**Mysteries of Birth, Blood, and Appetite:**

**The Interplay, Role and Function of the (Oc)cult in Indie Games**

Marie Luise Meier and Malte Wendt

With filter bubbles and echo chambers, conspiracy theories and the subsequent divisions in society, the term "cult" experienced a recent revival in academia as well as the public consciousness (Saha/Goudiss 2020). From an initially neutral or even positive definition (e.g. Troeltsch's 1931) as a religious phenomenon, the term has since developed into a pejorative one that sees cults as mystical and individualistically oriented groups with authoritarian structures and manipulative rhetoric that contests dominant cultural values (Robbins/Anthony 1982). As a result of the New Age movement in the 1980s, cults as embodiments of metaphysical and occult religions, however, "enjoy an acceptability in the West not seen since the scientific revolution. This acceptability is evident in the amount of favorable press given to psychic and occult phenomena." (Melton 2001, x). Cultist structures and their entanglement with the occult have always been visible in art, but became especially prevalent from the 19th century onward (Frenschkowski 2013, 436). More recent cultish structures such as the QAnon movement in particular rely on "cult-like practices to harden [the] individual belief system of its most ardent supporters" (Blazakis 2021) and their dominance in the news cycle have sparked renewed discourse around the inner workings of cults and their representation in media today.

In this work, we want to explore which purpose the occult serves within representations of cults found in popular indie video games. To that end, we will analyze the games *Night in the Woods* (Infinite Fall, 2017) and *Cultist Simulator* (Weather Factory, 2018). As a baseline, we will first examine different forms of the occult before defining cults,

their purpose, and the structures they tend to develop. Central to our analysis of cults, then, will be Richardson's (1979, 1993) framework on cultish structures.

In our close readings of the two games, we will tie modern and ancient meanings of cults and cultish practices to the cults presented within the games. As our two games occupy the two extremes of Juul's (2002) spectrum of games of progression and games of emergence[i], we will focus on a more narratological toolset in our reading of *Night in the Woods*, while for *Cultist Simulator,* particular attention will be devoted towards how the (oc)cult is represented through the games' rules and mechanics, as well as in how far player interaction is important to the interpretation of the occult's role within the game and the cultish society. With this, we hope to gain insight into how these indie games, which in themselves often serve as counterculture to the established mainstream games, portray the occult in general and cults in particular, which likewise serve as countercultural communities.

**Representations of occult societies: The (oc)cult and the role of the Uncanny**

In order to define the concept of a cult, we must first outline the occult and the practice of occultism. The main issue therein lies with the vagueness of the term, a result of the fact that its usage has been dominated by Christian rhetoric seeking to "oppose the existence of magic or the work of its practitioners" (Melton 2001: 1136), which is why it has functioned as an umbrella term for a whole host of loosely related topics, to name but a few: "[A]lchemy, demonology, ghosts, poltergeists, prediction, psychic powers, spells, and spiritualism," (Melton 2001: 1136) as well as "tarot and voodoo" (Howard 2014: 10).

While commonly used throughout the renaissance (Brittnacher 2013: 435), it was popularized by Agrippa von Nettesheim's 1510 work *De occulta philosophia*, describing the knowledge that – unlike established understandings of the world, like science and religion – was hidden, "occult". According to this conception, manifestations of the occult are therefore

consistent in their ability to communicate with or somehow make visible a network of meaning beyond our immediate human perception, and chiefly, to use this access in order to "alter reality according to the will" (Howard, 2014: 204). This underlying thread is still prominent in the modern reincarnation of occultism, which commonly self-identifies as "New Age" (Melton 2001: 1136) or Esotericism.

Freud's treatise on the "Uncanny" gives us more insight into the implications of the occult. Most obviously, Freud uses, among other approaches, the etymological origins of the German "unheimlich" , literally "un-homely" to identify the Uncanny as that which is uncomfortably unfamiliar and therefore hidden and secret (Freud 1919: 301). This ties the concept closely to the occult, which likewise refers to hidden knowledge. At the core of Freud's definition lies the intellectual uncertainty of whether something is alive or lifeless (Freud 1919: 308). This includes corpses and the subsequent discourse around the resurrection of the dead (Freud 1919: 315), but also the fear of one's own mortality when applied to oneself. This then leads to what Freud calls the "Doppelgänger" (Freud 1919: 309), basically any lifeless representation of oneself, such as a reflection in the mirror or the silhouette of one's own shadow (Freud 1919: 310). According to Freud, children ascribe life to inanimate objects such as the Doppelgänger, but as an adult it devolves to a harbinger of death (Freud 1919: 310). Consequently, the Uncanny represents the nostalgic desire to return to that infantile soul and resurrect the past (Freud 1919: 312).

