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Escape from Innsmouth and *The Shadow over Innsmouth* – The Role of The Reader and Player in Postmodern Multimedial Narratives

In 2011 Fantasy Flight Games published an entirely cooperative tabletop game based on the works of H. P. Lovecraft. *Mansions of Madness*, the board game, got a reedition in 2016 and, since then, the four original scenarios of the game have been expanded to include eighteen more. This paper focuses on the *Escape from Innsmouth* scenario and its relationship with Lovecraft's novella *The Shadow over Innsmouth* (1931). More precisely, this paper centres on the postmodern nature of *Mansions of Madness*, with a particular interest in the relationship between the role of the reader and that of the player. With this in view, this discussion starts by introducing some fundamental aspects of postmodernism relevant to this relationship, moving to the question of genre regarding both the game and Lovecraft's novella. As will be argued, an exposition of the intertextual essence of the game's scenario leads to the final underlining of the fundamentally postmodern phenomenon of the expansion of the passive reader's role to that of an active player. Due to the game being a mixture of a videogame and board game in a addition to being heavily narrative this hybrid genre is in this paper referred to as a multimedial work. Following a close reading of how the *Escape from Innsmouth* scenario in *Mansions of Madness* relates to Lovecraft's *The Shadow over Innsmouth* on an intertextual level, it is the aim of this paper to show these ever-present postmodern characteristics as a connective tissue between Lovecraft's fiction and contemporary multimedia narratives such as the interactive scenarios of *Mansions of Madness*.

The multifaceted nature of postmodernism has long made it a difficult phenomenon to define, resulting in a large body of works of a theoretical nature by

numerous scholars such as Linda Hutcheon, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Pierre-Félix Guattari, Fredric Jameson and others, whose insights are fundamental to disentangling postmodern phenomena. In order to introduce this theoretical apparatus, this paper has its starting point in Ihab Hassan's table of schematic differences between modernism and postmodernism (Hassan 34), an issue of great interest for Hassan who expands on it in the second chapter of his collection of essays, *The Postmodern Turn* (Hassan 25-46). Among his list of different characteristics of postmodernism, Hassan includes ones such as play, process/performance/happening, text/intertext and indeterminacy, which are respectively contraposed to the modernist characteristics of purpose, art object/finished work, genre/boundary and determinacy.

Starting with the concept of indeterminacy, Hassan's table leads us to the interrogative nature of postmodernism. As argued by Simon Malpas, "Postmodern fiction (…) raises questions about the very status of reality and the world" (24). This questioning nature of postmodernism is central to Linda Hutcheon too, who argues that "the postmodern is, if it is anything, a problematizing force in our culture today: it raises questions about (or renders problematic) the common-sensical and the natural" (Hutcheon xi). This view is shared not only by critics such as Hutcheon who locate postmodernism as a reaction and phenomenon which followed modernism, but also by critics who see postmodernism as being unbound from time-frames, or rather, as a stylistic phenomenon, such as Jean-François Lyotard, who argues that in postmodernism "all that has been received (…) must be suspected" (Lyotard 79). This

paper aims to adopt Lyotard's approach to postmodernism inasmuch as "thought of as a style rather than a period" (Malpas 28) in emphasizing the postmodern aspects of Lovecraft's story *The Shadow over Innsmouth*.

The next of Hassan's characteristics of postmodernism is the nexus of text/intertext. The concept of intertextuality is closely related to poststructuralism and the works of critics such as Julia Kristeva, who introduced the term of intertextuality, and Roland Barthes. In fact, Barthes focused on the fundamentally intertextual nature of texts in many of his works, claiming that "any text is an intertext; other texts are present in it, at varying levels, in more or less recognisable forms" (Barthes, "Theory of the text" 39). Already in his essay "The Death of The Author", Barthes claims that "the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes 146). Barthes' point of view results in a purely theoretical dealing with this "intertextuality in which any text is apprehended, since it is itself the intertext of another text, [that] cannot be identified with some *origin* of the text" (Barthes, "From Work to Text" 60). Nonetheless, from this notion of implicit intertextuality, postmodern critics such as Graham Allen have moved to the notion of hypertextuality, a term developed by Gérard Genette in his *Palimpsest* (Allen 107). In fact, Genette defined hypertextuality as "any relationship uniting a text B (hypertext) to an earlier text A (hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary" (Genette 5), or rather "any text derived from a previous text" (Genette 7). Moreover, Genette stresses that hypertextuality "is obviously to some degree a universal feature of literarity: there is no literary work that does not evoke (to some extent and

