is generally a movement from the low tech to the high tech. The reason for this movement is that these new technologies aim to improve upon the earlier technologies in order to make them more real, "thus remediation does not destroy the aura of a work of art: instead it always refashions that aura in another media form" (Bolter and Grusin 2000:75). The successful portrayal of reality is judged upon the viewer's experience and their subsequent authentic emotional response (Bolter and Grusin 2000:53).Bolter and Grusin's concept of remediation is highly arguable when we consider that media such as paintings and plays exist successfully side-by-side with

newer forms such as photography and films. Stam notes that this process, like

translation, means that these changes make the translated item different:

> The trope of adaption as translation suggests a principled effort of intersemiotic transposition with the inevitable losses and gains typical of any translation. (Stam 2000: 62)

Stam phrases this in terms of losses and gains implying that things benefit or lose from

the translation process, but this is more complex as it implies that there is a neutral

point from which the translated item can only gain or lose. By implication this means

that the thing being translated from is the central item, and this is a significant

problem in transmedia where it is not clear what the original is to provide the

reference point for gain or lose, rather than just different. We will however use Stam's

point of view whilst avoiding as far as possible the inherent value judgement

associated with the terms gain or lose.

Textual grids are critical as a tool for analysing the changes between translated

fantasy worlds because whilst some things change, others remain the same. Both the

changes made, and the things that are left in place are significant choices made by the

translator. Therefore we can say that anything that changes or does not change

represents a decision made which we can use to understand the thought process that

is undertaken in any translation between media. The central idea of translation studies

that provides theoretical support for my thesis is that the adaption and translation of

created worlds is inherently a guided process that requires knowledge of both sides of

the textual and conceptual grids. Without this knowledge a transmedia narrative will

not succeed as it cannot use the various media forms to add value to the overall

narrative.

Thesis Considerations

This thesis will explore how fantasy worlds and intellectual properties evolve as they are translated between different media. This is a very relevant question to consider because there is a significant movement between film, television, computer games and role-playing games and this process involves changes in the source material so that it can fit the new medium. To look at this we will consider three aspects: genre, cross platform franchises, and licensing and copyright infringement. In the case of genre, the same recognisable genres appear in many different media, but it appears that it is necessary for them to undergo changes to work in the new media and be commercially successful. We should note that despite using the same terms to describe the genres across different media, the genres are not always the same from one media to another. This suggests that rather than Tudor's simplistic statement that 'we feel we know a western when we see one' (Tudor 1974: 96), which does not assist the consideration of genre as it relies on an assumption of prior knowledge through cultural exposure, genre categories can be far more complex, and so more difficult to pigeonhole. This thesis does not intend to examine the difficulties that academics have faced in permanently defining genres and categorising films as part of them, but it does intend to look at the changes that genres undertake when they are moved between media. In other words this thesis focuses on the joins between media rather than on attempting to define the genre standards.

As part of the examination of genre we will examine how films like *Underworld* (2003) and role-playing games such as *Deadlands* (1996) represent different genres and examine how they blend and combine different genres to create more commercially successful hybrid products for the marketplace. This movement and

blending of the genres between media is often an industrial process with successful

products being further licensed to different platforms to take advantage of continuing

customer interest in the fantasy world. In addition there is a noticeable trend towards

fan activities which are intended to expand the universe to other products and

situations or to provide more detail on things which already exist in the fantasy world.

Just as genres need to adapt to different media, so do products, but the products are

not necessarily controlled by the original owners, so there is a clear drive towards

unlicensed hybrid products from grassroots activists, which is particularly noticeable in

the less regulated, wider ranging and more flexible fantasy worlds.

To examine this element of genre and how it is affected by change we will look

at transmedia products and what changes have been made in the adaptation process.

This adaption is often part of a company strategy to develop and exploit a fantasy

world. A successful cross platform franchise must have a strong concept that is

suitable for use in a range of formats. In addition this concept must be desirable to

consumers. The popularity of some role-playing settings and the ability of the

companies to sell a variety of cross platform products suggest that these settings and

narratives are attractive to consumers and therefore their intellectual property is

potentially valuable. This issue was highly relevant to White Wolf when they believed

that *Underworld* had infringed their copyright because there were potentially very real

financial implications. Fans may also adapt existing fantasy worlds because they want

to enhance their own experience of a world they are devoted to. As such not all of the

observed movement between platforms is legal, with both fans and companies

potentially infringing copyright to produce their own versions of products, such as the

various forms of Cthulhu merchandise. This creates problems including conflict

between fans, producers and copyright holders. We will examine these issues, and

look at the obvious desire of fans to have more access to settings and genres that they

particularly favour, with particular focus on the fan response to *Underworld*.

There is a constant flow of material between different media, a process that

has accelerated as we have entered the 21st century because publishing tools,

development and transmission have improved. The move towards digital technologies

has made content more important because it has become easier to manipulate, and

distribute.

> Digitization and 'Black Box' technologies are blurring and collapsing lines
> between media channels, transforming their characteristic protocols of produc-
> tion, representation, and delivery; they are also making content 'a very liquid
> asset' (Wolf 92), easily repackaged, remediated, and redistributed. (Parody
> 2011: 1)

This has enabled companies to have greater synergy between the development arms

that form their business. There is also a sound economic drive to further exploit

existing properties which are already familiar to audiences:

> Cultural landscapes flooded with remixes, remakes, and reboots, extended
> editions and director's cuts, programmes that close with an invitation to shift
> media for bonus interactive content or behind-the-scenes footage, and, of
> course, adaptations. (Parody 2011: 1-2)

It also enables the fan-base to communicate their individual ideas about their

preferred fantasy world to one another through technologies such as the Internet. At

the same time fans now have the ability to develop their own material to a high quality

standard that would be comparable to that of professionals, and then to communicate

this new material to the world without any middlemen being involved.

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Adaptation

One method for this renegotiation of a fantasy world is adaption, which is a limited form of transmedia, as it represents an attempt to move a property wholesale, adding little new to the fantasy world or making amendments and so acting with less regard for the media in which it will reside. For the majority of cases Gray (2011) is largely adequate:

> Any filmic or televisual text and its cultural impact, value, and meaning cannot be adequately analyzed without taking into account the film or program's many proliferations. Each proliferation, after all, holds the potential to change the meaning of the text, even if only slightly. (Gray 2011:2)

However we can say that we are looking at cases where this does not always apply. Starting from a point other than a film or a television programme, which the majority of games created since 1974 do, means that we need to consider the start point more carefully than the output as a whole.

In other words adaption ignores technical and aesthetic difference in a drive to maintain similarity and so veracity to the original even when it moves between media. Transmedia, on the other hand, adds to the fantasy world or amends it and also has a close interest in the media in which it will work in the future. We will focus on the transmedia element, rather than simple adaption, to examine how transmedia works.

In many cases adaption takes the form of moving a source into a new medium. Among the most common are film adaptations of novels and which are often subjected to very negative comments that take a 'profoundly moralistic' tone, often combined with a suggestion that the adaptation is unworthy and a betrayal of the viewer's feelings for the text (Stam 2000: 54). Yet for the most part adaptations do not

set out to harm the source material that they are built from, rather it is about improving or redeveloping of the original idea:

> An adaption is not vampiric: it does not draw the life-blood from its source and leave it dying or dead, nor is it paler than the adopted work. It may, on the contrary, keep that prior work alive, giving it an afterlife it would never have had otherwise. (Hutcheon 2006: 176)

Despite the apparent popular dislike, the fact remains that adaptations are very common and highly popular, 'if adaptations are, by this definition, such inferior and secondary creations, why then are they so omnipresent in our culture, and, indeed, increasingly steadily in numbers?' (Hutcheon 2006: 4).

Adaptations appear to function as a genre in their own right as the audiences are frequently aware of the original ur-story and so are largely interacting with the adaption to see how it has been modified and what new insights are offered. In other words when viewers see an adaption they are already aware of the central story and know what will happen. This is similar to understanding the rules of a particular genre. Hutcheon suggests that 'known adaptations obviously function similarly to genres: they set up audience expectations through a set of norms that guide our encounter' (Hutcheon 2006: 121). For example audiences largely know the story of Ebeneezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* but today many audiences will have cultural memories of the story as told through the many film and television adaptations rather than through a direct experience of the original Charles Dickens story. In effect the audience remember *A Christmas Carol* based on the rules of the well known myth or genre that they have learnt and not the story itself. As Hutcheon argues:

> For unknowing audiences, adaptations have a way of upending sacrosanct elements like priority and originality. If the adapted work is a canonical one, we may not actually have direct experience of it, but may rely on "a generally circulated cultural memory" (Ellis 1982:3). (Hutcheon 2006: 122)

Hutcheon's argument is that the audience do not directly know the story they are

watching, yet are still aware enough to be able to determine what the shape of the

story should be, and therefore if the story is faithfully rendered to the canonical genre

version or not. Lefevere, working in the field of translation studies, has similarly argued

that audiences may not have had experience of the original, particularly for well

known narratives that have significant cultural impact.

> When non-professional readers of literature (...) say they have "read" a book, what they mean is that they have a certain image, a certain construct of that book in their heads. That construct is often loosely based on some selected passages of the actual text of the book in question (...) supplemented by other texts that rewrite the actual text in one way or another, such as plot summaries in literary histories or reference works, reviews in newspapers, magazines, or journals, some critical articles, performances on stage or screen and, last but not least, translations. (Lefevere 1992: 6 – 7)

We cannot speak of audiences as a single group in this thesis. We are dealing with a

more complex set of interlinked individuals and groups that come to the gaming world

from a number of different directions. It is this kind of group that Janet Steiger calls

peverse in that they are not easily categorised:

> The more I study spectators, the more perverse I find them to operate, relative to what academics claim are the real or appropriate moviegoing behaviours. (Staiger 2000: 24)

We shall throughout this thesis consider the audience to be largely fragmented and do

not always behave as expected. This is made particularly clear when we consider the

case of *Underworld*, in which the fans of the *World of Darkness* act against the

interests of the company that owns and creates their preferred fan activity.

Our knowledge of a well known narrative is developed from more than just the original

source text. There is a kaleidoscope of imagery and texts that surround and inform the

understanding of the reader however 'our imaginations are permanently colonized by

the visual and aural world of the films' (Hutcheon 2006: 122). When we think of *A Christmas Carol* we visualise it using various film adaptations (Marin 1938, Hurst 1951 and Zemeckis 2009), but we also think of school plays and English lessons and other reference points from our personal experience beyond the film world, and these experiences - whilst commonplace - are unique to the individual. Each audience member has a different experience base to generate their personal understanding of, or liking for, the adapted narrative.

In essence then it is this kaleidoscope that a transmedia storytelling effort attempts to deliberately create. As Hutcheon notes, adaptations are 'haunted at all times by their adapted texts' (Hutcheon 2006: 6) but the adapted text is surrounded by each unique individuals experiences and the inconsistent patchwork of film, book and television knowledge that each audience member brings to bear on the adaption: 'what motivates adapters, knowing that their efforts will be compared to competing imagined versions in people's heads and inevitably found wanting?' (Hutcheon 2006: 86). Hutcheon goes on to argue that because of this adaptations can be very appealing to audiences with 'their mixture of repetition and difference, of familiarity and novelty' (Hutcheon 2006: 114). There is, quite simply, a comfort in the known.

> There must be something particularly appealing about adaptions *as adaptions*. Part of this pleasure... comes simply from repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise. (Hutcheon 2006: 4)

Adaption, we argue, is centrally more of the same rather than a novelty or difference. 'They affirm and reinforce basic cultural assumptions' (Hutcheon 2006: 176).

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Transmedia Storytelling

Besides adaptations of established narratives in a new medium, there is a flow of material for created worlds between media, which can also take the form of new stories in an existing setting using other media. At its most complex, Jenkins describes this as transmedia storytelling, which 'unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole' (Jenkins 2006: 95-6). This means that transmedia storytelling is quite different to adaptation because rather than repeating one story in different media, the intention is for each element to tell a part of an overarching story.

> Franchise storytelling may be defined as the creation of narratives, characters, and settings that can be used both to generate and give identity to vast quantities of interlinked media products and merchandise, resulting in a prolonged, multitextual, multimedia fictional experience. These 'aggregate texts' (Arnett 3) may comprise a co-ordinated act of transmedia storytelling, the systematic branching and extension of a narrative across multiple media outlets, or a palimpsest of a storyworld and its inhabitants built-up over time from repeated remakes, reimaginings, and remediations of one or more fictional texts and objects or something in between. (Parody 2011:2)

Expansive universes with epic narratives are often central to transmedia storytelling because they allow audiences many opportunities to explore. Jenkins describes two aspects that he considers key to the understanding of transmedia storytelling in his article *The Revenge of the Origami Unicorn*, these are which are 'worldbuilding', and 'spreadability verses drillability' (Jenkins 2009a) (Jenkins 2009b).

Worldbuilding has taken over in many contexts because it allows flexibility in the kind of finished product that is produced as well as the potential to make other connected products. The key thing to note for worldbuilding is that there is a significant economy of scale in ideas. A marketable idea for a fantasy world will enable the development of products to ensure large scale long term financial rewards for the

creative team behind it. In addition to more efficiently exploiting the products of

media conglomerates, convergence – although not an essential part of worldbuilding -

also further develops the concept of economy of scale, but for ideas, rather than

manufacturing. George Steiner describes this as an 'economy of invention' (Hutcheon

2006: 173).

> Industry insiders use the term "extension" to refer to their efforts to expand
> the potential markets by moving content across different delivery systems,
> "synergy" to refer to the economic opportunities represented by their ability to
> own and control all of those manifestations, and "franchise" to refer to their
> coordinated effort to brand and market fictional content under these new
> conditions. (Jenkins 2006: 19)

To devise an intellectual property that can work across several media could be argued

to be a better use of expensive corporate resources than creating multiple intellectual

properties each of which can only be used in one medium, particularly as it reduces

the risk of failure by spreading deliveries and so risk across multiple media. This can be

argued to be similar to the economies of scale used in manufacturing where the more

efficient production and distribution of larger companies means that larger profits can

be made from lower unit costs as production rises; it also encourages consumers to

buy the product as each product is cheaper.

Convergence is an important aspect of the modern culture industry, in part

because of the creation of media conglomerates such as Time-Warner who own and

produce intellectual property across a range of media. Large corporations like Time-

Warner already have the organisational layout required - including multiple production

divisions such as a film studio, record company and a computer games publisher - to

support and exploit a strongly defined world with a wide range of products that would

be expected to produce significant financial rewards over time. As a result of this

another key theme for this dissertation is convergence. Convergence is used to

describe a process where an intellectual property is exploited across several media to create a unified brand identity, but not necessarily a unified story. These media include any or all of film franchises, television, computer games, print media, the internet and merchandising. In some cases each of these different media are used in combination to tell an overarching narrative, with each piece telling a separate part of the story. Gray (2011) calls these paratexts:

> Paratexts are not simply add-ons, spinoffs, and also-rans: they create texts, they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them. (Gray 2011: 6)

These pieces are not a single text and work together to create a collage which each reader can individualise through their personal media choices. Jenkins describes convergence as 'the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want' (Jenkins 2006:2). Convergence covers the technical, industry based approach which is different to the grassroots influenced transmedia approach. Fans however are often technically literate and there are still areas where fans have some influence on convergence by their consumer choices.

A key aspect of convergence is the interaction of media consumers, especially fans. Jenkins argues that 'convergence ... is both a top-down corporate driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process' (Jenkins 2006: 18). This interaction by consumers takes many forms, from the officially sanctioned, to the unofficial activities of fans. The official, sanctioned and company approved of activities can include using company websites, interacting on company forums, entering competitions, while the unofficial can include writing fiction with the characters, making videos, drawing

pictures and creating mods (personalised modifications) for computer games. When it comes to role-playing games interaction from consumers is central to the product. The game rules encourage players to create their own characters, narratives and locations, and for the majority of games this creative element is essential to the control that players need to game successfully.

Consalvo has suggested that there are two paradigms for convergence based on geographical or cultural approaches. Western corporations mostly follow a 'center-periphery' paradigm where a property will have a central canon which is then filled out by other media products. Examples include *Star Wars* (where the central canon is the original trilogy of films), *Star Trek* (the original television series) and *The Lord of the Rings* (the trilogy of books by Tolkein). By comparison Asian companies mostly create a central universe or character and then build media products on this, for example *Hello Kitty* (Consalvo 2009: 137). The regional split of this model is arguable as the assumption of difference between Western and Asian methods of media production is unproven by Consalvo and there are counter-examples such as *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* in the West. He-Man was a Western produced toy with a media universe attached, which means that Consalvos method of differentiation does not necessarily apply in all cases. In addition the way that global media conglomerates operate make this model hard to apply in modern examples. Many new intellectual properties are deliberately designed to be suitable for a range of media. However it might be fair to see these as two different models for convergence that could be used to understand the process of convergence more widely.

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Worldbuilding

The combination of transmedia storytelling and convergence is commonplace in the games industry. The idea of a central universe which is then used as the basis of a range of products is a good way to understand the business strategy for the larger games companies such as TSR, Games Designer Workshop, Games Workshop, White Wolf and Wizards of the Coast. These companies create settings with an intention to exploit them across as wide a range of games and media as possible with the simultaneous aim of telling stories in as many different ways as possible. As Jenkins notes the need for the new is that 'In reality, audiences want the new work to offer new insights and new experiences' (Jenkins 2006: 105).

Jason Mittell describes spreadability and its opposite, drillability as:

Spreadable media encourages horizontal ripples, accumulating eyeballs without necessarily encouraging more long-term engagement. Drillable media typically engage far fewer people, but occupy more of their time and energies in a vertical descent into a text's complexities. (Mittell 2009)

This argues that there are two different kinds of universe and that a marketable universe has elements of both spreadability and drillability. For example, *Star Wars* which takes place in an area the size of a galaxy, represents a spreadable universe allowing a wide range of stories that can be told without impacting on the main story. *Star Trek* by comparison is often obsessively detailed, especially in relation to Star Fleet, with a narrative drive towards depth in technical or pseudo-scientific terms. However *Star Trek* also has elements of spreadability as much – indeed most - of the Federation is not described in any detail and there are many other starships in Star Fleet than the Enterprise or her successors. Equally *Star Wars* has a complex family backstory for the extended Skywalker clan which means that the fan is aware of and

has spent time understanding, creating a limited drillability in relation to Luke, Leia and Anakin/Darth Vader. In the case studies later in this thesis *Deadlands* would represent a spreadable universe based around the Weird West but with published offshoots in the more civilised East allowing more stories to be told with different social backgrounds. In comparison The *World of Darkness* created by White Wolf has aspects of both in that it is spreadable but has a significant drive towards drillability with detailed information on each group and on many geographic areas, such as *Chicago by Night* (1993).

Jenkins goes on to explain that 'in the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best – so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction' (Jenkins 2006: 96). Each medium is allowed to operate at its best, unconstrained by the other media to maximise the combined environmental and entertainment value of the whole. It is possible, even probable, that the viewer will not have experienced the entire transmedia narrative, or seen it in the order that it was intended to be delivered, indeed the viewer may not wish to.

Part of what has made this contemporary form of transmedia storytelling possible is the development of the home computer and the Internet. The average computer today has an immense encyclopaedic capacity which Janet H. Murray recognised in 1997: 'the limitless expanse of gigabytes presents itself to the storyteller as a vast tabula rasa crying out to be filled with all the matter of life. It offers writers the opportunity to tell stories from multiple vantage points and to offer intersecting stories that form a dense and wide-spreading web' (Murray 1997: 84). The

development of immensely powerful tools allows artists and fans to create and

catalogue the complex worlds that fascinate them. However fans' interest in products

such as long running television programmes does not just allow them to document the

programmes and trace long running plots; their detail-orientated interest also affects

the producers 'holding them to greater consistency over longer periods of time'

(Murray 1997: 85). When consumers want to engage with all the aspects of the

transmedia story, this can be a rich and fulfilling experience, as Jenkins details:

> Transmedia storytelling … places new demands on consumers and depends on
> the active participation of knowledge communities. Transmedia storytelling is
> the art of world making. To fully experience any fictional world, consumers must
> assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across
> media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups,
> and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come
> away with a richer entertainment experience. (Jenkins 2006: 21)

However there are disadvantages for consumers of transmedia products in these

detailed and expansive worlds and narratives. Murray suggests that:

> It encourages long-windedness and formlessness in story-tellers, and it leaves
> readers/interactors wondering which of the several endpoints is *the* end and
> how they can know if they have seen everything there is to see. (Murray 1997:
> 87)

As a result 'going in deep has to remain an option – something readers choose to do –

and not the only way to derive pleasure from media franchise' because 'sometimes,

we simply want to watch' (Jenkins 2006:130). Not everything that commercial

entertainment offers should depend on the viewers long term transmedia

engagement, indeed not everything can be developed to this degree. Even so it is clear

that the combination of technology and the modern approach of transmedia

storytelling offers something that expands significantly on what has been available in

previous generations.

All of these new ways to tell stories spread across a range of media have provided ways for fans to engage with a property that they already know and enjoy, creating and strengthening an emotional attachment to the created world. Jenkins argues that 'fandom … is born of a balance between fascination and frustration: if media content didn't fascinate us, there would be no desire to engage with it; but if it didn't frustrate us on some level, there would be no desire to rewrite or remake it' (Jenkins 2006: 247). Fans often want more than the show's makers are willing or able to give them, in particular as Kurt Lancaster suggests, they want more stories from their favourite programmes (Lancaster 2001: 155). Lancaster further suggests that the reason for fans continued interaction is that they want to try to recapture the cathartic moment from their original experience of the text (Lancaster 2001: 155). The objects that fans interact with become part of 'a personal mythology of symbols, images, and stories that we have adopted from the raw materials given us by the mass media, and we invest in those symbols and stories meanings that are personal to us or that reflect our shared experiences as part of one or another subcultural community' (Jenkins 1999). In other words these become more than just entertainment; rather they become part of people's lived experience and a reflection or modification of their personality and even ideology.

Products like computer games, comics, tie-in novels and merchandising are pre-created by the culture industries for audience consumption and there are only limited ways for users to alter them to use how they wish. However some licensed properties also appear as role-playing games which allow fans to create characters and stories using standardised tools in the margins of settings that they care about, as well as playing with existing characters and situations. Sometimes the setting emphasises the

marginal area to avoid players interacting with existing characters. Mackay argues that

these 'role-playing games set in specific imaginary worlds contribute a new dimension

of nuance and familiarity that can enhance the players' sense of verisimilitude'

(Mackay 2001: 26). In other words, the players' familiarity with a setting makes their

experience of role-playing in the universe deeper and richer, and this can apply equally

well to other transmedia products such as fan fiction or cosplay as well. The fans'

personal connection is emphasised by the creativity inherent in players' experience of

gaming and other fan activities, because they can create characters, narratives and

even new locations in the universe. These activities are not limited to the local socially

based fan group as through published rule-sets role-playing allows a pre-structured

and accepted way to participate with a property and tell further stories in and around

a favoured setting so that everyone who has the same rules set can communicate

equally – today its common for fan created ideas to be made available on the internet,

but before that amateur publications, nicknamed fanzines, fulfilled the same task.

> The role-playing game maintains a reciprocal relationship with forms of popular
> culture … that influence and, in turn, are influenced by the images, signs, and
> product art around it. (Mackay 2001: 26)

We argue that tabletop role-playing games are part of translation and transmedia

storytelling because Hutcheon argues that 'there is a difference between never

wanting a story to end – the reason behind sequels and prequels … and wanting to

retell the same story over and over in different ways. With adaptations, we seem to

desire the repetition as much as the change' (Hutcheon 2006: 9). This suggests that

role-playing games are not strictly adaptations, rather gamers want the story to never

end. The games designer Monte Cook appears to back this up:

> If the campaign ends, the fun ends. Most players like the continuity of playing
> the same character over time and don't want to see things draw to a close (in the

same way in which fans of a book or movie thirst for sequels to see more of their favourite characters). (Cook 2009: 97)

Role-players want to improve on the world by adding more detail and complexity, effectively continuing the job of worldbuilding that is usually done by media producers. The producers of role-playing games encourage this through the way the games are written. They provide rules which enable players to create original characters and encouragement to write adventures and settings. On top of this the players have a greater investment in characters that they create and control themselves.

Transmedia and convergence represent two sides of the same coin for the fans. On the one hand transmedia storytelling enables them to have a more complex narrative, whilst convergence enables them to have a more complex interaction with the created world itself. There is an element of fan activity which appears to be indistinguishable between transmedia storytelling and convergence activity, in as much as there is little difference in what is done, merely in the way it's viewed.

For the earliest role-playing game companies (TSR, Games Designer Workshop and Games Workshop) it could be suggested that the reason for this cross platform approach was due to the varied interests of those running the companies. As Mackay notes role-playing grew out of the miniature war gaming scene with many of these wargamers interested in a range of related hobbies, including fantasy and science fiction literature, hex-and-counter war gaming, and military history.

> This community was largely drawn from two existing groups, war gamers and fantasy / science fiction fans. Like war gaming, which had its own subculture of conventions, organisations, and newsletters, the fantasy/science fiction subculture cohered around annual conventions, formed itself into special interest groups and communicated via newsletters (often self-published fanzines). (Mackay 2001:16)

The precursor hobbies to role-playing games had a pivotal influence on how the role-playing game hobby developed. Role-playing took on many of the forms and activities that wargaming and science fiction literature had developed to meet and communicate with like minded individuals particularly when we consider the size of the United States and the then costs of long-distance communication. Conventions in particular proved to be a flagship for the various interests meeting at the same location and at the same time. The key gaming convention, GEN CON was developed in imitation of science fiction conventions (Laws 2007a: 10). It began as a wargaming show, but quickly displayed strong links with fantasy literature because of the interests of the organisers and attendees. At the 1968 GEN CON, the booths included one from a Lord of the Rings fan group, the Neo-Numenorians (Laws 2007a: 11), and by 1976 this fantasy element had expanded in importance to including a keynote by the author Fritz Leiber on Lankhmar (Laws 2007a: 30), and regular sessions with authors of fantasy novels through the 1980s and 1990s. GEN CON has become a massive and wide ranging worldwide meeting for gamers of all types including role-playing games, live action role-playing, collectable card games such as *Magic: The Gathering* and boardgames. It is now common for games publishers in the United States to release new products, or preview upcoming developments at GEN CON. These releases and previews are similar to the film and television marketing and previews at Comic-Con, and the gaming events perform the same kind of function.

Mackay's description of the early role-playing game community is confirmed by Fine in his ethnographic research which showed significant overlaps among different hobbies: 'there exists a fantasy gaming sub-society. This sub-society overlaps with those of war gamers, science-fiction enthusiasts and medieval history buffs' (Fine

1983:28). Fine goes on to say that there are other groups than wargamers, (which was niche hobby in the 1970s), were involved in the development of the role-playing games hobby. A number of science fiction fans came to role-playing as a way to further their original hobby interests. As Fine notes: 'a few science-fiction groups…became involved in fantasy gaming not through an interest in war games, but as a means of making their science-fiction and fantasy musings more intense' (Fine 1983:65). The interests of these different groups are clearly reflected in the kinds of games that are produced. Genre is a key aspect for understanding the production of role-playing games. The earliest games produced are all fantasy, with the first major science fiction game developed in 1979 with GDW's *Traveller* and the horror genre is added in 1981 with Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu*. It is notable that *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Traveller* and *Call of Cthulhu* are all in print today, in some cases with different publishers but they have never been unavailable since 1981, a period of 30 years.

This development of closely interlinked hobbies continues to this day with hobbyists such as Harry Knowles, the writer behind the website *Aint It Cool News*, making a professional virtue of their wide ranging and connected interests.

> What makes movie geeks special is that movies are where all roads converge. Sci- Fi geeks, comics geeks, technogeeks, computer geeks, Kung Fu and horror geeks, laserphiles and DVD junkies, videogame and Dungeons and Dragons mavens, skywalkers and trekkies and garden-variety obsessives – they all can find some sympathetic outpost in the movies. (Knowles 2002: 61)

Although Knowles comes from the perspective of film as being central to the hobby as he perceives it, and there is an argument to be made that films provide the visual aspect and imaginative drive for the hobbies that he lists, other hobbyists may (and do) equally argue that their preferred hobby is the central one. Ethan Gilsdorf, a

blogger for *Wired*, similarly shows the level of interconnection between the various

hobbies that he – as a young fan – undertook:

> Before I got into *Dungeons & Dragons*, I made Super 8mm animated shorts
> involving clay monsters that swallowed towns. I was a charter member of the
> *Star Wars* Fan Club. I shouted Bugs Bunny routines (...). I wanted to be a
> cartoonist for the *Boston Globe* and an animator for Disney. I wrote novels on
> an old typewriter. (Gilsdorf 2009: 10)

Gilsdorf lists a range of activities that straddle creative pursuits and popular culture

fandom and which are interlinked and can be seen to feed into each other, becoming

largely inseparable. Jenkins notes than many fans accumulate multiple fandoms, often

as a way of spending time with other people with similar interests (Jenkins 1992: 40-

41). This is clearly the case among role-playing game players, where role-playing is just

one activity among a broad range of inter-linked activities of which role-playing gaming

may or may not be central, depending on the player's personal interests. The

difference here is the accumulation is of hobbies, rather than fandoms, although they

can function in similar ways.

As a result of this interaction settings would be produced by the role-playing

games companies that have a range of products associated with them including rules

for role-playing, rules for miniature combat, miniatures, fiction and board games. This

assumed – often correctly - that the players and fans had similar interests to the

people managing the companies. As a commercial model it appears to have been very

successful, Games Designers' Workshop lasted 23 years, publishing a new product on

average every 22 days, whilst the UK based Games Workshop had a financial year

ending 2011 turnover of £123 million.

This cross-platform franchising was an important business model for TSR, with

a planned early example being *Dragon Lance* (1984). This fantasy setting was a

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springboard for the simultaneous release of role-playing game modules, novels,

miniatures and board games. This was expanded to include calendars, art books,

computer games and an animated film in 2008. However these were not a true

example of transmedia story-telling. The same broad story was reiterated across

different media, rather than each medium telling only a part of the story. The most

successful part of the franchise has been the novels, something that was not originally

a core aspect of TSR's business but which offered new things to consumers. By 2008

there were more than 190 official novels using the *Dragon Lance* setting, written by

different authors to meet the extremely high demand of the fans. Wizards of the Coast

continued this model when they bought TSR in 1997 with entire ranges of products

linked to a setting. From the 1980s Games Designers' Workshop (GDW) and Games

Workshop used similar commercial convergence strategies, with cross platform

franchises including role-playing games, war games, miniatures, novels and computer

games all based around linked fantasy worlds. Games Workshop has continued to

exploit a modified version of this cross platform strategy with some products licensed

to outside companies, and Games Workshop subsidiaries. The current *Warhammer*

Fantasy setting supports a war game, line of miniatures, novels published by Black

Library, a role-playing game published by Fantasy Flight Games, a fanzine published by

Warpstone, and a MMORPG by Mythic Entertainment; whilst previous products have

included both other tabletop games and computer games.

This movement between media is an industrial process with successful

products licensed to different platforms to take advantage of customer interest. Just as

genres need to adapt to different media, so do products. Not all of the observed

movement between platforms is legal, with both fans and companies potentially

infringing copyright to produce their own versions of products.

> The current licensing system typically generates works that are redundant
> (allowing no new character background or plot development), watered down
> (asking the new media to slavishly duplicate experiences better achieved
> through the old), or riddled with sloppy contradictions (failing to respect the
> core consistency audiences expect within a franchise). These failures account
> for why sequels and franchises have a bad reputation. (Jenkins 2006: 105)

This creates problems including conflict between fans, producers and copyright

holders. We will examine these issues, and look at the obvious desire of fans to have

more access to settings and genres that they particularly favour.

Aim of the Thesis

This thesis will develop the discussion that is occurring on transmedia

worldbuilding. Much of the scholarship on transmedia concentrates on storytelling,

where a single overarching narrative unfolds over several different media. The

intervention of this thesis will move away from the storytelling method used

elsewhere to consider how culture producers borrow the created world and its

aesthetics, narratives and fantasy worlds from other sources, including table-top role-

playing games and computer games. In other words the focus moves from the specifc

story being told to the background and shared values that the world has. A world can

contain multiple narratives whilst a narrative cannot contain more than a single

created world. The definition of worldbuilding is the creation of these background

shared values that the broad majority of those involved can agree on. This borrowing

happens because it enables them to use transmedia functionality to gain market share

from an already established audience who have a vested interested in, and enthusiasm

for, an established world. This borrowing happens around certain specific genres,

mostly fantasy, science fiction and horror. These genres are popular and particularly wide-ranging and so emphasise the possibilities of worldbuilding, making then good sources for multi-media franchises. This thesis will examine examples from these genres to examine what elements are translated to a new medium, and what is discarded. This examination will help explain how and why different media and settings work in the way that they do. It will also consider how critics and audiences respond to these transmedia products.

In order to approach this question we selected a number of case studies that would display the transmedia issues from the key transmedia genres of horror, science fiction and fantasy. The result is that each chapter offers a case study of a different transmedia product. We have chosen at least one example of each of horror (*Deadlands* and *World of Darkness*), science fiction (*Doom*) and fantasy (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) but in the case of genre, many products are hybridised, taking elements from more than one genre and an argument can be made that all of the genres in these case studies are in fact different forms of horror. This means in practical terms a single product may have more than one of these elements at a time. Each chapter uses a variety of techniques to understand the cases, including textual analysis, audience research, and some archive research. Textual analysis will be based on the examination of the artifacts created by the various producers for the games., this will include comments and reaction to the original item. From these techniques we draw out how the transmedia process worked for that specific fantasy world, which can vary in complexity and fidelity to the original source material.

One specific area that we will not be considering in this thesis is the Superhero genre. Although Superhero role-playing games appear to offer significant space for

transmedia worldbuilding the opportunities are very limited due to the nature of the characters. The reason for this is that inherently superhero characters, particularly in licesnsed products, differ wildly in power-levels which means that the gaming group have to accept one player as the star and the others are less important or sidekick characters. As a result this means that there are relatively few superhero tabletop role-playing games which have had significant levels of success, with sales sometimes being less than a thousand copies for a major hardback release from a well-known designer.

The thesis is structured into a number of chapters. Each chapter is a self-contained case study that looks at a particular fantasy world and this world can vary in its origins and direction of development as time progresses. Each chapter leads to the next chapter in terms of the examination of worldbuilding. To explore this process of transmedia my thesis looks at several examples in my chapters:

Fantasy Worldbuilding and Adaption in the time before the Internet

This is an examination of the history and development of adapation and worldbuilding in the tabletop role-playing games hobby. Starting in the 1970s it demonstrates how the developers of tabletop role-playing games were fans of existing fantasy worlds and used the new tools and techniques that the games provided to create adaptions of the literary worlds that they already loved.

It is evident that this adaption occurs early in the process of the development of the tabletop role-playing game and we will argue that the ability to create adaptions was the central driver of the development of the tabletop role-playing game.

This chapter provides significant background information for the chapters on *Deadlands*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The World of Darkness* providing the basic information on how the industry works in comparison to other creative industries and enabling the reader to understand the process of game development in a transmedia and adaption framework.

Failure, oblivion and monstrous success: the Western and role-playing games from *Boot Hill* to *Deadlands*

This chapter looks at an example of worldbuilding that was specifically created for a tabletop role-playing game and how its created world was successful compared to earlier attempts. The Western film has accumulated a huge quantity of narratives, characters and iconography that are associated with the genre. This chapter is an exploration of the commercially successful and long running table-top role-playing game *Deadlands* which argues that iconographic features from the western (in particular the spaghetti western) are appropriated by the game rather than common narrative and thematic elements, and these elements are then hybridized with narratives and features from science fiction and horror. This is due to the subject centred nature of many western narratives which tend be organised around notions of rugged individualism and the lone hero, whereas the priorities of role-playing games are to develop long-running narratives that have a wide range of roles for different individuals who, whether or not they form a group, must all have similar status and opportunities, a situation that the horror genre is well equipped to handle given its frequently association with groups under threat. The key to *Deadlands* success was its advanced use of hybrid genre worldbuilding which made it more flexible to the players than *Boot Hill* or other competing games.

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Buffy the Vampire Slayer and its official and unofficial games: Worldbuilding, control and the creative possibilities of play

This chapter looks at how an existing world, that of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, is adapted. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*has a detailed existing world that is highly attractive to gamers. This chapter is an exploration of the ways in which this television series was adapted into role-playing games, board games and computer games. Although the Buffy world can be translated, the format of the television programme cannot be recreated directly in any of these media. The new stories that these games make possible need to be able to be slotted into the existing Buffy narrative. Unlike *Deadlands*, which shifted material from a subject-centred form to a multi-player form, Buffy existed in multiple forms across multi-platforms. Originally developed as a television show that focused on the group dynamics of the 'Scooby Gang' as they battled the forces of darkness, the role-playing game maintains the universe or setting from the show, and maintains the sense of group dynamics but allows players to create their own characters and narratives. Alternatively the computer game, shifted from group dynamics to a far more subject-centred series of episodes, even though the player adopts a different character from the show in each episode. In other words, one may get to be different characters but there is no sense of acting as a team or within team dynamics.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer is an example of a licensed tabletop role-playing game which the tools to developers and narratives within the already existing world (or simply reuse ones that already exist, if the players prefer). With the combination of the examination of *Deadlands* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* we will have covered both

types of adaption that the tabletop role-playing game considers. We will then consider

how people – audiences and critics – react to these worldbuilding exercises.