The fact that many occultist practices were not derived from pagan traditions, but were fabricated by dominant Christian belief (Melton 2001:190), imbues occultism with the inherent ambition to oppose that established order. It makes its practitioners assume the role of the oppressed, the role of those excluded from the dominant narrative, the "religious deviants" (Richardson 1978: 29). This then gives rise to cults, which, in modern parlance,

114

always present themselves as an alternative to the established discourse. This means that, according to the contemporary understanding of the term, a cult always "develops in opposition to the dominant culture" (Richardson 1993: 349) which is why it must seek its alternative inspirations from outside of it (Wallis 1974: 300). Usually, this "break with tradition" (Nelson 1969) paradoxically entails a "focus on individualism" (Richardson 1993: 349). Unlike the collective upholding of the dominant narrative, a cult is marked by its motive of directly benefiting the individual lives of its members. These tenets can still be found in the New Age and movement of today, as it distrusts commonly accepted knowledge (Brittnacher, 2013:436) and offers alternative narratives that hand control over reality back to its members with the intent to "awaken" the supposedly asleep "masses", as with the Rajneesh movement and QAnon as prominent examples (Blazakis 2021).

Prototypical cults are also structured in ways that oppose the dominant culture. "If dominant cultural values are individualistic rational (as some would say about modern American society), then cultic responses could be the hippie subculture (individualistic-mystical, a communist cell (collectivistic-rational), and a religious commune, either eastern or Christian mystical (collectivistic-mystical)" (Richardson 1979: 38). Most often, cults are marked by authoritarian leadership, propped up by either communal or totalitarian structures, are aggressive in their proselytizing, use systematic programs of indoctrination, and attract middle class clientele (Robbins and Anthony 1982, 283). They also see themselves as legitimized by a long tradition of wisdom or practice, which makes it harder to differentiate them from established religions. As a result of these supposed ties to ancient traditions, cults use highly symbolic language in which they encode their ideology. (Ellwood 1986: 218-222) However, the vagueness and subjectivity of occultism is ultimately retained in the term "cult", and is still prevalent today, as the label is predominantly used for the "marking of difference" (Gallagher 2008:2018) between an established in-group and an antagonistic

outside force. This inherent Othering invoked by the label sets up cults as an ideal vessel for the ideology of a narrative's antagonist.

**The (oc)cult in *Night in the Woods* and *Cultist Simulator***

The two close readings were conducted individually by both authors, who then combined their findings. With *Night in the Woods*, as a game of progression, the relevant parts of the game concerning the (oc)cult cannot be skipped or missed and were concluded after two playthroughs. With *Cultist Simulator*, a game of emergence, the gameplay and lore were extracted through different playthroughs of the standard legacy of the Aspirant, which is the default mode, as well as with the advanced legacies of the Apostle Aestuant, which provided further insights into the role of the cult leader. Both games were played on PC.

**Night in the Woods**

*Night in the Woods* is an adventure game developed by Canadian indie studio Infinite Fall (2017) and Australian studio Secret Lab. Its widely acclaimed writing was awarded the British Academy Game Award for Narrative in 2018. The game is set in the fictional American Midwest-inspired rural town of Possum Springs, where the player controls protagonist and recent college-dropout Mae Borowski as she returns to her parents' home after quitting school. The resulting coming-of-age narrative about the struggle between holding on to one's memories of childhood and letting go is highly reminiscent of Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (Plizga, 2020).

Over the course of twelve in-game days, the story follows Mae as she tries to reconnect with her friends, dabbles in occult and at times borderline criminal practices, and eventually uncovers a cult that tries to reinvigorate the dying town by occult means. The player can choose with whom to spend each day's evening, ranging from breaking into an

abandoned shopping mall with her friend Gregg to joining her former schoolmate Bea on her emergency shift. All depicted characters in the game are anthropomorphic animals, which establishes the presence of an allegorical narrative layer, akin to that found in fables. Mae's friends, for example, are the rebellious yet childlike fox Gregg, his stoic, responsible boyfriend Angus, a bear, and the cynical and reserved crocodile Bea. Mae herself is a black cat, an animal closely associated with demonic spirits and witchcraft (Melton 2001: 504; 543). Over the course of the game, the occult theme expands into dreams, astrology, ghosts, necromancy, demons and even Satanism.

Throughout chapter 1, we learn that Mae's hometown, once a bustling miner's town, is in a state of rapid economic decline. For Mae, the town of her childhood is gone (**Figure 1**). As she desperately looks for ways to regain control over the present through reenacting the rituals of the past, she subscribes to a main tenet of occultism: "Occultism [...] always claims to be a tradition of […] knowledge [...], suppressed or forgotten by a larger society, that is to be rediscovered […]." (Fonseca 2005: 866)

Mae's relation to the past closely represents the Uncanny as per Freud's definition. She loathes her current self in the mirror, her Doppelgänger, as it reminds her of the material decay of her life and the world around her. Just like the Uncanny represents the desire to return to a childhood mindset (Freud 1919: 312), Mae dwells in the memories of her childhood and the magic layer it provided to the otherwise lifeless world. Her obsession with death is most obvious from her "Killer" nickname, her graverobbing adventures with Bea (Part 3: Day 11). Upon her return to the town, Gregg even greets her with the ironic foreshadowing: "Too bad you didn't join a murder cult!" (Part 1: Day 1) This seemingly dead world around her ties into her traumatic dissociation periods during puberty, in which the world and even people became "just shapes. […] Nothing was there for me anymore. It was all just stuff, stuff in the universe. Just… dead. […] When I'm alone in a new place, it's all shapes, […]." (Part 4: Day 11) In trying to return to the past, Mae thus wants to fill the uncanny, lifeless world with life again.