according to how it is read) some other literary work, and in that sense all works are hypertextual" (Genette 9). Within Genette's framework Allen too turns to hypertexts and hypotexts. The hypotext in the case of this paper is Lovecraft's story *The Shadow over Innsmouth*, or rather, the "text which can be definitely located as a major source of signification for a text" (Allen 107), more precisely, for the hypertext, which is, in this particular case, represented by *Escape from Innsmouth*. In her study of intertextuality, with a specific interest in historiographical metafiction Hutcheon sees intertextuality as postmodernism's "attempt to combat what has come to be seen as modernism's potential for hermetic, elitist, isolationism that separated art from the world, literature from history" (Hutcheon 140). In other words, if one combines all these perspectives on intertextuality it might be defined in Allen's term as follows: "intertextuality reminds us that all texts are potentially plural, reversible, open to the reader's own presuppositions, [and] lacking in clear and defined boundaries" (Allen 209).

This leads us to Hassan's remaining characteristics of postmodernism that have previously been singled out along intertextuality and indeterminacy, mainly those of play and process/performance/happening, characteristics tightly connected to the roles of the reader and, in the case of games, the role of the player, as they reflect the changeable nature of the texts' possible interpretations, the fact of a text not being a finished and completed work by itself, and underline the importance of both readers and players in the production of meaning throughout the processes of reading and playing. As maintained by Barthes, "the reader is the space on which all the quotations

that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost: a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (Barthes 148). The importance of the reader has gained great success as can be read from Bran Nicol's claim that "narrative is really a two-way process of construction by which the writer assembles events into a particular order, and so does the reader" (Nicol 26). The reader often takes the role of producing the plural readings of a text which is in itself open to different interpretations and no reader is the same, resulting in Hassan's individuation of play as one of postmodernism's characteristics. Chance encounters between a text and readers of different backgrounds, from age, nationality and sexuality to literary preferences and imaginative capabilities, result in myriad readings of the text. In fact, as described by David Harvey, "the cultural producer merely creates raw material (fragments and elements), leaving it open to consumers to recombine those elements in any way they wish" (Harvey 51). In this way, both authors and readers "participate in the production of significations and meanings" (Harvey 51), backing Hassan's and Genette's focus on process/performance/happening.

The plot of *The Shadow over Innsmouth* deals with an antiquarian's arrival to the infamous port town of Innsmouth in New England, a town that cannot be found on the map, but that people from surrounding towns have much to say about. The protagonist, having heard theories of a big epidemic and supernatural occurrences connected to the town, arrives to Innsmouth in a bus, checks his luggage in the only hotel in town, and proceeds to investigate the town on foot (Lovecraft 880). After talking to a grocery store boy, non-local just like him, and the local drunkard, Zadok

Allen, the protagonist finds out that the only business in town is the Marsh Refining Company, all the inhabitants work with fish and many are part of the local cult, the Esoteric Order of Dagon (Lovecraft 882). Rumor has it that the Marsh family deals with alien creatures from under the sea, who give them unlimited fish and jewellery in return for mating with the local people. The descendants progressively change from human to some kind of alien fish-frogs through their lives, which they "end" by going to sea and gaining eternal life in their new alien form. The protagonist ends up trapped in Innsmouth and pursued by the locals to finally faint while hiding and spying the alien creatures which have come to haunt him from the sea. The story ends by the protagonist finding out that he himself is of partly alien lineage and destined to the same ending.

The plot of *Escape from Innsmouth*, the *Mansions of Madness* scenario, intertextually parallels Lovecraft's hypotext in much detail, with some differences in service of the game's mechanics. The scenario starts by telling the investigators that they have stepped off the bus into Innsmouth, where everywhere they go they feel watched and followed by the locals. The investigators find out they have come to Innsmouth "on behest of professor Harris, a mutual friend who asked you to gather information on the lineage of the Marsh family". After half a day, the investigators want to leave, but they find out there is no way to leave Innsmouth as busses have stopped running, much as in Lovecraft's story. The investigators rent a hotel and find themselves in a cramped room, which is how the scenario's prologue ends.

In the game, someone tries breaking into their hotel room, which is exactly what happened to the protagonist of Lovecraft's story, giving way to his final escape from the town. What is new in the game is that the players get to interact with a radio, through which they hear the captain of a boat who is waiting for an Agent Craven, a non-player character who is to play the get-out-of-Innsmouth-free card. Although not existent in Lovecraft's story, Agent Craven is the one who gives you the possibility of getting out of Innsmouth via said boat. The investigators are supposed to collect all relevant clues, light a lantern on the dock and ring the fog bell when they are ready to be picked up. Along with Agent Craven, there is another non-player character, namely the drunkard, Zadok, who has a key to the tower with the fog bell. As the story progresses, the game gets harder and monsters and mobs of locals start pursuing the investigators who are supposed to solve puzzles and collect information on the Marsh family in order to win the game.