Doomed from the beginning? First person shooters, subjective cameras and

intertextuality in the critical reception of the film adaptation of *Doom* (2005)

This chapter is an examination of how critics responded to an exercise in worldbuilding

as part of the development of the film *Doom*, which is an adaption of the computer

game franchise. An exploration of the ways in which materials were moved from a

game format into a narrative structured film, a process that shifted priorities form the

first-person-shooter format to a group narrative. In this case, the film introduces two

elements that are not present in the game, the majority of the film involves an

investigative narrative as a team is sent in to a base on Mars to find out what has

happened to the human colonists, and in which the film spends considerable time on

character development to make the members of the team worthy of the audience's

investment. In short the film shifts from the individual focus of the first-person-shooter

to the group focus on the team. It also shifts from the simple goal of surviving the

maze and its monsters to diagnosing the threat and resolving the problem. Moreover

these changes and the narrative priorities came to a head in the critical reception of

the film and particularly its use of the subjective camera. As a first-person-shooter

game *Doom* was highly immersive, however when it became a film it lost this feeling of

immersion despite exploiting the same point-of-view technique. Many critics felt the

first person sequence in the *Doom* film did not work because of the very different ways

in which the subject camera operates and produces meaning within the medium of

film. The first-person view in gaming embodies feelings of control and identification

with the character, while in film it signifies a sense of voyeurism and lack of control.

The same technique had fundamentally different meanings in the two medium

because of their fundamentally different relationships to narrative and character.

Copyright, association and Gothic sensibilities: *Underworld* and the *World of*

Darkness

This chapter examines the fan response to the appropriation of the *World of Darkness*,

a world created by White Wolf and heavily copied in the *Underworld* film franchise.

After the release of the film *Underworld* fans debated whether it was a genuine

expression of the *World of Darkness* role-playing game setting and the gothic-punk

genre. Fans felt that there was a perceived similarity between *Underworld* and *The*

World of Darkness. This similarity provoked debate among fans about the gothic and

how the film diverged from the game. An important issue for debate among this

audience was 'look and feel', something that is intangible and hard to define, unlike a

narrative or character. These fans appeared to feel that they had a lot at stake when a

world is transferred between different media. In particular, their creative input into

the role-playing game through activities such as character creation and chronicle

development gave them a sense of ownership over the game setting that doesn't

happen in other media. This sense of ownership superseded that of the game company

in fan's opinions. They also were more clearly fans of the setting, rather than fans of

the producing game company, desiring more products with a similar setting, however

they were produced. This debate became particularly important because White Wolf,

the makers of this role-playing game, felt this market-place confusion was detrimental

to their business and they sued Sony over *Underworld*.

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Plushies, Carl Cthulhu and Chibithulu : The Transformation of Cthulhu from Horrific Body to Cute Body

This is an example of what happens when the underlying background and created world is stripped away from a particular character. HP Lovecraft's Mythos is a well established horror world that many writers, artists and other creative professionals have contributed to. One element, the character of Cthulhu, has been extracted and transformed from literary device into cute merchandising and humorous comics. This merchandising process has created something purely visual from the non-visual short story, and removed all context and narrative from the character that were important to making it horrifying. In the comics the character is given completely new stories, which are unrelated to the original short story. The character then only has meaning for those who recognise him, and for those who are unfamiliar with Cthulhu, the toys are just cute and quirky artefacts. As a product, without any context, these images of Cthulhu may not fulfil the needs of fans to interact with this world. These merchandising forms of Cthulhu use the stylistic language of cute, but they are still potentially horrific because they are also grotesque, meaning that perhaps Cthulhu has not moved so far from his horror origins after all.

Chapter 1: Fantasy Worldbuilding and Adaption in the time before the Internet

Introduction

This chapter demonstrates how worldbuilding and the adaption of worlds has taken place in tabletop role-playing games from the 1970s onwards. It is essential to understand that in the complex history of tabletop role-playing games adaption and worldbuilding has been intergral to the entire hobby. There is an argument to be made that the hobby, which has had millions of people involved, is based almost entirely around the desire to create and adapt worlds and that this drive is present from the start of the hobby and continues to this day.

This fan-based work predates the Internet by a considerable margin which is significant as to date most of the discussion is about how individuals and groups of fans use the Internet to communicate their ideas and adapt their chosen hobbies to support their new fan focus. As a result the debate since the mid 1990s has emphasised their use of the Internet rather than consider that the Internet is simply extending what has already gone before.

Early work by Constance Penley (1991, 1992) pre-dated the widespread popular use of the Internet and looked at the issues that fans faced in the pre-Internet age. Her work focussed on the 1980s and the tools available to *Star Trek* slash fans at that time, particularly their use of technology:

> The slashers (...) are constantly involved in negotiating appropriate levels of technology for use within fandom. The emphasis is on keeping the technology accessible and democratic. (Penley 1991: 141)

Penley describes the process of publication and distribution of fan fiction in the 1980s as:

> truly a cottage industry, done mostly in their own homes (or sometimes at work), all made a great deal easier, of course, by the advent of desktop publishing and cheap photocopying. Most of the zines and novels are spiral bound, often with varnished, strikingly illustrated covers, and contain many other graphics and drawings. (Penley 1992: 483)

The issues for early tabletop role-playing game designers and players the issues were broadly similar, even though the gender make-up was signicantly different. Unlike *Star Trek* fans however tabletop role-playing games could be made and sold without significant licensing issues. By the 1990s USENET and other communication tools were already in common useage among gamers, if not among *Star Trek* fans, but the argument that we are making is that this extended the scope of the usual activities, rather than replacing them.

We will argue that worldbuilding is the basis for the tabletop role-playing game and that the tabletop role-playing game industry as a whole developed from the desire of fans to have a standardised approach to interacting with worlds that they valued. This is a development in the examination of the tabletop role-playing games industry towards a more coherent model. We also present evidence that shows that the view that transmedia and worldbuilding are a new development is simply misguided and misses the point that such activities have been under active commercial exploitation for forty years.

Prior to the development of the tabletop role-playing game usually a single writer would create a world. Sometimes, as in the case of H.P. Lovecraft, they would allow other authors to link their work to the central created world but this was an exception and was only done between authors that were already in communication.

Tabletop role-playing games, on the other hand, were based around companies and players. The players were functionally volunteers and did not require the permission of another author to get involved – giving their time energy and ideas for free - and came to the task of transmedia worldbuilding as an act extending the world that they had a particular interest in. The companies were interested in providing product for transmedia world building that would sell sufficiently to finance further products.

Fantasy literature and the role-playing game

The key thing for early roleplayers was the drive towards developing the ability to play games in the worlds of literature that they had already enjoyed. Adaptations of existing worlds are a recognised aspect of the role-playing game industry and have been around since the earliest beginnings of the industry. Tosca summarises this:

> Tabletop roleplaying games are a hybrid entertainment form, part games part storytelling, mixing popular culture interests such as fantasy literature and wargames. They have therefore always been highly intertextual and convergent, at the beginning directly inspired by sword and sorcery literary worlds, and later expanding upon media universes drawn from film, television, comics, or computer games. (Tosca 2009: 129)

It is easy to demonstrate a transmedia link between fantasy literature and role-playing games, and we argue that tabletop role-playing games developed in the 1970s as a method of providing unofficial transmedia opportunities before the development of widespread merchandising that allowed the kind of creative play that these games made possible. It appears that there was a large and unsatisfied appetite for transmedia products in the fans' chosen areas which these games aimed to satisfy by providing additional storytelling opportunities. The reason for this link between role-playing games and fantasy literature is that the developers and players frequently both

read fantasy and played games and they therefore decided to consciously link the two activities.

The development of the earliest role-playing games demonstrates the level of transmedia drive that was present from the very beginning. Among the pioneers reading fantasy literature was a key hobby that was particularly noted among those who would go on to create and play role-playing games. As such the development of *Dungeons and Dragons* was heavily influenced by fantasy literature, especially *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55)*. The Lord of the Rings* had reached a wider audience after a copyright infringing American paperback version in 1965. This was the first time that *The Lord of the Rings* had been available in America in a form that was cheap enough for college students to buy. The link with literature reflected the growing interest in fantasy literature in the 1960s among Americans, particularly college students and hippies. Partly the success of fantasy literature was that, also for the first time, there was a broad middle-class with a widespread college education. The people reading Tolkien and developing games about it were highly educated, mathematically inclined and with sufficient free time to develop their own entertainment. As James F. Dunnigan, formerly the owner of classical war game company SPI noted:

> Geeks happened. Especially geeks who didn't think of themselves as geeks. The geek thing was all about education. What most people don't realise… is that the parents and children of the 1950s and 1960s were the first generations of what I call 'the overeducated'… The geeks needed something to entertain, to exercise that educated and developed mind. (Dunnigan 2007: 373)

The importance to players (casually nicknamed geeks by Dunnigan) of reading genre fiction, is emphasised in Fine's ethnographic study of role-players (and the role-playing games they played) in the 1970s. He states:

> Many gamers were avid science fiction and fantasy readers, who read what are called "space operas" or "swords and sorcery" fiction – fantastic literature of adventure rather than ideas. (…) Among the authors necessary for understanding these fantasy worlds the following stand out: Robert E. Howard (and his *Conan* series), Edgar Rice Burrows, Michael Moorcock, Jack Vance, H. Beam Piper, Gordon Dickson (*The Dorsai*), Larry Niven, and Robert Heinlein. (Fine 1983: 247)

The genre fiction mentioned by Fine as being important to these particular role-players in this specific period (1977-79) includes a number of pulp authors, major canonical science fiction writers and modern fantasy writers. An interesting omission, given that less than a decade had passed since the publication of *Dungeons and Dragons*, is J.R.R. Tolkien who had been so key to the development of the hobby which unified Fine's research group. It could be argued that Tolkien was no longer a marker for that specific group, while *Dungeons and Dragons* remained the pre-eminent role-playing game in terms of sales and brand recognition at the time. It may have gone without saying that it is likely that the players had read, or were well aware of, Tolkien's work, even so he is not identified as a critical figure for transmedia adapation among Fine's gamers. The attendees at GEN CON in 1974 were similarly representative of a wide range of interests:

> We were an odd mixture. The science fiction lovers, the early fantasy lovers – because that was in its inception at that time – and the historical people. (Laws 2007a: 23)

As a result of this eclectic mix of players, readers and historians, the drive towards gaming would start with something that they could all agree on, pulp fiction from a previous generation together with *The Lord of the Rings*, the latest fantasy literature. Fine's research is also confirmed by Ken St. Andre, another major figure in the early development of fantasy role-playing games, having created the alternative and very much simplified imitator of *Dungeons and Dragons*, called *Tunnels and Trolls* (1975).

St. Andre goes further, to suggest that fantasy fans want to role-play in licensed, rather than highly generic, worlds:

> We gamers are great fantasy fans. We read voraciously, and we have favourite books and characters in the literature. It is only natural that we should translate our favourite fantasy universes into gaming activities. (Schick 1991: 216)

This suggests that it is natural for fans to want to undertake transmedia activities. Henry Jenkins supports this view in *Textual Poachers* (1992), whilst concentrating on creative activities such as fan fiction which are in a similar category to role-playing games. As Ken St Andre comments, the issue is often one of translation, it is a conversion where the intention is to keep the same meaning. This enables the players of the translated world to bring the knowledge that they already have to the gaming table, creating a more faithful representation of the universe that they are fans of.

The choice of *The Lord of the Rings* over other fantasy settings for the development of the role-playing game; as well as the decision to ignore historical periods, particularly popular war games periods such as the Napoleonic or the American Civil War implies that the choices made for adaption were deliberately considered and developed in the 1970s. These development decisions were based upon literature rather than other hobbies such as film, television programmes or war games, all of which were popular among the early game developers. *The Lord of the Rings*, in many respects, set the template for fantasy literature for the future. In particular this template includes large novels in trilogies with fantastical racial groups, including elves and dwarves, having specific roles in the fantasy world. It could be argued that these standards remain in place, even for the most modern fantasy worlds such as Westeros, from *The Game of Thrones* (1996-) novels. In effect all fantasy novels published today are silently compared to *The Lord of the Rings*, in many cases

the advertising copy on the book makes it clear that Tolkien's work is the reference

point for which all others are to be judged.

The emphasis on providing as close a transmedia experience as possible for the

role-playing game player is clear in *Dungeons and Dragons* from the first edition,

termed 'Basic'. In this edition the fantasy races that the *Dungeons and Dragons* game

developers provided for their players were close and deliberate copies of those in

Tolkien's novels. *Dungeons and Dragons* included elves, dwarves and halflings

(originally called hobbits) in its player character options with the aim of encouraging

already enthusiastic players to play these specific races. This emphasis can be seen in

the number of options provided, the *Dungeons and Dragons* basic set provided seven

main character options, of which almost half were non-human, closely copying the

perspectives of *The Lord of the Rings* in which men are largely not focal characters. The

halflings, described as 'outgoing but not unusually brave' fit Tolkien's creations Frodo

and Samwise perfectly (Gygax and Arneson 1981: B10). It may be that this

development was expected by Tolkien who planned for future transmedia

developments of his original work: 'Tolkien perhaps foresaw this trend by telling a

friend in 1951 that he had planned to write a great mythology which would be

complimented by the work of "other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and

drama"' (Yates 1989: 65). Yates was writing as a member of the Tolkien society since

1972, having acted as both secretary and the editor of *Amon Hen*, the society bulletin,

at various times.

It was this direct transmedia basis that Tolkien foresaw from the start in

popular fantasy literature that helped make *Dungeons and Dragons* a success. As J. Eric

Holmes, editor of *Dungeons and Dragons Basic*, confirmed in 1981: 'without the

popularity of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, fantasy role playing would not have found the wide public it now enjoys' (Holmes 1981: 46). Holmes' connection between fantasy literature and the success of Dungeons *and Dragons* is confirmed by other writers from the same period. Steve Jackson (UK), was one of the founders of Games Workshop and importer of the first six copies of *Dungeons and Dragons* into the UK (Livingstone 1987: 16-18). He noted: 'why is it so popular? Partly because of the theme – Fantasy – which has gained an enormous following by the works of Tolkien, Moorcock, Howard and so on' (Jackson (UK) 1976: 9). These quotes from Holmes and Jackson (UK), written within ten years of the publication of *Dungeons and Dragons* (in 1974) show that the idea that the games were based on literature, specifically fantasy genre literature, is not a retrospective explanation developed after the fact - it represents the general understanding of those who were there when the games were developed. This early connection to fantasy literature can also be seen in the guests invited to GEN CON, an important annual gaming convention established by Gary Gygax in 1968 and which was, for many years, the main English language gaming convention in the world. In 1976, only two years after *Dungeons and Dragons* had been published, noted fantasy author Fritz Leiber appeared as the guest of honour (Laws 2007a: 30). From 1976 onwards fantasy authors would remain a fixture at Gen Con and similar events across America and in Europe. We are not left in any doubt as to what inspired early creators and they are open in acknowledging this debt, from the start role-playing games are intended as transmedia adaptions.

Fantasy literature very much defines fantasy gaming. Ken St Andre described the character types in his early fantasy role-playing game *Tunnels and Trolls* (1975) in such terms: 'first there are 3 types of characters: warriors, modelled after Conan the

Cimmerian; magicians, modelled after Gandalf the Gray; and rogues modelled after the Gray Mouser' (St Andre 1977: 11). Here we see Robert E. Howard's *Conan*, *The Lord of the Rings* and Fritz Leiber's Lankhmar novels referenced directly. It further suggests that the early generic fantasy games were created from a patchwork of inspirations including iconic characters and novels but what was lacking was a central narrative drive. There was, at that time, no idea of making a unified world; rather it was about cherry-picking the preferred options of the games designer and their players. As the games designer Paul Jaquays suggests:

> Most [game worlds] took place in an ambiguously generic westernised fantasy world drawn from a host of literary sources, such as The Lord of the Rings, Howard's Conan cycle, Fritz Leiber's tales of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, and Arthurian lore, with a sprinkling of Greek and Norse mythology to provide fantastic beasties. (Jaquays 2007: 261)

This would soon change as the developers became more sophisticated in their understanding of worldbuilding and transmedia adaption, which would see in the 1980s a drive towards both highly specific adaptations and highly complex and intricately detailed worldbuilding. In the case of world building this takes place over the course of many books both for obvious commercial value and the fact that a single book frequently does not have the space to provide the level of detail that the fans wanted. The 1970s game worlds were often minimalist in nature and therefore highly generic. Rulebooks and other support were extremely short, focussed on mathematical rules rather than background, and relied on a great deal of work and previous reading on the part of the players. This meant that many players were expected to develop their own game world, rather than using one that had been created for 'off the shelf' gaming. The first campaign world was Blackmoor, but this was not an official product and was the personal campaign world of Dave Arneson, one of the developers of *Dungeons and Dragons*.

Although originally inspired by genre fiction, game companies quickly began to create their own unique licensed worlds. These new settings in turn created their own fantasy novels in support of the new world. We can see that the drive for transmedia experience which began the tabletop role-playing game industry continued at a rapid pace and was further driven by the games companies' creations in a virtuous cycle of development, support and new development. One of the aspects of the new tabletop role-playing games was that their settings were often extremely intricate and detailed which enabled further creative development, in what would be the first steps towards what would today be called worldbuilding.

A recent example, *Eberron*, was developed by Wizards of the Coast as a new setting for *Dungeons and Dragons*. It began with a fan-based competition for the best fan-written game-world of one hundred or more pages, with a $100,000 first prize (Appelcline 2011: 291). The winning entry, developed by Keith Baker, formerly from Atlas Games, a small publisher who made very cheap *Cyberpunk 2020* and *Ars Magica* supplements, was subsequently developed for the market. *Eberron* proved to be successful both commercially and critically, winning the 2004 Origins Award for best game supplement. Keith Baker, employed as one of the editors, would deliver one core rules book, sixteen supplements and five adventures, effectively delivering thousands of pages of information on the world of *Eberron* into the hands of the players. Similar to many fantasy worlds, a map was central to describing the *Eberron* setting. It depicted a number of nations surrounding an area of wilderness, and as each new book was published, the nations and wilderness areas were given more detail, and fleshed out with characters, story ideas and hooks to inspire players and gamesmasters. Some of the detail could be considered to be largely extraneous such

as noting regional interests like dancing, but to a player whose character is from that

area they would find this detail useful in setting the tone of the character and their

homeland. *Eberron* was a product that was heavily inspired by other sources, as Baker

noted:

> I love both pulp and film noir, and I tried to instil the flavour of both genres into
> the one-pager. As for specific inspirations, well, the one sentence description
> was 'Indiana Jones and the Maltese Falcon meets Lord of the Rings,' and that
> holds true today. There aren't bullwhips and revolvers, but there is the same
> potential for conspiracy, mystery, and intrigue combined with high action and
> adventure, all set in a familiar fantasy world. (Appelcline 2011: 292)

Despite many years of worldbuilding it is clear that the basic building blocks are

ideas and images that fans are already comfortable with. Baker notes that it's a

familiar fantasy world, built on tropes that are already commercially successful.

Dunnigan, writing in 1981, appears to have already identified this:

> I think all good science fiction games do best when they come out of a created
> science fiction world, fantasy games too I think. They are both much better for
> having created a little bit of world, or a lot of a world, before the game itself is
> generated, and I think that's what makes a good game basically, good execution
> and good background. (Dunnigan 1981: 28)

In addition to having a detailed world, the setting must be designed to allow the

players the opportunity to develop their own characters and have a meaningful impact

on the game-world and its narratives. This is a critically important aspect of role-

playing game worldbuilding. The games designer Kenneth Hite details the

requirements for commercially successful worldbuilding in the role-playing game

industry:

> Commercial concerns tend to drive broader settings – those that support a wide
> range of character powers, types and abilities. Long-term campaigns (in games
> with rules for increasing player character power over time) work best if
> characters don't outgrow the setting's challenges, and if settings aren't too
> deadly for beginning player characters at first. (Hite 2009:69)

Eberron, with its varied and detailed game-world enabled a wide range of adventures to take place and this helped it to become commercially successful.

Eberron is not the first game-world, and it represents the culmination of nearly thirty years work in the role-playing game worldbuilding field. The first fully developed, original game-world was *Empire of the Petal Thrones* (also called *Tekumel*) (1975), up until that point non one, including TSR, had fully codified a game world and this had a significant impact on the approach that game developers take to this ever since. Unlike other contemporary games, it was not a copy of an existing world, however what *Empire of the Petal Thrones* did was provide the building blocks for showing how a complex game world could be described, and 'this was at a time when D*ungeons and Dragons* could be said to have no setting' (Appelcline, 2011: 8). The information that *Empire of the Petal Thrones* provided included detailed descriptions on the main cultures and histories of the 'Five Nations', interspersed with discussions of national costume and architecture, military styles and laws. Unlike most other role-playing games which tended towards north-western European knights and castles imagery in this period, these were heavily influenced by South Asia and Mayan styles and history.

This highly detailed game-world was the result of nearly four decades of work by its author, M.A.R. Barker, a professor of South Asian studies, as he developed the world including its languages for players to enjoy. As part of the world building for *Tekumel* M.A.R. Barker developed a language called Tsolyáni based on Urdu and Mayan, complete with all the items that a normal language would need for learning it – a primer, a grammar book, dictionary, and pronunciation guides. This level of detail is immense and moves the image of the game from one of play to one of a player beginning serious preparation to emigrate. Tolkien did similar levels of work on his

fantasy world, including the creation of fantasy languages, although Tolkien's novels proved to be more commercially successful than M.A.R. Barker's role-playing game.

Despite this highly detailed world, *Empire of the Petal Throne* was not commercially successful. In part this was because the game was extremely expensive in comparison to other products on the market, at between two and five times the price of its competitors. Appelcline estimates that the boxed game would cost around $100 today (Applecline 2011: 8). A secondary reason for its lack of commercial success may have been its radically different and unfamiliar fantasy setting. Even so *Empire of the Petal Throne* has proved to be something of a 'games-designers game', remaining in print until 2005, moving from publisher to publisher as time progressed. This is a remarkable feat for any game and it makes *Empire of the Petal Throne* the second longest lasting fantasy role-playing game, purely on the strength of its game world rather than its player base.

As well as the complex world building that was typified by *Empire of the Petal Throne* and *Eberron* the games industry also looked at direct development of highly specific adaptations. These role-playing game adaptations start soon after the most generic products such as *Dungeons and Dragons* have begun their movement towards specific settings, such as *Forgotten Realms*. These adaptations would include early and highly specific games such as *Call of Cthulhu* (1981), *Middle Earth Role Play (MERP) (1984)*, *Elric* (also called *Stormbringer*, 1981), *Indiana Jones* (1984) and *Conan* (1984). Such games would be, if not common, a regular occurrence in the games industry with some small companies such as Leading Edge Games having a business model based on purchasing the rights to produce blockbuster film role-playing games such *as Bram*

Stoker's Dracula (film 1992, game 1993), *Aliens* (film 1986, game 1991) and *The Lawnmower Man* (film 1992, game 1993).

A third type of adaption, the deliberate nod towards other areas of a fan's activities within the central area of another created world can be seen in Games Designers Workshops' *Traveller* (1977). *Traveller*, a space opera science fiction game, was originally released without a setting but quickly gained a created world based around the social class tables provided in the original rules. Because the rules included social ranks for knights, counts and dukes the created world became an empire, a vast omnipresent, if hardly omniscient, human dominated (although there are several human races from the racist Solomani to the long-lived Vilani) Imperium. The Imperium, at 11,000 worlds, was too big to detail although an early attempt was made to map it with the Games Designer Workshop product *The Atlas of the Imperium* (1984). This simply provided basic maps of the main gaming area, the fans however took it one step further by attempting to detail all of the worlds in the Imperium. The response to this vast collection of fan activity by Games Designers Workshop was interesting in that it attempted to organise the fans by supporting groups such as the History of the Imperium Working Group, which was led through the use of the company magazines *Journal of the Travellers Aid Society* (1979-84), replaced by *Challenge* (1984 to 1997).

The Imperium, under the input of the fans, developed quickly. By 1984 the main adventuring area – the Spinward Marches had been fully developed with official releases detailing the various alien or unusual human races that live on the borders of the Imperium. It is here that the fan activities blended with Traveller. Within the Spinward Marches is a small star-nation called the Sword Worlds. This was a deliberate

call back to the H. Beam Piper novel *Space Viking* (1963) which is based in the Sword

World, with the heroes' homeworld being the capital of the Traveller nation. In

addition other famous Tolkein swords are referenced within the Sword Worlds with

the planets Sting (named after Bilbo's sword), Anduril (Aragorn's sword), Narsil

(Elendil's sword) and Orcist (Thorin Oakenshield's sword). This creates a reference for

players that are aware of Tolkein, even though there is no intention for the space

opera game itself to become Tolkeinesque.

Today the work of mapping the Imperium and the other nations around it has

remained a popular fan activity for *Traveller* players that want to create and share

their creations. This has become, over time, and increasingly fragmented activity as the

various *Traveller* games and off-shoots which include *MegaTraveller* (1987) and

Traveller: The New Era (1993) have increasingly split the fan-base. *Traveller* fans have

invested vast amounts of personal time to detail the universe despite the original

intention of the author, which was not to do this:

> I found I had a reluctance to detail every possible fact about the Traveller
> universe. Game Masters and players should have the freedom to create what
> they want (or need) as they adventure. (Marc Miller, quoted in Applecline 2011:
> 54)

The drive to make a tabletop role-playing game adaption is based on the idea

that this is simpler to develop compared to other adaption work. From a certain

perspective all that is required to create the game are its rules, game statistics and a

description which is often taken directly and verbatim from the books or films, without

the requirement for advanced art skills or other publishing abilities that books or comic

books require. It can be done with the facilities available to the average student and

this was as true in the 1970s as it is today. In addition there are frequently other

resources such as artwork which can be sourced from the rights-holder. In many

respects a tabletop role-playing game requires only one person to do this work,

particularly when we consider that the early 1980s and 1990s was the start of the

desktop publishing revolution, which makes it considerably cheaper than the creative

teams required for computer games. Mike Pondsmith, the founder of R. Talsorian

Games was part of this process and described it in 1994:

> When I started R.Talsorian [Games] eight years ago, the main barrier between the largest games companies (TSR) and the smallest (RTG) was typesetting and colour artwork. Both were expensive and required an enormous amount of specialised knowledge; I know, because at the time I was a type-setter and graphic artist. Typesetting also required a lot of specialised training and machinery. You couldn't do it yourself, because even a cheap machine cost forty, fifty thousand dollars. Within a year, laserprinting dropped the price of typesetting to less than a tenth of what it was. Within four years, the price of colour cover dropped to less than a quarter of before. By 1990, there was literally no difference between the kind of book that a huge company could produce and a small in-the-garage company could; all you needed was a cheap personal computer, some software, and a service bureau to run the typesetting out on. Which meant an explosion of new games companies could exist, separated from the big boys only by their imagination and advertising budget. R. Tal [sic] currently produces four-colour artwork, finished typesetting, complex artwork; even video productions in house. Our hardware costs probably less than a single old fashioned typesetting unit did eight years ago. We can already get a book printed by submitting the entire thing on disk to the printer; there are even printing presses that just eat your disk and spit the books out the other end. (Pondsmith 1994: 38)

This technical advance in home-based publishing has not stopped, prices have fallen

continually for advanced, colour publishing and the publishing process has moved on

to include print-on-demand and PDF copies of game books which have significant

advantages for small publishers. PDFs are sold either independently on sites such as

Drive-Through RPG or bundled with hard copies of game books. The books chosen for

transmedia adaption were often science fiction or fantasy, because it is easier to write

games based upon such popular, widely known and wide ranging novels which come,

in each case, with a ready build world for transmedia development and a built in

fanbase willing to purchase the new material. This gave these games a greater chance

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of commercial success compared to an original background because there was an existing potential player / customer base of individuals who were aware of how the new game world operated.

However, this early drive towards transmedia adaptation and worldbuilding came with a naive understanding of intellectual property. An important early example of this conflict is the *Dungeons and Dragons* sourcebook, *Deities and Demigods* (Ward and Kuntz, 1980). The first edition provided information about not only genuine mythological characters from a variety of pantheons, but also characters from H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos (Ward and Kuntz 1980: 43-48), Michael Moorcock's Elric novels (Ward and Kuntz 1980: 86-95) and Fritz Leiber's Lankhmar novels (Ward and Kuntz 1980: 96-104). Although popular settings among players, their inclusion was problematic for copyright reasons. Another company, Chaosium had already licensed both the use of the Cthulhu Mythos from Arkham House, and Moorcock's creations directly from the author. As a result of this copyright issue publication of this edition of *Deities and Demigods* was halted and a second edition omitting this material was published in 1981. This second edition still included Lahnkmar, but now with the permission of Fritz Leiber. From this incident we can see an early desire to play with material based on licensed creations and for companies to provide the rules to make this transmedia play possible. Before this point in time it was common to take the imagery of copyright works, but in the case of *Deities and Demigods* the drive had moved beyond recognisable imagery to providing full transmedia support for other people's works. TSR as an organisation were unrepentant about the handling of *Deities and Demigods*, particularly when their own trademarks were involved, as when discussing *Tunnels and Trolls*. As Don Turnbull, head of TSR UK noted: 'anyway, that is

why we use trademarks in these pages - to protect TSR's property against thieves...

wouldn't you given similar circumstances, do your best to protect your own property

too?' (Turnbull 1983: 33). Given that this is written shortly after the *Deities and*

Demigods dispute there is a certain amount of hypocrisy here in that TSR had actively

undertaken what they considered to be theft when their own works were involved.

Not every product is available for license, and rarely as quickly as players and

fans may demand. This kind of adaptation has also had a significant influence on later

editions of the early games. For example *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* gained a

Barbarian class, which was very similar to Conan, without impacting on the Conan

license. The Barbarian appears in an early *Dragon* magazine, and is later made official

in the *Unearthed Arcana* supplement.

Both *Tekumel* and *Eberron* have novels as part of the overall worldbuilding

exercise. This is part of a broader symbiotic relationship between role-playing games

and novelisation books that developed with games and books feeding on each other.

Part of this is the suggestion from some commentators that role-playing games help to

keep some fantasy novels popular. The secretary of the Tolkien Society argued in 1989

that:

> From 1977, interest in Tolkienian fantasy might well have declined, if it hadn't
> been for the invention of *D[ungeons] & D[ragons]*, and its adaptation to
> computer games and solo game books. Although Gary Gygaz [sic] based *D&D* on
> the US *sword-and-sorcery* genre, many players brought [sic] the game because
> they wanted to role-play in a Tolkienian fantasy world. (Yates 1989:64-65)

This is probably an overstatement of the importance of role-playing to *The Lord of the*

Rings, particularly as the evidence from Fine is that by the late 1970s gamers had

moved on from Tolkien. However for games inspired by less popular authors, the

games may have been key factors in readers' continued interest, and instrumental in

keeping the works in print. Monte Cook suggests this was the case for H.P. Lovecraft's

work:

> It is likely that the [Call of Cthulhu] roleplaying game itself has become the major contributor to Lovecraft's enduring popularity, introducing new generations to his dark visions of cosmic horror. (Cook 2007: 42)

Again this may also be an overstatement, but the game company Chaosium have

played an important role in reprinting stories relevant to their game products by

authors such as Arthur Machen, August Derlath, Robert Bloch and Ramsey Campbell.

In addition a number of new authors working in the Cthulhu Mythos such as Dennis

Detwiller came out of the *Call of Cthulhu* role-playing game and Chaosium continue to

produce new anthologies of Cthulhu horror in the world of H.P. Lovecraft, and have

said that they consider the fiction produced to be canon in the overall Cthulhu Mythos.

The first of the gaming related fantasy novels, *Quag Keep* (1976), was written

by the Nebula award winning novelist Andre Norton, and set in TSR's *Greyhawk*

licensed setting (Laws 2007a: 34). TSR used an established and already popular fantasy

author to distribute the ideas and imagery that was associated with their *Greyhawk*

setting. Fantasy novels became an increasing part of the gaming industry because of

their commercial potential, from the willingness of both players and the general public

to buy generic fantasy literature. Here we see role-playing feeding fantasy literature

which is a reverse of the early days. Along with these licensed products, role-playing

also inspired some authors: 'in fact some of the locations, and creations, featured in

Terry's [Pratchett] Discworld tales first saw the light of day in his

D[ungeons]&D[ragons] campaigns' (GM 1988: 64). Also importantly, in addition to

using already established authors such as Andre Norton, the gaming industry's

production of fantasy novels supports new authors. Some of these such as R. A.

Salvatore, Kim Newman and Laurell K. Hamilton have become successful in their own right, going on to publish their own creations. Many of these role-playing setting inspired books entered the *New York Times* bestseller list showing that the books had an extensive and enthusiastic audience.

> We had a camaraderie, a sense we were doing something special, on the third wave of fantasy's popularity. The first wave was Tolkein, the second wave being Terry Brooks and the first *D&D* materials in the early '80s. The third went from *Dragonlance* to the launch of *Forgotten Realms*. (Laws 2007a: 98)

Whilst the original gaming novels were created from the games that authors had developed, or were created simultaneously as in the case of *DragonLance*, later gaming novels inspired the creation of additional gaming materials, creating a further cycle of transmedia storytelling from game to novel and back again. *DragonLance* turned the cycle into a unified approach, similar to the modern conception of transmedia franchising with the simultaneous release of the *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* published scenarios DL1 to DL16 (1984-1988) and the novels *Dragons of Autumn Twilight* (1984), *Dragons of Winter Night* (1985) and *Dragons of Spring Dawning* (1985) which were created during the playtesting period of the *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* scenarios and based, at least in part, on the experiences of the playtesting teams. It is now a typical part of a role-playing game to include specifically written short fiction and flavour text. This is something that has developed since the success of the formula in the White Wolf role-playing game *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1992). *Vampire: The Masquerade* was not the first role-playing game to include short fiction as later editions of *Call of Cthulhu* included the 1924 short story of that name as well as some of H.P. Lovecraft's poetry. What made *Vampire: The Masquerade* different was that the short fiction was new and directly provided for the game, rather than being the basis for the game.

The emphasis in the rulebooks is on reading, both for running the game and internalising the game-world. It must be noted that the average role-playing game book of rules often exceeds a hundred pages in length, with some rule books being considerably longer than that length. In addition it is normal for core rulebooks to be across several volumes, making the amount to be read several hundred pages. On top of this core reading requirement there are supplements which provide additional information in highly focussed areas and specific game materials called scenarios which are usually shorter in page count but often refer to information held in the core rules. This is a hobby which is about reading, either reading novels or reading rulebooks.

We have demonstrated that, from the first, tabletop role-playing games, such as *Dungeons and Dragons* were heavily inspired by fantasy literature and attempted to adapt it. However this development into an actual game was quite complicated, often far more so than many expected. Ken St. Andre suggests:

> The task of a game like *Stormbringer (*the roleplaying game based upon Michael Moorcock's Young Kingdoms world, especially the character Elric) is to transcribe the essence of someone's imagination into numerical and descriptive form so that it can be easily manipulated in the form of rules. The task of the gamers is to take those numbers and flesh them out in their own imagination, to recreate the storytelling experience in their own minds while playing. (Schick 1991: 217)

The key part of the adaptation of a novel into a role-playing is the provision of a consistent set of rules that define the world mathematically so that players can interpret the world in order to get a consistent outcome within their social circle. This requires that the developer understand both the world as described by the author, and the mathematical modelling required to enable players to get similar results at the gaming table. As such the foundation of the rules for tabletop role-playing games are

nearly always mathematical in nature and use probability to determine the likelihood of outcomes, often supported by a randomising element such as dice.

Since the development of *Dungeons and Dragons* and its subsequent publication of bespoke game-worlds there have been literally thousands of other game-worlds developed and published. A few game publishers have chosen not to support a single world, but to provide a game that can support all of the game-worlds at once, providing a set of core rules that can be used to play any setting the players may wish, sometimes with minor modifications to support particularly unusual or genre-specific settings. Among these are the *Generic Universal Roleplay System* (GURPS) from Steve Jackson Games, *Basic Roleplay system* (BRP) from Chaosium, and the *Savage Worlds* system from Pinnacle Entertainment. Each of the companies that provide these game systems also have specific game worlds that use these systems including *Call of Cthulhu* and *Deadlands*. These highly generic game products enable the company to sell outside of its core readership and so make additional sales of its main rules book. It may also encourage readers and player to purchase the system and setting specific materials.

Conclusion

It is certain that role-playing games and adaption are intimately linked. We have demonstrated through this historical evidence that tabletop role-players are very interested in fantasy literature and use the games they create to adapt the fantasy literature that they read. This interest extends to films and other media, and can often be both commercial and non-commerical in nature – not all adaptions are licensed and some are deliberately intended not to require a license fee. Further examples of this

will be discussed in the chapter on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* which will examine both

the licensed game and its unlicensed imitators.

The other drive in tabletop roleplaying games is the development of new

worlds such as the *Empire of the Petal Throne*, Traveller's Imperium and *Eberron*.

These are original to the tabletop role-playing game industry and show a level of depth

and creative drive that is the equal to any other created world with maps, languages

and political institutions being developed in great detail. This would become important

when we consider the relative success of the game *Deadlands* in the next chapter.

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Chapter 2: Failure, oblivion and monstrous success: The Western and role-playing games from *Boot Hill* to *Deadlands*

Introduction

This chapter will examine the Western and the Western tabletop role-playing game in the light of the previous chapter. Whilst fantasy, science fiction and horror games were involved in effective worldbuilding developing from existing texts and developing new worlds the Western tabletop roleplaying game was less successful in the marketplace. This examination is particularly important as the Western genre is one of the most important genres of the 20th century in film, television, and the novel, and so is common in discussions of genre in film studies. Despite this the Western has for the most part been poorly represented in tabletop role-playing games. Examining what made Western genre tabletop role-playing games succeed or fail is a critical part to understanding what makes a created world popular.