To achieve this, she tries to find unconventional, exciting solutions and semantics to the boring, meaningless world on an alternative, magical layer. When Bea, after a stressful day at work, lectures Mae about the depressing reality of life, Mae responds: "You need, like, some magical shit to give you a new perspective," (Part 2: Day 5) and then proceeds to lead a swarm of fireflies to her. Instead of roaming Possum Spring's streets, she can climb and explore the world's rooftops, while balancing on wires and lampposts. Here, she discovers many unusual characters and even finds actual remnants of her childhood, like her former teacher, Mr. Chazokov. With him, Mae can explore the stars to identify constellations with his telescope and discuss the mythological stories they are based upon. This astrological soul-

searching offers yet another layer of hidden meaning, rules that explain the seemingly chaotic world and offer Mae the stability she craves. Mr. Chazokov inadvertently sums up Mae's occultist meaning-making quite concisely: "The gods are only stand-ins for things we cannot control." (Part 2: Day 4) The more she descends into her alternate reality, the more she loses touch with her worried parents at home, whose guidance and support do not offer any solutions Mae would find acceptable. As her situation at home turns increasingly more inhospitable, the story frames the occult, and with it the cult itself, as a parental substitute, a role that cults regularly employ to lure in teenagers (Richmond 2004: 367-369).

Mae's soul-searching has her turn to a range of unorthodox deities. This eclectic pantheon represents an alternative to the dominant, institutionalized religion in the game. In the mirror, she prays to "Whatevergod," in her dreams, she meets a gigantic cat with cryptic advice on life, that she later refers to as "God", and ultimately, the cult's goat deity turns into her waking nightmare. Dreams as a form of otherworldly communication are a central theme of the occult (Brittnacher 2013: 437) and play a major role in the game. Towards the final act of the story, it is revealed that a cult of concerned citizens is behind the recent abductions in town, as well as Mae's increasingly debilitating nightmares, which always end with Mae being swallowed by Lovecraftian monsters. The cult's ambition is to rewind time through human sacrifices (**Figure 2**). In doing so, the cultists represent the town's desire to turn back the clock, and by extension, Mae's misplaced desire to do the same. The cult's attraction to Mae then, is the looking back, the inability to let go. Possum Springs represents Mae's fond memories of her carefree childhood and youth. Her desire to hold on to the past is therefore a form of necromancy, attempting to resurrect that which is already dead. Mae herself claims to understand the cultists' intentions: "I kinda get them. […] It's like a porch light that's on and there are all these bugs around it. And then the light goes out. And there's a hole where the light was." (Part 4: Day 12)

*Figure 2*: *Night in the Woods' cultists sacrifice humans to a supposed goat god in the mine.*

The cult's world view is deeply Satanic: The cultists worship a mysterious black goat, reminiscent of Satan's representation in black magic, as for example the Witches' Sabbat. They are convinced that their human sacrifices will restore the town to its glorious past. This "pact with the devil" (Melton 2001: 1348) is a core aspect of Satanism. The cultists claim to exclusively sacrifice those who "won't be missed" (Part 4: Day 12), which indicates that if Mae refuses to leave her childhood behind, she too will be left behind. Their meetings in the mines, where they act out their sacrificial rituals, directly quote the concept of the Black Mass, and even the fact that they gather in a haunted mine is in itself a deeply occultist trope: "The belief that mines are haunted is an ancient and universal one [...]. [S]tories of haunted mines are linked to legends of secret underground temples of occultists." (Melton 2001: 1039-1040) This is because caves metaphorically represent hidden knowledge, which in this case fittingly sits exactly where the cult resides, in the once buzzing mines of Possum Springs' distant past. As the cult is ultimately buried under the collapsing mine, the specter of

Possum Spring's former heyday is erased along with it, Mae's nightmares come to an end, and she learns that she must move on.

As the counterbalance to the cult, the mysteriously omniscient janitor ultimately represents Mae's delivery from her worsening mental and physical state. The janitor frames the game's narrative as a whole as both the first person Mae encounters and the last person she talks to before the final scene with her friends. In all his appearances, he is heavily implied as a divine being, since he knows Mae's name, although she never met him, and repeatedly provides her with veiled but suspiciously relevant advice on life. In a theatrical play, for example, her character, an evil witch, is lectured by the "Forest God", portrayed by the janitor: "The world you know endeth, and who can say what lieth in the world to come?" (Part 2: Day 7) In the game's penultimate scene, Mae tells him that she does not know whether she learned anything from the recent events, to which he responds: "In my experience, the big things don't teach you anything, but they make you something. […] Welp, done an honest day's work. Quittin' time!" (Part 4: Day 12) Where the occult deities represent the hidden, the janitor represents the real, where the occult is spiritual, the janitor is mundane. In reference to the janitor's occupation, in the game's final scene, Mae recounts a dream she once had: "It was like the town was abandoned. […] I went to where my house used to be. When I was there, I felt completely hopeless. But now I think I could just build another house, or I could just move on. Knowing when to hold on and when to let go." While Mae tried to find comfort in the occult gods, looking for a way to escape the mundane world, the janitor – true to his job description – helped her stay grounded in reality and rebuild.