The epilogue of the game depends on the playthrough's outcome. If the players lose, the mob sabotage all of their ways of exit from Innsmouth and catch them, while the game informs the players that they "are dragged through the streets toward your gruesome fate". If the players win, they do so by embarking on a small fishing boat, with evidence on the Marsh family stacked away safely and the narrator informs them that "stepping onto dry land, you finally begin to hope you have left the nightmare of the accursed town behind once and for all".

In order to individuate these postmodern characteristics in Lovecraft's story and the intertextual implications relating to the *Escape from Innsmouth* scenario and

connect them to the theoretical apparatus introduced in the earlier paragraphs, a few words need to be dedicated to the question of genre regarding both the hypotext and the hypertext. As clarified by Eric Carl Link, Lovecraft's writing belongs to the category of tales of supernatural horror, or rather, weird tales, which are "a direct descendant of the gothic tradition." (xii) In fact, according to Mark Fisher, "Lovecraft practically invented the weird tale, developing a formula which can be differentiated from both fantasy and horror fiction" (49). While Link underlines that weird tales "serve as reminders that our knowledge of the world is incomplete" (xiii), Fisher locates the specificity of weird tales in "the way in which it opens up an egress between this world and others" (65). As Fisher explicates, Lovecraft's fiction often focuses on a sense of "wrongness" which results from this egress – "a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist there" (Fisher 15). On the other hand, scholars such as Kálmán Matolcsy claim that "the Lovecraftian text, most significantly, deals with the modes and results of acquiring knowledge and the problems encountered during the process," (Matolcsy, 16) placing *The Shadow over Innsmouth* in the general category of Lovecraft's "tales about a general inquiry" (Matolcsy 169). Whether a supernatural/weird or general inquiry tale, *The Shadow over Innsmouth* and Lovecraft's writings in general have been most famously known under the name of "cosmic horror." According to Thomas Hull, "Lovecraft was primarily interested in creating an appropriate mood to inspire in the reader a sense of cosmic horror: that hopes, dreams and philosophies of humankind are inconsequential to the larger universe" (10). In a way, this sense of insignificance of

humankind is combined with Lovecraft's penchant for writing tales which focus on a pursuit of knowledge such as *The Shadow over Innsmouth*, forming what Lovecraft expresses in one of his most cited quotes as "the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" (Lovecraft, *The Annotated Supernatural Horror in Literature* 21).

The notion of the weird tale leads us to what is fundamentally postmodern in Lovecraft's story and writing in general. In fact, Lovecraft's tales seem to be fundamentally written as to challenge the stability of realism, Western epistemology and grand narratives, since "it is the irruption into this world of something from outside which is the marker of the weird" (Fisher 20). In other words, Lovecraft's tales are dependent on a postmodern relation, "an exchange, a confrontation and (…) a conflict between this world and others" (Fisher 19) to function as weird tales. The origin of his horror stems from Lovecraft's questioning of our knowledge of the world surrounding us, or rather, the same fundamental interrogative nature that postmodernism adopts in general. It is indeed this challenge of the weird tale which translates into the instability of the world which makes Lovecraft's writing postmodern. Lovecraft wages "a war on totality" (Lyotard 82) in his tales such as *The Shadow over Innsmouth*, "by treating really existing phenomenon as if they had the same ontological status as his own inventions" (Fisher 24). This postmodern charge of Lovecraft's texts, according to Timothy H. Evans, expands further than the mere general setting of Lovecraft's fiction. Evans claims that a great part of Lovecraft's stories progress with a mixed plethora of invented and actual folklore, buildings, historical events, volumes of occult lore,

scholarly sources etc. (Evans 123), underlining a presence of intertextuality in Lovecraft's fiction. According to Evans, "this postmodern fusion of the real and the virtual leaves most readers not knowing where real ends and virtual begins" (123), the term virtual referring to literary works presenting possible worlds that are not mimetic. This contributes to the sense of horror that lies in that which is unknown and the Lovecraftian consensus that "when faced with horror, we must accept that reality is at least partly unknowable, otherwise horror would not exist" (Peak 165). In fact, Lovecraft's writing plays with what Sigmund Freud defined as the uncanny, which "belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread" (Freud 123). Freud states that "the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (124) moreover stressing that "an uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred" (150). Hence, it seems that both indeterminacy and with it the interrogative nature of postmodernism, as well as intertextuality, make up inherent elements of Lovecraft's writing, in line with Lyotard's notion of postmodernism being a condition to be individuated in cultural production regardless of the period to which it pertains.