Partly the commercial failure of the tabletop role-playing Western game was a matter of timing as there was a declining market for the Western in all mediums in the 1970s and 1980s which is the time when tabletop role-playing was first developed. In 1984, with only two examples of the Western genre published, *Boot Hill* (1975) and *Wild West* (1981); *Imagine* magazine claimed that 'Western games are the apogee of the role-playing hobby' (Cowie 1984:38). Observation would suggest that Cowie was wrong in stating that these games were the pinnacle of role-playing, even in 1984. The games themselves were not popular compared to the fantasy games produced by the same publishers. Neither were they critically acclaimed for their advances in game design or setting. It is significant that no more games in this genre would come along in the next decade; it is also significant that according to Neale, in 1984 Westerns had a zero market share at the cinema (Neale 2002:29).

When Schick stated in his detailed 1991 survey of published role-playing games that 'the paucity of Western systems shows how little interest the genre holds for people under age 30' (Schick 1991:400) there were still only the same two Western genre games available that Cowie would have seen nearly a decade earlier, adding credence to Schick's argument and undermining Cowie. Schick's argument also coincides with demographic research into the dwindling audience for traditional film Westerns (Neale 2002:28). It would be fair to say that in 1991 the Western role-playing game genre was quite dead. Nevertheless since 1996 there have been developments in both game design and the Western genre in film that makes this area of enquiry worth examining. This chapter will examine *Deadlands: The Weird West* (1996)*,* a game that appears to be the exception in the Western role-playing game genre. *Deadlands* appeared at a time when the Western genre film had begun to reinvent itself and also begun to exert its influence over other media such as the comic book. The game was a critical and commercial success, leading to a transmedia franchise which included war games, board games, and a collectable card game.

Whilst *Boot Hill* had been released into a generally declining market for the Western; *Deadlands* arrived just after a revival of interest in the American West in the early 1990s. Neale sets this into a context of 'an equally expanding and equally plural "New Western" culture, a culture that included novels, paintings, vacations, lifestyles and a revitalised country music scene, as well as a new wave of revisionist academic histories' which Western genre films fed into (Neale 2002:32). This revival included the high profile Oscar-winning films *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *Unforgiven* (1992), along with examples such as *Posse* (1993) *Tombstone* (1993), *Wyatt Earp* (1994), *Maverick* (1994), *Bad Girls* (1994) and *The Quick and the Dead* (1995). In addition the Western returned to television with the seven Emmy Award winner *Lonesome Dove* (1989) and *Return to Lonesome Dove* (1993) (Neale 2002:33). This Western revival also included comic books with new stories for *Jonah Hex* (1993 and 1995) and the original story, *Preacher* (1995-2000). This suggests that by 1996 there was sufficient new interest in the Western for a new Western-based game to be successful. In addition Hensley

ensured *Deadlands* would have a wider fan-base through genre mixing, particularly the inclusion of what are perennially popular horror elements. It appears that the role-playing industry approved of the idea and awarded *Deadlands* two Origins Awards (an important industry award) for 1996, Best Role-playing Rules and Best Graphic Presentation of a Role-playing Game, Adventure, or Supplement. In the same year *Six Guns and Sorcery*, which was also set in the American West, won Best Role-playing Supplement. 1996 then was a clearly a year in which Western genre games came to the fore. *Deadlands* brought a number of new elements to the gaming table which had not been seen before and it concentrated on the Western genre.This chapter will examine, through using the example of *Deadlands*, what changes the Western genre undergoes when it is translated from film to role-playing game and consider what genre tropes need to be added to make a Western genre game a success.

Genre, the role-playing game and generic hybridity

Genre is an important way of understanding and discussing novels, film and television programmes. For the most part, the same recognisable genres appear across many different media, but it becomes necessary for them to undergo changes to work and be successful. In the case of role-playing games limited academic research has been carried out on their use of genre. However it is important to note that role-playing games use many long established genres heavily , but the creators sometimes need to use them very differently to other media. In addition role-playing games often combine different genres to create hybrid genres to make more successful products. *Deadlands* will be used as a case study to understand how genre is established in role-playing games, which are outside of the visual medium of film. Role-playing games are heavily influenced by film genres so we will briefly consider film genre theory.

Early genre theorists' attempted to pin down film genres into easy definitions. The Western was considered to be the quintessential popular American genre in the 1960s and 1970s (Hutchings 1995: 62). As a result it was central to much early genre theory as it was believed that if the Western films could be categorised accurately this would enable the

lessons learned in that process to be applied to all genres. This attempt to pin down genre was done by looking at key features of the films. The iconography, narrative and themes were closely considered to show how each film slotted neatly and permanently into a specific group of films. Ryall defined genres as: 'patterns/ forms/ styles/ structures which transcend individual films, and which supervise both their construction by the film-maker and their reading by an audience' (Neale 2000: 12). In addition genres 'guarantee coherence by institutionalising conventions' (Neale 1980: 28). These wider definitions of genre, although helpful, did not make it easier to classify individual genres. As a concept genre is used not only by academics, but also viewers and the film industry but these groups all understand and use it differently. Ryall points out that this widespread use of the term genre is problematic because it suggests 'that the concept of genre is clear and well-defined, non-problematic' (Neale 2000: 17). However 'there are no uniform criteria for genre delimitation – some are defined by setting (like Westerns), some by profession (like legal dramas), some by audience affect (like comedy), and some by narrative form (like mysteries)' (Mittell 2004:8). If different genres are not defined in the same way then it seems difficult to identify genres and apply genre theory to films.

These attempts to find defining similarities between films to make them fit into a genre creates problems. Differences are erased through repressing the differences across time, between nations and within a period. Mittell suggests that 'instead of asking what a genre means… we need to ask what a genre means *for specific groups in a particular cultural instance*' (Mittell 2004:5). In the case of horror for example Jancovich argues that 'most academic histories include films that were not originally produced or consumed as horror films and are defined as horror only retrospectively' (Jancovich 2002: 7). With this problem in mind it may be better to consider films in more specific groupings that can better take into account the cultural and production backgrounds, for example Altman's suggestion to think in terms of cycles rather than genres (Altman 1999).

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In the case of role-playing games there is some evidence of generic cycles. However the role-playing game industry is quite different to the film industry and, the creation and publication of games can take considerable lengths of time. It may be more appropriate to talk about role-playing games in terms of cycles of particular types of rules set. These rules cycles might include d6 games (which use six-sided dice and rules created by West End Games, appearing in the late 1980s), d20 games (which use a twenty-sided dice and released as part of Wizards of the Coast's Open Game License, appearing in the early 2000s) and Theme Rich games. Theme Rich games appeared in the late 1990s and *Deadlands* with its heavy emphasis on its Western theme falls into this cycle. This reviewer comments on the theme rich aspect of *Deadlands*:

> It was fairly unique and well integrated; it took a common "Western" feeling pastime and made it a game mechanic. My Fate chip [sic] were even stored in a western style hat, it was hard not to be taken in by the ambiance the game drew to itself just by the props of the game itself. (Daniel 2006)

He comments that the richness of the theme encourages players to extend the game further and gives a great deal of pleasure. However as Tosca argues this referencing of other cultural artefacts demands a great deal from players, in particular a good understanding of the genre used and the cultural artefacts that are being used as touchstones:

> This kind of on-the-fly collective storytelling is highly demanding and requires that players are knowledgeable of the setting, genres, and themes evoked in each particular game so that their utterances and actions will make sense and be productive in story-advancement terms. Imitation, quotation, parody, and other forms of meta-textuality are common strategies to fill the storytelling gaps. Since the narrative occurs largely in participants' heads, any reference to an external diegetic world will help give shape to their imagination and steer it in the right direction. (Tosca 2009: 129)

For those who are unfamiliar with the Western *Deadlands* may be incomprehensible and any references made to film, television programmes or video games will not enrich gameplay for these players.

Generic hybridity is not a new concept in films and is used to describe films that use multiple genres. Neale notes that 'many Hollywood films – and many Hollywood genres – are

hybrid and multi-generic' (Neale 2000: 51). This is not a new strategy, with different genres

being used to appeal to different sectors of the audience (Neale 2000: 251). The Western film

has always blurred genre boundaries. For example films such as *Seven Brides for Seven*

Brothers (1954), *Paint Your Wagon* (1969), *High Plains Drifter* (1973) or *Breakheart Pass* (1975)

included additional non-Western generic elements from genres such as the musical, romance,

horror and spy thriller. However the early Western role-playing game, *Boot Hill*, did not blur

genre boundaries, particularly into areas such as romance or comedy. In part this was because

the game designers were trying to be a faithful representation of a kind of traditional Western

that was almost wholly imagined. Genres such as romance were excised because they were

considered problematic by early role-players who were mostly male and did not want to

explore such feminised genres. *Deadlands* largely ignored *Boot Hill*'s issue of traditional versus

non-traditional Westerns by concentrating solely on one type of Western, the Italian Spaghetti

Western. It reinvigorated the moribund Western role-playing game by using the generic

hybridity of the 'New Western' revival films combined with the imagery and style of the

Spaghetti Western to help achieve its success. Rather than being a straight historical recreation

of the West, it blurred the boundaries between the Western, alternative history, horror and

steampunk genres. One reviewer described it as: '*Wild Wild West* meets George Romero with

a whole lot of gunslinging, flamethrowing, and hex casting from atop a steam wagon' (Taylor

1999). This description is very similar to Collins' description of *Back to the Future III* (1990) as

'John Ford meets Jules Verne and HG Wells' (Collins 1993: 243). This suggests that *Deadlands* is

an even better example than *Back to the Future III* of Collins' concept of a genre of eclectic

irony. This genre 'is founded on dissonance, on eclectic juxtapositions of elements that very

obviously don't belong together' (Collins 1993:242). This is certainly a fair description of

Deadlands which mixes a wide range of disparate elements. In addition Collins implies that the

reason for *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *Back to the Future III*'s (1990) commercial success

was that, although very different in tone, they worked on a generic level to become more than

just a Western. *Dances with Wolves* did this by creating a Western that was also an "authentic"

historical film while *Back to the Future III* became an eclectic Western hybrid. *Deadlands* does something similar to these films by straddling several genres to become more than just another Western game like *Boot Hill*. However the difference between role-playing and film is that *Deadlands* players are able to privilege whichever elements appeal most to them within their games. Unlike like a film, this can reconfigure the text completely, though players' choice of characters, adventures and settings. In other words, although the rules may be eclectic, players' games may not be. We argue that it is this hybridisation within *Deadlands* that enabled the transmedia franchise game to be so successful, when every previous attempt was a commercial failure.

The rest of this chapter will consider how role-playing games exhibit genre through their use of language, artwork, setting, characters and game mechanics. *Deadlands* will be examined through three of the genres it is considered to represent, the Western, horror and steampunk.

The Western Deadlands

There are a number of elements in *Deadlands* which are designed to emphasize the western genre and create mood. These can be split into props, the use of language, graphic design and game mechanics. In role-playing games the game mechanics are important because these determine how the fictional world functions while the game is played. Different mechanics can emphasise different elements and make the game a more convincing recreation of a fictional world.

The text of *Deadlands* heavily uses language to evoke the western setting. This begins with renaming the gamesmaster as the 'marshal' and the players as the 'posse'. Not only is this generically appropriate, it also sets up a logical relationship between the players and the gamesmaster. In Western stories the marshal sends out a posse to deal with a problem and in *Deadlands* the players are dealing with a scenario set up by the gamesmaster. In addition the

skills are named using a western style dialect, such as Shootin', Filchin' or Lockpickin'. Filchin' is the game's dialect slang for sleight-of-hand and picking pockets. It is not a normal game convention to use slang for skills rather than a simple phrase to describe the skill. *Dungeons and Dragons*, set in a fantasy Medieval Europe, uses 'Pick Pockets' to describe the relevant skill which is a statement that is less evocative of a particular time and place. The idea behind this language is to encourage the players and marshal to use Western-style language to create an appropriate mood. The language style used in *Deadlands* is all encompassing. The introductory fiction is written in the same dialect style:

> Howdy, Marshal. Thought ya might be getting' up soon. Those tinhorns that planted ya didn't realize you wuz already dead. Reckon they'da done a lot worse to yer sorry carcass if they'da known better. (Hensley 1996: 5)

This was changed in the latest edition, *Deadlands: Reloaded* (2006), to be consistent with the publisher's *Savage Worlds* line. However the text still features descriptive words such as 'amigo', 'hombre' and 'cowpoke'; and there are disadvantages named 'tenderfoot', 'grim servant o' death' and 'slowpoke'. Part of this may have been meant ironically but the net effect is to remind that players throughout of the flavour and style of the old West as seen through the *Deadlands* prism.

Many role-playing games use dice to add a random element and *Deadlands* is no exception, using a selection of four sided, six sided, eight sided, ten sided and twelve sided dice. However it also uses playing cards and poker chips as part of the game mechanics which add directly to the western theme. Unlike the unusual selection of dice, playing cards and poker chips are easier to obtain in an American mall. They add to the Western theme because card games and gambling are common motifs in Westerns, with characters visiting saloons, depicted playing poker or operating as gamblers (Buscombe 1993:126-127). An interesting comparison can be made with *Castle Falkenstein* (1994) which also used playing cards as a game mechanic. However unlike *Deadlands*, playing cards replace dice completely in *Castle Falkenstein* and are used to determine the results of actions. Similarly to *Deadlands* playing

cards are used to emphasize *Castle Falkenstein*'s setting, but in *Castle Falkenstein* the setting is

European Victorian, rather than American Western.

In *Deadlands* playing cards are used for two game mechanics. The first is to determine

when and in what order characters will act in a fight (frequently termed 'initiative'). This is

done by dealing playing cards to each player for every character involved in a fight. Shane Lacy

Hensley explains the design:

> The cards were used for initiative because we wanted a system that let most characters
> act once or twice in a round, but a gunslinger could get off several shots. But how do you
> do that without the gunslinger going first and killing everyone first? Our system lets you
> break down a combat into tiny fragments of time and simulates the fast action of a
> Spaghetti Western without making everyone else sit around and watch the gunslingers
> all night. (McNutt 1999)

It is important to note Hensley's intention to emulate the action in Spaghetti Westerns, rather

than the *Boot Hill* approach of including all types of Westerns from the 1920s to the then

present day. The Spaghetti Western has a number of genre conventions which *Deadlands*

supported in its character creation and visual but there is also an intention to create a

balanced game mechanic that will give all players a chance to participate in a fight. The driver

of the choice of the Spaghetti Western as the basis for *Deadlands* was its inherent propensity

to violence as a method of conflict resolution, which is common in most tabletop role-playing

games. Hensley specifies this connection to Spaghetti Western genre films further in interview:

'*Deadlands* was really designed around the movie [The Outlaw] *Josey Wales*. We wanted every

bullet to feel really chunky. … We always called it chunky combat' (Blessing 2006). Within

Deadlands there are three specific rules that are designed to closely emulate the Spaghetti

Western. Firstly to make the game more brutal and dangerous during melee combat the

strength of the character becomes a multiplier. In effect this makes items such as knives

exceptionally deadly and reflective of the kind of damage that these weapons are shown to do

in Spaghetti Westerns. Secondly the damage caused by firearms is stepped which means that

the more skilled a character is with a gun, the more damage they can do to an opponent

before the location they hit on their opponent's body is taken into account. A superb shot is more likely to hit the 'Noggin' (head) or 'Vitals' (abdomen), making their skills even more dangerous. This again reflects the high levels of skill that gunfighter characters exhibit in Spaghetti Westerns.

Thirdly, formal duels between characters are exceptionally lethal. By taking on the formality of a duel the character loses the option to reduce the damage they take by using fate chips. As in the Spaghetti Westerns the first character to hit their opponent has a greater chance of survival. There is the option to intimidate the opponent to make them flee by giving the most intimidating character additional cards to create a poker hand.

The second and more interesting use of playing cards in *Deadlands* is by magic users to cast spells. This element is particularly well integrated into the background which is a critical part of worldbuilding making the world of *Deadlands* unique and therefore special to the players. In addition it is a method of changing a traditional Western archetype, the riverboat gambler, to something that is closer to a magician. Magic users in *Deadlands* are called 'Hucksters' and to get magical effects must deal with demons called 'manitous'. Within both the setting and the game mechanics this is represented by a poker game. The player is dealt a minimum of five cards and must make a poker hand for their spell to succeed. Better poker hands produce more powerful effects. Within the setting this is depicted as a spiritual poker game against a Manitou, and if the Manitou is defeated, the character can force it to carry out a magical effect. The huckster originates in a piece of original art for the *Deadlands* game; 'Allan Nunis ... did a quick comic book page showing a gambler throwing cards as he cast spells. That became the huckster' (McNutt 1999). The visual concept of the huckster also bears a resemblance to the Marvel character, Gambit, a Caijun or deep South character from the Mississippi bayou like many traditional riverboat gamblers, who transforms playing cards into energy missiles which are thrown at his enemies, which would be immediately obvious to most fans of *Deadlands*. The illustrations featuring huckster characters often show their magical

playing cards crackling with energy (Hensley 1996: 72). The character is a revision of a traditional Western archetype, that of the gambler. The huckster character is also mapped onto historical characters, most notably 'Doc' Holliday (1851-1887), who is revised into a powerful sorcerer. The setting's 'magical grimoire' is Hoyle's Book of Games, a book detailing card games (and spells) that is available in mundane shops.

The poker chips, referred to as 'fate chips', act as variable value bonuses, determined by the colour of the chip. These are distributed to players at the start of each adventure and as a reward for good role-playing. They are also a reward for eliminating certain supernatural monsters. Shane Lacy Hensley explains his reason for fate chips as: 'I wanted a tangible reward for role-playing and solving the adventure' (McNutt 1999). The poker chips provide a sense of using an ability or power that requires the fate chips because the player has to physically return the chip back into the pot. This also adds a tactile element to the game, with the feel and sound of the chips moving back and forth.

The emphasis of the link between the Western and *Deadlands* did not stop at the gaming table. Ten cheap supplements were released at $5 each by Pinnacle under the heading of 'Dime Novels', harking back to the nineteenth century sensational fiction books (Buscombe 1993: 109-111). Each of Pinnacle's Dime Novels featured a short story and an adventure based on the short story. The Dime Novel concept helped players get adventures cheaply, and it offered a unique format to the people interested in the game. Adding fiction to a game line was common at the time and both Games Workshop and Wizards of the Coast ran successful publishing ventures for game-related fiction. The Dime Novels provided a limited amount of space for additional worldbuilding but at the same time it assisted Pinnacle in expanding their range by combining a known old West phrase and the item that they hoped to market. This was more easy to do with the Dime Novels than with other additions to the *Deadlands* world such as the card game, pog game, boardgame or miniatures which did not have a link to the old West's naming styles.

In many Western genre films women, black and Chinese characters are portrayed as second class citizens at best or simple property at worst. They are often poorly characterised and excluded from an active role in Western narratives. *Deadlands* dismisses this convention and allows female, black and Chinese characters to participate fully in the adventures. This makes the game far more like the a-typical Western *Johnny Guitar* (1954) and revisionist Westerns such as Posse (1993). This is made possible by the alternative history that Hensley wrote for *Deadlands*. The position of women is described as:

> In the world of *Deadlands*, the Civil War has dragged on for more than 16 years – from 1860 to the present date of 1876. Manpower in both the North and South is at an all-time low. This is good news for women because now many of them are able to fill roles they could only dream about before. (Hensley 1996:29)

This opens up female characters beyond the widow, homesteader or school teacher available to players of games such as *Boot Hill*. *Deadlands* and *Deadlands: Reloaded* emphasise this through the illustrations which feature women in a range of roles. In the *Deadlands* archetypes women are depicted in stereotypically male roles such as sheriff, Pinkerton, gaucho and pony express rider as well as the more feminine nun and saloon gal [sic]. *Deadlands: Reloaded* continues this in its illustrations. Similarly strong characters are rare, even in modern Westerns. This is despite the varied and important roles that women took on historically in the opening up of the West, with figures such as 'Poker' Alice Ivers (1851-1930), Belle Starr (1848-1889) and Annie Oakley (1860-1926) as inspiration for feminine characters in *Deadlands*. The range of roles that *Deadlands* allowed female characters encouraged a wide female audience for the game (Blessing 2006). Just as women are emancipated, so are blacks:

> By 1879, racism is becoming a thing of the past in the Weird West. … Just as in the real West, folks are willing to overlook the colour of a person's skin in favor of the content of his character. Bottom line: just as in our own lives, bigoted and outright racist attitudes are the province of villains and the shamefully ignorant. (Hensley and Flory 2005: 31)

Just as *Deadlands* features no game mechanic disadvantage for playing a woman, black characters are similarly encouraged. Black characters are featured in the classic *Deadlands* archetypes, such as the soldier, cowpoke and the black woman pony express rider. However

they are not well represented in other illustrations. *Deadlands: Reloaded*, although explicitly

making a stand against racism, features only two illustrations of black characters.

Problematically both of these are illustrations of voodoo practitioners, rather than a range of

occupations. This is arguably a retrograde step, which excludes blacks from daily life. (Hensley

and Flory 2005: 31 and 96) A group who are far better represented are the Chinese. Chinese

characters in Westerns have little precedent. The few Chinese that appear are non-speaking

extras such as Rooster Cogburn's landlord in *True Grit*. This is despite the historical importance

of Chinese labour in the construction of the railways and their considerable success in

California. Classic *Deadlands* features several illustrations of Chinese characters, in a selection

of activities. An interesting illustration shows a Chinese character on a horse fighting a

skeleton with a Chinese lance (Hensley 1996: 68). *Deadlands: Reloaded* expands this to include

a large number of illustrations and magical kung fu which is the equal of shamanism or hex

magic. The background describes a Chinese railroad company run by a warlord who controls

much of California from his capital Shan Fran (San Francisco). In effect Chinese characters are

still minorities, but they have the ability to liberate themselves at will. *Deadlands* allows the

Chinese to have more of a voice than most Westerns. Although fantastical, *Deadlands*

addresses the voice of women and minorities who are frequently ignored in traditional

Western narratives. It allows players to explore the forgotten true stories of women ranchers,

black cowboys and Chinese workgangs in a non-threatening fantasy setting.

A useful comparator game in this Western genre is *Boot Hill*. It was the first Western

genre game, published in 1975. *Boot Hill* is a very early role-playing game and it is easy to see

its origins as a skirmish wargame. The first edition emphasized combat to a degree far beyond

its contemporaries and characters could only have skills that were useful in a gunfight or a

brawl. One reviewer describes *Boot Hill* as 'half wargame, with the bulk of the rules for

simulating gunfighting. Like a wargame, *Boot Hill* came with a tactical map and counters, and

these were almost a necessity for combat' (Dushay 2004). The second (1979) and third (1984)

editions of *Boot Hill* expanded the rules to cover more situations but it retained its combat

heavy focus. Player characters were encouraged by the rules to be gunslingers that were frequently outsiders. To try to counteract this, the TSR house magazine, *Dragon*, published a set of tables which allowed players to randomly generate a background occupation.

> The idea is not to reflect the population, but to recreate the mix of character types you find in westerns- especially the older westerns and new old-style westerns (respectively typified by *Rio Bravo* and *Breakheart Pass*), where there was more variety of characters; newer westerns tend to divide the population into three classes: cuties, killers and bodies. (Crabaugh 1981: 30)

However because the tables attempted to recreate Western films, there was a distinct bias (a more than a 40% chance) for male characters, towards a range of gunslingers such as gunman, bounty hunter, deputy marshal, cavalryman and deputy sheriff. To a degree this is representative of many Western films. This problem was exacerbated by published adventures which lined up a series of opponents to fight rather than a selection of townsfolk to interact with. For example the description for *Lost Conquistador Mine (BH2)* (1982) asks 'Can you elude Indians, claim jumpers, bandits, and vigilantes and find the lost gold of Mendoza?' There seemed to be few options for characters who wished to interact peacefully in the suggested setting. This was recognized in *Dragon*:

> Everyone seems to have a place in *Boot Hill* except the player-characters, who have to be content with a place on Boot Hill. They wander in out of nowhere, invariably causing much havoc and then moving on. (Crabaugh 1981: 30)

The adventure modules frequently place the player-characters outside of society and this along with the emphasis on violent characters makes it hard for players to make an emotional investment in it. Crabaugh's description of *Boot Hill* bears a fair resemblance to Wright's descriptions of the typical characters of the Professional Western:

> Professionals must be outside of society – they cannot afford to be in society, or they would lose their effectiveness. … They are men only interested in earning their pay. They are not interested in churches, schools, love, and moral progress. (Wright 1975:115)

Wright places no value judgement on the characters of the Professional Western unlike Crabaugh who sees the professional player-characters of *Boot Hill* negatively. As outsiders the

player-characters have no attachment to the townsfolk or town. Instead the players are encouraged to treat them as a means to an end, solving problems through violence rather than negotiation.

Boot Hill placed a heavy emphasis on 'the greatest gunslingers of all time' and provided players with rules and outlines for them in the game and in supplemental articles in *Dragon*. Occasionally these were historical figures such as Billy the Kid or Wyatt Earp, although it is difficult to determine if these rules are for the historical figures, or the characters in fictional accounts of their lives, such as *My Darling Clementine* (1946), *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* (1957), and *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973). However wholly fictional characters were far more frequent. In his article Hammack justifies this choice as:

> Movies and television have given us some of the greatest gunslingers of all time. Their abilities are far superior to those of any gunfighter who really lived, or so it seems from the old shows. (Hammack 1980: 44)

The rules were sufficiently complete that players could play the characters from a variety of films and television programmes. Throughout Hammack's article most of the statistics provided for these 'greatest gunslingers' are for the actor rather than the character. The stars chosen for Hammack's article are from a broad timeframe and even include silent stars such as Hoot Gibson, Tom Mix and William S. Hart. Clint Eastwood is presented as Clint Eastwood, rather than 'the Man with no Name' or Rowdy Yates. However the statistics presented are those of 'the Man with no Name' – a perfect killer with skills such as Accuracy and Speed at a human maximum of 100, who is never surprised and with a number of additional skills relating to shooting on horseback, on the move or against fleeing targets. The text goes into further detail:

> Clint Eastwood did appear in westerns on TV, but his career wasn't in the "star" category until he played the "man with no name" character in the "Dollars" movies. Definitely one of the finest gunfighters ever seen, Eastwood has a Gambler Rating of 12. (Hammack 1980: 45)

Just as the statistics provided are attributed directly to Clint Eastwood, the text attributes the

abilities of 'the Man with no Name' to him as well. *Boot Hill* emphasised the idea that the actor

and the character they portray are interchangeable. However it is unreasonable to suggest

that the actor can do all the feats that their characters can. A reviewer suggests that: 'it wasn't

so much a simulation of the real West, but a way for players to enter the television series and

movies of the genre' (Dushay 2004).

Like most TSR games *Boot Hill* was well supported and had little competition from the

similarly themed competitor, *Wild West* (1981). However despite *Boot Hill*'s availability and

unique generic placement, it had limited commercial and critical success:

> BH4 continues the honourable tradition of *BOOT HILL* modules. They don't get the
> recognition they deserve because the game is not that popular. (Cowie 1984:38)

Although not widely popular on release, *Boot Hill* continues to have a number of die-hard fans

who like its sparse rules. After *Boot Hill* the Western genre does not reappear until 1991 with

GURPS Old West. This was part of the GURPS range of historical sourcebooks. If *Boot Hill* blurs

the line between fiction and reality then *GURPS Old West* falls firmly into the realistic with

some additional fictional touches:

> Authentic equipment lists outfit your character from head to toe. Carefully researched,
> detailed background information lets you build an adventure or campaign with highly
> realistic detail, or simply an adventure with Western flavour. … This book is the Old West
> as it should have been – liberally tinged with romance and heroics. But there's little need
> to stray from the truth. Nearly every Hollywood myth has its counterpart in history.
> (Dupuis 2000: 4)

The authors are careful to distinguish between historical reality and fiction: 'a number of

western clichés are covered, along with discussion about the reality the clichés misrepresent. If

you want to use all the clichés of a 50's B grade western, you will find most of them here'

(Barnett 2001). However GURPS is not a widely run system and the success of *Old West* was as

limited as *Boot Hill* but without the die-hard fans. Neither game hybridised the Western

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material with other genres, although they were deeply influenced by popular culture versions

of the American West, rather than the historical American West.

The Horror Deadlands

Horror is a popular genre for role-playing games. Hite suggested in 1999 that 'almost a

third of all role-playing games bought in America are horror games of one kind or another, and

all the others can be run as horror games' (Hite 1999:3). This appears to be backed up by

Wizards of the Coast's market research into the adventure game industry. Their research

showed that of the role-players questioned, 25% played *Vampire: The Masquerade*, 15%

played *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*, 8% played *Call of Cthulhu* and, most relevantly for this

chapter, 5% played *Deadlands;* each month (Wizards of the Coast 2000). These four games are

widely acknowledged as having an important horror component. *Vampire: The Masquerade*,

Werewolf: *The Apocalypse* and *Call of Cthulhu* are long-standing entries in the horror genre. In

addition *Vampire* and *Call of Cthulhu* are considered to be genre defining in the context of

horror gaming.

Problematically many horror games rarely use the word 'horror' to describe

themselves, making them hard to identify. For example the second edition of *Vampire: The*

Masquerade waits until page 17 before it states that it is 'a storytelling game of personal

horror' (Rein-Hagen 2000: 17). While *Call of Cthulhu*, although having used a variety of terms

in its publication such as 'a role-playing game of Horror and Wonder' and several logos using

the word horror, tends to hide this vital information on the back of its publications.

Just as it is difficult to pin down a universal definition of horror in film studies, it is

similarly difficult when looking at role-playing games. Game author Phil Masters defines horror

in role-playing games as:

> 1. The set of motifs and images associated with that body of fiction, mostly in the gothic
> mode, which is usually called "Horror". Examples of these motifs include vampires, other

> undead, werewolves, haunted houses, more or less gruesomely unpleasant things happening to characters, and characters experiencing intense fear. (…) This article will refer to this approach as "Motif Horror".

> 2. Actual stories, plots, and scenarios that are scary, worrying, and horrifying. In other words, that which leads to the players experiencing fear. This approach will be termed (…), "Emotional Horror". (Masters 1995)

This definition is backed up by Kenneth Hite who sums it up more neatly as horror defined by content and horror defined by intent (Hite 1999:7-14).

This is a somewhat simplistic definition of horror. If one takes the concept of motif horror within role-playing games it could include far more than it excluded. Classic horror motifs such as ghosts, skeletons and demons are common in fantasy games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* but have no automatically horrific undertones. This could be because, as Schick suggests: 'few of us are scared nowadays by conventional monsters like werewolves and Transylvanian vampires – they've been cheapened through overuse in movies and comics, and they've become more funny than scary' (Schick 1991: 238). Fantasy based games do not use game mechanics to make these conventional horror motifs have a fear effect on player characters. As a result, if such motifs were the only aspect taken into account it would be easy to describe most role-playing games as part of the horror genre. By comparison Robin Laws argues that:

> Horror, especially in cinematic form, thrives on outright stock characters. This may be because it's a disreputable genre catering to hacky creative instincts, but more likely its use of stereotype goes hand in hand with the social/ sexual anxieties the genre so often dabbles in. (Laws 2007b:7)

Here the suggestion is that conventional monsters are required for horror gaming because they are used as metaphors for other issues.

Masters argues that games such as *Vampire: The Masquerade* fall into a third category, that of Romantic Horror:

> *Vampire* casts the PCs, not as opponents of the supernaturally horrific, but as its embodiments. Nominally, in the game designers' intention if not in typical play, they

remain victims of the horrific elements of the game-world - but their victories are defined, not by any success in defeating monsters, but by the extent to which they come to terms with, and even learn to use, their own monstrous natures. (Masters 1995)

This sense of romance comes across in the way the game was marketed. The cover of *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991, 1992, 1998) uses a picture of a red rose on green marble, which implies more of a sense of romance rather than horror (Appelcline 2011: 217). Of these categories *Deadlands* falls more into motif horror with a limited amount of emotional horror. Similarly to the Western genre, horror can be inserted into role-playing games in different ways, from horrifying motifs, gruesome descriptions, and frightening stories.

The gruesome is commonplace in fantasy games such as *Middle Earth Roleplay* (1985) and *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* (1986). Both of these examples provide a table of descriptions of violent deaths to be used when a player makes a successful combat roll, with a score which is well above average. In *Middle Earth Roleplay* these descriptions are often tinged with humour, for example: 'Blast annihilates entire skeleton. Reduced to a gelatinous pulp. Try a spatula' (Charlton 1985:77) and 'Disrupt chest. Lungs and heart explode from impact. Very messy' (Charlton 1985: 77). By comparison *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* is somewhat more serious in its gruesome descriptions:

> Your blow smashes through the arm and into the chest, caving in one side of the ribcage. The arm is completely destroyed, and blood showers yourself and your opponent. Your opponent collapses dying almost instantly from shock and bloodloss. (Halliwell, Priestley, Davis, Bambra, and Gallagher 1986: 341)

This style of description continues in the latest 2005 edition of *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*. This is not horror as Masters describes because although over the top and bloody, it is unlikely that either the characters or players would experience fear. These are descriptions of wounds that usually happen to the player-character's opponent, rather than something the player-character should fear for themselves. The gruesome is less exploited in *Deadlands*, particularly in descriptions for game play. Hensley does use humour, for example in the rules describing the effects of combat: 'If a character's wounds reach the maimed mark in his guts or noggin,

he's kicking buckets, pushing daisies, buying farms, and the like' (Hensley 1996:101). The

detailed descriptions of wounds are mostly absent in *Deadlands*, possibly because of an

assumption about players extra-textual knowledge garnered from film and television

programmes.

The concept of 'emotional horror' is more successful for role-playing than the concept

of 'motifs'. Masters says that it is something which 'leads to the *players* experiencing fear'; in

specific terms, not the *characters* (Masters 1995, my emphasis). This is important because,

although the characters can be seen as avatars of the players; the players do not necessarily

experience the emotions that the characters do. A gamesmaster would consider an adventure

successful if the players as well as the characters had experienced emotions such as fear:

> The greatest of these [questions] is, perhaps, the problem of whether any game which
> achieves significant emotional identification of the players with the protagonist P[layer]
> C[haracter]s can ever allow itself the degree of threat - the willingness to destroy
> (fictional) bodies and spirits - that may be demanded of "true" horror. (Masters 1995)

In addition, if it is the plots that are 'scary, worrying and horrifying' (Masters 1995) then Hite is

quite correct to suggest that: 'any game can be a horror game, if the gamesmaster is trying to

scare the players and if the players are willing to be scared' (Hite 1999:3). In part this comes

down to the social contract between the games master and the players. However the

presentation of a game can help set this social contract because it is this that helps to create

an expectation in players about the game:

> Just as the reader of any form of fiction enters into a sort of contract that sets the
> conditions for her willing suspension of disbelieve [sic], every role-playing game
> comes with a similar, implicit contract that formulates what is expected of the player
> to make the package work, whether this is "Epic role-playing in legendary Britain"
> (King Arthur Pendragon 1992), "A Storytelling Game of Personal Horror" (Vampire,
> 1992) or "A grim world of perilous adventure" (Warhammer 1995). (Dormans 2006)

The presentation, including art and tagline are an important way for players to identify what

genre of game is being offered up. It is important for players to be able to identify the genre

and have some familiarity with the genre, as Hite argues:

> The players should be able to understand the setting and its common assumptions. This privileges settings based on popular culture stalwarts such as Star Trek, or settings based on widely read but not particularly differentiated genres such as vampire fiction; in other words, settings with mass appeal or at least a mass knowledge base. (Hite 2009: 70)

Problematically not all role-playing games are clear about the kind of game that they promise. This is particularly the case with older games, some of which just use the generic descriptor 'a fantasy role-playing game'. *Deadlands* used the tag-line 'Spaghetti, with meat!', which in part refers back to the Spaghetti Western. However the 'meat' part of the tag could suggest excess, or meat in a more literal sense, such as dead bodies and violence.

One way to identify what belongs in the horror game is to use Carroll's definition for 'art-horror' (Carroll 1990). The key aspect for Carroll in art-horror is the monster. He describes this monster as:

> Impure and unclean. They are putrid or mouldering things, or they hail from oozing places, or they are made of dead or rotting flesh, or chemical waste, or are associated with vermin, disease, or crawling things. They are not quite dangerous but they also make one's skin creep. Characters regard them not only with fear but with loathing, with a combination of terror and disgust. (Carroll 1990: 23)

These monsters are not only physically and spiritually unclean, but unpleasant enough to force a physical reaction in the characters. Similar blood curdling descriptions are not uncommon in role-playing games with many games providing extensive bestiaries of monsters.

One of Hensley's original creations for *Deadlands* was the 'harrowed' which could fit into the category of unclean monsters. These are dead bodies animated by demons called manitous. However these are not like typical zombies, because if the original 'owner' of the body can gain control over the manitou, they are largely free-willed and retain the personality and skills that they had whilst they were alive. In addition they gain magical powers from the manitous and cannot die unless shot in the head. Harrowed are the most visibly supernatural characters that players can use. Unlike the huckster or shaman they are far more noticeable,

particularly when they retain the wound that killed them. The harrowed are described in the text:

> Undead characters always have pale, sallow skin. They don't rot, since the manitous inside them sustain their bodies with magical energy, but they don't exactly smell like roses either. (Hensley 1996: 164)

This description fits in with Carroll's description of an unclean monster, with their rotting flesh animated by demons. The harrowed presented in the *Deadlands* background, who are mostly based on historical figures such as Wild Bill Hickok and Abraham Lincoln, often have reasons for coming back from the dead.