Ultimately, the game's cult and its tenets do not empower the protagonist but instead serve as a challenge to be overcome. *Night in the Woods* utilizes the occult in a largely traditional sense, whereby its inspirations are drawn straight from a Christian, mostly

pejorative understanding of the term. The cult takes on the role of the antagonist, which aligns with the default usage of the term: "The primary assumptions of that logic are that cults are decisively not like us [...]." (Gallagher 2008: 217) The game thus uses its cult to mark the initial aspirations of its protagonist as the Other, and antithetical to the actual destination of Mae's coming-of-age story. The cult and Mae's original stance represent aversion to change, but as Mae realizes what her own desires would culminate in, she sees the error of her ways and accepts change. As a coming-of-age narrative, *Night in the Woods* thus makes use of the genre-typical religious framing, whereby the development of the soul is represented through metaphors of heaven and hell (Brittnacher 2013: 438).

However, her eventual journey out of the liminal space of occultism does not mean that the game endorses conventional religions, nor does it discard occult meaning entirely. Mae's negative views of the church, for example, are still validated when the institution fails to give refuge to a desperate homeless man, exposing the church's values as ultimately meaningless. The cult's ambitions and methods are also arguably capitalistic in nature (Fiorilli 2022), which would yet again associate evil with the dominant ideology, and therefore paint its detractors, i.e. Mae, as subversive and thus occult.

**Cultist Simulator**

*Cultist Simulator* is a rogue-like card-based simulation video game by the indie studio Weather Factory, published in 2018. The game was made possible by a successful *Kickstarter* campaign in 2017 and won several awards, among them the "Debut Game" and the "Game Innovation" awards at the 15th British Academy Game Awards.

In the game, the player takes on the role of a citizen in an unspecified society inspired by the 1920s. On the distribution platform Steam, the game describes its goals as the following: "Seize forbidden treasures. Summon alien gods. Feed on your disciples. Cultist

Simulator is a game of apocalypse and yearning. Play as a seeker after unholy mysteries, in a 1920s-themed setting of hidden gods and secret histories." While this could lead one to expect an action game, *Cultist Simulator* actually revolves around card-based resource management. The player acts by combining cards via so-called "verbs", such as Study, Talk, Explore, or Dream. The combination of cards, which serve as nouns or objects to the respective verbs, leads to unforeseeable outcomes. Automatic timers consistently feed on the resources of Money or Health. If either runs out, the game ends. If certain negative cards such as Fascination or Dread accumulate, the player's avatar succumbs to madness.

This fits the overarching theme of Lovecraftian horror, which, according to Simmons (2022: 242), has seen a recent resurgence in gaming. Just as with "Weird Fiction" in general, the supernatural elements serve as "supplements rather than contradictions" (Luckhurst 2012: 2) to the game's representation of the real world. The Lovecraftian, God-like beings of Cultist Simulator are "the Hours", which dwell in a mystical place called "the Mansus", a house of the mind, under the sky of "the Glory", the light of knowledge. The game's fragmented narrative is heavily entangled with this lore. Just like Lovecraft eclectically uses symbols and motives from different mythologies to different effects (Smuda 1997: 39), the game indirectly draws from sources such as Greek mythology, as with the Hours, who are predecessors of titans, or just from universal mythological patterns (Smuda 1979: 39) similar to those in Campbell's (1949) *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. The myth in Cultist Simulator, just as that in Lovecraft's works, evokes the illusion of depth (Smuda 1997: 21), even if the actual story and lore is quite comprehensible.

*Cultist Simulator*'s protagonist is regularly drawn to either Dread or Fascination, the destructive resources of the game. As a result, he or she is always in danger. When succumbing to Fascination, for example, the ending exclaims: "First it was the dreams. Then