As for *Mansions of Madness,* the question of genre seems a bit more complicated to define as it is in itself a multimedial work, meaning that it is a work which combines narrative, board games and videogames, being a tabletop game for which an application is required and is overtly based on Lovecraft's fiction. In its *Learn to Play* physical booklet, the game is defined as "a cooperative game of investigation and horror inspired by the writings of H. P. Lovecraft" in which "the investigators'

ultimate goal is to explore the scenario's map and piece together the evidence and clues required to solve the mystery". Yet, the game is no typical cooperative tabletop strategic game, simply relying on the players working together while playing a board game in order to strategize and win against the game's mechanics, as it requires the players to download an application that is to guide them through the scenarios. The *Escape from Innsmouth* scenario is one of the four scenarios that make up the original game. As a mixture between a board game and videogame, and as a game with clearly narrative intentions and overt intertextual references such as quotes from Lovecraft's novella, the setting and, to an extend, the basic storyline, as well as the appropriation of characters such as Zadok, the question of genre of *Mansion of Madness* can be approached from various perspectives. The study "Understanding and Evaluating Cooperative Games" establishes a number of different categories of cooperative games, mainly focusing on videogames. Nevertheless, three of these categories correspond to an extent with the game mechanics of *Mansions of Madness*. The first is the category of "complementary cooperative game design pattern," which "implies that players play different character roles to complement each other's' activities within the game" (El-Nasr et al. 3). This is true for *Mansions of Madness* inasmuch as players choose their own investigators according to their different statistics and abilities, and with that decide what approach to the game they want to adopt in a given playthrough. As an example, a player could decide to play as William Yorick, a gravedigger whose special ability is that he gains a Clue token whenever a monster is defeated, while another player might decide to play as Minh Thi Phan, a secretary whose ability is to

reroll a die while resolving a test once per round. Moreover, the investigators' abilities include strength, agility, observation, lore, influence and will, all of which can range on a scale from one to four and are different for each investigator, giving players certain advantages and disadvantages in the varied encounters they stumble upon throughout the game.

The second category is that of "shared goals cooperative design pattern," which refers to a game type that is "used to force players to work together (…) where a group of players are given a single quest with a shared goal" (El-Nasr et al. 3). This design corresponds entirely to the structure of *Mansions of Madness* as all investigators share the same goal throughout the whole scenario, with the exception of a player gaining an *Insane Condition*, a card they are forbidden to reveal to fellow investigators, which can make alterations to the game's outcome. In the case that more investigators gain an *Insane Condition* card, *Mansions of Madness* can correspond to the third category of "synergies between goals cooperative design pattern," which "forces players to cooperate together through synchronized goals" (El-Nasr et al. 3). As an example, a player could gain the Narcissism *Insane Condition* which states that "at the end of the game, you win if you have 6 or more Items. Otherwise, you lose the game", while another player might get the Arcane Aspirations *Insane Conditions* instructing that "at the start of your turn, if you have a Spell and you are in a space with exactly 1 other investigator, you immediately win the game and the game ends. If the game ends for any other reason, you lose the game". The players cannot win unless both these *Insane Conditions* are met, a factor that makes the players cooperate in new ways as one is

prohibited from sharing their *Insane Condition* with the group. Maybe the safest choice in terms of genre would be the category of "self-involving interactive fictions," introduced by Jon Robson and Aaron Meskin as a category which involves "all video-game fictions" (173) but includes also a number of "non-videogame fictions" (173). This category encompasses both the element of interaction, which is present between the players as well as between the group and the game, the element of fiction, which is fundamental to the game's plot and theme, and, in the end, the fact of self-involvement, as players take up the parts of investigators and have to adept to their character's abilities and goals.

It is precisely the notion of interactivity that brings the game a step closer to the postmodern aspect of *Mansions of Madness*. Although mostly reserved to videogames, notions such as interactivity, immersion and participation are essential to the board game's relationship to Hassan's postmodern characteristics of play and process/performance/happening, especially in regards to role of the player in construing the story. According to Bryan Alexander, "one key aspect of game-based storytelling is the immersion of a player in the story's environment" (92). In *Mansions of Madness* this is made true by a mixture of non-interactive interventions on part of the game including a narrative introduction into the scenario, as well as another such interlude at the end of each storyline which depends on the outcome of that specific gameplay. Playing with multiple endings and multiple scenarios is another clear indication of this game's direct connection to postmodern aesthetics. Along with these longer narrative pieces of storytelling, mainly the prologue and the epilogue, the

application intervenes and guides the investigators through the scenario by different smaller narrative instances such as descriptions of locations, monsters, interactions with non-player characters, combat and effects on the investigators. Through these narrative aspects of the game, *Mansions of Madness* employs second-person storytelling, that is, stories which "narrate the conditions of your actions" (Alexander 99).