Although the supernatural occurs in Western stories, the zombie is not a common feature. There are few Western films that overtly feature this kind of supernatural character. However it is possible to see similarities in the characterisation of the Stranger in *High Plains Drifter* (1973) and the Preacher in *Pale Rider* (1985). Many identify the Stranger as either the town marshal, returned from the grave, or a spirit of vengeance working on the marshal's behalf. In comparison the Preacher is identified as an angelic saviour called by the community's prayers to take revenge for them. Both the Stranger and the Preacher are depicted as supernaturally skilled in comparison to their opponents and able to know the unknowable. The harrowed in *Deadlands* are similarly supernaturally skilled but unlike the Stranger and the Preacher, will not vanish when their vengeance is realized. It could be argued that these films were inspiration for the harrowed in *Deadlands*.

However although many games may provide such descriptions of unclean monsters the rules do not necessarily follow this through. For the monsters described in role-playing games to fall into Carroll's definition of the art-house unclean monster the rules must force a physical effect on the player characters to represent the character's 'revulsion, nausea and disgust' (Carroll 1990:22). The rules should make the characters display: 'abnormal, physically felt agitation (shuddering, tingling, screaming….)' (Carroll 1990:27). In horror games such as *Call of Cthulhu*, characters who see horrifying things can be subject to psychological effects

including madness. This has an in-game effect which makes them less competent. Those who

successfully battle the unclean monsters become stronger mentally, and gain sanity.

As characters defeat supernatural monsters in *Deadlands*, they do not gain sanity as in

previous games. Instead they gain 'grit' named after the John Wayne film, *True Grit* (1969). In

True Grit the character Rooster Cogburn who is supposed to have 'grit', is described by the

Sheriff as 'a pitiless man, double tough, fear don't enter into his thinking.' As characters in

Deadlands defeat supernatural creatures they become increasingly immune to fear. This image

of the one-eyed lawman recurs in *Deadlands* in the artwork and in the overall storyline relating

to the one-eyed Texas Ranger, Hank Ketchum (Hensley 1997: 93) (Hensley and Flory 2005: 25).

True Grit seems to be important to Hensley because it appears in another of his Western genre

role-playing games, the *All Flesh Must Be Eaten* supplement, *Fistful of Zombies*. This

supplement features the US Marshall Henry Hawk Coghill, dealing with a zombie outbreak. The

character is described as having the advantage True Grit: 'the son of a bitch is so tough he

won't die until he has had his way' (Hensley 2003: 70). This advantage allows him to ignore

wounds until his goal is completed. The character's name is similar to Rooster Cogburn and the

illustration of the character shows a man with an eye patch and similar build to John Wayne

(Hensley 2003: 65).

Art has been crucial in conveying *Deadlands'* horror theme. Hensley claims the setting

was inspired by 'a picture of an undead Confederate by Brom' which was used as the cover to

a book for *Vampire: The Masquerade* and *Wraith: The Oblivion* (1994), called *Necropolis:*

Atlanta (1994) (McNutt 1999). There are two clear thematic elements that Hensley draws from

the picture, the American Civil War period and the undead. The artist Brom was used to

illustrate the cover of classic *Deadlands*, using a similar style of illustration.

The comic book character *Jonah Hex* is an important, if never directly mentioned,

influence on *Deadlands*, particularly its more horrific generic elements. Jonah Hex represents

one of the few Western characters in comics that is still being published. The character first

appeared in *Weird Western Tales* in 1971, a supernatural horror Western comic from the early 1970s, before getting his own title, *Jonah Hex* in 1977. He is a Western anti-hero who is a deliberate outsider, dressing in a confederate uniform long after the end of the American Civil War. What appears to be a key source for *Deadlands* are the Jonah Hex revivals in the 1990s, particularly *Two Gun Mojo* (1993) and *Riders of the Worm and Such* (1995). These were written by Joe R. Lansdale, who mostly writes in the horror, Western and suspense genres. Not only are they generically similar, there are elements common to *Deadlands*. *Two Gun Mojo* featured zombie gunfighters, including the undead Wild Bill Hickok; whilst *Riders of the Worm and Such* added steampunk style super-science. These elements create Western hybrid genre comics, similar to the genre constructed in *Deadlands*. From 2005 Jonah Hex has appeared in a monthly DC title called *Jonah Hex,* returning him to a gritty and spaghetti Western based historical world, and seemingly removing him from his horror roots. The Hex property was further exploited in a 2010 film, *Jonah Hex*.

A horror role-playing game that was contemporary with *Deadlands* was *Werewolf: The Wild West* (1997), a historical setting for White Wolf's *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* (1992). The original setting of *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* emphasizes the horror genre and, while *Werewolf: The Wild West* used a Western background; it was deliberately positioned as a supernatural horror game. This is confirmed by a reviewer:

> Frankly, if you own *Werewolf: the Apocalypse* and are willing (and able) to sit through "*Dances With Wolves*" a couple of times, you'll be equally equipped to run a Savage West chronicle. *Vampire: the Dark Ages* really explored the Medieval setting and reworked the rules to do this; *Werewolf: the Wild West* has some cosmetic alterations, but is basically the same game in a different century. (Rowe)

The Western elements are superficial and do not drive the stories that the game tells, whilst there is very little within the game system that is additional for the new Western setting. Compared to the depth of gameplay and Western influenced props that *Deadlands* uses, *Werewolf: Wild West* is not recognizably Western. However the generic legacy of *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* forced the designers to stick with the horror genre for *Werewolf: Wild West*.

World of Darkness fans would not accept any game using this setting without an element of horror. *Deadlands* by comparison had no history, so Hensley could choose to emphasise genres in different ways. The publisher of *Deadlands* deliberately courted the players of other games such as *Werewolf: The Wild West* through their Dime Novels. Some of the Dime Novels were written as crossover books for these thematically similar games. The adventures in these Dime Novels were written to appeal to both *Deadlands* players and players of the crossover game. *Adios A-Mi-Go* crossed over with *Call of Cthulhu*, and featured Mi-Go, while the *Under a Harrowed Moon* trilogy allowed werewolves similar to those in *Werewolf: Wild West*. In addition they featured conversion notes between the featured games. In the case of *Werewolf: Wild West* they provided additional material for a game that was poorly supported by its publisher because it was not successful by the standards of White Wolf's other games.

The Steampunk Deadlands

Along with the Western and horror elements, *Deadlands* also engages heavily with steampunk. Cherry and Mellins describe steampunk as ' a relatively minor science fiction subgenre,' which was 'given the name steampunk in the late 1980s, and remain[ed] largely unnoticed by the mainstream media until the mid-to-late 2000s' (Cherry and Mellins 2012: 6). Steampunk is loosely based on Victorian and Edwardian speculative fiction authors such as Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, and Edgar Rice Burroughs. At its heart is the development of science fiction ideas within Victorian society. By using the combination of a staid society which is ironically undergoing massive technological and societal changes, this genre allowed exploration of many of what are considered to be cyberpunk themes, without having to explain a new world to an audience. The technologies introduced into this setting, are 'organized around advanced science and technology anachronistically retrofitted onto a Victorian-themed – and thus often steampowered – world' (Cherry and Mellins 2012: 6). As a result this makes the genre 'a particularly visual form of fiction' (Cherry and Mellins 2012: 6). Although steampunk appears easy to recognise Hantke argues that the genre is poorly defined:

> In the absence of a coherent and systematically developed genre definition, the term "steampunk" tends to look somewhat ragged around the edges when critics begin to search for features that everyone can agree constitute essential characteristics. (Hantke 1999)

However this is no different to the majority of genres in film and television studies which are loosely defined and change radically over time. The genre has its origins in popular fiction but 'due in a large part to [its] visual quality, it has translated easily into other media such as film, television, comic books and video games' (Cherry and Mellins 2012: 6). Film examples include *Wild Wild West* (1999), *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003), *Back to the Future III* (1990), and *Jonah Hex* (2010). Although many of the novels are set in Europe, the American West is a common location in film examples. The term steampunk is also retroactively applied by some modern advocates to earlier works, with novels such as H.G. Well's *The Time Machine* being considered to be steampunk. However there are distinct problems with this. When writers such as Verne and Wells were working, the genre was considered to be that of scientific romance and the stories were science-fiction stories looking to the future rather than retro-futuristic fantasies about the historical past. However it is possible to see steampunk elements in different media before Jeter coined the term in 1987. For example earlier films such as *The Time Machine* (1960) and *The Assassination Bureau* (1969) could also be considered to be steampunk, along with the television programme *Wild Wild West* (1965-1969).

Role-playing game companies quickly saw the possibilities inherent in steampunk and incorporated it into games, as a major or minor element. The first role-playing game to explicitly link itself to steampunk was the 1988 game, *Space 1889*. In this game the players take on the roles of English gentlemen and women who are extending the frontiers of the British Empire to new lands on Mars. In many respects it resembles a colonial fantasy of India in space, with the Indians replaced by civilised Martians and the Afghans by wild Martians. The game summarises itself as:

> Everything Jules Verne *could* have written. Everything HG Wells *should* have written. Everything A. Conan Doyle *thought of* but never published – because it was too fantastic. … Science fiction role-playing in a more civilised time. (Chadwick 1988: back cover)

This relates the game very directly to its source material, Victorian speculative fiction.

One of the key facets of steampunk 'is *allohistory,* an alternate history to that which we know as "reality". (...) Its versions of the nineteenth century diverge from ours, because in them certain critical events happened differently' (Miller and Van Riper 2011: 87). The technological advances described in steampunk stories frequently have effects that are minor, but subtle, or world-shaking in their implications. Hantke argues that:

> Steampunk constitutes a special case among alternative histories, a science fiction subgenre that postulates a fictional event of vast consequences in the past and extrapolates from this event a fictional though historically contingent present or future. (Hantke 1999)

These alternative histories usually revolve around the effects of advanced technology in Victorian society. For example the key steampunk text, *The Difference Engine* (1990) by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling revolves around the creation of working models of Charles Babbage's difference engine. This has lasting effects on society in the novel, including the way the availability of working credit card systems changes the handling of commerce.

This alternative history can also impact real historical figures. Hantke argues that 'steampunk takes the textuality of history for granted. It does so when it mixes historical figures and fictional characters or when it fictionalizes historical characters' (Hantke 1999). For example in *Space 1889* part of the alternative history revolves around General Gordon (1833-1885) who was killed at killed at Khartoum. In the game-world Gordon is evacuated, along with the remnants of the garrison, by British airships (Chadwick 1988: 166). Similarly *Deadlands* incorporates many historical figures, such as Wyatt Earp, 'Doc' Holliday and Abraham Lincoln, but refashions them into characters that fit with the setting.

Technology is also important to the steampunk genre. Hantke argues that 'in adopting the name "steampunk," that is to say, in choosing the steam engine as the most appropriate icon of the past to describe itself, it makes technology its main focus' (Hantke 1999). The technologies depicted in steampunk texts 'look like Victorian technologies because they, like the technologies that defined the real Victorian era, are the products of the individual scientists and inventors and the nascent research-and-development laboratories of the era' (Miller and Van Riper 2011: 87). Miller and Van Riper go on to suggest that:

> Western steampunk in television and film uses fantastic images of technology-out-of-time to create critical commentary on the idea of progress and the inherent tension between "civilization" and nature. (Miller and Van Riper 2011: 85)

The combination of location and futuristic technology open up possibilities to explore different issues about technology and how we relate to it. *Deadlands* includes many advanced technologies such as steam-powered helicopters, flamethrowers, and advanced steam-powered Gatling guns, all available to the characters by mail-order from the mad scientists, Smith and Robards.

Another game that should be held up for comparison with *Deadlands* is *Castle Falkenstein* (1994). *Castle Falkenstein* was similarly a hybrid genre game, combining the Victoriana, fantasy, steampunk and alternate history genres. It built on the generic legacy of *Rifts* and *Shadowrun*, which combined high technology cyberpunk with fantasy. Rather than miniaturization and microchips, the science in *Castle Falkenstein* relied on Victorian science using steam power. The fantasy elements include fairies, dragons and magic, combined with an alternative history where fictional characters such as Captain Nemo exist and the denizens of fairyland affect British government. There are a lot of generic similarities between *Deadlands* and *Castle Falkenstein*, although the elements are used differently. *Castle Falkenstein*'s European setting was supported by *Six-guns and Sorcery* (1996), a Western supplement to the main game.

Conclusion

In conclusion we examined the Western genre for a number of reasons. Foremost of these is that the Western is one of the first film genres to be studied, and it is perhaps the most studied film genre. We chose to look at *Deadlands* because it is both a Western and a Horror game, with its own unique developed world. We have demonstrated that *Deadlands'* success over other Western games is based on a range of unique factors to the game. The most important of these is its status as a hybrid genre game which allows players to take into their games whatever elements appeal most to the players. This generic hybridity allowed players to challenge traditional ideas about the American West and how it can be understood:

> Once destabilized by the exotic, fissures develop in the terrain of once-unchallenged values and ideals inherent in the traditional Western, creating space for questions, commentary, and critiques. (Miller and Van Riper 2011: 90)

It is clear therefore that other games, whilst equally Western based, were constructed in other ways. This enables us to contrast the worldbuilding methods that games designers use from the same root stock, the Western. Some use horror extensively such as *Deadlands* or White Wolf's *Werewolf: The Wild West*, whilst others prefer a more fantasy-oriented approach such as *Castle Falkenstein*. In other words this environment enables us to consider how worldbuilding works when we can see that the designers take similar elements and get remarkably different results. In some respects the Western genre has provided more problems for games designers than benefits, as games such as Boot Hill have failed to develop significant game worlds despite coming from the Western. The requirement for success in developing a Western based game is the addition of another genre which enables effective worldbuilding to provide the flavour and stories that the players demand.

The Western film, like the Western role-playing game had developed into a genre which allowed a number of different approaches and enable a more sophisticated audience to appreciate the setting. In addition *Deadlands'* equal opportunities stance, allowed female and

ethnic minority characters a full range of options widened the game's appeal to groups who do not traditionally role-play. The game's designer, Hensley, created a special playing experience through the addition of genre appropriate props that added excitement to mundane tasks like resolving actions. These, together with a revival of interest in the Western helped *Deadlands* achieve a success that *Boot Hill* did not and *Deadlands* appears to have outlasted the films that gave it its initial impetus.

Whilst the world of *Deadlands* was specially created for the tabletop role-playing game and so was controlled at all times by the authors this is not the only kind of game world that can be built. As we will see in the next chapter examining *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* licensed worlds optioned by games design companies have their own inherent strengths and weaknesses for transmedia world building compared to developing their own created world.

Chapter 3: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and its official and unofficial games: Worldbuilding, control and the creative possibilities of play

Introduction

Buffy the Vampire Slayer has a detailed existing world that is highly attractive to gamers. This chapter is an exploration of the ways in which this television series was adapted into role-playing games, and computer games; offering a different example to the unique world that *Deadlands*, examined in the previous chapter, created. Good television creates characters and stories that colonise our imaginations. For fans these programmes can become, in Kurt Lancaster's words 'the ultimate fantasy escape … a kind of "theme park" that never closes forever circulating what a group of cultural critics calls a "spiral of simulacra"' (Lancaster 2001: 155). As this suggests it is possible to spend all one's time immerged a fictional world. This starts with watching the television programme then moving on to interacting with it in various ways – discussing it, writing stories about it, collecting action figures of its characters, playing games based on it. This movement between media is frequently an industrial process with successful products licensed to different platforms to take advantage of customer interest. Just as genres need to adapt to different media, so do products. However these movements are not limited to just corporations, individual fans can and do create significant adaptive works.

These fan activities range from using and collecting officially sanctioned licensed products, to unofficial activities which license holders might consider objectionable. Despite their creative drive fans are frequently marginalised; 'fans tend

to see their legal status as similar to their social status: marginal and, at best, tolerated rather than accepted as legitimate part of the universe of creators' (Tushnet 2007: 60). One activity that straddles the line between the officially sanctioned and the unofficial is the tabletop role-playing game through both licensed and unlicensed games. The licensed role-playing game allows fans to create characters and stories in the margins of television programmes that they care about, as well as playing with existing characters and situations. Although licensed they straddle the unofficial because the producers cannot control how players might use the game. Role-playing allows a pre-structured way to participate with a property and tell further stories in a favoured setting. Some products can act as both an industrial product catering to fans' desires and an 'authentic' fan culture when fans use the product for their own purposes. In addition, even for programmes where there are licensed games available, unofficial versions proliferate. The easy availability of high quality unofficial content means that 'someone who enjoys watching a show may thus slide easily into the world of fan-generated content, without any prior screening and without much effort' (Tushnet 2007: 62).This chapter will consider this copyright infringement and how some companies and fan activities side-step copyright in order to create games that closely resemble the target that they wish to imitate.

This chapter will use *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as its main example because it has inspired both licensed and unlicensed role-playing games and will compare these games with the PlayStation 2 video game *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Chaos Bleeds*. The core examples *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* role-playing game, and a campaign setting called Shadow Slayers presented in the role-playing game *D20 Modern*, were both published in 2002 and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Chaos Bleeds* was published in 2003,

and are therefore contemporaries. This means that any comparisons made are

comparing like with like.

Although the world of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* can be translated into other

media, the format of the television programme cannot always be easily recreated in a

new medium. However role-playing games have some similarities to serial television.

Frequently a game may be long running, with multiple adventures, which are often

interlocking, to create story arcs. However unlike other serial forms the plot must be

constantly revised as the players interact with the narrative. The games designer

Monte Cook describes this process:

> Campaigns then are serialised, like some television series and most comic books.
> Like those media, the plot has been planned from the beginning. But in a role-
> playing game campaign, the game master has to be flexible enough to
> continually modify that story line as each game session is played out and the
> actions of the player characters change things. (Cook 2009: 101)

When role-playing games use existing worlds the new stories that the games make

possible need to be able to be slotted into the existing world and established

narratives. How easy this is depends on the way that the licensed world has been

constructed. In the case of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* world it is possible because

not only does the programme have gaps in the core narrative; but it also has a wide-

ranging world that has been implied by material provided in the episodes, both of

which can be filled in by fans. Originally developed as a television show, *Buffy the*

Vampire Slayer has existed in multiple forms on multiple platformsthe role-playing

game maintains the universe or setting from the show, and the sense of group

dynamics whilst allowing players to create their own characters and narratives for their

own groups. At the same time the computer game, ignores group dynamics to a far

more mission-centred series of episodes. The player adopts a different character from

the show in each episode. In other words, one player may get to be many different characters but there is no sense of acting as a team or within group dynamics.

In the role-playing game industry there has always been a tension between the official and unofficial; the licensed and the unlicensed. Both game creators and game players express a desire to create and play games set in licensed properties. In the case of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* this can be examined by looking at the games that have been produced. One tabletop role-playing game company, Eden Studios, paid for the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* role-playing game license. A number of competing games companies did not purchase a license but did release competing games that had at the very least similar settings and themes, and it would have been obvious to the fans of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* what was intended by these games companies. The net result is that a number of official and unofficial games were released into the market at roughly the same time; this provides us the ability to examine how the games interrelated.

Interacting with Television Shows

To improve upon their experience of television, fans frequently want greater interactivity with the programmes they watch. As a technology, television on its own can be isolating and limiting to fans who want to interact with their favourite shows. Marshall Sella argues that:

> With the aid of the Internet, the loftiest dream for television is being realized: an odd brand of interactivity. Television began as a one-way street winding from producers to consumers, but that street is now becoming two-way. A man with one machine (a TV) is doomed to isolation, but a man with two machines (TV and a computer) can belong to a community. (Sella 2002)

This interactivity appears to be becoming one of the most important aims of 21st century television. In addition to these official channels, viewers are often willing to use the internet to interact with television programmes online, using informal networks and unofficial forums worldwide. It is hard to state just how important the internet has been in bringing 'consumers [fans] from the margins of the media industry into the spotlight' (Jenkins 2006: 246). Among fans, participation has become the norm and people who might once have been termed rogue readers have now become inspirational consumers (Jenkins 2006: 246). This participation can be at any number of levels, from discussion boards and Wikipedia to cos-play, fan art and fan fiction. For role-playing the internet has subsumed traditional print media, with fanzines and magazines being mostly replaced by forums and webzines. In addition, many new ways of distributing content are being experimented with, by not only fans but those in the industry, which is beginning to make both groups indistinguishable from each other. Micro-publishing utilising both print-on-demand and PDF is common with PDF being particularly important because it cuts out distributors and the cost of printing. Players can also exploit the internet to create virtual gaming groups using technologies such as MSN and Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) to play in real time.

However to see the internet as the be all and end all of fan collaboration fails to acknowledge the way that fans have been interacting with their favourite programmes for decades, long before the internet revolution. Prior to the internet this took place in fanzines and at conventions, in person and through the mail. Many of these old ways of interacting with other fans and programmes have been transferred onto the internet. This has created a new global audience, replacing the old local audiences for fan activities. New technologies have not only created a global audience but also allow

greater participation. Fan fiction for example, once shared as photocopies among members of small groups, can be distributed on forums with a disparate group of like-minded individuals, while role-players use the online environment to share settings, adventures and homebrew material which they once shared in fanzines or at conventions.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer is an American hybrid genre television programme that incorporates elements of horror, comedy, action and teen drama. The programme tells the story of a California 'valley girl' who is also humanity's last defense against vampires and demons, together with her mismatched friends. The supernatural elements were used as metaphors to comment on commonplace teenage and young adult issues. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* started in 1997 and continued until 2003, spanning seven seasons and 145 episodes. As a popular and long-running television show, there was a great deal of merchandise intended to capitalize on its success. Among the merchandise available were collectables, novels, comic books and a number of gaming items including several computer games, a role-playing game, a collectable card game and two different board games. In addition to the official games and merchandise provided there was a considerable amount of unofficial games that referenced the back story of *Buffy: the Vampire Slayer* quite closely. This activity was particularly intense around 2002- 2003 as it was the last season of the show and there was a strong desire to keep the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* brand active among the fans, who also had a vested interest in maintaining activity in the characters and stories from the show.

We will examine one computer game and two role-playing games that take place in or near the 'Buffy-verse'. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Chaos Bleeds* (2003) is a

game for the Playstation 2 released by Sierra and is just one of six official computer

games for various platforms based on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The box describes the

plot as:

> A dreaded enemy from Buffy's past has unleashed the ultimate incarnation of
> evil – The First. Now Buffy and friends must unite with an unlikely ally to slay
> vampires, zombies, and other bloodthirsty hellions. Destroy the dark side, before
> Sunnydale is forever condemned to permanent darkness. (*Buffy the Vampire
> Slayer: Chaos Bleeds* 2003)

This description of the plot sounds very similar to a plot for the television series,

particularly season seven, and certainly the design and plotting make the player feel

that this is an episode of the television series. The First has been a villain in a both

stand-alone episode and the main villain for the final season, whilst the dreaded

enemy from the past was a single-episode villain named Kakistos. As such, the fans

would have a strong interest in the First as a mastermind character, whilst Kakistos is a

recognisable minor villain. An important element in the game is fidelity to the series,

something that is critical to fans of the original television programme. In order to

achieve this most of the characters are voiced by the original actors, and a great deal

of effort has been spent to make the on-screen characters and locations appear to be

'visually correct' in order to immerse the player in a believable world, whilst adding

this new story. The game even conforms with 'Buffy-verse' canon, featuring, for

example the grave of Buffy's mother who had died in season four, although it is not in

itself canon. In addition the game box suggests 'buy-in' from Joss Whedon, as the

creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and the writers (which include Joss Whedon) of

the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* comic book. *Chaos Bleeds* also provides a series of mini-

games that encourages multi-player interaction and some degree of open play. One

important aspect of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* programme is humour, and the game

attempts to retain as much of that as possible, through in-game dialogue and these

mini-games. For example one mini-game is based around catching rabbits, reflecting the character Anya's comical fear of rabbits.

The game is structured in the form of an episode of the programme, subdivided into a number of scenes. The story is advanced through a combination of cut scenes and interactive sections that are controlled by the player. It is the narrative that drives the game forward, with the player taking an active role in locating plot items and defeating monsters. The game allows players to play many of the major characters from the programme such as Buffy, Xander, Willow, Spike and Faith. For a player it feels like one is taking part in an episode, rather than just passively watching. They have relative free agency to solve the puzzles presented, uncover secret areas and kill the monsters as they wish. However the main game is pre-scripted with a limited range of options. The player cannot choose which character to play for each mission, although the changes of perspective and location help the game to feel like an episode of Buffy as it was common for characters other than Buffy to have significant, even critical roles in resolving the danger that Buffy and her friends face. For example in 'The Zeppo' (Season 3, episode 13) Buffy becomes sidelined, allowing the episode to centre around the struggles faced by Xander, a character who is usually reserved for comic relief. Equally there are a number of episodes when Buffy is used as a diversion to allow her friends with magical abilities, Willow and Giles, to provide a magical solution. This means that the fan of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is used to characters other than Buffy being vital to the overall story resolution. As part of the overall narrative the player has significant limits to their freedom to act. On first viewing, it appears that the player has agency and the ability to control the action. It feels interactive because the player is controlling one of several popular characters but this

feeling of interaction is only illusionary. The story is fixed and in each chapter the character the player will use is pre-determined by the programmers. They cannot choose to ignore missions and follow their own goals such as exploring Sunnydale or interacting with characters that are not important to the storyline. As such it gives the illusion of free will, rather than the actuality. The official nature of the game, with its scripted story means that the player cannot choose to enact their own version of the characters based on their desires and fantasies. . All of the player's options are pre-chosen by the company controlling the development of the game. This means that players have no choice or free will in the game. Instead they are just, in Buffy's own words, 'going through the motions, walking through the part'.

The limitations of the computer game, particularly relating to the ability of the player to make their own decisions are made clearer when we consider the more free-form opportunities that the tabletop role-playing game offers. Unlike *Chaos Bleeds*, a role-playing game can be very flexible. For the players of the tabletop role-playing game they can satisfy the player's desire for full interactivity because players can create their own stories and characters, or use existing ones, in ways that neither *Chaos Bleeds* nor the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television programme can support, giving fans what they want, which is greater interactivity with their desired programme.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer is a licensed role-playing game product released by Eden Studios in 2002. The game was a high quality product with hardback covers, full colour interiors, and many official colour photographs from the programme. It was also available in a premium edition which featured an embossed cover. The book contained lots of information about the series, including a summary of the long running narrative

and details of the characters, as well as providing a set of rules to role-play stories set in the 'Buffy-verse'. It is worth noting that the book did not include information about the actors, or any production details. Although this is typical for role-playing games of this type, production information might be expected by fans that are unfamiliar with the conventions of this role-playing game genre. Instead these adaptation games deliberately retain the 'fourth wall' to keep the integrity of the established world. The game gives players the tools to play not only existing characters and stories from the television series, but to also create their own original material and player characters termed 'white hats', borrowing terminology used in an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* called 'The Wish' (Season 3, episode nine). This opens up the 'Buffy-verse', allowing players to create characters that might be similar to existing ones, but that do not exist within official canon. As a setting, the 'Buffy-verse' is very rich, with many possible options available to players that are only hinted at in the series, such as a group of Watchers, the lives of other slayers or even using other time periods or locations. The book briefly covers such options and provides information on how to develop these kinds of games.

Similarly to *Chaos Bleeds*, the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer Role-playing Game* is a licensed product. As an example of a licensed product the role-playing game has exceptionally high production values and could be seen as an exemplar for this type of adaptation game. The publishers had access to both official photographs from the television programme and publicity shots to illustrate the book, which are used on every page. It also includes dialogue quotations to open new sections and illustrate ideas. The text is written in an informal style, similar to the way that the characters speak in the television programme, making 'wise-cracks' and referencing 'popular

culture' frequently. This style should be recognisable to fans, and helps create an immersive experience that is more entertaining than reading other rule books. The net effect is that the reader drawn into the role-playing game by the heavy use of the conventions and style of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television programme. Even if a player decided not to use the game, the text is entertaining in its own right.

The production of a licensed product means that it is sanctioned by the creators of the property and, by implication, that they agree with way that the product will be used. When playing video games the boundaries are set by the programming which the license holder has a say in, while for table-top role-playing games there is greater freedom for the players to use the game as the player decides, and the license owner has no direct control over this activity. By providing a range of options, including licensed characters, the company (in the case of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Fox) is giving the players the ability to create outside of the company's control and encouraging them to use it. It may be possible to hack or jailbreak a video game but this breaks the license agreement, whilst a tabletop role-playing game comes with the ability to freeform as desired and so there is no reason to hack or jailbreak the rules unless the player chooses to and this can be done freely without impacting on the licensing agreement at all. The license holders must be aware of the potential for fans to use role-playing games in ways the company may not approve of, especially as there is no way to control the way the owners of the game go on to use it. However the potential for structured free creation in role-playing games gives fans limitless opportunities to indulge their desires for new narratives using the background and themes of their favourite television programme, in this case *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

In addition to the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* licensed role-playing game there were also attempts to write unsanctioned games which are in no way officially connected to the 'Buffy-verse', but merely so similar that a fan cannot be persuaded by the official license holders that they are significantly different. Unsanctioned and unofficial games are quite common and as we demonstrated earlier such activities are the hallmark of the gaming industry. Such games are created by even the largest games design companies; it is not just something that occurs at the unprofessional and small company end of the corporate world. In the case of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* the company that had the license, Eden Studios, was at best a mid-sized company. Hasbro, a vast games company who own both Wizards of the Coast and TSR produced an alternative unofficial *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* game without purchasing the license. In this case we can see that it is the smaller company who purchased the license whilst it is the large multinational that provided an unofficial licensed product into the market.

Wizards of the Coast had already produced a set of rules that provided for a number of alternative worlds under the heading of *Dungeons of Dragons 3rd Edition*, also called *D20* for the main type of dice used in the game. *Dungeons and Dragons 3rd Edition* was, in the main a fantasy game set in the standard pseudo-medieval period. In order to expand the range of 3rd Edition towards a more modern urban-fantasy trend, which was at that time highly popular with novels such as Jim Butcher's *Harry Dresden* series or Simon R. Green's *Nightside* fantasies, an additional rules set building on the 3rd Edition rules was released. This rules set called *D20 Modern* (2002) expanded the original information provided in the 3rd Edition rules and added a number of character classes that could represent key licensed characters by describing them as archetypes. The archetypes chosen were summarised in a single word such as Strong, Fast, Tough,

Smart, Dedicated and Charismatic, based upon the highest statistic that the particular character had – strength, dexterity, constitution, intelligence, wisdom or charisma.

D20 Modern was heavily targeted towards the urban fantasy market. Urban fantasy is set in modern periods, often in the city, with magic being both uncommon and unrecognised by wider society and extremely powerful. One common theme is the tension between technology and magic, particularly when characters use technology to work with or hide their magical powers. Harry Dresden, from the Dresden files, (which also has a licensed role-playing game), uses a hockey stick as a wand or wizards staff, because a hockey stick is less noticeable in the city than a wand. Another theme which is common is the idea of ancient wizards defending humanity from outsiders, particularly as most of humanity is unaware of the threats that they face. In some respects this idea of empowered individuals that are knowledgeable of the risks that the human race faces on a daily basis goes back to the original cosmic horror writings of H.P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard, but urban fantasy characters tend to be closer to the work of Robert E. Howard, in that the characters are more heroic and more active in defending humanity.

D20 Modern was not only designed to compete with the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer Role-playing Game*, rather it was designed to provide a modern urban fantasy setting in general for players that probably already had 3rd Edition. Within the game there were several game settings which were provided to assist the players in developing their games. By design one of these closely replicates the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* world. In *D20 Modern* this background was called Shadow Chasers (Slavicsek, Grubb, Redman, Ryan 2002: 285). Shadow Chasers is described as 'heroic horror in the tradition of *Resident Evil, Special Unit 2, Alone in the Dark, Angel* and

Buffy: The Vampire Slayer'. (Slavicsek, Grubb, Redman, Ryan, 2002: 285). It is clearly

stated that this section of the rules book is intended to support *Buffy the Vampire*

Slayer (and its spin-off, *Angel*) tabletop role-playing games. The heroes are described

as 'being called to their mission by a higher authority or a feeling of destiny' (Slavicsek,

Grubb, Redman, Ryan, 2002: 285) which is in the case of both Buffy and Angel highly

appropriate and summarizes the reason that most of the characters are involved in

fighting against the monsters that the programme depicted each episode.

The game went further in its adaptation, by providing the players with

character options that can recreate characters in the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

television series as well as the licensed role-playing game. One of the advanced

characters provided is called a 'Shadow Slayer' (Slavicsek, Grubb, Redman, Ryan, 2002:

290) which the text describes as 'a champion arises in every generation to combat the

forces of darkness and defeat the denizens of Shadow' (Slavicsek, Grubb, Redman,

Ryan, 2002: 290). This closely models the introduction voice-over of the first season of

Buffy: The Vampire Slayer, which runs: 'Into every generation is born a chosen one, she

alone can fight the vampires...' The intention is to use the intertextuality of the book

and the voiceover in order to encourage the adaptation of *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*

without actually paying the license fee, and possibly in recognition of the fact that

another company had already purchased the license. It also completely eliminated any

form of control that Joss Whedon or Fox might have wished over these games. The

character class of the Shadow Slayer is quite interesting as it is clearly intended to

provide a character that has the skills and abilities of Buffy, such as the fast healing

ability which allows Buffy to be injured in one scene and recovering quickly in the next,

together with the sensory abilities that Buffy has to recognize evil creatures and to hunt them down.

One key part of the Shadow Slayers background is the illustrations that are used to show what the world is like. The emphasis is on battle against evil creatures using traditional weaponry rather than modern firearms which are, usually, useless against monsters. This is part of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* world in which the characters, despite being able to get hold of such modern weaponry usually do not bother, preferring traditional weapons such as battleaxes or swords.. As a result it appears that even when ancient evils were confronted with ancient weapons, it was seen as problematic, while modern weapons remained taboo.

From the point of view of adaptation the licensed game is more limiting because it although it is a beautiful representation of the 'Buffy-verse' in a role-playing game, it provides what can feel like a second best creative experience. This can be because the creative option presented in the licensed game may result in characters that are not as interesting or as well presented as those from the show. There is a tendency therefore to downplay the creativity of the player and replace it with the characters and narratives that already exist. This emphasizes a critical difference between the licensed and unlicensed game. The imagery that the licensed game has for every area other than the creative sections is based on full colour stills from the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television series. The creative sections, including the character archetypes, are based on artwork that is clearly not 'Buffy-verse', or particularly in line with the style of the rest of the book. The unlicensed product, as it does not have the advantage of the Buffy imagery, is able to have a more cohesive and coherent internal artwork style – effectively turning a problem in the form of the lack

of the license into a benefit. The players' own creativity is, in the unlicensed book, not held to be a separate thing and is therefore encouraged.

In summary we can say that there is clearly a strong drive among fans of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television show towards adapted games that offer them freedom to interact with the property. This freedom can be technically advanced but actually quite limited as seen in the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Chaos Bleeds* computer game, or it can be less technical and more free-form as demonstrated by the tabletop role-playing games examined.

Chaos Bleeds is technically an impressive product with close attention paid to making the game as similar to the television programme as possible. This means that the game developers have placed a marked emphasis on the look, voice actors and narrative to deliver a product that is, in effect, a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episode that the player can experience for themselves in the third person. What the player cannot do is have an impact on the narrative. It is this limitation that makes this particular product so frustrating in adaption terms.

More free form, but less technically advanced, are the tabletop role-playing games. Both games enable and encourage the players to create their own stories and characters. There is a marked difference between the licensed product in terms of what it gives to a player. The unlicensed product is, oddly, more free than the licensed product as it enables the players to create whatever they want when adapting *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Neither of the parties that own the license are able to contradict what the developers of *D20 Modern*, or their players want to do. This is liberating as it enables a much greater sense of openness for the player.

Conclusion

As has been shown, the ability to interact with and adapt a television programme is very important to fans. It is this desire to interact that encourages the proliferation of fan activities. The range of fan activities suggests that for some fans there can never be enough expressions of their favourite programme or new narratives for it. In effect what fans want is more television and when that cannot happen due to budgets, cancellation or frustrated desires, they turn to television by other means.

It is this drive that leads to the desire to adapt other products and materials to support the world of the television programme. As we have noted this adaption can be supported and controlled by the company that owns the intellectual property or it can be unofficial and based on deliberately knowing allusions to the fans. The amount of freedom that the fan has in using the adapted products largely relates to the closeness of the licensed goods to the original intellectual property holder. The closer it is to the owner the less freedom the fan-player has. At the same time it may be the case that more technically advanced products are available at the price of less creative freedom. The quality of the licensed goods is extremely high and a great deal of effort has been expended in making the product as impressive as possible. This is because a good quality television show clearly has an interest in ensuring that the goods it directly controls reflect its core principles such as quality control, image and brand.

Unofficial products, and official products when they move away from the specific imagery of the brand, are more variable in their quality. This can mean that it is possible for a unlicensed product to have a more effective art work package than the

licensed product. In the case of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* the *D20 Modern* unlicensed package was more effective at communicating the creative message than the licensed one. This may mean that licensed products, even when they offer a set of rules to support creativity, may fail in this attempt. It is more complex to provide an adapted product therefore than some may think, particularly when we consider that the original adapted products were seen as simply requiring a rules set. The wrong rules set or imagery can act to imply that the players' creations are inherently second best to the television shows characters.