it was the visions. Now it's everything. I no longer have any idea what is real, and what is not." Mental illness and the constant struggle to differentiate between reality and dreams are two of the recurring themes of Lovecraft's works (e.g. *Pickman's Model* [1926]). Just as with Lovecraftian horror in general, the unknown is a source of dread, thrill - and consequently entertainment. Horror video games usually represent this unknown through literal darkness: "[T]he use of darkness serves to heighten tension, as the player does not know what is in the gloom beyond the flashlight, leading to feelings of apprehension and an acute awareness of noise and movement on the screen." (Stobart 2019, 79) The same applies to *Cultist Simulator* on a procedural (Bogost, 2007) level. Here, the fragmentary nature of the game's occult lore, narrative and gameplay have the same effect. Sudden unanticipated movement on the board or changes in music, triggered by hidden processes, lead to a feeling of uneasiness. This is especially true for seemingly random timers that start by themselves, without clarifying what kind of events or cards they will produce. The hidden nature of gameplay rules and lore are therefore the true challenge of the game. The player's success heavily relies on their understanding of the occult, represented by the literally hidden rules of the game. The game therefore mechanically recreates the "hidden" (Howard 2014: 206) knowledge that the occult represents, as the occult is likewise often displayed as mysterious, chaotic, shrouded in darkness and not comprehensible by the human mind (Howard 2014, 270) or even defying rational thought outright. Mastering the game is therefore an analogy to mastering the occult: Both require trial and error, with only limited knowledge of what the occult actually is, does, or provides. For example, simply founding a cult in the first place is not explained through any tutorials, yet leads to vastly different traits providing different powers that the player then has to master.

The overwhelmingly large range of possible actions (Mitchell 2021: 164) enhances this necessity for trial-and-error gameplay (Hanson 2018: 111) even further (**Figure 3**). The

game is also 'extreme[ly] unforgiving, with no explicit 'save' mechanism, and a 'permadeath' mechanic, such that failure requires a complete restart" (Mitchell 2021: 175). Only once the player starts to understand the gameplay and the effects of the cards, they can finally travel the doors of the Mansus, which provides the resources that are ultimately necessary for the standard victory, the ascension of the player's avatar from the mortal realm to the immortal one.
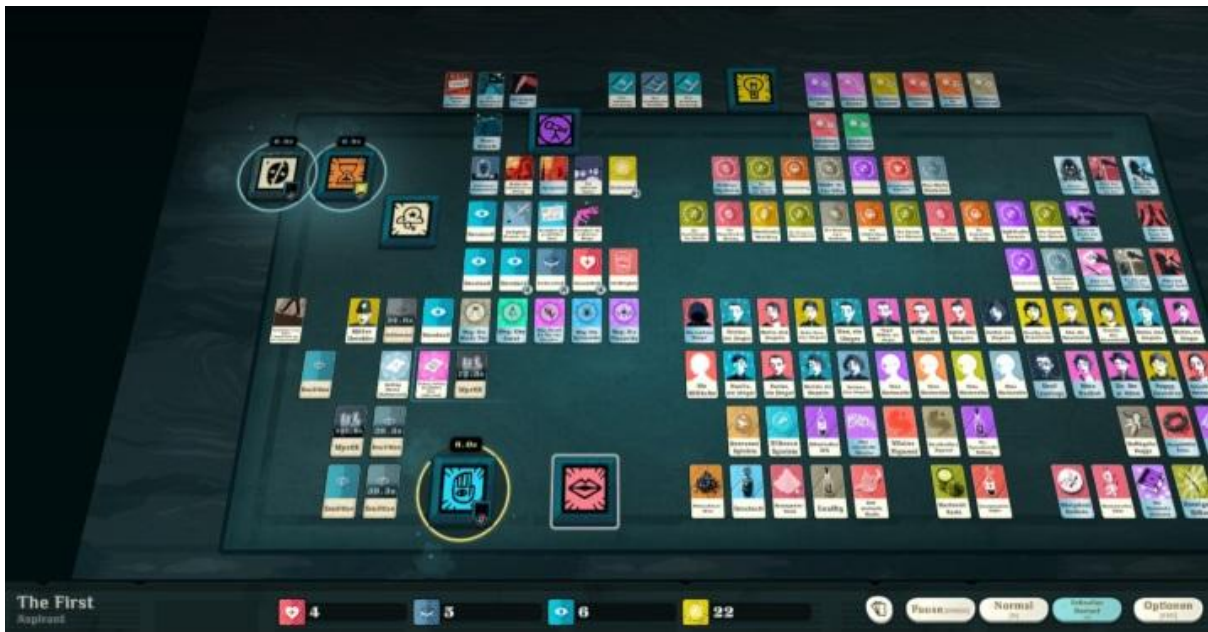


*Figure 3: Cultist Simulator's board grows progressively more complex over one playthrough.*

The occult in *Cultist Simulator* is masked through symbolist language. The game's so-called Nine Principles, for example, necessary to found a cult, embody archetypal characteristics of cults, in the form of ideologies that underpin them: Heart, Grail, Moth, Lantern, Forge, Edge, Winter, Knock, and Secret Histories. Their in-game descriptions usually hint towards Freudian drives. Grail, for example, is described as "[h]unger, lust, the drowning water". Many provide cryptic descriptions that lead to more questions than answers, as with the description of Edge: "All conquest occurs at the Edge. One who dwells there is blind, and cannot be wounded. Another is strong, and grows stronger." Others, like

Heart, Moth, Lantern, and Forge mention flames and fire as a dangerous fascination, or represent the thrill of uncovering dangerous knowledge, like Knock or Secret Histories. Heart and Secret Histories even reference the "world's skin" that divides the known world from the unknown, hidden world of the occult. These symbolic abstractions, also evident by the graphically simplistic design, force the player to piece together the lore of the game by themselves. This shifts the narrative elements and the unfolding lore from the game to the player's imagination, where this mastery of occultist language and symbols means power and control for both the player and their respective avatar. The descriptions of the game's cults are similarly suggestive. The Order of the Bloody Cup, for example, formed under the aspect of the Grail, is described as "[a]n occult society dedicated to the mysteries of birth, blood, and appetite". This remains rather vague, and so the player is again invited to fill that gap with e.g. rumors of cults in the 1980s, "nasty stories of satanic violence (including the rape and slaughter of virgins and the ritual impregnation of 'brood mares' to produce infants of human sacrifices)" (Barker 2004: 138) which were publicized in the United States and slowly became popular in other parts of the world.