It is exactly this second-person storytelling that paves the way to the more conspicuously postmodern elements of such games as well as the nature of multimedial works such as videogames and, in this case, boardgames in which the player is lured into the game as a protagonist. Although highly variable, the *Mansions of Madness* scenarios have an ideal reader, or rather ideal player in mind, as each story has a given itinerary meant to be followed. The players are introduced to their mission at the beginning of the scenario and, as is stated in the *Rules* booklet, "if the investigators take too long to complete the investigation, the scenario's objective might change or become more difficult to accomplish". Here lies the basic rule of interactivity and immersion specific to videogames, which is, according Berry Atkins, that the "text we read watches us over time, it presents the illusion of knowing us as we come to know it, of reading us as we read it" (146). In other words, we "engage in a joint act of cooperative narration that blurs the boundary between text and author" (Atkins 147), resulting exactly in realisations of Hassan's ideas of process/performance/happening and play. In line with postmodern indeterminacy and open-endedness, Atkins claims that "no other player or reader reads or writes the

same text. It is unique. It is an original. Every one of us is an author, every one of us is artist" (Atkins 153).

Throughout Lovecraft's story a feeling of uncanniness and claustrophobia prevails, as the protagonist seems to be constantly watched by the locals, and, according to Onni Mustonen, "the physical description of the city (…) emphasizes the obscuring nature of the architecture" (137). Moreover, Mustonen claims that "by limiting the narrator's and reader's point of view, both are left to wonder what they cannot see, and if that which they cannot see poses a threat to the character" (138). This is paralleled in the game by the gradual revealing of new game tiles, which expand the scenario's map and possibilities of interaction, discovering with them new clues, monsters and routes of action. It is exactly through this "coincidence of view" (Mustonen 143) that the players take part and expand the relationship between the protagonist and the reader in Lovecraft's novella. Moreover, as explained by Alexander, "a gap between our desire and that of the character opens and closes, forming a sort of dialogue across psychological states" (100), a phenomenon maybe even more conspicuous in cooperative boardgames where real-life playthroughs result in passionate and lively reactions from the players in real-time gaming when given investigators are, for an example, in peril or die. Although the reader of the story cannot change how the story unfolds, their individual reading coincides with the protagonist's point of view and the specific reading which springs from the contact of the text with individuals of different backgrounds as readers. In a way, as explained by Mustonen, "both the reader and the player use the mechanics at their disposal to

explore the diegetic worlds via action" (145). Whether the players decide to open the door to their room is of their own volition, just like the decisions regarding conversations with characters such as Zadok. The prologue and the epilogue(s) are the same for each playthrough. Some may choose to kill all monsters that appear throughout the game, some to evade them, resulting in different storylines and in a plurality of possible meanings and versions of *Escape from Innsmouth*.

As proffered by Mustonen "we take, interpret and send signals as a part of the system, be it literature or games, and by playing we can also explore our own role in the meaning-creating system" (146). In the case of *Mansions of Madness*, it is as if the player takes a step into and becomes part of a larger conglomerate work consisting of the player-investigator and reader-protagonist continuities, or rather the active role of the reader being expanded to the active role of the player construing the particular storyline within the game. In a way, narrative games such as these show how "games, like novels, belong to a system of intertextuality and remediation that characterizes all media environments" (Hayot 181), a case which is maybe even more evident in overt hypotext-hypertext relationships, as is the case with Lovecraft's novellas and the different *Mansions of Madness* scenarios of which *Escape from Innsmouth* is only one. Such narratives invite us to shape them through our actions, and to let through "the very plurality of meaning: an irreducible (and not just acceptable) plurality" (Barthes, "From Work to Text" 59). Moreover, intertextuality "continually refers to the impossibility of singularity, unity, and thus of unquestionable authority" (Allen 209), and the inherent postmodern nature of Lovecraft's *The Shadow over Innsmouth* with

its fragmented and ruptured egresses between worlds and ontological planes is reflected in games such as *Mansions of Madness*. Viewing this hypertextual relationship with all the aforementioned postmodernist characteristics in mind renders even more immersive and interactive the plural interpretations and readings of Lovecraft's stories, resulting in an ever-more privileged position and role of the reader/player in their contact with narratives, the development of creative imagination and alternative pathways, and constant questioning of the world that surrounds them.

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