Computer and role-playing games can offer for fans a significant improvement over television programmes, particularly television programmes that have ended as in the case of Buffy when the games were released it was known that this was the last season of Buffy. They act as not only an obvious and structured way to interact with the programme but also a way to interact with other fans. In both the computer game and tabletop role-playing games rules are required to structure the experience and ensure that the games conform to the viewer's experience of the programme. In a computer game these rules are represented by the programming and controlled by the developers, while in a table-top role-playing game the rules are written down but may be ignored or 'house-ruled' by the players based on social agreements made at the time of the game. Role-playing offers options that television programmes cannot. By their nature they are social experiences, with a group of friends spending time together; while a television programme is not always a social experience, even with the massive opportunities for communication with like-minded individuals that the internet has provided. As well as the social aspect a role-playing game offers players almost complete control over characters and narrative that a television programme

can never make available, and even the most advanced computer games finds difficult

to provide. The key thing to remember about the transmedia adaption of *Buffy the*

Vampire Slayer was that there was already a reasonably detailed world already in

existence which had been developed through the television programme and its

ancillary products. This made it easier to create further licensed works. As we will see

in the next chapter on *Doom* the creators of the film started from a position where

there was very little material already developed and so they had to make whatever

was needed at the time. This meant that critical reception of the new film was mixed

and is important when we consider the position that different critics came from –

some as fans of *Doom*, and some as film critics who did not play computer games.

Chapter 4: Doomed from the beginning? First-person-shooters, subjective cameras and intertextuality in the critical reception of the film adaptation of *Doom* (2005)

Introduction

In the previous chapter we examined *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a created world with significant multiple narratives and artifacts already prepared for the next group of adapters to use, giving the fans the comfort of continuity and detail. In this case study the preparation of this foundation for the created world of *Doom* was not as complete as that of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and so the film makers had to make a large number of creative decisions to flesh out the patchy world of *Doom*. This makes the film and game *Doom* a case study in a worldbuilding that is done without significant fan involvement and the response of the critics (some of whom were fans) to this is significant in considering what makes a created world work.

The computer game *Doom* was the seminal first-person-shooter computer game of the 1990s. In 2005 the game was adapted into a film, directed by Andrzej Bartkowiak and staring Dwayne Johnson. Although one fan's opinion that '*Doom* was to games what *Rashomon* was to movies' (Keskar 2005) might be considered fair, the film adaptation has been less well regarded. As the defining characteristic of the game, a first-person-shooter sequence was included as a key section of the *Doom* film. The marketing for *Doom* exploits this sequence, with it being discussed in interviews with

the Chief Executive of id Software, Todd Hollenshead (Dyer 2005), actor Karl Urban

(McKenzie 2005) and the producer Lorenzo de Bonaventura (Total Film 2005); as well

as being a key part of their Comic Con presentation (Quint 2005). The first-person-

shooter sequence is one of the most commented about aspects of the film, so this

chapter will concentrate in particular on the critical reception of this key sequence.

The majority of reviews mention it and have a definite opinion about it; although the

consensus is divided. The first-person-shooter genre of computer game and this

sequence in the *Doom* film can both be understood in relationship to the subjective

camera shots used in cinema, therefore this chapter will also consider some of the

theoretical issues of the point-of-view shot. However we will demonstrate that the

same technique had fundamentally different meanings to the audience because of the

different relationships to narrative and character in films and video games. This

understanding of the point-of-view shot is necessary in order to understand and

critique the positions of the various reviewers and commentators.

　　　Doom is described by the technology news website, *The Register,* as 'the game

that defined the first-person shoot-'em-up category' (Smith 2006). The game was

developed by id Software in 1993 as a downloadable shareware game with additional

levels (or episodes) available for purchase. Shareware is sample software that is given

away for free to encourage consumers to buy a full version of the programme. During

the 1990s this business model and method of distribution was often used by smaller

computer game developers as a way to distribute games outside of the usual channels,

such as shops. *Doom* went on to become a massive critical and commercial success.

As King and Borland describe:

The game would explode like a rocket shell in the collective consciousness of PC gamers, changing the way that people thought about the computer as a gaming platform, and inspiring whole industries of imitators. (King and Borland 2003: 89)

It has been estimated that *Doom* was downloaded and installed on 10 million computers within two years of release. Although less than ten percent of these downloaders went on to buy the additional levels, it still produced profits of more than $100 million for id Software (Smith 2006) (McKenzie 2005). Bryce and Rutter attribute the game's success to ' the sense of unease and anxiety created as the gamer's character travelled through deserted corridors' (Bryce and Rutter 2002: 68). As a horror game it has been considered a success, with Fritz and McNary suggesting that '*Doom* gives players the kind of moody atmosphere and tension horror filmmakers aspire to reach' (Fritz and McNary 2004: 8).

Doom went on to spawn numerous sequels, including *Doom II: Hell on Earth* (1994), *The Ultimate Doom* (1995), *Doom 64* (1997) and *Doom 3* (2004) and many imitators, some of which used the *Doom* game engine under licence from id Software. In addition to these video game sequels and imitations, the *Doom* first-person-shooter game has been translated into other media to create a multimedia franchise. The franchise includes a series of four novels, a comic book series, a boardgame, and the *Doom* film.

Adaptation and intertextuality

The *Doom* film is part of what has become a growing cycle of video game adaptations in American cinema. Ben Fritz and Dave McNary, writing in the industry journal *Variety*, argued that video games provide 'an easily adaptable, exciting kernel' (Fritz and McNary 2004: 8). What is particularly important is 'the foundation it provides for compelling characters, conflicts and visuals' (Fritz and McNary 2004: 8),

rather than the popularity of the license. Although there are early examples of video game adaptations such as *Super Mario Bros* (1993) and *Street Fighter* (1994), the cycle became particularly prominent from 2001 onwards. As Fritz and McNary go on to argue:

> Producers who option a game no longer just get a heroic plumber or a babe with a gun – they get three-dimensional characters and complete plots that translate into features just as easily as a book. (Fritz and McNary 2004: 8)

In addition unlike a book, video games as a visual medium, can give producers a good idea of what a film adaptation might look like. More recent examples of the cycle include the films *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001), *Resident Evil* (2002), *Silent Hill* (2006), *Hitman* (2007), *Max Payne* (2008), and *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time* (2010), all of which are based upon games with the same title. Of these examples *Resident Evil* has become a successful franchise with four cinema-release sequels (*Resident Evil: Apocalypse* 2004, *Resident Evil: Extinction* 2007, *Resident Evil: Afterlife* 2010, and *Resident Evil: Retribution* 2012). It's important to note that the majority of the films in this cycle are adaptations of first-person and third-person shooter games which frequently have strong characters and storylines. This therefore makes *Doom* an odd choice for a film adaptation because it lacks both narrative drive and any characterisation. The marine in the *Doom* game has no name, as John Romero, one of the designers of the game, has stated: 'there was never a name for the *Doom* marine because it's supposed to be YOU[sic]' (The Romero 2002). The lack of characterisation in early first-person-shooters such as *Doom* allows players to project themselves more easily onto the role the game offers, and if we take Romero's comment into account, this is what some game designers intended. In addition *Doom* has a very limited narrative, with the main objective being simply survival in a monster infested maze. Harry Knowles argues that this lack of characterisation and narrative is what made

Doom an entertaining game: 'what was great about *Doom* was there was no real story. No real characters. Really, shit went down and you were supposed to contain and wipe that shit up. That's it' (Knowles 2005). More recent first-person-shooters have attempted to redress the potential narrative and characterisation flaws of *Doom* with more complex narratives and characterisations.

A range of traditional film genres are represented in the film adaptations of these video games, including horror (*Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill*), action-adventure (*Lara Croft* and *Prince of Persia*) and neo-noir (*Max Payne*). *Doom* itself had the potential to be adapted into a film that used several genres, as Nashtradomus argued: '*Doom* is the perfect game that can be adapted into a horror, action, or war film and come out with some ripe thrills and some edge-of-the-seat action' (Nashtradomus 2005). In addition to these film adaptations of video games, many video games are heavily influenced by film:

> What is particularly noticeable about current adaptations is that, unlike the platform and beat-'em-up derived *Super Mario* and *Street Fighter*, for example, they have come to be based on games that can already be said to be influenced by cinema. (Keane 2007: 109)

Such games borrow elements such as narratives, characters, sound design and appearance. For example *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (2001) features a level similar to the German castle in *Where Eagles Dare* (1968), including the wintery setting. A scene where Clint Eastwood's character Schaffer kills a radio operative is replicated as a scene in the game, along with sequences using cable cars, which also form a key part of *Where Eagle's Dare*. This idea that video games are heavily influenced by genre film appears in Clownfoot's review of *Doom*:

> Maybe it's part of the cyclical nature of many computer games often being replicas of films in the first place (G[rand]T[heft]A[uto] is *Scarface*, *Resident Evil* is

Dawn of the Dead) that it will always be a case of seen it all before, because the audience pretty much have. (Clownfoot 2006)

The video game examples that Clownfoot uses are not official adaptations. However it appears that the designers of these video games use references to films to act as shorthand for the players. These references can add depth and meaning to games without having to explicitly explain all aspects of the setting. It is also fair to note that not all intellectual properties are available for developers to license, may be costly or have significant restrictions on how they might be adapted. *Doom* itself was originally planned as a licensed game based on *Aliens* (1986), but there were problems over control of the intellectual property (King and Borland 2003: 106). The game retained the concept of patrolling a maze of corridors, but replaced Giger's Alien with demons from hell. The influence of James Cameron and *Aliens* is noted in the review of the *Doom* film in *Sight and Sound*:

> James Cameron's *Aliens*, the archetypal marines-versus-monsters movie that inspired SF and horror films from *Predator* to *Dog Soldiers*, exerts an influence well beyond the boundaries of cinema. Video-game developer id Software clearly drew upon Cameron's 1986 movie in 1993 for the first instalment in its seminal *DOOM* series. (Worley 2006: 54)

This was also noted by Clownfoot, posting on *Empire's* website who comments that 'the original game has more than its fair share of knowing nods to James Cameron's action masterpiece' (Clownfoot 2006). When the game was adapted into a film, it seems that the makers returned to *Aliens* to help inform the film's appearance. Many reviewers noted the influence of *Aliens* in *Doom's* look, including Barber (2005), Clownfoot (2006), Empire (2005), Massawyrm (2005), Nashtradomus (2005), and Seymour (2005).

Aliens is given a great of credit for influencing the look and feel of several video games in addition to *Doom*. Massawyrm, a reviewer for *AintItCool*, proposed that:

> Discussing this film without talking about *Aliens* is virtually impossible. Let's face it – *Doom*, *Halo*, *Resident Evil* – they're all video game adaptations of James Cameron's masterpiece of a sci/fi sequel. (Massawyrm 2005)

Many of the reviewers examined make comparisons between *Doom* and *Aliens*. However these comparisons are not just because of the existing connection between the *Doom* video game and *Aliens*. Rather it appears that *Aliens* is elevated over *Doom* by many of these reviewers because they see it as a high quality science-fiction action film, and something special among genre films. Nashtradomus describes the *Doom* film as like 'one big remake of (...) *Aliens*' (Nashtradomus 2005). While Barber goes further, and describes it as 'a simple-minded remake of *Aliens*' because 'a squad of space marines wanders around lots of underlit corridors, toting guns big enough to dislocate your shoulder, and hoping not to be eaten by slimey creatures' (Barber 2005). This comment from Barber suggests that it's not even a good remake of *Aliens*, because *Doom*, as a 'simple-minded remake' has omitted something that made Cameron's film a piece of presumably intelligent entertainment.

For Clownfoot '*Doom* is actually a cliché-ridden *Aliens* rip-off', but this doesn't appear to surprise him, because he goes on to comment 'well, yeah, what else were you expecting?' (Clownfoot 2006). Similarly negative is Seymour who describes *Doom* as 'all four *Alien* movies compacted, boiled in chicken fat and then pumped with steroids' (Seymour 2005). The connotation here is interesting because it creates an analogy with processed foods and products like mechanically recovered meat. These processed foods are considered to be unhealthy and of poor quality. This is combined with connotations of pretence with highly flavoured reclaimed scraps that are made to look like appealing products. This analogy therefore suggests that *Doom* is made from the 'leftovers' of the *Aliens* franchise, with the added flavouring of special effects.

The second film that is identified by reviewers as an influence is *Predator*

(1987). Rafe Telsch describes Doom as '*Predator: The Next Generation'* (Rafe Telsch

2006), while *Empire* asks 'could this be a *Predator* for the 21st century?' (Empire 2005).

However this comparison isn't always favourable. Harry Knowles from *Aint It Cool*

News appears to hold *Predator* in high regard:

> Essentially Wesley Strick and Dave Callaham have written a satire of McTiernan's
> original *Predator*. Don't get me wrong, this isn't anywhere near that quality.
> That's a brilliant work. (Knowles 2005)

However Knowles, who labels himself as an enthusiastic fan of genre films, is

comparing a science-fiction action film, with what he sees as an exemplar of the genre.

It is therefore not surprising that for Knowles, *Doom* falls short, and this is presumably

the point of the comparison. Similarly Clownfoot argues that *Doom* 'lacks the punch

that both Cameron and John McTiernan managed to enthuse within both *Aliens* and

Predator' (Clownfoot 2006). Here again *Doom* is being compared negatively to films

that are considered exemplars for the science fiction action genre. Rafe Telsch is more

positive and describes *Doom* as 'more like an '80s Arnold flick then a video game,

which is one of the best compliments I can give a film of this genre' (Rafe Telsch 2006).

For Rafe Telsch the best examples of the action genre star Arnold Schwarzenegger, in

particular his early roles in the 1980s. Therefore for him *Doom* is good because it

conforms to his genre expectations, and compares favourably with what he considers

the best of the genre. In addition the *Doom* film is considered to be good because it

manages to transcend its video game origins. While Knowles and Rafe Telsch try to

place the *Doom* film within the context of the science fiction or action genre, the

populist film review magazine *Empire* emphasised the film's pedigree:

> The monsters are real, they're not CGI. They're made by Stan Winston who did *Jurassic Park* and *Predator* and all that. So the monster's got weight and when they're in a scene they're like Aliens! (Empire 2005)

For the journalist the involvement of Stan Winston is a signal of quality in films that rely on special effects. This also sets up a conflict between physical effects and CGI effects with physical effects lauded over CGI. All of this comment suggests that the film of *Doom* is highly derivative. However given that the game was itself was created in imitation of films such as *Aliens*, it is unsurprising that the film returned to the inspiration of the game for its look and feel.

First Person Problems

First-person perspective is employed in both video games and cinema. Although camera shots from a protagonist's point of view look similar in both video games and film, they are understood differently by audiences and critics, and have different functions within the two mediums.

The first-person-shooter is a genre specific to computer games, where the action takes place in a first-person perspective, and the player uses their quick reflexes to dispatched multiple enemies with a range of attributes (Wolf 2001:131). Salen argues that:

> The mode of seeing privileged by first-person shooters is one of positioning, tracking, identifying, predicting and targeting. This point of view, in which all modes of seeing are framed through a weapon's line of sight, reduces the space of play to that which is immediately accessible, visible and targetable. (Salen 2002: 103)

In the case of *Doom*, the player moves his character around a three dimensional maze, running and jumping to reach the goals and equipment that the game offers. The character is rated with health and armour, and carries a variety of weapons and their

ammunition. This information is displayed on screen and updated in real time. The

monsters that the player-character encounters in *Doom* have a variety of power levels

and abilities; from weak zombies through to powerful creatures with evocative names

such as the Hell Knight and Cyberdemon. Some of these monsters are very numerous

whilst others appear only as the single 'boss monster' at the end of an episode.

Godinez describes the film *Doom* as 'like a roller-coaster ride' (Godinez 2005).

This is an interesting analogy especially as he views this positively. Certainly a roller-

coaster ride is exhilarating, however although fun they are passive experiences where

every twist, turn and shock has been carefully planned before anyone gets on the ride,

unlike gaming where the unexpected can happen particularly as games become more

advanced and 'sandboxed'. By comparison the ride happens to the customer rather

than the customer having any input on what happens. The image of a roller-coaster is

a strange analogy for a first-person-shooter where the player is an active participant

who can choose what they do from a wide variety of options which the game makes

available. However it is a perfect analogy for a film, where people sit in a cinema seat

and the film provides an exciting experience that happens to them. For non-gamers

this roller-coaster analogy does not give a real sense of why the games are

exhilarating. The games offer personal excitement and active choice often on a real-

time basis while the film does not. By comparison, Massawyrm who uses a similar

analogy is shown to be far more negative in his views of *Doom*. He describes the film as

'more akin to sitting on a tram taking you through a mechanical haunted house, the

audience is treated to a series of seemingly animatronic monsters popping out of

nowhere to be blown apart by our seemingly soulless hero' (Massawyrm 2005).

Masswyrm emphasises the passive in his description by using the word 'sitting'. The

idea of a slow moving, cheap and dismal fun-fair attraction that is considered as something of a joke of a ride, is used as a negative, especially when compared to Godinez's roller-coaster. Even so the basic analogy of a ride is continued with animatronics being a sign of a particularly dismal experience. What is lacking in Massawyrm's opinion is authenticity; *Doom* fails to be realistic enough for his taste.

Doom was the first major first-person-shooter game and as such it led to the development of increasingly sophisticated games which are 'attempting to create an immersive experience in which the gamer feels involved on a more or less continuous basis' (Bryce and Rutter 2002: 71). By making the gamer the central figure in the *Doom* game it meant that the players became emotionally invested in their character's survival and success. It is this emotional investment that continues in modern first-person-shooters in which the environment and gameplay are carefully designed to entice the gamer into accepting the reality of the game. The current technical leaders in this field, such as the *Far Cry* franchise, offer breathtaking vistas and 'sandbox' environments enabling the player to have immense creative freedom to explore their environment.

Jenkins and Squire describe first-person-shooters as 'modern equivalents for the backyard, fields and woodlands where previous generations played 'capture the flag' (Jenkins and Squire 2002: 65). These games act as replacements for real-world experiences that are difficult to obtain in modern city life.

> Game consoles should be regarded as machines for generating compelling spaces, that their virtual playspaces have helped to compensate for the declining place of the traditional backyard in contemporary boy culture, and that the core narratives behind many games center around the struggle to explore, map, and master contested spaces. (Jenkins 2004: 122)

According to Morris the most important aspect of first person shooters (and by implication *Doom*) is the ability to play multiplayer games. This allows a group of people to play the same level and compete for resources to kill the other players and be 'last man standing'. She describes it as the most common form of first-person-shooter gaming, unlike the single player option which may only be completed once or twice by a gamer (Morris 2002: 84). Multiplayer gaming continues to be very important to the development of the first-person-shooter and, in many respects, is the driving force for new technical developments in the gaming arena, particularly as broadband internet availability expands and the number of people willing to game online increases. There are a number of specialist companies that support first-person-shooter on line gaming and these include Playstation Network which claims to have more than seventy million players. The act of online gaming is increasingly tied to other online elements of a player's life, such as the provision of Playstation Network trophies (awarded for completing certain game –related tasks) being reported on an individual player's Facebook page.

Increasingly today the development of multi-player options overshadows the provision of the immersive experience for a single player. There is an upper limit to what can be provided to a single individual in a game and the producers are looking to give the gamer the best possible experience. As the development of the *Battleground* series appears to suggest that experience is provided by playing and beating other human gamers in vast and complex team games. In the case of *Doom* the multiplayer systems available in 1993 were primitive compared to the internet based options of today. It was not uncommon for players to have to take their expensive personal computer gaming systems to a central location such as a friend's house and physically

link the computers using cabling. At the same time the game software offered

extremely limited multiplayer options in terms of player numbers and game styles.

The first-person-shooter aspect was considered key to the perception of *Doom*,

so a sequence imitating it was included in the film adaptation. The five minute

sequence depicts the action from the perspective of Karl Urban's character, Reaper.

The character moves around a series of corridors and shoots his gun at zombies and

various monsters. The audience can identify that the action is from Reaper's

perspective because we are shown Reaper's reflection in the mirror at the start of the

sequence. Otherwise all we can see of his character is the occasional blurry reflection

in the metal walls, and Reaper's gun, which is constantly in the bottom of the frame.

Worley describes this as an 'almost abstract homage' to *Aliens* (Worley 2006: 54):

> Director Andrzej Bartkowiak (...) takes pains to recreate Cameron's dank inferno
> of hissing blue steam, enclosed tunnels and cage-like walkways. But the movie
> only briefly recalls the hellish amber glow of the game in a redundant point-of-
> view sequence towards the end. In this abrupt, almost abstract homage a
> camera roams the dark corridors, allowing the viewer to share the vision of hero
> John Grimm (Karl Urban) as he dispatches a succession of lurking monsters with
> shotgun, limpet mines and chainsaw. (Worley 2006: 54)

When we look at Worley's quote it is significant that he argues that the sequence

where the film most resembles the video game, is actually unnecessary. In other words

an action-oriented film does not need to reference its source material, even when that

source material is both visual and action-oriented, and will be known and loved by its

fan audiences. Why is this representation of the standard *Doom* video game standard

redundant in *Doom* the film? It could be that it has been assumed that the audience,

as fans of the game do not need to see such a uncomplicated imitation of their game.

There is also a difference in our understanding of how first-person operates between a

video game, where the player has control, and a film, where the viewer does not. This

therefore makes the experience of the first-person-shooter sequence in the *Doom* film very different to the game.

Ebert describes the same scenes in the film as 'a sequence that abandons all attempts at character and dialogue and uncannily resembles a video game' (Ebert 2005). If the sequence does 'uncannily resemble a video game' then this suggests it is a good adaptation of the *Doom* video game. However Ebert's comment suggests that video games by implication do not have characterisation or dialogue. In the case of the *Doom* video game this is probably fair, but when other first-person-shooter video games are taken into account this is less fair. The main issue with the sequence that we shall discuss later is that whilst it resembles a video game, it is only superficial because the audience member cannot participate. Instead it is intended to remind the audience of their time as players rather than being a direct simulacrum.

At a promotional panel at Comic Con the first-person-shooter clip was framed as 'something that hasn't been done in film before….' (Quint 2005). This is statement is somewhat unrealistic, and Quint goes on to qualify it; 'they're kind of right... this has been done (…), but not in the context in which they did it' (Quint 2005). The point-of-view shot is an important part of the visual vocabulary of cinema. It is most regularly seen in horror films, particularly those in the slasher subgenre. Krzywinska notes that 'often the point-of-view shot in the horror film is synonymous with that of the killer or monster' (Krzywinska 2002: 214). This type of point-of-view is described by Clover: 'we see through his eyes and (on the soundtrack) hear his breathing and heartbeat. His and our vision is partly obscured by the bushes or window blinds in the foreground' (Clover 1992: 45). She goes on to explain that many critics have suggested that such shots force viewers to identify with the killer. However, as Clover goes on to suggest, it is not

clear that viewers automatically identify with the character behind the point of view shots that they watch. Rather it can 'work as much to destabilize, as to stabilize identification' (Clover 1992: 45). Hutchings suggests that rather than encouraging a sadistic view, the killer's point of view shot may instead encourage viewers to identify with the victim, gaining a masochistic pleasure (Hutchings 2004: 196).

In his report Quint does go on to name-check both Brian De Palma and John Carpenter as directors who use point-of-view shots. It should be noted that both are horror film directors, with Carpenter having an important role in crystallising the slasher genre with his 1978 film, *Halloween*. However Quint points out that there is a difference in context between the point of view shots used in slasher films and the first person shooter sequence in the *Doom* film. *Doom*, although featuring elements of horror, uses the point of view shot quite differently to a slasher film and by extension, the directors he mentions. Rather than seeing through the eyes of the killer, we are watching the action from the perspective of the hero, specifically the hero as he acts to save others.

The point-of-view shot in the slasher film is often used to conceal the identity of the killer, while making the character present in the film. In *Doom* it is made clear whose perspective the shot is from because we see Reaper's reflection in the mirror, and Reaper is visually present in the film in other ways. In addition it is clear that Reaper is carrying a firearm and reloading it as needed, which is rare in slasher films. This sequence in *Doom* is instead more similar to the noir thriller *The Lady in The Lake* (1947) in which the film is shot entirely from the first-person perspective of Raymond Chandler's detective Phillip Marlowe. Throughout the film we only see what Marlowe sees, including his reflection, the coffee cup moving to his lips and the woman he

kisses. This unconventional use of the camera created a similar debate to the one that

the *Doom* first-person section created in the 2000s. The central issue was that the first-

person technique, whilst interesting, was not a standard technique in popular cinema.

However if identification is uncertain as Clover suggests then will viewers of *Doom*

actually identify with Reaper in this first-person-shooter sequence? If viewers do not

identify with Reaper, then who can they identify with? The monsters appear for only a

few seconds before being killed, making it difficult to transfer identification to them

unlike the victims in slasher films who are often on screen for several minutes during

point of view shots to heighten tension and viewer concern for the characters. Harry

Knowles' description of his experience of playing *Doom* is very interesting in light of

this discussion of the point-of-view shot in slasher films: 'that the game was a total

John Carpenter First Person vision thing… well, I was Michael Myers with a Big Fucking

Gun! Heh. Too much fun' (Knowles 2005). He relates *Doom*, as a first-person-shooter

game directly to the slasher film, referencing *Halloween*. In particular he relates to the

killer, not the victim. This suggests that it is potentially possible to see the experience

of playing first-person-shooters as identifying with the killer in films such as *Halloween*.

However there is a central difference between how a film viewer and a game

player relate to the character they see on screen. The difference is one of control and

the ability of the player to choose alternate paths and better tactical solutions to

presented problems.

> Player identification with a game character (or with the camera itself) is arguably
> even stronger, and certainly more overt (playing *Tomb Raider*, the player 'is' Lara
> Croft) than a mainstream audience's identification with onscreen characters.
> (Howells 2002: 117)

Whilst *Tomb Raider* is a third-person gaming franchise the central point remains that

the player, because they control the gaming avatar, feels a greater identification with

that character's successes and failures than they do with film characters over which

they have no control. In the case of *Doom* this is exacerbated by the fact that the lead

character is unnamed and therefore the player does not have to be Lara Croft, they

can play themselves. As Morris notes:

> If primary identification is the cinematic subject's identification with the act of looking, then the F[irst-]P[erson-]S[hooter] player is unequivocally the one doing the looking. He or she is invisible in the game, just as one's own body is mostly invisible from one's point of view in real life. The player is placed in the scene not only by the first-person point of view but also by his or her total control over this point of view. (Morris 2002: 89)

Counter-intuitively it is the player's invisibility in the game, and often the player's

seemingly magical and effortless insertion into the narrative, that means that the

player can easily associate with the action going on around them. By making it easier

to enter and enjoy the game world the player finds it simpler to take on the limited

identity offered by the game.

Given that the point-of-view shot is a staple of modern horror cinema, why

would the first person shooter sequence in *Doom* 'leave a non-gamer in the audience

perplexed and frustrated' (Berardinelli n.d.) as Berardinelli suggests? Although the

sequence is quite long, it doesn't use techniques that an audience would have not

seen before, as the evidence from *Lady in the Lake* and the slasher genre proves. It

may be frustrating because it changes the pace of the film and slows down the

narrative, but not because of a lack of understanding unless viewers are, as

Berardinelli implies, not familiar with common cinema techniques.

Instead of replicating the language of the horror film genre, the *Doom* film's

first-person-shooter sequence is an attempt to replicate the experience of playing the

Doom game. The first-person-shooter experience appears to be a both intense and

personal one, leading gamers, according to Morris, to talk about their in-game

experiences in the first person (Morris 2002: 90). In addition 'F[irst] P[erson] S[hooter]

players report a sense of immersion and primary identification far greater than that

established in relation to other screen media' (Morris 2002:90). These experiences are

the result of the personal involvement of the players. Quint, a reviewer from *Aint It*

Cool News, after watching the first person shooter sequence at Comic Con, described

his favourite part as:

> After shooting a ton of Imps and reloading, the camera is moving down a dark
> corridor. It pans casually to the left to see a vague shape and sends off one shot
> in a knee-jerk way. After a beat we see that the shape was Karl Urban's face. It
> was the reflection of the P[oint] O[f] V[iew] and there's a bullet mark on the steel
> or whatever the reflective surface was. I've done that a dozen times while
> playing. That made me smile. (Quint 2005)

In examining the first-person-shooter part of the film, Quint notes sequences that

allow him to recognise his own behaviour when playing the game. It is normal for first-

person-shooter games to include points that are intended to make the player jump, in

a similar way to the false scares used in such films as *Jaws* which are intended to lead

the audience first to a fake climax of fear, and then usually to a real one. This fear

experience is more intense in horror games than horror films because, as Krzywinska

(2002) notes, the player is more involved in the action than a simple viewer: 'the

interactive dimension of horror games enables a *more* acute experience of losing

control than that achieved by most horror films' (Krzywinska 2002: 216). For Quint the

reminder of this moment of false fear is a reminder that he himself has been in the

same position as the character in the film, as indeed have many other players of the

computer game *Doom* that have reached the same point in the game.

    This is elaborated on by Rafe Telsch who points out that some elements, even

successful ones, do not always translate well between different media. Of particular

importance is that the strength of a first-person-shooter game is its interactivity. When

the *Doom* film is compared with the game:

> There's no interactive element to it, the audience is just watching a walkthrough, so the F[irst]P[erson-]S[hooter] sequence is just like watching a video game. (…) while it does remove the audience from the action during the film's climax (the reverse effect of what it was striving for), it doesn't mar the entire film. (Rafe Telsch 2006)

When the experience is translated into a film it becomes passive. As Rafe Telsch

suggests, the film becomes like a walkthrough, an activity that game-players use to

learn the secrets of a level, not as an entertainment. This therefore makes the

sequence in the film boring because the film-viewers will never get to play the level

they have seen a walkthough of. He describes the sequence as 'like watching a video

game' the problem of course being 'watching' rather than playing. This makes it a

passive experience rather than an active one. If the point of view shot is supposed to

involve the viewer - in one way or another, it is interesting that Rafe Telsch feels it

removes the audience, effectively the opposite of its intention.

However despite what is a pleasurable element for *Doom* players like Quint, it

is problematic because the audience member is watching someone else play the game.

As Kim Newman comments: 'there's nothing duller than watching somebody else play

a game' (Newman 2005). What makes it more difficult is that we are not even

watching one of our own immediate friends play a computer game, where we could

have an emotional stake in their success or failure. This is something that Massawyrm

picks up on: 'the first person sequence (…) turns out not to be like watching one of

your buddies play Doom on his PS2. On the contrary, I've had fun watching my buddies

play *Doom* on their PS2. This was retarded' (Massawyrm 2005). The implication is that

it is the emotional involvement with friends that can make watching someone else play

Doom enjoyable. Without that it is simply dull and potentially stupid. In the case of the film it is a fictional character who is the principle source of interest, rather than a friend, which distances the viewer even more from the action. Roger Ebert summarises this loss of power for the viewer in this way: 'I haven't played it [*Doom*], and I never will, but I know how it feels not to play it, because I've seen the movie. *Doom* is like some kid came over and is using your computer and won't let you play' (Ebert 2005).

In first-person-shooters the centre of identification is almost entirely with the main character, but it is possible to identify with secondary characters in certain circumstances. Morris argues that this occurs through a combination of visual cues, player actions and the ability of the game to enable agency through enabling and encouraging multiple solutions to puzzles.

> Primary identification in the F[irst] P[erson] S[hooter] game is established more directly through the constant first-person point of view, the player's own sense of agency and experience of interactivity. (Morris 2002: 89)

The aim of this is to immerse the game player into a world where they are the hero, encouraging the player to think like the leading actor in an action film. This is a unique strength of the computer game, which cannot be matched by the film. Films by their very nature are not amenable to interaction with the audience in an active, rather than a passive, manner.

> The dynamic in play is towards greater control of the game environment, yet control is nonetheless localised and is always qualified by the game's broader infrastructure. Film, however, offers no equivalent. It is unable to exploit the potential of interactive devices to intensify an awareness of the dynamic of *being in control* and *out of control*, and this aspect is key to the specific types of suspense and emotion-based pleasures offered by horror games. (Krzywinska 2002: 215-216)

The key point of control is that the film audience has very little control, to the point that most audience members can merely choose not to look. The alternative to this in

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video games is the cut scene and the fixed camera angle. The cut scene halts the game action and uses the time to impart game relevant or narrative information to the player. Fixed camera angles, in computer games, frame what the game player sees and stops the player from being able to look around corners or into certain areas ahead of time. As Krzywinska argues 'although games may give the player freedom to look, first-person framing in gameplay is, nonetheless, in cinematic terms, 'restricted''

(Krzywinska 2002: 214). This ensures that monsters can still appear from nowhere and be sufficiently scary rather than be resolved as minor tactical issues. Even so, as Morris notes, the computer game player has significant and direct control over what happens on the screen for the vast majority of the time that the game uses (Morris 2002: 89).

Characterisation

An essential difference between films and computer games is the ability of the main characters to express themselves through non-verbal clues. In the case of films actors are able to provide a wide range of body language clues to indicate what the character is feeling and this can be particularly effective when using the human face indicate subtle plays of emotion to the audience. However this cannot be done in a first-person-shooter as the audience cannot see their own body or face. This limits the amount of emotional and character information that can be communicated using traditional methods. In addition first-person-shooters such as *Doom* may not feature enemies that are human. This means that for the player developing their understanding of the characterisation and emotional meaning of the game takes on a more complex aspect.

> As far as characterisation is concerned videogames are, indeed, generally less
> successful than novels or films. Character development becomes a matter of the

player mastering certain skills and tragic flaws are reduced to a declining energy
bar. And with the tasks in each level remaining more or less the same (...) the
illusion of narrative progress is such that the levels merely have to look different.
(Keane 2007: 104)

Keane's argument does apply to many first-person-shooters, but not to the majority of

videogames. Character development is integral to most modern games. For example

the *Max Payne* franchise is based entirely on the character development of the

mentally ill Max Payne as he attempts to deal with the deaths of his wife and child in a

neo-noir New York. In the case of the video game *Doom* there is less room for tragic

flaws, and one could argue that given the odds against the player spending time on

emotional development rather than survival horror would be to miss the point entirely

– delay would only result in death.

Whilst it was the case in certain early games such as *Doom* in 2004 that:

While today's games have better developed plots and sharp visual styles, there's
little room to develop characters when the protagonist acts differently
depending on who's playing. (Fritz and McNary 2004: 67)

This critique has been largely removed as an issue in today's games, following years of

games design development and technical advances. The player can decide how to

approach most game problems in a number of ways. In some cases the game provides

character classes that can do different things, such as in multiplayer games where

characters are snipers or medics, which enforce different play styles. A sniper

character in close quarters combat is extremely weak, whilst a medic would avoid

contact with the enemy as much as possible. Another method for determining the

approach to a game-related problem may be the equipment that the character is

carrying, careful play and husbanding resources, may leave the player able to use

special equipment at a vital time. Some modern games such as *Halo* have worked to

reduce the ability of the player to carry equipment and so it makes the decision-making on resource management even more difficult.

There is a further issue about defining characters in game. Characters such as Max Payne are carefully delineated through the use of cut scenes and special levels scattered through the main story and it does not matter what the player does to get there, they will still have to be exposed to the same issues that Max's less than stable psyche is hurt by. To complete the game players have to accept that some things are unavoidable, such as Max's guilt over the death of his family and the imagery that results.

The character, and the choices that the player makes when playing the character, can create a different persona for the game character through play. Players in *Doom* may prefer direct assault over stealth, or long range use of the explosive scenery. All of which gets the same results without having the character act in the same way. Hutcheon argues that this enables the computer game player a level of control that is unusual in the entertainment world: 'the player becomes at once protagonist and director in a way no performance spectator or reader ever can' (Hutcheon 2006: 135). Hutcheon goes further, arguing that the gaming interface facilitates the players' internal monologue by enabling them to ascribe their personal emotional feelings to the computer game character.

> Although it may be true that the characters or avatars have no real interiority, players do, and in manipulating the avatar's movements, they can attribute their own motives, desires, hopes and fears in the context of the game, of course, to this character. (Hutcheon 2006: 63)

There is an argument to be made that in the case of *Doom* the options for acting are extremely limited. However the game engines from first-person-shooters such as

Doom, *Quake* and *Halo* have been used by creative gamers to create machinimas. Salen describes machinima as 'animated movies made utilising the client-side, real-time 3D rendering technology of game engines' (Salen 2002: 99). For example *Red Vs Blue*, a machinima created by Rooster Teeth from the *Halo* game engine has become a successful brand, with nine seasons of animations available both online and for purchase on DVD. The machinima has also received validation from Microsoft, the publisher of *Halo*, who has commissioned special content. Just as the first-person-shooter game questions the point-of-view shot in film:

> Machinima engages questions about the role of specialised looking, or point of view. Recams, or demos of game play refilmed and edited from alternative perspectives and distributed as movies, clearly demonstrate the role point of view plays in affecting representation. (Salen 2002: 103)

The existence of machinima suggests that although players might rely on the game designer, when playing a game, it is possible to take advantage of game engines to create something new. It also allows typical ideas about point-of-view to be questioned, particularly how the technique works in a filmic sense.

> In the game, players can see themselves as producers of the fiction (despite the authorial stamp of the game's programmers and designers on the game's engine and graphics) because of their active role in the game. (Morris 2002: 90)

Doom, from its original inception, offered the players the ability to make and distribute new levels. Indeed the fourth level sold as part of *The Ultimate Doom* (1995), called *Thy Flesh Consumed*, was developed from home-made packages created by many players. It is notable that these levels were considered to be significantly harder, more challenging, and for experienced players more fun, than the ones that the original design team developed. This was enabled by the provision of the WAD file format in *Doom* which let players create and distribute their own levels, often via CD-Rom or pre-HTML internet facilities. In this way the players were very involved in the creation

and authorship of new *Doom* stories, either commercially in things like *The Ultimate Doom* or through fan based social provision. This kind of fan development is not uncommon and can be seen in not only first-person and third-person shooters but also simulation games such as *The Sims* (2000). *The Sims* has a vast network of enthusiastic amateurs creating and distributing furniture, clothing and wallpapers for others to use, which in turn enables others to create their own stories in *The Sims*. As Bryce and Rutter conclude: 'the difference between film and games is not only that the audience makes the spectacular happen in games but that they can make the spectacle itself' (Bryce and Rutter 2002: 75)*. Doom* provides both spectacle and characterisation for the games player to enjoy.