The game explains the overall function of a cult like this: "To recruit believers, I must build something for them to believe." The protagonist therefore admits that they rely on a set of made-up beliefs, of principles to lure in followers, which, according to the game's mechanics, are no more than mere tools. Just like resources, they can be used and sacrificed in rituals. Followers are divided into different classes and can be promoted from one level to the next, recreating the inherent hierarchy of a cult. Many are explicitly meant to be sacrificed in a ritual or to sacrifice themselves in dangerous actions like defending the cult against investigators. Such rites closely resemble the popular perception of occultist doings, "classified as divination, bewitchments, and necromancy" (Melton 2001, 190). Even summoned entities are just tools for the player's avatar to eliminate opponents, destroy

evidence or gain resources. Rituals and rites are performed with the 'work' verb, presenting an alternative to mundane, everyday work as a laborer or clerk. The occult therefore, on the first glimpse, presents itself as the antithesis to the capitalist, earthly mindset of gaining money. It is presented as the work of the mind to ultimately strive towards something bigger, namely ascension. It does, however, leave the bodily tasks of, for example, going on expeditions or committing murder for financial gain to the followers, thereby creating an alternative capitalist system in which the cult leaders sits on top of the hierarchy.

Talking about the cult in public can lure in new 'pawns' but always carries the danger of being noticed by the so-called Suppression Bureau, which strives to keep the world from learning about the occult by hunting occultists and censoring occult material. The description of the in-game book "The War of the Roads, 1450-1580, CENSORED EDITION," for example, reads: "Willis-Ford describes the War of the Roads, an event in a History other than our own, in detail. But numerous pages have been removed; the name of the publisher is blacked out; and an ominous slip stapled to the cover explains that Willis-Ford has been 'excised'." The Suppression Bureau therefore represents the dominant narrative suppressing the occult, reminiscent of the QAnon-related conspiracy of the "deep state" (Blazakis, 2021) that supposedly hides evidence of something greater, in this case a world of new gods, the existence of magic and the opportunity to ascend. The cult and the cultist leader in these narratives are those who try to communicate that knowledge back to the masses. This analogy, however, is not viable anymore when examining the actual goal of the cult, which is to help the player's avatar, the leader, reach a higher level of being, of immortality and power. Consequently, the cults in *Cultist Simulator* fit Ellwood's (1986: 218-222) definition of cults perfectly: They rely on systematic programs of indoctrination and are headed by an authoritarian leader. If one of the followers tries to overthrow the leader and become their rival, they are marked as a threat. If that former follower reaches ascension first, the player

loses the game. The whole purpose of the cult is therefore not to help the masses but exclusively its leader.

The game's so-called Apostle legacy victory is only available after the standard ascension victory. Here, the old player's avatar ascends and the new cult leader, the new avatar, must help him or her reach a form of Godhood as the final step of an even higher ascension. This can only be done by sacrificing the new cult leader's life for that of the old one, the "Shaper". In case of a Major Forge victory, the game thus narrates: "Our Shaper passes both the Door and the Gate, […] and a single place has opened in the ranks of the Long. It is not for me. I am Nowhere. […] In Nowhere it is very cold. But it is always possible to be deader." In the end, it is thus only the leader who profits from the cult. Followers gain temporary diversion through participating in it, yet only he or she is the one who ascends. This glorifies self-sacrifice for the benefit of the leader. It is even presented as a lesser evil, since it is "always possible to be deader," leaving open the possibility for rebirth.

The followers of Cultist Simulator's cults are, just as their leader, starving for an alternative to their mundane lives. When the avatar climbs the corporate ladder of the fictional company Glover & Glover, in which they can earn money, the game just ends, proclaiming: "I have my fire, my books, my clock, my window on the world where they do other things. I could have been unhappy. I'm not unhappy. This was a successful life, and when it is over the sweet earth will fill my mouth, softer than splinters." All cultist progress is lost. Ascension to the Mansus (**Figure 4**) remains out of reach, and therefore the true goal of the game is not achieved. A cult leader who becomes a leading detective in the Suppression Bureau is greeted with a similarly mundane ending: "Then one day, I will die, and some time after that, my name will be heard no more." Earthly achievements are thus framed as an ultimately wasted life. Ascension endings, by comparison, are expressed much more

positively, as for example that of the cult of the Conflagration of Hearts: "For a little while I dwell in the high rooms of the Mansus, […] I am hairless and imperishable as marble, and the Forge's fire still burns within me. I carry the Shaping Strength. […] Perhaps, one day, I will rise even higher." Here, words like "marble", "strength" and allusion to immortality underline transformation as the purpose of cults.



*Figure 4: Cultist Simulator's portrayal of The Mansus, the house of the mind, visualizes ascension.*

The mystical offered by cults, however, refers both to the Greek muein, "to remain silent", and the Christian meaning, derived from *mustikos*, which implies "the literal meaning of the scriptures in the light of revelation" (Dupré 2005, 6341). These two opposing meanings dominate the game. The cult leader always has to either hide the cult and remain silent about the cult's doing to avoid the attention of the Bureau and rivals, or loudly proclaim occult knowledge to gain more knowledge in return. This duality is enshrined be the game resource called Mystique. It both attracts the attention of the Buraeu's Hunters and lures in followers, representing said duality mechanically through a risk-reward scheme with benefits and

drawbacks. Interestingly, it can also be used to distract Hunters from the true intentions of the cult, and players consider it a vital tactic to cover the board in Mystique to distract hunters.[ii] Therefore the mystical is not only a transient experience in C*ultist Simulator* but glamor to draw in others, to distract from the occult and ultimately to dazzle and manipulate others in order to reach the selfish goal of ascension. The mystical is ineffable, undeserved in nature, transient and expanding beyond its ordinary limits (Dupré 2005, 6342; Moore 2005, 6355). The occult in *Cultist Simulator* is likewise ineffable due to its fragmentary nature, undeserved as it has to be conquered and claimed and is not given, transient, as it is dreamed up by the player with the verb "dream", and expanding beyond its ordinary limits as it allows the avatar to expand beyond human limitations, summon otherworldly beings and in consequence become one.

**Conclusion**

Even though *Night in the Woods* and *Cultist Simulator* differ vastly in the focus of their game design, they construct the occult and the concept of cults in similar ways, albeit with different means. *Night in the Woods*, as a game of progression, relies mainly on its writing and visualization, while *Cultist Simulator*, as a game of emergence, conveys meaning mainly through the procedural rhetoric of its mechanics (Bogost, 2007).

This is most obvious in how both titles present the occult as hidden knowledge. While *Night in the Woods* conveys this by literally hiding its occult knowledge away from the mundane streets of Possum Springs, such as in dreams, on rooftops, or, as the title implies, in the woods, *Cultist Simulator* hides the rules that dominate its gameplay. On a semantic layer, dreams and madness play a central part in the narratives of both games, as the protagonists can both be driven mad by the occult and both summon and suffer from Lovecraftian monsters. Cults and their followers are also depicted as ultimately egotistical by both games.

The protagonist of *Cultist Simulator* is motivated by his own ascension alone, and Mae initially only cares for her own nostalgic ambitions, as does the cult.

However, there are essential differences. Although both games otherwise follow typical contemporary definitions of cults, the cult of *Night in the Woods* has no discernable leader, while *Cultist Simulator's* gameplay revolves solely around him or her. This can be explained by the fact that the cultists in *Night in the Woods* are actually driven by the belief in restoring the town, whereas *Cultist Simulator's* leaders construct their narratives merely to lure others in. Cultist Simulator can thus be read as parody, whereas *Night in the Woods* takes its cultists by their word. Consequently, *Cultist Simulator's* cults are the protagonist of the story, open for the player to project their own ambitions into, while *Night in the Woods'* cult presents the game's main antagonistic force with its own, destructive ambitions. As a result, mundane endings in *Cultist Simulator* present failure, while in *Night in the Woods*, the mundane is Mae's savior. However, to clearly mark cults as such, both games, and thus both roles of the cult, protagonist and antagonist, resort to traditional, Christian symbolism and therefore pejorative understandings of cults. We can therefore conclude that while cults can in fact occupy the role of the protagonist in indie games, this framing is inherently parodistic in nature. On the other hand, the portrayal of cults as the story's antagonist requires only the application of popular stereotypes. A more thorough investigation of indie games is necessary to assess whether in this, these titles are just outliers or exemplify a larger trend.

---

[i] Juul (2002) describes games of progression as following a pre-determined structure, while games of emergence are closer to card or board games, where a story dynamically emerges from players interacting with the rules of the game.

[ii] This tactic is explicitly mentioned in the respective *Cultist Simulator* Wiki entry: https://cultistsimulator.fandom.com/wiki/Mystique.

## Acknowledgements

## Ludography:

*Night in the Woods*, Infinite Fall, Finji, 2017.

*Cultist Simulator*, Weather Factory, Humble Bundle, 2018.

## Bibliography:

Barker, E., 'Watching for Violence: A Comparative Analysis of the Roles of Five Types of Cult-Watching Groups', in: Bromley, David G. & Melton, J. Gordon, *Cults, Religion and Violence*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 123-148.