Conclusion

In terms of world building the film *Doom* had a broad palette to choose from as the game itself did not present a coherent world. This meant that the film was able to show the world however it wished, provided that it also gave a link back to the original game. It does this through the use of the specific game-monsters, firearms and most importantly the first-person shooter point of view shot.

As a film adaptation of a video game *Doom* presented a number of issues about the translation of properties between media. The first of which was the issue of fidelity to the source material. As a first-person-shooter the *Doom* game was played from the first-person perspective. To translate this aspect, which was considered core to the property into a successful film was problematic. To translate it directly, as the film did in the first-person-shooter sequence, this although satisfying to fans of the original media, was not well received by critics. As one fan argued:

> *Doom* works as a tribute because it fails so utterly as a movie. There is a reason so many video game-based movies suck: They are fundamentally different forms of representation. Thus by being faithful to the game, the movie pisses off the critic and pleases the gamer. (Keskar 2005)

Effectively the film of *Doom* is a good adaptation of the game because it is a poor film.

This suggests that it is impossible to create a satisfactory film adaptation of a video

game because of the differences in the two media. A major issue with these

adaptations is the subject of agency. A video game where a player controls the action

is a vastly different experience to a film in which the viewer's options are significantly

less powerful on the story that is being told. For those who are familiar with the *Doom*

game, watching the film is a very different experience. This is summarised by

Clownfoot:

> Without the interactive nature that the game will always hold for the player (because you're the one blowing the crap out of everything), the film conversion will always struggle to hold ones attention. (Clownfoot 2006)

It is this combination of fidelity and agency that drives the debate about the first-

person-shooter sequence in the film *Doom*. There is at the same time a desire for the

film to reflect the visual imagery that the player recalls, but this point-of-view

technique was used in an unusual manner, making it sometimes difficult for everyone

to enjoy. This leaves the film in a difficult position, particularly when compared to a

film adaptation of a book as a book can leave much to the imagination of the reader,

whilst a video game is precise in its ability to provide visual and audio information. The

other issue that underscored the debate on fidelity was that the *Doom* game did not

have a great deal of depth to create a film narrative from, which meant that the film

makers had to build an entire world, as well as create a narrative and group of

characters to provide the audience with things to watch. This was cause of much of the

critical reaction to the film itself and suggests that creativity in worldbuilding relies on

the fan support for it. This is central issue of the next chapter in which White Wolf,

creators of the *World of Darkness* sued Sony for taking their created world and the

negative reaction of the White Wolf fan-community to this legal situation.

Chapter 5: Copyright, Association and Gothic sensibilities: *Underworld* and the *World of Darkness*

Introduction

In the previous chapter on *Doom* we examined what happens when a created world is expanded significantly by filmmakers. In this chapter we look at the results of what happens when filmmakers take from another created world and the legal and fan-based complications that result. The central thesis of this chapter is that fans do not necessarily support the company that creates their chosen fan activity, preferring to support the fan activity in all its aspects whether it is by the legitimate owners or otherwise. In some respects this is not unusual for the tabletop role-playing game community to want to have adaption within their gaming world.

In September 2003 Sony Pictures released the film *Underworld*. Even before its release the film had proved controversial following a legal action for copyright infringement from White Wolf, a games publisher, and Nancy A Collins, one of their fantasy writers. White Wolf alleged that Sony had used unique elements that they had developed for their *World of Darkness* line of role-playing games. It was also alleged that *The Love of Monsters* (1994), a short story by Nancy A. Collins and written for White Wolf's game line, had been plagiarised in the film's plot. *Underworld* can be viewed as a kind of unofficial transmedia product created by Sony Pictures, which recalled many of the images and narratives of a created game world from the small games company, White Wolf. It is significant because it is a case of a larger company using, or at least appearing to use, the creativity of a smaller firm to inspire the look and feel for their own transmedia product, and it is quite possible that Sony did not expect their product to be challenged by a far smaller company. This chapter will explain the background to

this case, including an examination of fans, Gothic and the *World of Darkness,* it is particularly

significant because of the worldbuilding aspects of the *World of Darkness*, the appropriation of

the world by Sony and the negative fan reaction to the owners of the *World of Darkness*

defending their legal risks but in so doing risking the supply of further transmedia goods. We

argue that fans want their preferred world to be developed far more than they want the

companies that produce it to have ongoing success. This is a significant aspect to be

considered when examining fan activities and their relationship with transmedia producers.

As a result of their desire to rewrite a text, many fan activities revolve around a

violation of someone's property rights. The interactive nature of role-playing games makes it

easy for fans of a game to refashion it to their own desires unlike film and television

programmes. It might be expected that fans of the *World of Darkness* – a setting that was

unique to White Wolf – would support its only producer. In addition White Wolf might be

perceived by fans to be the 'underdog' in a legal battle against Sony, and therefore more

sympathetic. This chapter will show that the opinions expressed by forum posters, particularly

those who claimed to be fans of the *World of Darkness* did not follow this pattern. Instead

there are similarities to John Tulloch's examination of Australian *Doctor Who* fans, who

expressed dislike in fanzines of particular individuals such as John Nathan-Turner, who were

responsible for the production of *Doctor Who*, while still enjoying the programme (Tulloch

1995). This chapter will demonstrate that the reaction of the fans to a challenge to the rights

of the *World of Darkness* was not to support the owners and creators of their preferred

created world, but to react negatively to any suggestion that other providers could not use the

imagery that White Wolf had generated. In effect the fans were choosing to reject the person

supplying the material whilst still wanting more of the aesthetic. In some cases, fan reaction

was so negative that some questioned whether or not White Wolf should continue in business,

which as White Wolf were the sole legitimate supplier of the *World of Darkness* goods implies

that the audience are only supportive of their chosen aesthetic and do not care which

company provides it or under what terms. In addition the fan reaction to the question of who

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owns the ideas that form the overall world was considerable. The fans have a significant stake

in the created world because they create their own characters and narratives based on the

products provided, yet at the same time they also want more examples of this kind of setting

to be provided so that there is more perceived depth to the *World of Darkness*. The issue

appears to be that the fans wanted more of the preferred product and are at best ambivalent

to the named individuals or companies that are responsible for the creative process. In the

case of *Underworld,* the fans of the *World of Darkness* were supportive of the gothic-punk

setting rather than White Wolf. This chapter will examine what gothic-punk is in the context of

White Wolf.

　　　　Underworld proved to be highly popular and a number of sequels were made

meaning that the *Underworld* franchise has to be considered a significant success. The

popularity of *Underworld* among White Wolf players suggests that the film makers were

successful in transferring something as hard to define as a 'look and feel' – a combination of

emotional tone, art palette and other signifiers which will say to the aware viewer that a

particular property is being referenced deliberately - which is unusual in transmedia

storytelling because it is more common for elements such as characters, narratives and

locations to be transferred between media. This means that *Underworld* offers some unique

transmedia elements to explore, together with a large amount of audience reception available

due to the legal action and discussions around it. Therefore this chapter will examine the

reactions of fans of the *World of Darkness* in internet forums at the time and develop a picture

of what they thought and felt about both *Underworld* and the legal action.

　　　　The discussion of the *World of Darkness* leads to an examination of the game and

its relationship with both *Underworld* and, surprisingly, *The Matrix* (1999). Many fans were

convinced that *Underworld* had taken from both sources in its development. As a result we will

examine the similarities between the *World of Darkness*, *Underworld*, and *The Matrix* and also

consider the similarities between *Underworld* and *The Matrix*. We propose that this

demonstrates the popular-culture literacy of the Internet forum posters who recognised the

similarities between these sources.

For this chapter we examined the forums of several websites which date back to

2003 to find out what people were saying about *Underworld* and the legal action by White

Wolf. These forums included role-playing devoted forums such as RPG.net, RPG Junction,

Gamewyrd and Ogre's Cave; film forums such as Geek Roar and Rotten Tomatoes; and

Halloween Forum, which is devoted to the Halloween holiday. Before the release of

Underworld websites such as RPG Junction for example had a dedicated forum, 'Goth

vampire/werewolf movie alert', following the development of the film and speculating upon it.

The Internet, and in particular what appears on forums is frequently determined by their

users:

> Use of the Internet is dominated by the selections and choices of the consumer.
> Whether through entering a key word though a search engine or inputting an exact web
> address into their browser, the user is required to decide, to adapt a famous Microsoft
> slogan, where do they want to go today? (Hodkinson 2003: 288)

I chose to look at Internet forums because forums such as these had replaced fanzines by the

end of the 1990s as the main source of communication between role-playing game players, as

it had for other sub-cultural groups. Hodkinson's research into online Goths showed that 'most

Goths [he] spoke to said that the first thing that they ever entered into a search engine was

either the name of a Goth band or the word 'goth' itself' (Hodkinson 2003: 289). This suggests

that the Internet is a tool for some people to further their sub-cultural lives, through increased

sub-cultural capital and the potential for contact with like-minded people. On Internet forums

Gauntlett argues that:

> Since participants cannot see each other, and are not obliged to reveal their real name
> or physical location, there is considerable scope for people to reveal secrets, discuss
> problems, or even enact whole 'identities' which they would never do in the real world,
> not even with their closest friends. (Gauntlett 2004: 17)

Internet anonymity is important because it frees posters up from expected social conventions, and gives them license to say what they think. However this can make things difficult for researchers because there is no way to verify what has been written.

Usenet forums can also give a fuller and more varied picture of what fans were thinking, particularly as some of the posts may have never seen publication in a fanzine because of issues of space and quality. Unlike fanzines, internet forums have moderators rather than editors which allows all online fans to participate and not face the censorship of the editor. Tushnet outlines the benefits of the internet for fans who produce fan-fiction:

> When fans distributed work via mimeographed or photocopied zines, editors usually reviewed content. Now, anyone can post a story minutes after writing it, before even using a spellchecker. To put it more positively, today anyone can post a story on her own web page even if its content is not popular enough to support a zine. (Tushnet 2007:6)

There are similar issues for role-players. Just as some fandoms have a limited fan base, there are role-players who are devoted to games that are no longer in print, or games that have had limited print runs. These players can produce new scenarios, settings and rules and distribute them online without being concerned about the commercial viability that a fanzine publisher must consider. On forums the censorship of posts revolves around both formal and informal forum rules which are often clearly defined:

> forums of various kinds 'create unique normative standards' and 'continually reinforce the norms by creating structural and social sanctions against those that abuse the groups systems of meaning. (Hodkinson 2003: 292)

Interestingly for this study, no censored posts or locked threads were found, except on White Wolf's own forums, where there is a notable lack of discussion, suggesting relevant forums may have been deleted.

Formed in 1991, White Wolf is one of the largest companies in the role-playing games industry, behind the owners of *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Magic: The Gathering*, Wizards of the Coast. By 2003 White Wolf had a market share of 26% of the tabletop role-

playing game market, with book sales of over 5.5 million (White Wolf 2003a). White Wolf is

now owned by CCP Games, the Icelandic publisher of the massively multiplayer online role-

playing game (MMORPG) *Eve Online,* who bought them in 2006 (White Wolf 2007)*.* White Wolf

is best known for its *World of Darkness* line of role-playing games which included *Vampire: The*

Masquerade (1991*)* and *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* (1992). As the success of White Wolf's

games shows, this setting is very popular. To exploit this popularity the *World of Darkness* has

been licensed for a variety of merchandising outside of the role-playing game sphere. These

include other kinds of tabletop games including collectable card games such as *Vampire: The*

Eternal Struggle, and board games such as *Vampire: Prince of the City*, novels, comics,

computer games such as *Vampire the Masquerade: Bloodlines*, and the Aaron Spelling

television series *Kindred: The Embraced* (1996) (Appelcline 2011: 219-220. The setting is clearly

of great interest to consumers, and is considered a viable proposition for a MMORPG created

by CCP Games (White Wolf 2007). In 2003 White Wolf took the remarkable and financially

risky step of rebooting their *World of Darkness* setting to remove a mass of internal

contradictions that had occurred because of their previously often chaotic game development

methods. (Appelcline 2007a and 2007b) The original games were replaced with redesigned and

updated versions including a core rulebook and *Vampire: The Requiem,* and *Werewolf: The*

Forsaken. 2003 was therefore a vulnerable time for the company.

2003 also saw the release of *Underworld*, a film about a centuries-old war

between vampires and werewolves starring Kate Beckinsale. Beckinsale's character, Selene, is

a vampire 'death-dealer', who hunts werewolves as part of this war. In the pursuit of her duty,

she meets and falls in love with a young werewolf, Michael Corvin. While protecting him from

both sides, she discovers that the werewolf threat is worse than the vampires believe.

Ultimately she discovers that the vampires are the villains of this war because of their

genocidal actions against the werewolf population. Corvin is linked to both sides and, after

being infected, becomes a vampire/werewolf crossbreed, referred to as 'an abomination'. The

film ends with Selene and Corvin on the run together. The film was highly successful – with a

budget of $22 million, it grossed $95.7 million at the box office worldwide, and spawned three

sequels – *Underworld Evolution* (2006), *Underworld: Rise of the Lycans* (2009) and *Underworld:*

Awakening (2012) (Box Office Mojo 2008).

Copyright infringment

Copyright law is complicated, and it is expected that copyright holders will go to

court to protect a copyrighted property. If they do not then they can risk losing copyright. As

an intellectual property, the *World of Darkness* is a valuable asset for White Wolf that must be

protected from copyright infringement. It would be the *World of Darkness* that was at the

heart of the legal issue that resulted from the film *Underworld*.

On 5 September 2003 White Wolf and Nancy A Collins, sued Sony Pictures, Screen

Gems and Lakeshore Entertainment alleging seventeen separate counts of copyright

infringement. They claimed over 60 points of unique similarly between *Underworld* and the

World of Darkness (White Wolf Inc., White Wolf Publishing Inc. and Nancy A. Collins vs Sony

Pictures Entertainment Inc., Lakeshore Entertainment Corp. and Screen Gems Inc. 2003). It was

also alleged that the script of *Underworld* was based on the story *The Love of Monsters* (1994)

by Collins, which featured a romance between a werewolf and a vampire. The case rested on

more than just the use of a couple of unique concepts. It was significant to the case that,

although some of the ideas are not original to the *World of Darkness* and include a number of

different mythical and literary elements, Mark Rein-Hagen combined them in a way that is

unique to White Wolf. As William Strong explains: 'an original exposition of public domain

material may take the form of an arrangement. […] [the] originality lies (partly) in the

juxtaposition of these public domain elements, and [the] copyright extends only to the limits of

[the creator's] originality' (Strong 1999:5). This appears to be an appropriate way to

understand the copyright issues surrounding Rein-Hagan's creation of the *World of Darkness*.

The case revolved around the suggestion that the same mythical and literary elements are

combined in *Underworld* in the same way as the *World of Darkness,* in addition to the plagiarism of Collins' short story *The Love of Monsters*. However an idea or plot can not be copyrighted, instead copyright protects the way the idea is expressed (Strong 1999: 13). Problematically 'no one has reliably defined […] the boundary between idea and expression' (Strong 1999: 179-180).

The case itself was settled out of court, with neither side willing to divulge details of the resolution. This may imply that both sides of the suit felt their case was not strong enough to guarantee a win. In addition suits for copyright infringement can be both expensive and lengthy, something that both Sony and White Wolf may have wanted to avoid. The *Underworld* franchise does not appear to have been harmed by the legal action for copyright infringement by White Wolf. The first film, *Underworld*, was commercially successful and two sequels and prequel have been made.

It is not possible here to examine each of the seventeen counts of copyright infringement. The areas that this chapter will look at are the aesthetics, the vampire/werewolf war and the abomination.

The *World of Darkness* is the brand name for the setting of a number of linked White Wolf role-playing games. The first game in this setting was *Vampire: The Masquerade* which was followed up with, among others, *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*. The *World of Darkness* is a modern urban horror setting with a strong gothic undertone. It is based in the real world of today but, one that is twisted very slightly to create an image that the rulebook describes as 'through a looking glass darkly' (Rein-Hagen 2000: 28). The setting is described by Rein-Hagan as gothic-punk (Rein-Hagen 2000: 28-29). It combined aspects of vampire mythology and Goth style with the ambience of Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*. The *World of Darkness'* vampire gothic-punk unifies urban horror with the Gothic and Goth subculture to make a new sub-genre. This term is used in White Wolf's Complaint for copyright infringement presented to court and explained in the following way:

26. The combination of gothic and punk lifestyles work together to encourage creativity and imagination. They avoid the normalcy of the status quo and the mundane, which suffocates imagination.

27. For the Gothic-Punk way of life, emotions rule actions and passion overrides logic and reason. (White Wolf Inc., White Wolf Publishing Inc. and Nancy A. Collins vs Sony Pictures Entertainment Inc., Lakeshore Entertainment Corp. and Screen Gems Inc. 2003: 5)

In 1991 this setting was highly original in the role-playing games industry and was one of the first games aimed specifically at mature players, with adult themes and narratives. Typically player-characters are supernatural beings, including vampires, werewolves and mages. Characters are often filled with personal angst and torment over their monstrous natures whilst the urban cityscape is threatening and out of human proportion.

The Gothic

The most important aspect of the *World of Darkness* is the Gothic. This is a deliberate aspect of Rein-Hagen's worldbuilding for the *World of Darkness* setting. If we examine the *World of Darkness* we will develop a better understanding of how the worldbuilding was undertaken, and what other sources it used to develop its imagery. Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith define the Gothic as 'not merely a literary convention or a set of motifs: it is a language, often an anti-historicising language, which provides writers with the critical means of transferring an idea of the otherness of the past into the present.' (Sage & Lloyd Smith 1996:1) As a concept the Gothic continues to be as relevant today as it was in the 18th and 19th centuries and as a result appears in a range of contemporary media. Catherine Spooner summarises its key themes as: 'the legacies of the past and its burdens on the present; the radically provisional or divided nature of the self; the construction of peoples or individuals as monstrous or 'other'; the preoccupation with bodies that are modified, grotesque or diseased.' (Spooner 2006: 8)

It is possible to identify all of these themes in both the *World of Darkness* and *Underworld*. The legacy of the past is important in both texts. In *Underworld* it is critical to the

plot with two intrusions of the past onto the present. On the wider historical scale, Selene doesn't know the origins of the vampire/werewolf war and on a personal level she doesn't know the truth about the murder of her human family. This makes Selene vulnerable to manipulation by Vicktor, her father-figure, who has suppressed the truth. Equally the *World of Darkness*, features the intrusion of the past, although it is represented physically through the vampire elders. The vampire elders and younger vampires are in perpetual conflict. The elders are afraid of younger vampires because of their greater numbers and so use their power and influence to control them. This creates disquiet among the younger vampires who become envious of their elders' power.

In terms of the division of the self both texts have examples. Selene is internally conflicted. She believes that her family were murdered by werewolves and her occupation is hunting werewolves; yet she has fallen in love with a werewolf and begins to see the werewolves' viewpoint. While in *Vampire: The Masquerade*, a key part of the game is the struggle between the humanity of the individual and their vampire desires, which are nicknamed 'the beast'.

Both texts construct groups of people who are defined as monstrous and 'other'. In the case of *Underworld* and the *World of Darkness* the groups are literally monstrous – werewolves and vampires. This has escalated to war and because each group is so radically different and can do things that the other cannot, this makes the enemy that much stranger and more 'other'.

Modified bodies are central to both *Underworld* and the *World of Darkness*. Vampires and werewolves are by their very definition no longer human, and therefore modified from the norm. Werewolves can even change shape, moving from human to man-wolf and even full wolf forms. Both texts feature the abomination, a werewolf/vampire hybrid which is a monstrous modification of the already modified werewolves and vampires. The vampires in *Underworld* are concerned about the purity of their bloodline, while the vampires

in the *World of Darkness* are more concerned about the bloodline being diluted through the generations. In effect the abomination is a grotesque to characters that are already grotesque.

There is no doubt that both *Underworld* and the *World of Darkness* are Gothic constructs and deliberately so. Both use the key Gothic themes and a similar Gothic aesthetic. In particular the cityscape of *Underworld* bears close resemblance to the description of the world in *Vampire: The Masquerade*:

> Buttressed buildings loom overhead, bedecked with classical columns and grimacing gargoyles. Residents are dwarfed by the sheer scale of the architecture, lost amid the spires that seem to grope to Heaven in an effort to escape the physical world. (Rein-Hagen 2000: 28)

Selene is depicted moving through an old-world city lost among the rooftops and spires of gothic churches.

Fans of the *World of Darkness* and *Underworld* were well aware of the similarities. The vampire/werewolf war and the abomination are ideas that both appear in the White Wolf campaign supplement, *Under A Blood Red Moon* (1993). In this supplement a vampire leader, desperate to find an external enemy to unite his fractious followers, attacks and kills a werewolf. His miscalculation is that he believes that werewolves, although powerful, are essentially small in number. The retaliation from the werewolf tribes is immense – hundreds of werewolves descend onto Chicago with the aim of exterminating all vampires. There is a marked similarity between *Under A Blood Red Moon* and *Underworld* which is commented on in the Complaint for copyright infringement:

> 73. In the World of Darkness vampires and werewolves have been at war for as long as any of them can remember. In Underworld vampires and werewolves have been at war for over 1000 years.
> 74. In the World of Darkness, werewolves and vampires are depicted as natural enemies. In Underworld, werewolves and vampires are depicted as natural enemies. (White Wolf Inc., White Wolf Publishing Inc. and Nancy A. Collins vs Sony Pictures Entertainment Inc., Lakeshore Entertainment Corp. and Screen Gems Inc. 2003: 13)

Both feature wars between vampires and werewolves, the vampires not recognising the large

werewolf threat, and the intention to unify various vampire factions by creating a common

enemy. However the concept of conflict between vampires and werewolves is not new. Paul

Barber shows that is well established in folklore and suggests that its origins are in the

scavenging of dead bodies by dogs and wolves. (Barber 1988:134) In addition there are

numerous earlier examples in film including *Frankenstein's Bloody Terror* (1968) and *The*

Howling VI: The Freaks (1991).

The level of hatred between the two warring sides in *Under A Blood Red Moon* is a

key part of the story: 'the mood is one of *revulsion.* This story is about two very different races.

Their values, their beliefs, their morality and even their tactics differ from one another. Each

side is sickened by the other. They do not respect their enemies; they are instead repulsed by

them, seeing them as blights to be removed' (Brown 1993: 11). This hatred leads to each side

being willing to undertake what would be called ethnic cleansing. In *Under a Blood Red Moon*

the werewolves explicitly plan to eliminate all vampires in Chicago whether they are involved

in the war or not. Neither side is interested in taking prisoners or negotiating a settlement, and

the concept of civilian or neutrality is meaningless.

The same mutual hatred applies in *Underworld*. Both the werewolves and the

vampires despise the other group. In *Underworld* this is taken to a logical extreme, with Selene

acting as a dedicated anti-werewolf fighter with hundreds of years of experience. The

vampires and werewolves of the *World of Darkness* use not only tooth and claw, but also high-

tech weapons such as phosphorous rounds to kill vampires and silver nitrate rounds to kill

werewolves. Many of these weapons are developed by a multi-national corporation, run by

werewolves. Similarly in *Underworld* there are clearly advanced research facilities dedicated to

developing more effective methods of killing each other. There are also similarities to the

weapons depicted in the *World of Darkness* with *Underworld's* vampires armed with silver

nitrate bullets, as listed in the Complaint for copyright infringement: '84. In the World of

Darkness, the vampires created Silver Nitrate bullets specifically for fighting werewolves. In

Underworld, the vampires created Silver Nitrate bullets specifically for fighting werewolves'

(White Wolf Inc., White Wolf Publishing Inc. and Nancy A. Collins vs Sony Pictures

Entertainment Inc., Lakeshore Entertainment Corp. and Screen Gems Inc. 2003: 14).

Into the middle of the war in *Under a Blood Red Moon*, comes the abomination – a

werewolf that has been deliberately infected by a vampire's bite. An abomination is a rare

creature with a mix of werewolf and vampire characteristics that is rejected by both vampires

and werewolves as unnatural. Werewolves particularly despise the abomination because not

only is it physically tainted but spiritually tainted. As spiritual eco-warriors the werewolves

consider the walking dead, like vampires, as unnatural. Again there is a marked similarity

between *Under A Blood Red Moon* and *Underworld*: '79. In the World of Darkness a

werewolf/vampire hybrid is called an "Abomination." In *Underworld* a werewolf/vampire

hybrid is called an "Abomination"' (White Wolf Inc., White Wolf Publishing Inc. and Nancy A.

Collins vs Sony Pictures Entertainment Inc., Lakeshore Entertainment Corp. and Screen Gems

Inc. 2003: 14). *Underworld* features a vampire/werewolf hybrid in the character Corvin, who is

born a werewolf and then bitten by a vampire. The film uses the word 'abomination' twice to

describe a vampire/werewolf hybrid. The concept of a vampire/werewolf hybrid and the use of

the word 'abomination' to describe it, is unique to White Wolf. The difference in the handling

of the abomination between *Underworld* and *Under a Blood Red Moon* is that in *Underworld*

the abomination is partially the result of werewolf experimentation and genetic development,

whilst in *Under A Blood Red Moon* the abomination comes from vampires capturing

werewolves and torturing them.

Fan response

The merits of the case between White Wolf and Sony were debated on both role-

playing and film forums. The official court documents submitted by White Wolf, were copied

by interested role-players and made available as Portable Document Files (PDF) on several

role-playing websites. This made it possible for those who were sufficiently engaged by the

case to read them and comment directly on the claims for copyright infringement, although

this did not always happen. However what was key to these fans' involvement was the

Internet. It allowed both discussion and the ability to share pertinent information to the case:

> The publishing and networking capabilities of the internet have enabled more viewers to participate in activities usually associated with long term, committed fandom, such as writing fan fiction, collecting images and information, and following the activities of those associated with their text. (Pullen 2004: 80)

Many of those commenting on the Complaint for copyright infringement were self-proclaimed

White Wolf fans who prefaced their comments with statements about their level of

involvement with White Wolf's games. These usually express a level of personal enjoyment,

such as 'I really enjoy White Wolf's games' (Wolfie 2003) and 'I love W[orld] o[f] D[arkness]'

(Margi 2004) or express their involvement in terms of years played, such as 'I had followed

W[orld] o[f] D[arkness] for years' (eruditus 2003) and 'I've played vampire and werewolf for

years...' (Margi 2004), along with those who simply say 'I am a fan of White Wolf' (Sephiroth

2004). This appears to be an attempt by the posters to justify their opinions by stating their

credentials or subcultural capital.

As Sarah Thornton suggests in *Club Cultures* 'subcultural capital is objectified in the

form of fashionable haircuts and well-assembled record collections' and 'embodied in the form

of being 'in the know', using (but not over using) current slang and looking as if you were born

to perform the latest dance styles.' (Thornton 1995:11-12) As this takes place online, it is

therefore more difficult for the posters to demonstrate their subcultural capital. They cannot

display their collection of gaming books or their long running game campaign, both things that

would demonstrate significant subcultural capital to other role-players. In this case subcultural

capital must be based on affirmations of how much one loves the games or how long one has

played them. It is noticeable that the posts critical of White Wolf tend to have far more of

these personal justifications than the positive ones. It looks like fans think that a certain

amount of subcultural capital is required to justify a negative opinion. This is possibly to 'prove'

that they know what they are talking about and therefore have a right to comment on the film

and its links to the specific details of the *World of Darkness*. Parody argues that:

> For fans of major, mainstream media franchises, negotiating subcultural identity and capital is complicated by the uncompromising accessibility of franchise entertainment (which adaptation only increases); reading franchise adaptations through the lens of fidelity provides a useful opportunity to display fannish expertise and assert precedence. (Parody 2011: 7)

It is certainly the case that these fans use these spaces for discussion as a way to demonstrate

their subcultural capital, and they attempt to use these displays to show the quality of their

knowledge and by extension the strength of their fandom. By comparison a significant number

of positive posts do not explicitly say that they are fans of White Wolf. A couple of posters

specifically said that the law suit had changed their opinion of White Wolf, from positive to

negative. For example 'until today I rather liked White Wolf' (Leopoldo 2003) and 'I have really

lost respect for them [White Wolf] after this lawsuit' (Wolfie 2003).

Many of the critical posts were vitriolic with some posters believing that White

Wolf had ulterior motives for the legal action. There are suggestions that the suit was brought

for nothing more than free publicity:

> We all know why White Wolf sued, they just wanted the publicity. If they make no money on this, they have already made a profit in bringing people's attention to a small market company who makes Vampire and Were-wolf games, stories and r[ole]p[laying]g[ame]s! (BLADE 2003)

In addition this was combined with the idea that White Wolf were looking for a payoff, or were

planning on capitalising financially on the publicity. The majority felt that the lawsuit was

'ludicrous' and said this in no uncertain terms in their posts, using phrases such as 'the lawsuit

is crap' (T-monster 2004), 'I find it ridiculous' (Margi 2004) and 'the suit is frivolous' (eruditus

2003). Posters express support for Sony, with one poster suggesting that Sony should 'bury

them [White Wolf] under so much counter litigation W[hite] W[olf] won't be in a position to

pester anyone ever again' (edmund 2003). It seems that although posters like the *World of Darkness* setting, they are far more ambivalent about White Wolf; fans care more about the product they use than they do about the source of that product. This reaction, when White Wolf represents the sole source of legal supply, is surprising. That it happens is worth noting and we can draw the not unreasonable conclusion that the supplier does not matter to the fan.

White Wolf games have been sufficiently popular that a large fan club was established called the Camarilla, named after the largest group of organised vampires in *Vampire: The Masquerade*. In the years leading up to the release of *Underworld*, White Wolf had fought a legal action with the Camarilla, effectively *their own* fans, over trademark infringement by the Camarilla (Appelcline 2007b). In February 2003, White Wolf had managed to take over the – formerly independent but now bankrupt - fan club and its property. This had left a number of fans conscious that White Wolf, when taking legal action to protect its interests, did not necessarily appear to have the best interests of the fans or their hobbies at heart. This may mean that there was an additional underlying level of bad feeling within the fans reaction to the *Underworld* dispute, which goes unmentioned but is unlikely to have been forgotten by September 2003 and may have coloured the fans' reaction to the White Wolf position on the case.

Despite this White Wolf was surprised at the level of negativity that came from their own fans over the case. In a statement originally on the White Wolf forum, but reposted on RPG Junction, the president of White Wolf, Mike Tinney commented: 'we're also a little remotely surprised by the knee jerk reaction some folks are having to this legal action that we're taking to perpetually protect what we seemingly believe to be infringements of our copyrights' (reposted by JamminJeremy 2003). If, as Tushnet suggests, 'plagiarism (...) is one of the most serious offences against the fan community, and when discovered the plagiarist is generally publically excoriated' (Tushnet 2007: 65) then why is the alleged copyright

infringement of the *World of Darkness* not seen in this same negative light? What Mike Tinney

may not have realised is that the fans were reacting to a threat to a source of additional

transmedia products that they could not expect from White Wolf. As such a threat to the

setting that they were consuming was met with rage. From the perspective of White Wolf, as

the creator of the *World of Darkness*, they were being criticised for standing up for their legal

and moral rights as they saw them. It appears that the existence of White Wolf as a company

and its legal rights was irrelevant, and even a negative, to the fans who had just seen these

rights be used to take over the Camarilla fan club and then threaten the release of the film

Underworld. It is significant that these fans did not appear to support the actions of the

company that makes a game that they demonstrated was important to them through their

expressions of subcultural capital.

A point that some posters make is that the *World of Darkness* is not unique, in

particular, that other writers such as Anne Rice or Laurell K. Hamilton may have a better case

against *Underworld*. For example:

> Having seen the film itself, I'd say that Anne Rice and Laurel K. Hamilton have much
> more to be angry about than White Wolf. (Johnny McKenna 2003)

and…

> Personally, I think that the creators of Blade, Anne Rice, the writers of Near Dark, and
> just about every other piece of vampire fiction should sue White Wolf. White Wolf
> should acknowledge that they did nothing original, and just get over it. (T-monster 2004)

These authors are specifically named because their novels have a similar vampire gothic-punk

setting. Anne Rice's vampire novels feature angst-ridden vampire protagonists – rather similar

to *World of Darkness'*s monsters battling to retain their humanity but also similar to Selene in

Underworld. While the Anita Blake line of novels by Laurell K. Hamilton features a vampire

hunter who is in love with both a vampire and a werewolf. Again there are similarities with

both *Underworld* and the *World of Darkness*. It is revealing that posters noticed a similarity

between the *World of Darkness* and Anne Rice's work given that Rein-Hagen had originally

planned *Vampire: The Masquerade* as a licensed property based on *The Vampire Lestat* (1985):

> As we were driving Mark Rein-Hagen said, "I've got this idea. I want to do an Anne Rice
> role-playing game". He wanted to get the license to do *The Vampire Lestat.* (Lisa
> Stephens quoted in Laws 2007a: 102)

Vampire: The Masquerade is not identical to Anne Rice's novels, beyond featuring vampires in

a modern urban setting. The game features far more vampires, in communities and with

significant social structures. The vampires themselves draw on a wider range of cultural

sources and are combined in a fantasy world that incorporates other supernatural beings,

including werewolves, in a way that Anne Rice does not.

The most significant part of *Vampire: The Masquerade*'s success was its ability to

tap into the Goth subcultures which had become more significant in the late 1980s. 'The Goth

influence gave the game an original feel, but also made it attractive to people who had never

considered roleplaying before or had grown out of the hobby' (Vasilakos 2007: 349). This

gained the game a wider audience beyond the established male role-players, which included

large numbers of female players:

> Between the release [of *Vampire the Masquerade*] and the next year, that whole Goth
> subculture that it tapped into was very obvious. It was also picking up steam culturally in
> general. We were seeing more people embracing the idea of dressing in black frilly
> petticoats with umbrellas or top hats. That whole extroverted Goth sensibility. We
> started seeing them almost right away. The Live Action game is credited with really
> drawing them in. Women in petticoats and top hats are very attracted to live action
> games. (Nicole Lindroos quoted by Laws 2007a:103)

The fans of *Vampire: The Masquerade* were unusual gamers, and represented an unusually

feminine group of players. *Vampire: The Masquerade* became a significant addition to a Goth

lifestyle being included as a Goth signifier along with fashion, music and other popular culture

choices.

The fans' vitriol towards White Wolf is significant. The White Wolf fans are

interested in the vampire gothic-punk genre, embodied for them in more than just the *World*

of Darkness but in other cultural objects such as *Underworld, Interview with the Vampire* and the Anita Blake novels. For them the *World of Darkness* exists independently, without the support of White Wolf. Therefore White Wolf, by suing Sony for copyright infringement, was threatening and limiting fans' supply of vampire gothic-punk. White Wolf's Complaint for copyright infringement asked the court for an injunction 'preventing the distribution, marketing, release, sale, and rental of *Underworld*,' 'the recall of all copies of *Underworld*' and 'the impoundment of all copies of *Underworld* (...) in their possession, custody and control' (White Wolf Inc., White Wolf Publishing Inc. and Nancy A. Collins vs Sony Pictures Entertainment Inc., Lakeshore Entertainment Corp. and Screen Gems Inc. 2003: 22). The implication for fans was that White Wolf was suggesting that only their brand of vampire gothic-punk is 'authentic' and only they can supply it. This is problematic for fans because, as their posts suggest, they want a broader supply of vampire gothic-punk and that any expression of this genre is 'authentic' to them. It would appear that fans of *Vampire: The Masquerade* view the company as an impediment to, rather than an enabler of, their interests. It is possible that the posters are fans of the vampire gothic-punk genre rather than just the *World of Darkness*.

Fans usually position themselves as being alternative to the mainstream. By supporting *Underworld* and Sony Pictures, the White Wolf fans had chosen to support a mainstream cultural product. This is unexpected in that the fans have chosen to move away from supporting their preferred lifestyle choice of *World of Darkness* gaming to support a film created by a large corporate body. This can be seen as a case where people that classify themselves as outside of the mainstream – both Goths and gamers – support the mainstream, which is unexpected. This overturns the typical notion that fans like to support a perceived small company underdog against a dominant multinational. In part it is a desire for more vampire gothic-punk products among White Wolf fans. However, although role-playing, as an activity, could be described as alternative; in the context of the role-playing industry, White

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Wolf, as one of the largest companies, is the mainstream. It is not therefore strange that they have transferred their interest from one perceived mainstream company to another.

In the press release announcing that they had filed a suit against Sony, White Wolf claimed that the film had confused its fans. Mike Tinney is quoted in the release: 'the volume of confusion in our marketplace is amazing, our fans think they're going to be seeing our film. Of course, if the movie gets released, in a way they will be' (White Wolf 2003b). This was said for two reasons – firstly because there is a strong legal reason to say so, because if there is confusion among fans between the *World of Darkness* and *Underworld*, then it strengthens their claim of copyright infringement and that they were 'suffering irreparable harm and damage' (White Wolf Inc., White Wolf Publishing Inc. and Nancy A. Collins vs Sony Pictures Entertainment Inc., Lakeshore Entertainment Corp. and Screen Gems Inc. 2003: 22). Secondly it appears that Tinney misunderstood fans' reaction to the film and the legal case. There is little to support his views from the forum posts made by the fans of *World of Darkness* at the time, with only one poster admitting to have been confused as to *Underworld's* origins:

> When I first saw the Preview at Freddy vs Jason my first thought was it was an 'adaptation' of the game. The whole World of Darkness/Vampire vs Werewolf thing was just like the game. (The Unknown 2003)

However, once the legal action had become public knowledge it would have been clear to White Wolf fans that *Underworld* was not made with White Wolf's agreement. It is unlikely that many posters would want to admit to any earlier confusion, as this would suggest a lack of subcultural capital in front of their peers.

The idea of the fans wanting to see a '*World of Darkness* style' film is backed up in forum postings. One of the posters who watched *Underworld* felt that it 'ISN`T the World of Darkness, but pretty damn close' (phish1yem 2003). While another poster on RPG Junction suggested that it 'may look kinda W[orld]o[f]D[arkness]-ey when ya scan it, but it definitely doesn`t seem like a Garou [werewolves] vs. Kindred [vampires] thing' (B. Samedi 2003),

meaning that it took the gothic-punk imagery that is the basis of the *World of Darkness* and

used it in the film.

So if *Underworld* wasn't the *World of Darkness*, as the fans saw it, what did the

forum posters think it was? Many posters described *Underworld* as being similar to *The Matrix*

(1999) rather than the *World of Darkness*. There were several areas that posters identified as

similar, specifically the costumes, special effects and fights:

> I thought that it had more of a Matrix feel about it. The skin tight leather outfits, guns
> blazing with the matrix-like special effects. Long leather coats for the other Vamps.
> (Gilthos 2003)

and...

> I think this movie is more similar to the matrix than any other movie.. damn the visuals,
> the costumes, the music, cheoreography all seemed similar... (Bleh 2004)

This idea was well supported in several promotional articles for *Underworld*. On the MTV

website *Underworld* was summed up as 'kind of like *Interview With the Vampire* meets *The*

Matrix' (Downey 2002) or as *Penny Arcade* put it more succinctly: 'like a gothic *The Matrix*'

(Tycho 2003). The similarities between *The Matrix* and *Underworld* were felt to be so marked

that a poster suggested on Geek Roar: 'O well.. guess they might as well join the bandwagon

and sue too' (Bleh 2004). The fans propose the argument that *Underworld*, instead of being a

copy of the *World of Darkness*, has instead copied something else entirely.

There are a number of visual similarities between *Underworld* and *The Matrix*

which were mentioned by the critics at the time:

> *Underworld*, looks like it was shot on leftover sets from *The Matrix*, not to mention
> copiously uses the bullet-time special effects *The Matrix* made popular. Even Kate
> Beckinsale's outfit cop[y]s the Trinity latex bodysuit. (Chung 2003)

As posters noted, the costumes, including the use of trench coats, heavy biker boots and PVC

are almost identical. Selene and Trinity wear similar outfits, based on body fitting clothing,

with functional boots. However *Underworld's* vampires retain a Goth aesthetic with a mix of

modern Goth subculture fashions and Celtic knot-symbols on their practical trench coats.

Spooner describes Goth style as something that 'combined the nihilism of Punk, the perverse

sexuality of fetish wear and the graveyard exoticism of 19th-century mourning costume to

create a macabre aesthetic. Garments were predominantly black, accessorised with 'vamp'

makeup and *memento mori* motifs' (Spooner 2004: 162). The film's use of Victorian inspired

costume, corsets as outerwear, and heavy make-up which are very much elements of

traditional Goth fashion along with the incorporation of pvc and leather, fit with this definition

by Spooner.

The special effects in *Underworld*, especially the fight scenes, used many of the

techniques that *The Matrix* established. A number of the fights are similar to those in *The*

Matrix, with 'two or three shots that are literally carbon copies of those in *The Matrix*'

(Mackenzie 2003). These include a fight in each film featuring a subway station that uses

almost identical positioning of the scenery (the opening gun-battle in *Underworld*, and the

closing one in *The Matrix*) and a gun-battle where the bullets catch the surface of a body of

water (the rescue of Morpheus in *The Matrix* and the underground fight towards the end of

Underworld).

Moving beyond the visual similarities, there are also similarities in the theme and

characters. Both films are about secret wars being carried out just outside the sight of normal

people. In each film there are groups with special abilities that are not accessible to the

ordinary person. Ultimately, a single individual is chosen from the masses who will become

uniquely powerful. The intention is that the arrival of this person will end the war. In terms of

characters this individual is either Neo or Corvin. Neo and Corvin are sought out by a John the

Baptist figure, Morpheus or Lucian. There is a helpful warrior-handmaid in either Trinity or

Selene. The character is betrayed by either Cypher or Kraven and his 'death' leads to him

becoming more powerful than before.

In later posts this examination of the *Matrix* moves on to discussion about how the *World of Darkness* is supposed to look. Some posters have very clear ideas based on extensive knowledge of films across a range of horror cinema examples: 'my visual impression of the W[orld] o[f] D[arkness] has always been more like, er... Usually okay, you forcibly know eighties movies like Lost Boys and, um, other eighties movies?' (helmerj 2006). Although these are seemingly taken from Rein-Hagen's list of source material for the *Vampire the Masquerade* game:

> Bela Lugosi's *Dracula* and Murnau's silent *Nosferatu* are the granddaddies of the genre. Other good (or at least amusing) films include *The Hunger, Near Dark*, *Vamp, The Lost Boys, Salem's Lot*, the Christopher Lee Hammer Horror films, and the anime flick *Vampire Hunter D*. (Rein-Hagen 2000: 25)

This relationship between horror films from the 1920s onwards is a deliberate creative decision by Mark Rein-Hagen and it is clearly something that the fans posting on the forums about *Underworld* understood and appreciated as part of the overall gothic-punk genre. An interest in role-playing games does not preclude and may even encourage an interest in other similar cultural activities. Spooner argues that:

> Goth as a subculture is specifically geared towards consumption not only of the conventional subcultural commodities, music and clothing, but also of literary and cinematic narratives (...) Goths suture their identities from complex networks and literary and cinematic affiliations, incorporating the various characters and archetypes they encounter into their fantasy life and playing them out through costume. (Spooner 2004: 165)

It can be argued that role-players are similar to the Goths that Spooner describes. Rarely is role-playing, an activity, done without reference to other cultural artefacts. One of the critical points of role-playing games is that the action occurs in the imagination of the players, and it would appear that the fans use horror films to provide the basis for these imaginary constructs. It should be noted that not all of the fans referenced horror films, or films suggested by Mark Rein-Hagen in developing their image of the world. Indeed, some of the fans have more unconventional impressions of the aesthetic of the World of Darkness: 'as has

been said se7en is, I[in]M[y]O[pinion], how the W[orld]o[f]D[arkness] is meant to look'

(LivingForADay 2006).

The evidence is that neither *The Matrix* nor *Underworld* were viewed as being particularly original by the fans of the *World of Darkness*. Equally the *World of Darkness* is also seen as building on things that have come before. It is quite possible that the fans have a stronger view of the history of their chosen subculture than the companies that provide the products that the subculture consumes.

For those fans who were supportive of White Wolf's case, the similarities between *Underworld* and the *World of Darkness* were too close to be a coincidence. As one poster on Geek Roar wrote:

> The similarities between the plot, feel, and style of the Underworld are WAY too close to the Vampire world of W[hite]W[olf] for me to believe that the writers/producers were not directly and/or indirectly influenced by W[hite]W[olf] novels and sourcebooks. (Al 2003)

At the same time there is disappointment that White Wolf hadn't put their own *World of Darkness* film into production yet, as one Rotten Tomatoes poster wrote: 'too bad W[hite]W[olf] couldn't have done their own project years ago…' (Thorshammer 2003) There is also the suggestion that a While Wolf film could potentially be very successful, given the box office returns for *Underworld*:

> The moral of this is … a World of Darkness film would possibly do quite well, especially if it was better than Underworld. (straightbourbon 2003)

Those posters who were pro-White Wolf felt that a *World of Darkness* film could be very good, given what they felt was high-quality source material.

An important theme that comes out in many posts is less about the nature of the worldbuilding undertaken by Sony and White Wolf and more to do with the desirable and aspirational nature of Kate Beckinsale in her role in *Underworld*. There are many comments

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about Kate Beckinsale's desirability, particularly her 'ass'. For some later viewers this is the

best part of the film:

> Good points: (…) Kate's ass. (Knut@ 2006, April 9)

> Best part of the movie: Kate/Selene's shapely, shiny, leather-boldly encased butt.
> (Taylrdave 2006)

Her allure becomes almost the point of watching *Underworld* for some viewers: 'Oh come on,

you had Ms. Beckinsale in a skin-tight black leather catsuit. What more do you want?' (Olly

2004). Much of this desirability revolves around her costume, particularly the tight PVC cat

suit, which emphasised her physical attributes. Spooner argues that 'Goth quite clearly

depends on a spectacular style or set of styles for its identity, and as such represents another

manifestation of the Gothic preoccupation with clothes' (Spooner 2004: 159). This

preoccupation with clothes is further developed in the discussion between a group of posters

at Halloween Forum about how they will make a replica of Selene's costume for Halloween

and where to look to find similar items. One poster described Selene as 'so beautiful, in every

way! Her looks, her personality, her shape, and that pvc catsuit...omg !!! I'm in love with her !

And like others in this forum...want a costume just like HERS !' (selene 2004). For the

(presumably) female posters, not only is the character of Selene aspirational but her costume

is also desirable. Something similar is happening here to Pamela Church Gibson's suggestion

about the character of Trinity in *The Matrix*:

> Trinity does wear some stunning PVC outfits […] ; she wears functional, flat-heeled biker
> boots and is frequently seen astride a Ducati motorbike that might be, for many, as
> desirable as Carrie-Anne Moss herself. (Gibson 2005: 120)

For these posters who aspire to be like Selene, rather than desiring a technological item like

Selene's Maserati, they have transferred their commodity fetishism onto her costume (Gibson

2005:120). This desire is extended by a poster on *RPG Junction* who wants to try out the new

version of the *World of Darkness* 'if it means I can artistically be a badass who wears black vinyl

jumpsuits, mows down mooks with abandon, drives a Maserati, and has the "Never Needs

Ammunition" feat' (Knut@ 2006, April 9). In particular this poster wants to create a role-playing character that imitates Selene; from her attitude, costume, and behaviour, down to the very car she drives.

For people who have enjoyed the film *Underworld* there seems to be a desire to incorporate elements of the character Selene into their lives, whether it is through taking on the character through costume and dress, or by adapting the character for gaming purposes. For the forum posters these 'online communications are more frequently used as an extension of 'life as it is' than as tools for explorative identity building' (Hodkinson 2003:296). The key element appears to be that the fan gains something from the taking on of some or all of the Selene role and that makes them feel good.

Conclusion

In conclusion the case of *Underworld* and White Wolf features one of the largest companies in the role-playing game industry, which had a large and passionate fan base. Its main development was *World of Darkness*, a uniquely gothic-punk setting that they used in their range of role-playing games and related products. It was this property that White Wolf felt had been infringed by Sony Pictures Entertainment in their film *Underworld*. As a result it was important to them that they protect their intellectual property when they felt that *Underworld* infringed it. *Underworld* appeared to copy many aspects of the *World of Darkness*, including the aesthetics, the concept of a vampire/werewolf war and the vampire/werewolf hybrid, the abomination. Despite White Wolf being so certain that their created world was being used by others without acknowledgement it seems that the fans disagreed or were actively against White Wolf enforcing their rights, if it meant that they could not watch the film *Underworld*.

This means that the reaction to the news of this legal action was marked in fan circles, which included fans of White Wolf products, fans of the *Underworld* film and fans of

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both. The case was debated by these fans in forums on both gaming and film websites. Given

that the case appeared to be clear-cut to White Wolf, it did not seem unreasonable for the

company to expect to get support from their fans in what would have assumed was a

reasonable attempt to protect their property, including the *World of Darkness,* from other

companies. Surprisingly there were a significant number of White Wolf fans who were deeply

critical of the actions of White Wolf, to the point that some declared that they would no longer

support any White Wolf products. This is interesting as normally the fans would be expected to

demonstrate loyalty to White Wolf, which they did not. Based on the example of White Wolf,

fans do not feel that they owe anything to the company that produces the material that they

consume. Instead it appears that the posters are fans of a vampire gothic-punk setting, rather

than specifically White Wolf's *World of Darkness*. *Underworld* supported the desire of some

fans to see a vampire gothic-punk film. White Wolf's actions, although protecting their

intellectual property, threatened fans' supply of gothic-punk material, although many fans

expressed a desire for a 'proper' *World of Darkness* film in the future following the success of

Underworld. Frequently reasoned debate, rather than name calling or trolling, over the case

appeared to happen among those who were not White Wolf fans as the emotional investment

in the *World of Darkness* was often a lot lower among people that did not only play *World of*

Darkness based games.

There is a certain irony that White Wolf sued the makers of *Underworld* stating

that they were concerned about confusion in the marketplace, when it quickly became clear

that many people felt that the franchise that had most directly been copied from was *The*

Matrix. Even so this similarity is not clear-cut. As such the owners of *The Matrix* did not sue the

makers of *Underworld* and so this similarity was not explored in a court case. However it can

be suggested that *Underworld* appears to take several aspects including aesthetics, characters

and plot from *The Matrix*. Both films have punk sensibilities, with *The Matrix* having a more

cyberpunk image, *Underworld*, a gothic-punk one. Characters such as Morpheus and Lucian are

very similar, as are Trinity and Selene, and Neo and Corvin. One area that becomes clear in the

forum postings is the popularity of Kate Beckinsale's character Selene, a character that

manages to be both sexually desirable and aspirational at the same time, rather like Trinity. In

comparison Corvin is a far less interesting character, although he is more powerful than Selene

and the story in *Underworld* is, to an extent, centred on his re-creation as a vampire-werewolf.

The case itself was about the *World of Darkness*, and its appropriation by Sony to

make the film *Underworld*. Clearly White Wolf's setting, the *World of Darkness*, was

considered worth using for the film *Underworld*, so in that regard it must have been an

effective form of worldbuilding. Without the developed world that White Wolf had created

there would have been no legal action. What is particularly significant is that many fans agreed

that the world had been appropriated and then went on to say that it was not a particularly

original setting and yet even so they remained fans. The fan behaviour revealed in this case is

complex and does not follow the expected fan actions when their main source of *World of*

Darkness products is threatened.

In all of the case studies within this thesis to date we have looked at creating or

adapting worlds. The next chapter will examine what happens when the created world is

removed from a core character, changing the meaning of something significant.

Chapter 6: Plushies, Carl Cthulhu and Chibithulu: The Transformation of Cthulhu from Horrific Body to Cute Body

Introduction

Within this thesis the emphasis has been so far on adding additional information to the created world. In this case we are looking at what happens when a transmedia effort acts to remove the information that has been previous generated around a character, in this case Cthulhu, in order to make the character more saleable.

Cthulhu first appeared in the 1926 short story *The Call of Cthulhu*, by H.P. Lovecraft. The character is just one small element of Lovecraft's 'mosaics of interlocking metatexts' (Price 2009: 225). Despite this, Cthulhu has often been referenced visually in popular culture and is one of the more recognisable elements of Lovecraft's work. Lovecraft (1890-1937) worked predominately in the 1920s and 1930s as an author of short stories for pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales*. His stories were influenced by earlier writers of the gothic and macabre, in particular Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), Arthur Machen (1863-1947) and Lord Dunsany (1878-1957). In addition he ghost-wrote stories for figures such as Harry Houdini (for example *Imprisoned With The Pharaohs* 1924) and edited other writers' works. An important part of his output was an extensive quantity of letters, which he used to correspond with many of his contemporaries, including other writers such as Robert E. Howard, August Derleth and Robert Bloch.

The success of Cthulhu and other elements of Lovecraft's work were aided by his generosity to these other authors, encouraging them to use his creations in their stories. In return Lovecraft referenced his followers' creations in his own stories (Price 2009: 232). The effect of this was to create a rich and densely populated setting termed the Cthulhu Mythos. Joshi argues that the Cthulhu Mythos should be understood as a series of plot devices which work together to express Lovecraft's cosmic horror:

> A wide array of extraterrestrials (deemed "gods" by their human followers); an entire library of mythical books containing the "forbidden" truths about these "gods"; and a fictionalised New England landscape analogous to Hardy's Wessex or Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. (Joshi 1996: xvii) quoted in (Petley 2008: 40)

Petley argues that 'Lovecraft's influence on modern culture has been, and continues to be, immense, even though in his own lifetime his work was barely known outside the readership of the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*' (Petley 2008: 42). After Lovecraft's death, his generosity to other writers encouraged the creation of a genre of fiction that is still used by modern authors including Brian Lumley, Ramsey Campbell and Stephen King. The Cthulhu Mythos is, as Miller suggests 'an invention big enough for other writers and artists to crawl into, inhabit and expand upon' (Miller 2005). The collaborative nature that Lovecraft himself encouraged makes the Cthulhu Mythos open to others to use and reinterpret at will. Lovecraft's written work is now out of copyright and his ideas and creations are still being used by not only writers, but also visual creative professionals such as artists and merchandising designers. These images draw Cthulhu down many different visual paths, all according to the creative impulses of the artists. As a result the depiction of this creation has changed into a range of forms. Cthulhu's body has morphed from Lovecraft's horrific description into comical and most importantly for this chapter, cute forms.

In many ways this is very different from how transmedia and fan activities operate within modern commercial concerns. Lovecraft actively gave creative control to other people while in modern franchises there is a tension between those that hold the copyright and creative fans. Tushnet explains that 'some copyright holders have ... taken an aggressive stance against fan creativity, sending ... cease-and-desist letters threatening lawsuits to fan websites' (Tushnet 2007: 60). This occurs even when the works that the fans are creating 'would be classified as fair use under U.S. copyright law' (Tushnet 2007:60). Some copyright holders view fans negatively, as people who take from producers, rather than as an important part of the industry:

> Fans are simply seen as "pirates" who steal from the studios and give nothing in return. Studios often defend their actions against fans on the grounds that if they do not actively enforce their copyrights they will be vulnerable to commercial competitors encroaching on their content. (Jenkins 2006: 189)

In comparison Lovecraft openly encouraged creative use by other people, and would also adopt their new creations into his open and expanding created world. This active expansion continued after the death of Lovecraft, as other writers and artists continued to extend the Cthulhu Mythos in new directions and using different media. Overt elements from the Cthulhu Mythos appear in almost every medium, including films (Petley 2008), role-playing games and computer games. In addition there are a number of covert references in popular culture to Cthulhu Mythos characters and objects. For example the Necronomicon appears in Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead* (1981), while Cthulhu appears in two episodes of the children's cartoon series *The Real Ghostbusters* (1986-1991) and is referenced in the Rockstar Games computer game *Max Payne* (2001). One critical point with these references is that any context has often been removed and the elements have been stripped of their originating narrative in these appearances. This leaves the viewer to make the connections back

to H.P. Lovecraft and his Cthulhu Mythos. In many respects this is a test of the viewers'

subcultural capital. Thornton argues that 'subcultural capital (...) has long defined itself

as extra-curricular, as knowledge you cannot learn in school' (Thornton 1995:13). In

the case of the Cthulhu Mythos, this is knowledge outside of the everyday and of value

to those in relevant subcultures. For the viewers who recognise these references they

can gain an addition level of enjoyment from these products. In addition by being able

to demonstrate this subcultural capital to others in the subculture it gains fans' status:

'subcultural capital confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder'

(Thornton 1995: 11). The other side of these references is that for the producers of the

cultural artefacts, this very public demonstration of subcultural capital can be

pleasurable in itself. This subcultural grandstanding is combined with a deeper

concealed meaning because these references to the Cthulhu Mythos evoke a set of

particular ideas in the knowledgeable consumer's mind. At the heart of the Cthulhu

Mythos is the sense that the universe is larger than human comprehension, and that it

is a nihilistic place with a secret history. These simple references to the Cthulhu

Mythos can add a disturbing sense of depth to those that have the appropriate

subcultural capital, but for those without the appropriate capital, they are potentially

meaningless.

In *The Call of Cthulhu*, the chief source of fear, the character Cthulhu, is only

ever seen second hand, in dreams and depicted in artwork. However even this second-

hand image is horrific. The narrator is shown 'a morbid statue whose contours almost

made me shake with the potency of its black suggestion' (Lovecraft 1926). Lovecraft

describes Cthulhu as 'a monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-

like head whose face was a mass of feelers, a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious

claws on hind and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind' (Lovecraft 1926). This

describes an unnatural body that is intended to create fear and loathing in the reader.

However, some have suggested that 'hardly any reader finds Cthulhu frightening. In

fact, by all indications, the public is very fond of the creature' (Miller 2005). Cthulhu

appears to have developed a separate life from his principle text, *The Call of Cthulhu*. If

so then this suggests that Cthulhu might be a popular hero as defined by Bennett and

Woollacott (1987). Bennett and Woollacott use the term to describe characters such as

James Bond, Sherlock Holmes and Robinson Crusoe, who although:

> Have their origins in a particular work or body of fiction, ... break free from the originating textual conditions of their existence to achieve a semi-independent existence, functioning as an established point of cultural reference that is capable of working – of producing meanings – even for those who are not directly familiar with the original texts in which they first made their appearance. (Bennett and Woollacott 1987: 14)

Such characters are tailor-made for the transmedia age as they do not need to have

their back-stories explained and there are gaps within the ongoing narrative that

enable new stories to be inserted with little difficulty. Jenkins describes this difference

from the perspective of a screenwriter:

> When I first started, you would pitch a story because without a good story, you didn't really have a film. Later, once sequels started to take off, you pitched a character because a good character could support multiple stories. And now, you pitch a world because a world can support multiple characters and multiple stories across multiple media. (Jenkins 2006: 114)

If Bennett and Woollacott's definition is applied to Cthulhu, it is debatable that he can

be described as a popular hero. We should note that the characters they list as

examples have been translated into other media many times – James Bond has now

primarily become a film character and the books are secondary to many viewers'

understanding of James Bond. However it is debateable whether this definition can

apply wholly to Cthulhu. Outside of the relevant subcultures he is not sufficiently

recognised or well known enough to create meanings for those who are not familiar

with the original texts in same way that the character of James Bond contains

meanings for the majority of Britons. However for a specific subculture of fans

including horror fiction aficionados and role-players the character of Cthulhu is

meaningful, even if they have not read Lovecraft's stories. Perhaps instead it is better

to describe Cthulhu as a cult hero, who forms part of a geek alternative canon of cult

icons. Therefore Cthulhu has a limited number of well-informed fans which enables the

narrative behind the monster to be easily removed. This means that Cthulhu is

particularly interesting for study as the developed world behind the character is

eliminated for commercial exploitation.

When stripped of the narrative these characters become potentially empty

symbols, devoid of any meaning. This is echoed in Erb's work on King Kong, where she

argues that:

> In many current commercial activations ... King Kong is deracinated, in the sense that the character is torn from his textual roots in the 1933 film. Although this deracination occurs with all popular figures, in the case of King Kong, one significant consequence is that the character's historical origins in a moment of extreme racial strife largely vanish, leaving behind only a "cute animal" figure. (Erb 1998: 20)

Although Cthulhu has been 'reworked, inflected in different directions and to different

ends' (Bennett and Woollacott 1987: 283) unlike the more successful popular hero, he

has become nothing more than a cute monster. It is the movement from horrific figure

to cute consumption oriented icon and how it occurs that this chapter will examine. In

particular it will consider aspects of transmedia movement where this central

character has lost its meaning, or more accurately had it removed, in the transmedia

process. The central point of transmedia storytelling is that each separate object links

with every other one and reinforces an over-arching narrative. In general it is very

difficult to do this which means that each object has less meaning than the whole, as each contains only part of the full narrative. In the specific case of Cthulhu and its cute versions we see that objects are deliberately divorced from their meaning in a process of transmedia movement.

This chapter of the thesis will examine the depiction of Cthulhu in merchandising and comics as a cute monster and how this affects our relationship to the character. The idea of a cute Cthulhu appears to have gained the status of a meme, as this image appears to have become commonplace in merchandising and comics, as well as fan-produced art. A meme is defined as a unit of culture that is passed on by imitation (Blackmore 1998). The cute Cthulhu meme has developed over the last decade and has become widespread, particularly as the internet has supported the development and communication of ideas, including cute. Harris argues that the appreciation of cute is something that is passed on through imitation and continually reinforced by positive feedback:

> Our persistence in fawning over children who rock their babies, change the diapers of the many incontinent toys on the market, placate anxious dolls, or thrash disobedient teddy bears teaches these toddlers both the significance of their own cuteness--that is, their vulnerability--and the importance of recognizing cuteness in others. Through such rigorous training in role-playing, our culture actively inculcates in our children the doctrines of cuteness. Cuteness is therefore unique among aesthetics because it lays the foundations for its own survival by building into itself a form of proselytizing. (Harris 1993)

Similarly Gary Cross argues that for cute representations of children to work 'adults had to share them with children, the source of their "power." The adult not only imagined children as cute and invited the young to participate in rituals of wonder but also encouraged them to identify with the adult's playful fantasy' (Cross 2004: 126). Toy Vault produce specifically Cthulhu baby products, including My First Cthulhu Plush for the baby market. This is a cute toy, made with child-safe materials, for adults to

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buy for children. The intention of the adults, who are fans of Cthulhu, is to pass this onto their children. Both of these suggest that cute and the appreciation of cuteness might also be a meme as Blackmore defines. Adults create the idea of cuteness and pass it on to the next generation. It could be argued that the cute Cthulhu meme has some of its origins in Brian Lumley's Mythos fiction. In *The Transition of Titus Crowe* (1975) Lumley introduced a character called Kthanid 'who except for those eyes, might have been great Cthulhu himself!' However unlike Cthulhu he is 'the very soul of goodness and mercy, those massive golden eyes were lucid depths through which passes all the love and compassion of a father for his children' (Lumley 1997: 454).

The chapter will consider a selection of different cute Cthulhu merchandising centred on Steve Jackson Games' *Munchkin Cthulhu* (2007) card game. Steve Jackson Games is a games manufacturer based in Austin, Texas which has had a long pedigree in creating humorous games based around geek subcultures, including *Munchkin* (2001) and *Chez Geek* (1999). *Munchkin Cthulhu* with its expansions and additional merchandising are part of a larger series of games called *Munchkin* which all use the same rules, but each set emphasises different themes through the artwork and card names. The central premise of *Munchkin* is that it satirises different genres of role-playing games and some of the negative social behaviours that some role-players engage in.

Many of Steve Jackson Games' products, including *Munchkin*, *Munchkin Cthulhu* and *Chez Geek* are illustrated by John Kovalic. Kovalic is the writer/ illustrator of *Dork Tower* (1997-), a comic about four male 'dorks' and their interest in computer games, role-playing games, fantasy and science fiction films and merchandising. This link to geek culture made Kovalic suitably placed to work on the card illustrations for

Munchkin Cthulhu. In addition to illustrating these games Kovalic designed both the

Chibithulhu and the *My Little Cthulhu* toys. The *Chibithulhu* is produced by Steve

Jackson Games and *My Little Cthulhu* is produced by Dreamland Toyworks. Both of

these products were based on card art that Kovalic created for the *Munchkin Cthulhu*

game. The artwork had proved popular with fans of the game and additional

merchandising was arranged using the imagery including T-shirts and soft toys. It

appears to be part of Steve Jackson Games business strategy to create additional

merchandising for their games based on core images. Kovalic has also illustrated a

comical role-playing game Pokethulhu, which is a parody of Pokemon. The cover image

is an illustration of the pokémon Pikachu, with tentacles replacing his mouth in

imitation of Cthulhu. One of the game expansions to *Munchkin Cthulhu*, *Munchkin*

Cthulhu 2: The Unspeakable Vault (2008) was illustrated by François "Goomi" Launet,

who produces illustrations for horror role-playing games, and record covers, as well as

a humorous Cthulhu Mythos inspired webcomic, *Unspeakable Vault (of Doom)* (2004-).

The webcomic features characters based on characters from the Cthulhu Mythos,

including Cthulhu, Nyarlathotep and Shub-Niggurath. With this background in mind the

chapter will consider *My Little Cthulhu* by Dreamland Toyworks, the *Chibithulhu* from

Steve Jackson Games' *Munchkin Cthulhu*, and Cthulhoo from the web-comic

Unspeakable Vault (of Doom). The chapter will also consider some work from other

manufacturers including Toy Vault's plush toys and Carl Cthulhu from the comic *Little*

Gloomy to act as comparators to John Kovalic and François "Goomi" Launet's designs.

These cute Cthulhu products are quite complex theoretically and appear to

straddle the line between character merchandising and designer toys. Steinberg

defines character merchandising as:

> A form of cultural production and marketing that uses a character (or multiple characters) to generate the consumption of media forms such as television programs and video games, objects such as plush dolls and plastic toys, and products like car insurance and financial services. (Steinberg 2010: 210)

Although Cthulhu is a recognisable iconic character to some people, these toys are unlicensed products and don't exist to generate further consumption for other media forms. In addition unlike other iconic characters such as Mickey Mouse there is no single iconic form for Cthulhu (Steinberg 2010: 212). Instead the character is made recognisable by its combination of strange animal parts such as tentacles and wings. Some of the products discussed, in particular the *My Little Cthulhu*, could potentially be argued to fall into what is variously described as 'urban vinyl', 'designer vinyl' or the designer toy movement (Phoenix 2006) (Steinberg 2010). Steinberg describes the designer toy as: 'a three-dimensional figure based on the design and pattern of a particular artist or graphic designer collective, usually made from rotocast vinyl, but includes resin, plush and wood objects as well' (Steinberg 2010: 210). These toys are made in limited quantities, reflecting the small scale nature of the companies involved in their production but also the idea that they are limited edition artworks to be collected by connoisseurs. A key aspect of these designer toys is that they are made without narratives or backgrounds, and exist solely as desirable objects. This subverts traditional character merchandising which relies on its connection to other media forms for its desirability (Steinberg 2010: 213). The Cthulhu merchandising under discussion have been divorced from their narratives, making them more like designer toys than character merchandising.

Kawaii as soft and mouthless

Much of the theoretical work on cute has focussed on Japanese manifestations of cute, termed *kawaii*, examining items such as *Hello Kitty*, *Pikachu* and Loli-goth fashions. There has been comparatively little examination of Western cute, including characters such as Snoopy, the Moomins or Pingu, which are regarded as *kawaii* in Japan (Roach 1999) (McVeigh 2000: 232). This means that Western characters that have evolved into cute forms such as Cthulhu have been even less comprehensively studied. This chapter will therefore draw on work on *kawaii*, whilst acknowledging that there are important societal differences between Japan and America.

Sharon Kinsella defined *kawaii* as meaning 'childlike; it celebrates sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced social behaviour and physical appearances' (Kinsella 1995: 220). *Kawaii* is a relatively new word, appearing in Japan during the 1970s. It has quickly become commonly used in daily language with 'Japanese teen magazine *CREA* call[ing] *kawaii* "the most widely used, widely loved, habitual word in modern living Japanese"' (Roach 1999). The English word 'cute', with its meaning of 'attractive, pretty, charming' is similarly, a relatively new word. (OED 2011) Cross summarises the development of the word:

> Until the twentieth century "cute" was merely a shortened form of "acute," signifying "sharp, quick witted," and shrewd in an "underhanded manner." In American slang of 1834, it came also to mean "attractive, pretty, charming" but was applied only to things. The original meaning of the "cute" person was interchangeable with "cunning," a corruption of "can," meaning clever and crafty. Significantly, both words shifted meaning by the 1900s (though only briefly for cunning), from the manipulative and devious adult to the lively charm of the wilful child. (Cross 2004: 43)

In Japan *kawaii* is used to describe a huge range of things, from *Hello Kitty* merchandising, to young animals and children. Kinsella argues that 'the essential anatomy of a cute cartoon character is small, soft, infantile, mammalian, round, without bodily appendages (arms), without bodily orifices (mouths), non-sexual, mute,

insecure, helpless or bewildered' (Kinsella 1995: 226). This description is supplemented

by Christine Yano who suggests that 'many characters are animals or quasi-animals

who must be cared for or trained' (Yano 2004: 57). This is particularly important

because 'as living, breathing, active things, they exist somewhere in between being

human but not quite human, controllable but not too controllable, allowing us to

project our own selves onto them' (McVeigh 1996: 295). The ability to project

ourselves onto them is a suggested part of the reason for these cute characters'

success. This feeling is created by not just a human/ animal hybrid character but by

giving the characters a blank expression. This is part of the *kawaii* aesthetic and can be

seen in characters such as *Hello Kitty*, who has small expressionless eyes and no visible

mouth. McVeigh in his work on *Hello Kitty* argues that:

> Her plainness characterizes her as a cryptic symbol waiting to be interpreted and
> filled with meanings. Thus, she functions as a mirror that reflects whatever
> image, desire or fantasy an individual brings to it. Her mood is ambiguous;
> neither happy, sad nor agitated, thus ready to absorb and reflect back to her
> admirers whatever they are feeling on a certain day. (McVeigh 2000: 234)

In other words, the blank expression of *kawaii* characters allows viewers to project

their own feelings and ideas onto it. This means that however a viewer feels, the

character can 'respond' by being a blank slate. This is in part aided by some of Sanrio's

most popular characters (including *Hello Kitty*) not being tied to an existing story or

film (McVeigh 2000: 234). However it is not just cute characters which exploit this

'blank slate' aesthetic. According to Ruth Handler, the creator of Barbie, she 'avoid[ed]

giving Barbie any physical or biographical details that would limit the owner's

imagination. To this end, ... "the face was deliberately designed to be blank, without a

personality, so that the projection of the child's dream could be on Barbie's face"'

(Rand 1995: 40). Similarly to Sanrio, Mattel 'has deliberately refrained from circulating

certain Barbie biographical details or narratives – such as an age, a geographical

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location, or a wedding – that might foreclose fantasy options' (Rand 1995: 8). The

character of Cthulhu already has a narrative associated with it – that of H.P. Lovecraft's

short story, *The Call of Cthulhu*. However the cute Cthulhu merchandising that this

chapter will examine has for the most part stripped away this narrative, leaving the

character of Cthulhu floating free, without meaning or signifiers. This therefore allows

consumers to easily interpret the cute Cthulhu merchandising in any way they wish

and project their own meanings and desires onto the character.

The *Chibithulhu*, is a soft toy designed by Kovalic for Steve Jackson Games. The

design has its origins in art for a card titled 'Chibithulhu' that appears in the game

Munchkin Cthulhu. The soft toy is made from plush and available in a range of colours

and sizes from 'deceptively tiny' and 'insanely medium' to a 20-inch high 'mind-

crushingly huge' toy (Steve Jackson Games 2012). It has stubby arms and legs and a red

embroidered heart on its chest. The embroidered eyes are excessively large for the

face, with clearly defined pupils and irises, and long eye lashes. This makes them look

like the exaggerated and highly detailed eyes used for manga and anime characters.

Unusually for a cute character it has a mouth, but it is stuck in a big forced smile. The

wings are white and rounded, and look more like those of an angel, rather than a

monster. The soft toy of *Chibithulu* is definitely not intended to be monstrous or scary.

As a soft toy it is worth comparing with the similar plush Cthulhu toys made by Toy

Vault. This Cthulhu is made out of plush fabric and is smooth, soft, and rounded. It is

designed with gangly arms and legs and oversized hands and feet. This version of the

character is the closest to having claws, with the fingers coming to a rounded point.

The eyes are glass studs, similar to many soft toys. They clearly appear to fall into the

same category that the *Chibithulhus* inhabit. However the *Chibithulhu* and the Toy

Vault Cthulhu soft toys are not necessarily cute, as Kinsella defines the term. They are not sweet, vulnerable or weak and although their face is blank and their body, soft, they don't appear insecure, helpless or bewildered.

John Kovalic, the designer of the *Chibithulhu*, also designed *My Little Cthulhu*, a vinyl toy which is produced by Dreamland Toyworks. This design is also based on card art for *Munchkin Cthulhu*. *My Little Cthulhu* is perfectly smooth skinned, with tiny, placid eyes, no mouth and a huge, monstrously out-of-proportion head, which is far larger than the rest of his body. Tiny wings that could never fly have been affixed to his back. The limited edition versions produced in the alternative colours of red and black have a different facial expression. The eyes could be interpreted as displaying an emotion like anger through the use of a downward curving eyebrow. *My Little Cthulhu* is designed with human victim figures (sold as 'Little Victims') which can be placed in his hands, to be eaten by him. This allows the owner to care for the cute character by feeding him almost as cute victims.