Blazakis, J., *Why QAnon's Similarity to Other Cults Makes It a Significant National Security Threat*, LA Times, 2021: < https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-02-21/qanon-cults-capitol-attack-trump-threat> (24/9/2022).

Bogost, I., *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, 2007, Cambridge; New York: MIT Press.

Brittnacher, H. R. & May, M. (eds.), *Phantastik: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, Stuttgart: Metzler, 2013.

Campbell, J., *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1949.

Dupré, L., 'Mysticism [First Edition]', in: Jones, L. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Farmington Hills; Michigan: Gale, 2005, pp. 6341-6355.

Ellwood, R., 'The Several Meanings of Cult', *Thought LXI,* Vol. 241, (1986), pp. 212-224.

FIorilli, P., *Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Gods: Reading Night in the Woods through Mark Fisher*, Game Studies, 2022: <https://gamestudies.org/2201/articles/fiorilli> (21/9/2023).

Fonseca, T., 'Occultism', in: Joshi, S. T., *Supernatural Literature of the World: An Encyclopedia*, Westport; Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2005, pp. 865-870.

Frenschkowski, M., 'Okkultismus', in: Brittnacher, H. R. & May, M. (eds.), *Phantastik: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, Stuttgart: Metzler, 2013, pp. 435-440.

Freud, S., 'Das Unheimliche', *Imago*, No. 5/6, (1919), pp. 298-324.

Gallagher, E. V., '"Cults" and "New Religious Movements"', *History of Religion*, Vol. 42, No. 2, (2008), pp. 205-220.

Hanson, C., *Game Time: Understanding Temporality in Video Games,* Bloomington; Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018.

Howard, J., *Game Magic: A Designer's Guide to Magic Systems in Theory and Practice*, New York et al.: CRC Press, 2014.

Juul, J., 'The Open and the Closed: Game of emergence and games of progression', in: Mäyrä, F. (ed.), *Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference Proceedings*. Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2002, pp. 323-329, <http://www.jesperjuul.net/text/openandtheclosed.html> (20/06/2022).

Luckhurst, R., 'The Weird Rewired: Genres, Borders and the New Europe', In: Coelsch-Foisner, S. & Herbe, S. (eds.), *New Directions in the European Fantastic*, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2012, pp. 1-12.

Melton, J. G., *Encyclopedia of Occultism & Parapsychology*, Farmington Hills; Michigan: Gale, 2001.

Mitchell, A., 'Encouraging and Rewarding Repeat Play of Storygames', In: Dillon, R. (ed.), *The Digital Gaming Handbook*, New York et al.: CRC Press, 2021, pp. 163-181.

Moore, P., 'Mysticism [Further Considerations]', in: Jones, L. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Farmington Hills; Michigan: Gale, 2005, pp. 6355-6359.

Nelson, G., 'The Spiritualist Movement and the Need for a Redefinition of Cult', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 8 (1969), pp. 152-160.

Plizga, B., *An Ode to Night in the Woods: A Charming Game About the Bleakness of Life,* Medium, 2020: < https://medium.com/super-jump/an-ode-to-night-in-the-woods-a-charming-game-about-the-bleakness-of-life-6b0890836f86> (24/9/2022).

Richardson, J. T., 'An Oppositional and General Conceptualization of Cult', *Annual Review of the Social Sciences of Religion*, Vol. 2, (1978), pp. 29-52.

Richardson, J. T., 'Definitions of Cult: From Sociological-Technical to Popular-Negative', *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 34, No. 4, (1993), pp. 348-356.

Richardson, J. T., 'From Cult to Sect: Creative Eclecticism in New Religious Movements', *Pacific Sociological Review*, Vol. 22, (1979), pp. 139-166.

Richmond, L. J., 'When Spirituality Goes Awry: Students in Cults', *Professional School Counseling*, Vol. 7, No. 9, (2004), pp. 367-375.

Robbins, T. & Anthony, D., 'Deprogramming, Brainwashing and the Medicalization of Deviant Religious Groups', *Social Problems,* Vol. 29, No. 3, (1982), pp. 283-297.

Saha, P. & Goudiss, G., *Enthralled Subjects: Cults, Conversion, and Quarantine Fixations*, The Berkeley Public Forum on Religion and Pandemic, 2020.

Simmons, D., 'Bringing … Uncertain Geographies Under … Control? Exploring the
Lovecraftian Walking Simulator', in: Gonzalez, A. A. & Sederholm, C. H. (eds.),
*Lovecraft in the 21st Century: Dead, But Still Dreaming*, London: Routledge, 2022, pp.
241-252.

Smuda, S., *H.P. Lovecrafts Mythologie: Bricolage und Intertextualität - Erzählstrategien und
ihre Wirkung*, Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 1997.

Stobart, D., *Videogames and Horror: From Amnesia to Zombies, Run!*, Cardiff: University of
Wales Press, 2019.

Troeltsch, E., *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, New York: MacMillan, 1931.

Wallis, R., 'Ideology, Authority, and the Development of Cultic Movements', *Social
Research*, Vol. 41 (1974), pp. 299-327.