However this is a perverse kind of feeding – rather than feeding a cute rabbit carrots - the owner is feeding a cute monster people. The blank expression of Cthulhu makes it easier for the owner to project their feelings onto this Cthulhu toy, feelings which may include negative feelings such as anger and rebellion. These feelings seem appropriate to suggest if the owner is projecting feeding people to a blank-eyed monster. Conveniently for the social acceptance of the toys owner these feelings are concealed from onlookers by the cute and blank-faced nature of this toy. These kinds of feelings are not unusual among children who play with dolls. Formanek-Brunell's research on nineteenth and early twentieth century doll play revealed a whole range of behaviours, but 'not all the feelings and issues which doll play accommodated were

superficial and sweet' (Formanek-Brunell 1998: 370). She uncovers different types of

play that explored children's darker feelings:

> One eight-year-old doll dentist used toothpicks as dental tools. Another boy shot his doll full of holes with a bow and arrow so that he could dress its wounds. Boys play also included doll crucifixion and executions' while 'a four-year-old girl disciplined her doll by forcing it to eat dirt, stones and coal. (Formanek-Brunell 1998: 374)

Although these kinds of play may not have been sanctioned by adults, other activities

such as the doll funeral were; 'these practises were encouraged by adults and

mourning clothes were made for dolls. It was not uncommon for fathers to make doll

sized coffins for their daughters' toys' (Formanek-Brunell 1998: 370). In a period when

infant mortality was high, the rituals of death would have not been unusual to

nineteenth century children. However it seems that these doll funerals may have been

cathartic, acting as 'an expression of aggressive feelings and hostile fantasies'

(Formanek-Brunell 1998:374-375). Similarly Gray argues that Star Wars toys:

> offered many implicit and explicit "proper" uses, in the schoolyard, garden or on the bedroom floor, children could do anything they wanted with those toys, from the "proper" to the "improper". (Gray 2011: 187)

Although it is difficult to directly map from child behaviours to adult behaviours, it is

not impossible that this kind of merchandising may reflect certain kinds of fantasy for a

consumer. Phoenix argues that:

> Toys are symbols that have a figurative power to embody thoughts and emotions that may have their origins in childhood, but are not childish. We recognise parts of ourselves – our secret, wishing selves – in toys. The part of us a toy touches is our unexpressed, dream(ing) self. (Phoenix 2006: 9)

In the case of licensed character merchandising their appeal 'is based on the image

networks to which they belong, rather than the material qualities of the toys

themselves' (Steinberg 2010: 213). This appears to be a deliberate strategy on the part

of those responsible for merchandising. David Imhoff, the senior executive president of

worldwide licensing and merchandising at New Line Cinema is quoted by Pomphrey on

the subject of *The Lord of the Rings* film merchandising; 'we want movie merchandise

to transport consumers into the unique fantasy world they've experienced in the film'

(Pomphrey 2007:60). The self-confessed geek and blogger Ethan Gilsdorf relates his

relationship to his collection of *Lord of the Rings* figures:

> On my cluttered desk I had erected a shrine for my two-inch-high Fellowship. (...)
> My minor show of fealty gave me a sense of belonging. But also longing: I so
> wished for Gandalf, Gimli, and Aragorn to join the rest of this miniature, plastic
> band of heroes. And a tiny me had wanted to join them, too. (Gilsdorf 2009: 13)

His collection of characters has taken on a religious significance and their visible

display marks him as part of geek culture. As a collector, he wants to own a full set of

characters. However he also describes something that is more than just a need to

consume the products or a fondness for the characters, rather it is a desire for what

the characters represent. In *The Lord of the Rings* the Fellowship, made up of Gandalf,

Aragorn, Legolas, Gimli, Boromir, Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin, is a brotherhood

which defends and cares for each other.

Many of these items of cute Cthulhu merchandising are produced in multiple

versions. Each version is almost identical apart from colour, size or elements of

costume. This is similar to Mattel's creation of multiple versions of Barbie. It acts as a

way to sell what is essentially the same product many times, often to the same

consumer. Rand quotes the president of Mattel: '"The ultimate goal of making each

Barbie special is to create the rationale for why little girls need to own more than one

Barbie doll," [and] that Mattel is trying to get girls to think that they need more than

the reigning average of seven' (Rand 1995: 24). Each Barbie is made special by the

addition of different outfits, accessories and sometimes different hair styles and skin

tones. It is these differences make the dolls different from each other and therefore desirable as individuals.

The examples of Cthulhu merchandising this chapter discuses fall into this pattern of producing multiple versions. The most interesting is the *Chibithulhu*, which is not only a soft toy, but also acts as a supplement to the *Munchkin Cthulhu* game. In order to encourage the players of *Munchkin Cthulhu* to purchase this piece of merchandising, the Chibithulhus have additional rules for the game printed on the labels of the toys. This is not unusual for Steve Jackson Games, who frequently produce expansions for their games, as well as merchandising such as toys, figures and t-shirts. This works in a way that is very similar to film franchises. The expansions for the games act in a similar way to film sequels, providing more of the same kind of thing for a player who has enjoyed the original. The rules published on the *Chibithulu* label encourage multiple purchases of the toy because it gives players an advantage when playing the *Munchkin Cthulhu* game for each unique *Chibithulhu* that they own. The rules state:

> 2. Mini-Chibithulhu must be in the room when you begin play in order to help you. Each Mini-Chibithulhu can only help one person per game (...)

> 4. Only one Mini-Chibithulhu can help you during the game. Exception: If the game is at your house (...) you may have two Mini-Chibithulhus of different colours and each one can help you once. If you have more than one *size* of Chibithulhu you may apply this rule once for each size! (*Munchkin Chibithulhu Plush* 2008)

These rules make the *Chibithulhu* desirable, not just as a toy or collectable, but also because of the benefits it confers when playing *Munchkin Cthulhu*. The other examples of cute Cthulhu merchandising also have multiple versions, but these work more similarly to the different versions of Barbie. *My Little Cthulhu* has a number of special limited editions, including a red figure called 'Angry', a black figure called 'Goth', a

glow-in-the-dark figure and a plain figure designed for purchasers to paint themselves.

The availability of multiple versions is a common strategy in the designer toy industry,

and companies such as Play Imaginative, Toy2R and Kidrobot all produce do-it-yourself

models for consumers to decorate (Steinberg 2010: 225-226).

Toy Vault produces a wide variety of Cthulhu Mythos-inspired plushes. Central

to the range is Cthulhu, which is produced in different colours and sizes, as well as a

variety of different outfits, including Elvis (*Cthulhu the King Plush* n.d.), as a graduate of

Miskatonic University (Miskatonic Cthulhu Plush n.d.) and a superhero *(Super Hero*

Cthulhu Plush n.d.). These are highly detailed soft toys, especially those dressed in

outfits, potentially making them more of an adult collectable than a toy. However

some of Toy Vault's plushes such as *My First Cthulhu* are specifically made to be

suitable for children, with embroidered facial details, instead of plastic eyes, and made

using 'baby friendly fabrics'. These toys are supplemented by other collectable Cthulhu

items such as Cthulhu slippers, a Cthulhu mobile phone pouch and a Cthulhu backpack.

The range also includes other plush Mythos toys, including plush Shoggoths,

Necronomicons, and Deep Ones. The plush Necronomicon is designed like the fabric

baby's first books, linking this horror icon to children's culture. These different

variations are made in limited quantities and go out of production, making them

collectable because of the limited supply.

The characters based on Cthulhu which appear in comics are somewhat

different to the toys described above. The nature of the comic book medium means

that they are imbued with their own personalities which work in conjunction and

opposition with the characteristics created by Lovecraft. In effect each comic develops

its own world which includes but is not limied by the original creation of Lovecraft. Carl

Cthulhu appears in the *Little Gloomy* comic, and is depicted with a rounded body and head, with no mouth and large black eyes. The proportions of Carl's body, although not completely unrealistic like the toys described, are still odd, suggesting a child's body, rather than that of an adult. Unusually his skin is mottled with spots suggesting that it is not smooth. This appearance falls into the definition of cute, however this cute style is part of the overall style of the comic book, with other characters similarly depicted. His personality is not what we might associate with a monster, with Carl describing himself as lonely and depressed, whilst fearful of the other monsters. In addition Carl's dream world is depicted as 'Happy Bunny Hollow', which is populated with cute, fluffy rabbits. These personality traits create a more sympathetic character, helping to make him cute, but pitiable. Cthulhoo from the web-comic *Unspeakable Vault (of Doom)* is radically different to Carl Cthulhu. His body is deformed, with claws sticking out of his body, suggesting that he has no legs. The eyes are tiny, but mismatched, looking like pin-pricks on a giant inflated head. The character is obsessed with eating, whether it be human cultists, or blue whales and is the butt of practical jokes. Just like Carl, Cthulhoo is part of a family of characters, but these characters are based on other Cthulhu Mythos creatures.

The merchandising and comics that this chapter will discuss is mostly aimed at this select group of collectors. However the comic *Little Gloomy,* a gothic comic by Landry Walker and Eric Jones, is somewhat different. The characters appeared originally in their own *Little Gloomy* comic, aimed more at adults, particularly those of the Goth subculture. These can be placed as part of a genre of Goth comics including *Emily Strange* and *Gloomcookie*. *Little Gloomy* then went on to be picked up to appear in *Disney Adventures* magazine, a publication aimed directly at children. The original

readers were Goths who were likely to have seen that many of the characters in the comic are inspired by the 1930s and 1940s monsters created by Universal, while the child readers of *Disney Adventures* did not have this reference point. Carl Cthulhu is just one character in a cast that includes Simon Von Simon, the mad scientist; Larry, the wolfman; and Frank, a Frankenstein's monster created by Simon Von Simon. For the original readers the inclusion of Carl suggests that Cthulhu is part of a canon of classic monsters. In this case however the worldbuilding that Lovecraft undertook has been completely removed and all that remains is a version of the original Cthulhu character inserted into a new setting with a radically different personality and motivation which means that the original cosmic horror is completely lost.

Kawaii as pitiful and grotesque

These cute bodies castrate Cthulhu by deliberately reducing the image's power to scare us by making Cthulhu pitiable. Harris argues that cuteness is 'an unconscious attempt to maim, hobble, and embarrass the thing [the creator] seeks to idolize' (Harris 1993). This maiming is physical with characters having 'stubbly arms, no fingers, no mouths, huge heads, massive eyes -which can hide no private thoughts from the viewer-, nothing between their legs, pot bellies, swollen legs and pigeon feet- if they have feet at all. Cute things can't walk, can't talk, can't in fact do anything at all for themselves because they are physically handicapped' (Kinsella 1995: 236). This acts as a way of disempowering the cute characters. Harris argues that it 'forc[es] them into ridiculous situations and making them appear more vulnerable than they really are' (Harris 1993). A key part of this is that the character becomes pitiable and in need of care. Yano suggests that the attraction of a cute object is that the viewer is left 'simultaneously wanting to care for it, own it, and become it' (Yano 2004: 59). This is

confirmed by Cross in his work on the cute child, which suggested the child 'evoked in

adults a longing to care for, protect, and possess, as well as to sacrifice' (Cross 2004:

80-81).

The cute merchandising forms of Cthulhu, although not completely

incapacitated, are still sexless, mouthless creatures that cannot communicate, or feed

themselves, even when provided with substitute food, just as the *My Little Cthulhu* is.

Chibithulhu, although provided with a mouth, is forced into a permanent expression of

happiness, which still suggests a degree of submissiveness to its owner. Its stumpy

limbs mean it can do nothing for itself. There is an argument to be made that mouths

are irrelevant to toys as toys are inanimate objects and cannot eat or speak. However

in cute the lack of a mouth relates to submission, because the cute has no visible

mouth, they are rendered silent, and making them submissive to their owners which is

a strong part of the aesthetic. As Roach suggests; 'if submissiveness is part of the

appeal of cute, what better than to have no mouth at all?' (Roach 1999). However it is

somewhat different for the comic book characters, Carl Cthulhu and Kthulhoo.

Although they are deformed and seemingly powerless, they gain agency through their

actions and dialogue. The cute aspects seem to be successful in making these products

desirable purchases.

Cute appears at first to be incompatible with the horrific but Harris suggests

that cute 'must not be mistaken for the physically appealing, the attractive' (Harris

1993). Instead he links it to the grotesque, his reasoning being that 'the grotesque is

cute because the grotesque is pitiable, and pity is the primary emotion of this

seductive and manipulative aesthetic.' (Harris 1993) By comparison Steig, quoting

Jennings, describes the grotesque object as displaying 'a *combination of fearsome and*

ludicrous qualities – or, to be more precise, it simultaneously arouses reactions of fear and amusement in the observer' (Steig 1970: 255). Steig suggests that the grotesque is paradoxical in that 'it at once allays and intensifies the effect of the uncanny' (Steig 1970: 258). It is used to deal with feelings of anxiety by expressing fears and then distorting them so that they become harmless. The fearsome is made safe by the ridicule of the grotesque aesthetic, while that which is uncomfortable to identify with is made strange.

Lovecraft's description of Cthulhu does evoke the grotesque with its mismatch of animal parts from different species; however it does not evoke pity, which is required for Harris' definition. The nihilistic nature of Cthulhu in Lovecraft's story is more frightening than his appearance. Although powerful, Cthulhu has no interest in humankind, wanting neither worship nor fear. On this basis, according to Steig, the grotesque appearance of Cthulhu in the story helps to distance us from the frightening nature of the character. The cute merchandising does retain the grotesque mismatch of Lovecraft's story, with additional deformities in the creatures' out-of-proportion eyes and heads; and stumpy limbs. The out-of-proportion elements of these Cthulhus bring to mind children and infantile animals, whose proportions are different to those of adults. They evoke pity because they cannot care for themselves. Their grotesqueries in this cute form help to distance us from them, not because we are frightened, but because we may not want to identify fully with a nihilistic monster.

What is the *kawaii* aesthetic used for?

As an aesthetic *kawaii* has a number of functions. In Japan it is not only fancy goods such as stationary, stickers and key chains that are decorated with cute characters, but also credit cards and passenger jets. Allison argues that 'play characters have become a popular strategy used by groups, products, and companies of various sorts to stake their own identity and differentiate it from that of others' (Allison 2006: 17). Many of the more serious items such as credit cards are difficult to differentiate from similar products in the marketplace, so the *kawaii* character branding can provide an important point of difference for consumers. For example 'twenty three banks, including Mitsui, Sumitomo, Sanwa, and Mitsubishi; fourteen stock companies, including Yamaichi, Daiwa and Nomura; and seven insurance companies, including Nihon Seimei, Sumitomo Seimei and Yasuda Kasai' have licensed cute characters (Kinsella 1995: 226). These branded accounts appear to be popular in East Asia with 'Aeon Credit Service in Hong Kong issu[ing] 100,000 Hello Kitty MasterCards in nine months' (Koh 1999) and long lines for new accounts when Makoto Bank in Taiwan adopted Hello Kitty (Roach 1999).

Brands in the West do not operate in this way, with cute characters mostly confined to discretionary or trivial products, and those aimed at children. The majority of Cute Cthulhus observed, rather than acting as an aid to selling unrelated products, are instead collectable merchandising (that is, a product in its own right) for fans and collectors. The comic book Cthulhu characters in addition get their own merchandising, with Carl Cthulhu immortalised as a sculpture and Cuthulhoo used to sell t-shirts.

Kawaii in Japan is also used to conceal the ugly, whether this is an ugly message or an ugly but essential activity or object. Roach describes this cute layer as 'a form of window dressing for the uncute' (Roach 1999). For example cute characters are used

on Japanese warning signs and government material meant to 'warn or admonish' to 'soften and [make] more acceptable' the message (McVeigh 1996:300). Kinsella argues that:

> In some cases a mismatch between the goods function and its design had simply gone unnoticed, at other times it was a deliberate attempt to camouflage and mask the dirty image of the good or service in question. (Kinsella 1995: 228)

In comparison Western cute child images from the turn of the twentieth century through to the 1930s 'were popular because they appealed to adults trying to get "back" to childhood through their children' (Cross 2004: 125). In this case it was a way for adults to connect with their children and a particular state in their lives. Cthulhu is very much a case where the function of the character, which that it is a horrific alien monster whose very existence reminds human beings of how irrelevant and small they are in the cosmic scale of the universe, has been overwritten and camouflaged to mask its central premise.

Consuming *kawaii*

Consumption of *kawaii* objects by adults can offer a way of escaping from the normal activities of daily life. The focus is on escape because of the pressures of daily life in crowded cities and the social expectations of others. The escape needs to be consumption based as there is very little spare time for it to be time consuming, and – in Japan - it has to be small scale and light to carry as there is little spare room in many people's homes for storage. In the United States there is more room to store possessions and so the objects can be larger, often a lot larger, in size.

For adults there are two aspects to this escape, an escape from the physical world and an escape from the social world. Allison suggests that something as simple

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as carrying a cute key chain or phone charm can act as 'a reminder ... of something

beyond the reality of [the] office, cramped housing, and daily commutes' (Allison 2004:

43). Even something as quick as a glance can be enough to act as psychological boost

(Yano 2004:63). Part of the experience of escape is the feeling of nostalgia consuming

cute artefacts creates. The key aspect of this nostalgia is a remembrance of childhood

and the feeling of being carefree (Yano 2004:62-3). This nostalgia for childhood is

expressing a 'yearning to be comforted and soothed' (Allison 2004: 40). With cute

being used to conceal the ugly, this nostalgic consumption is concealing the ugliness of

the present: 'alienation is increasing ... people want to return to their childhood where

there is no ugliness' (Koh 1999). The cute characters act as emotional backup that can

always be relied upon, like a family member. Allison concludes that 'whether a Kitty-

chan key chain, Doraemon cell phone strap, or Pikachu backpack, these commodity

spirits are '"shadow families": constant and reliable companions that are soothing in

these post-industrial times' (Allison 2006: 91). For character merchandising based on

established worlds 'the character provides a means of accessing the world – this being

one of the reasons for its consumption' (Steinberg 2010: 213). The toy acts as a focus

for remembering the film, television programme or computer game, even when you

cannot access the source media. This idea is supported by Gray who argues that the

Star Wars action figures provided a way for children to access and interact with the

Star Wars text, at a time when it was not possible to relive the text on home video

(Gray 2011: 181). For adults, the experience of consuming *Star Wars* action figures is

slightly different:

> The purchase and display of Star Wars figures by adult fans is commonplace,
> signalling again the importance of the toys themselves. If Star Wars can act as a
> doorway back in time, for many fans toys serve as a key to this door. (Gray
> 2001:184)

Here the toys seem to act as a way for some fans to access their childhood memories and their early responses to the films.

In Japan the escape can also be from what is socially expected and the demands of other people. Yano describes an article in *Kitty Goods Collection* that suggests ideas for 'spending one's leisure time in "doing Kitty"'. Here the cute icon inspires fans' leisure time, 'provid[ing] the opportunity to focus on oneself, by oneself, luxuriating within *honne* (one's true feelings) to a schedule packed tightly with *tatemae* (public face)' (Yano 2004: 62). McVeigh describes cute as 'a form of escape from the real world, or at least from the high pressure social world of Japan. "Fantasy" stated one young woman; "it's a way of forgetting about the unpleasant things we all have to put up with everyday"' (McVeigh 1996: 294). It is therefore not surprising that Japan was a leading driver in *kawaii* given the particularly intense social world that can be created in a small island with a high population.

In the West these feelings are not as clearly defined as in Japan, and the social pressures are less intense, however there is still a split between one's desires and what is socially expected. To display a cute Cthulhu is a way of expressing one's personality and desires in a way that is non-confrontational. The toy can be a form of rebellion, resisting the expectations of society and labelling the owner as such, demonstrating their sub-cultural capital to those in the know, whilst remaining unconfrontational in approach – a cute Cthulhu is more visually appealing to the uninitiated onlooker than for example, the surrealist horror art of H.R. Geiger. Seiter argues that:

> All members of modern developed societies depend heavily on commodity consumption, not just for survival but for participation – inclusion – in social networks. Clothing, furniture, records, toys – all the things we buy involve decisions and the exercise of our own judgement and "taste". Obviously we do

not control what is available for us to choose from in the first place. But consuming offers a certain scope for creativity. The deliberate, chosen meanings in most people's lives come more often from what they consume than what they produce. (Seiter 1995: 3-4)

The discretional products we choose to consume and display are a way of participating in different social groups and showing our alliegences to other people. Cross elaborates on the example of the Kewpie doll, a cute child figure based on the drawings of Rose O'Neill (1874-1944). These dolls were created as character merchandising, and as such were heavily mass produced along with other items bearing the Kewpie image.

> Men bought Kewpie dolls for their office desks and women for their dressing tables. They succeeded as "charms," however, not because they had supernatural power but because they were fads and a fantasy, playfully embraced. As such, they represented the wonder of childhood, a dreamworld that adults, if not children, knew to be mere dream, but that was nevertheless enchanted because it enchanted children. (Cross 2004: 125-126)

The Kewpie dolls, although toys, helped adults connect to a desirable fantasy through their consumption. It is important to note that the consumers knew that the ideas that the dolls represented was a fantasy. However it makes the desires the Kewpie dolls represented no less real. Cross argued that these kinds of cute child images 'takes both the child and the adult to the edge of the acceptable, even across the line of self-control, to a playful, unserious anarchic moment' (Cross 2004: 44). In other words it gives them a chance to step outside of their ordinary lives and society's prescribed behaviours to explore the boundaries and to return to the experience of play.

Choosing cute Cthulhu character merchandising is a way of consumers creating meaning in their lives. It is useful here to consider Yano's description of the "wink on pink", a phenomenon where businesswomen display their femininity though small accessories such as a pink notebook or Hello Kitty rubber stamp. She suggests that 'the

wink on pink ... represents a small act of defiance in recuperating and asserting both the playful and the feminine using the kitsch of a Japanese icon in a masculinist world' (Yano 2006: 157). If we consider the consumption and display of cute Cthulhus, they could be seen as a "wink on geek", in other words a way of expressing affiliation to fandom. However, unlike the more obvious sign of pink, a cute Cthulhu is less obvious, and is instead a sign to those in the know, a kind of secret handshake for fans.

Conclusion

We have examined what happens when the created world is removed from a character and we have demonstrated that the movement from horrific object to cute object has shifted the balance of power in consumers' relationship with Cthulhu. As a horror icon, Cthulhu has power over his observers because he creates feelings of fear and loathing in them. However, as a cute monster, the power shifts to the observer because the blank expression allows the observer to imbue the toy with their own feelings and emotions. If we consider the cute Cthulhu merchandising under discussion, we see that many of the elements that Kinsella, Yano and McVeigh list have been incorporated into the depictions of the character to make Cthulhu appear cute. All of the forms under discussion have transformed and simplified Cthulhu's body into a smooth skinned, rounded, clawless form. The face has been reduced to two main types – either a featureless form with tiny eyes, like Hello Kitty, or a 'chibi' form with large eyes, inspired by manga and anime. Cthulhu's wings become like those of dragons or angels.

These cute artefacts have a valuable function in people's lives. The creation of Cthulhu as consumable objects gives people 'a mechanism for interacting with the

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world through the imagination' (Allison 2004: 43). The objects enable the owner to

show people their particular affiliations in a manner which may require the viewer to

have significant cultural capital to appreciate the collection of plush toys or other

items. This cutification of Cthulhu weakens the character of Cthulhu, in doing so it

offers the consumer a cute imaginary escape from their ordinary lives, in much the

same way that *Hello Kitty* does. This is a significant change in the intended audience

reception of Cthulhu from Lovecraft's original vision and represents a strengthening of

the consumer's vision over that of the original author. Cthulhu, even when presented

in the rounded, large-headed, cute form still occupies a grotesque form, as it is quite

possible to be grotesque-pitiable and cute at the same time. Cute Cthulhu therefore

occupies a point somewhere between horror and traditional cuteness.

Conclusion: From transmedia narrative to transmedia worldbuilding

This thesis has demonstrated that adaption is a critical drive of the fan experience and has been for forty years. This pre-dates the internet and means that much on the research to date has been misdirected onto methods of communication rather than intent. We have shown that the drive towards adapation in tabletop role-playing games is there from the start and continues to this day. The central purpose of tabletop role-playing games is to provide the ability to represent worlds in a manner that that players can use. This use can be of either a created world specific to the game, such as *Deadlands* or a licensed (or close approximation) world such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

We have argued that a created world provides the basis for many narratives and characters and so offers a longer term return on the creative investment for the producers compared to a single one-shot narrative. This means that the investment in developing a world offers a franchise a better financial result. We can see this in franchises such as *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* which are based on a broad world which offers many narrative options and so small areas of considerable depth.

There has been a great deal of research on transmedia published to date, although this has largely focussed on narratives, and how narratives are translated between media. There is also a drive to understand how a number of media can work together to carry a single narrative. In essence we argue that this effort only explains part of the picture of transmedia adaption; the evidence is that the created worlds are

more important than the specific narrative. Whilst narrative is important it is not the foundation for the understanding of transmedia worlds and in fact narrative is secondary to the world building effort. As Jenkins' work has continued he has revised his current position to include greater emphasis on the important aspects of transmedia such as world building (Jenkins 2009a) (Jenkins 2009b), rather than an over-focus on narrative.

Part of my contribution is the examination of a number of different types of created worlds, rather than focussing on analysing the method of telling the story used in each one. The process of worldbuilding is not new and has been a consistent theme in fantasy writing such as *The Lord of the Rings* since the 1950s and tabletop role-playing games since 1975. Jenkins himself references Frank L. Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* which began in the 1900s (Jenkins 2009a). In some respects this kind of worldbuilding is a continuation of the development of myth and oral storytelling which has been a concern of those who create narratives since ancient times. In modern terms we are looking at what is probably at least a century of worldbuilding, with deliberately designed processes for the creation of myth and archetypes being a critical part of the development of 20th and 21st century world building. Both Marvel and DC have created characters and deliberately worked to ensure that these characters have worlds in which they can interact, whilst ensuring that each character has a separate, often highly specific, domain to operate in. The worlds have been deliberately developed and redeveloped over time by these companies as they seek to both maintain the relevance of their characters and readers' interest in the narratives.

It is this development and redevelopment of the shared world that gives the foundations for narratives and so gives narratives their creative drive. Without the

world provided the narrative structure is weaker and there is less scope for human interaction and drama across a wide spectrum of media. We believe that worldbuilding is more important than narratives because a fully developed world can support a large number of narratives and characters. If we take the example of DC and Marvel they each have a single large scale world, and each world is populated with dozens, possibly hundreds, of characters, each of which is capable of supporting a number of narratives. The most popular characters may have many monthly comic books, such as the eleven comic books for Batman and the wider Batman-specific characters such as Catwoman, together with Batman's appearances in group comics such as the Justice League of America. At the same time the most popular characters may have other media in which they appear, for example the console games *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (2009) or the film *Batman Begins* (2005). If we accept that narrative transmedia adaption is less significant than the transmedia adaption of worlds then this would mean that emphasis to date in transmedia research has been misdirected and has tended to focus on the minutiae rather than on the larger picture of world development and transmedia world adaption.

This transmedia world development has been demonstrated repeatedly as producers have realised that this ecosystem means that multiple narratives can be sustained with the same central premise. *Star Trek*, for example, has had several different Enterprises with different crews at different points in time, and this is before the recent retcon which appeared in the latest film, effectively rewriting the *Star Trek* history and starting, with a clean mythical slate. This creates spaces within a world with narrative gaps which enables fans and other companies to want to fill those gaps as a process of encouraged interaction and so create within the same world without

impacting on what might be created elsewhere. The urge to fill in parts of the world which the narrative has not claimed is a key driver of fan activity and worldbuilding.

Transmedia worldbuilding and games

Role-playing games are essentially new games, which did not exist in a formal sense prior to 1974. Their development and spread has been rapid to the point that such games are recognisable world-wide. Role-playing games provide the tools to support many different locations, characters and narratives as a basic development goal. The ability to support many different narratives is essential because the aim of many players is to role-play in the same world for a long time and this will require multiple stories. In addition many groups will play each game and it is certain that even if the groups happen to play the same narrative it will be resolved in a different manner, depending on the games master, the characters and the players' interpretation of their characters.

> Creating and maintaining a role-playing campaign is a little like writing an ongoing episodic story like a comic book or television show – but one in which the writer is not in control of the main characters. It is as much about reacting to what the characters do as it is about planning story arcs. It is about managing an entire world and determining how its inhabitants response to the actions of the characters while maintaining the desired story arc. It is about giving the players what they want and providing the story line what it needs to continue. It is the very heart of the role-playing game hobby. (Cook 2009: 103)

The need for many different potential narratives in a game is related to the need of the players for long-term storytelling using the same characters in different situations. This is another core point for role-playing games in that they should enable long term character interaction and development in a single world. Role-playing games that do not support such long term narrative structures such as *My Life With Master* (2004), tend to be games that are played once or are used for comedic or morality purposes.

My Life With Master, although critically lauded, is arguably more of an art project rather than a game, particularly when considered against the similar project *Puppetland* (1999) which despite being small scale and experimental dealt with complex issues and provided the ability to have long-term narratives for the players. For players of role-playing games the over-riding desire is to create and play characters that are interesting to the player, other players and the games master. Over time characters can develop new skills and abilities, whilst resolving older narrative issues such as defeating character specific enemies or losing old friends. Different types of characters are more open to games master provided narratives than others, and this is something that was explored in the chapter on *Boot Hill* and *Deadlands*. In the case of *Boot Hill* the setting limited the characters and the choice of narratives, and this resulted in the game being less popular than the more open, cross genre, *Deadlands*.

Deadlands is a key case when we consider worldbuilding. Starting with the real world in 1863, *Deadlands* added horror, magic and steampunk science fiction to create a world that was very different from our own, nicknamed the Weird West. This opened up a wide variety of narratives and characters for the players to choose from, expanding the demographic of Western role-playing game players significantly. *Deadlands* chose to take a modern view of women and minority characters in the West, although there is a strong argument that in the historical Wild West there was a different and more complex set of values than those shown in the Deep South and other popular culture narratives of the same period. This new approach further enabled the players to enjoy a wider world. *Deadlands* would also take inspiration from other sources in the development of their world, including a Chinese dominated San Francisco and the Indian nations surrounding Deadwood and the Devils Tower. It is

this combination of factors – cross-genre, expansive and open to development by the players that enables a transmedia world building effort to succeed.

Games, both tabletop role-playing and computer games in general, have extensive experience of transmedia adaption in both directions as both source and target of transmedia work. As the examination of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* notes there is an argument to be made that tabletop role-playing games started as an effort to provide transmedia adaption for pulp fiction. They then expanded into developing their own worlds and created their own fiction to support these worlds in a cycle of invention, adaptation and reinvention that has not concluded. The *DragonLance* series is perhaps the most significant in terms of transmedia worldbuilding as the series has supported several role-playing games, boardgames, over two hundred novels and, in 2008, an animated film. The heart of the role-playing games industry is dedicated to transmedia adaption, either licensed or unlicensed, to provide to the players the tools that they need to adapt their preferred world, whether that world is from literature, film or television.

From the chapter on *Underworld* it is clear that the worlds created by role-playing games companies are complex and sufficiently large that other companies want to – at the very least - borrow from their ideas. In the case of *Underworld*, Sony appears to have taken key concepts and ideas from White Wolf's World of Darkness. What is important when we consider transmedia worldbuilding is the fan reaction to the White Wolf threat against future World of Darkness films; the fans were heavily in favour of new materials for their preferred world, to the point that they were publically against the original developers of the World of Darkness. What this means is that it is the fans that are the groups that support the development of the new

transmedia world, whether or not it is good for the production company that originally

created it. The negative fan reaction to the recent *Star Wars* prequels can also be

viewed in this light (Brooker 2002: 79-100).

There is a more complex element to this view of the intellectual property rights

of tabletop role-playing game companies. From the very start role-playing games have

provided the tools to create unlicensed adaptations of other people's work, so in the

case of *Underworld* there was an argument to say that White Wolf's World of Darkness

had already taken ideas from writers such as Anne Rice in the development of their

world. In effect the argument is that nothing is truly original as each development

builds on ideas that have already come before from other sources. We have

demonstrated that for a successful role-playing game world there is a need for the

players to be able to conceptualise the game-world using cultural icons that already

exist, such as Anne Rice's sympathetic vampires. As Hindmarch states 'the Storyteller

then lets the players loose within the game world, trusting that genre and subject

matter will instinctively show the players the boundaries of the game space'

(Hindmarch 2007: 53). Without this ability to provide a short-hand description of the

game world it will fail to be attractive enough to players for it to be though of

successful; as in the case of *Empire of the Petal Throne* which created a unique game

world but did not attract players in the same way as the World of Darkness.

In computer games this adaption can occur as companies make games that

have a background that is sufficiently detailed or open-ended to inspire the players.

Doom, interestingly, is a game that does not have a narrative in any conventional

sense. Whilst there are short cut scenes which in the earliest version used text only,

there is not a coherent driving force for the players' actions other than a combination

of survival and tactical efficiency. *Doom 3* attempted to alter this paradigm using methods that had been created for earlier games such *Resident Evil*. This raises the question as to whether the *Doom* world is insufficiently developed to allow a worldview to be understood by all of the fans. In some respects the film *Doom* therefore had to create both a narrative and a transmedia world adaption without enough information for either. This meant that the fans of *Doom* were certain to be unhappy no matter what the filmmakers did, while reviewers who were less familiar with the franchise were bemused. This means that the central controversy over the first-person-shooter section reflects a wider issue that the only thing about *Doom's* world and narrative that the fans can agree on is a combination of corridors on a base on Mars, which are seen in first person. Everything else is brought to the game or the film by the fan or the filmmakers.

In the case of Cthulhu both the narrative and the transmedia world has been completely removed as central character has been redesigned into a cute mode as a part of a drive towards creating a successful merchandising product. Although we often see merchandising as part of a transmedia experience the evidence is that the most successful ones, such as Hello Kitty or Barbie, remove – or more accurately never had - references to any form of adapted world. The key point of merchandise is that there should be no barriers to the interpretation of the merchandised character, something that Hello Kitty supports by removing the mouth ensuring that even basic emotions are not communicated to the owner, allowing any or all interpretation.

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Taking this work forward

There is extensive work that can be done to take this thesis forward. There is already a significant body of work on the cultural industries which can be applied to a study of the role-playing game industry (Caldwell 2008) (Hartley 2005) (Du Gay 1997) (Hesmondhalgh 2007) (Howkins 2007) (Florida 2002). Equally much of the work done on transmedia narrative can be extended to cover the wider issue of the adaption of transmedia worldbuilding. There is already early evidence of movement in this direction as Jenkins' recent blog posts make clear (Jenkins 2009a) (Jenkins 2009b). The role-playing games industry provides a microcosm for studying transmedia adaption and worldbuilding in general. We have demonstrated that the basic building block of the role-playing games world is transmedia adaption and this is unique in the creative industries. The role-playing industry is particularly interesting because unlike many other cultural producers the companies involved are frequently very small with limited outputs, both in terms of numbers of products per year and publication print runs. In many respects this method of making creative products is a vision of the future of the creative industries in which single individuals or very small teams will deliver products to market using the opportunities that desktop publishing, new media, and the Internet provide. Small companies also have the ability to change publishing strategies and products quickly as the market changes its demands. The advantages that modern communications tools have made possible have been grasped by the tabletop role-playing game industry to create their work and distribute it. The industry can be seen as early adopters, often risking and then exploiting these new technologies because of potential cost savings. There is an academic impact to this as the modern business model for the small scale publisher and distributer of role-playing games works in a

way that traditional mainstream and academic publishers are only just catching up with.

At the same time there is a movement of games designers from creating tabletop role-playing games to setting up full scale transmedia projects intended from the start to capitalise on a single created world in as many media, and using as many narratives, as possible. For example Gareth-Michael Skarka has recently created the *Far East* world which uses a role-playing game, novels, music and art to create and support the world. These creative professionals can move easily between tabletop role-playing and computer gaming because of the worldbuilding and narrative creation skills they have gained. It is significant that it is veterans of the role-playing games industry, such as Sandy Petersen, Mike Pondsmith and Dennis Detwiller that are assisting the creation of new computer game worlds. These designers have the experience and tools - from their role-playing games design knowledge - to create wide spanning game worlds that enable players to successfully develop long term relationships with their characters. This flow of professionals is not just based upon their skills. As a small industry is not possible for many role-playing game designers to have a sustainable career, and creating gameworlds becomes a hobby to be done in conjunction with a paying job.

This then creates a different model for the cultural industries that can be learnt from and used elsewhere. Although small scale, by their own terms some role-playing game companies have been very successful. This success includes for example the 1000 copy print run of *Wild Talents* (2006) which was sold online within 24 hours, while Kickstarter projects by Arc Dream Publishing for new *Call of Cthulhu* campaigns have exceeded their funding targets by a hundred percent. Kickstarter is particularly

interesting because it allows consumers to choose and directly support what products are created, rather than being forced towards large scale productions. It appears to be a return towards patronage, but one where individuals can group together globally to commission the products they want to see. The evidence suggests that there is a willingness to support small fast moving businesses if they can deliver the cultural products that people want.

Transmedia adaption and world building are critical concepts in our understanding of how creative products are developed and sold worldwide. To date they have not been properly understood and there is a vast amount that can be done to draw out the lessons that can be taken from the role-playing games world. This thesis represents a step forward in that process.

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Cthulhu Plush Cell Phone Holder (n.d.). Designed by Paul Blake [Toy] USA: Toy Vault.

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Deadlands: Doomtown (1998). Designed by Bryon Wackwitz, and Dave Williams (II)
    [cardgame]. USA: Pinnacle Entertainment Group.

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    Petersen [Collectable Token Game]. USA: Fantasy Flight Games.

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    USA: Pinnacle Entertainment Group.

Deep One Plush (n.d.). Designed by Paul Blake [Toy] USA: Toy Vault.

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Grand Theft Auto 3 (2001). DMA Design, [video game]. USA: Rockstar Games.

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    Sanrio.

Little Victims (2006) Designed by John Kovalic [Vinyl figure]. USA: Dreamland
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    Sottosanti [cardgame]. USA: Wizards of the Coast.

Max Payne (2001). Remedy Entertainment, [video game]. USA: Gathering of
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    USA: Rockstar Games.

Miskatonic Cthulhu Plush (n.d.). Designed by Paul Blake [Toy] USA: Toy Vault.

Munchkin (2000) Designed by Steve Jackson, art by John Kovalic [Cardgame]. USA:
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Munchkin Chibithulhu Plush (2008) Designed by Steve Jackson, art by John Kovalic
    [Toy]. USA: Steve Jackson Games.

Munchkin Cthulhu (2007) Designed by J. H. G. Hendriks and Steve Jackson, art by John
    Kovalic [Cardgame]. USA: Steve Jackson Games.

Munchkin Cthulhu 2: Call of Cowthulhu (2007) Designed by Steve Jackson, art by John
    Kovalic and François Launet [Cardgame]. USA: Steve Jackson Games.

Munchkin Cthulhu 3: The Unspeakable Vault (2008) Designed by Steve Jackson and
    Fade Manley, art by François Launet [Cardgame]. USA: Steve Jackson Games.

My First Cthulhu Plush (n.d.). Designed by Paul Blake [Toy] USA: Toy Vault.

My Little Cthulhu (2006) Designed by John Kovalic [Vinyl figure]. USA: Dreamland
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My Little Cthulhu: Angry (2006) Designed by John Kovalic [Vinyl figure]. USA:
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Ultimate Doom [PC Version] (1995). id Software, [video game]. USA: id Software.

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