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Encountering Weird Objects: Lovecraft, LARP, and Speculative Philosophy

Chloé Germaine Buckley

Introduction: Philosophy, Play, Props

The speculative and materialist turns of twenty-first century philosophy ask humans to “think about the liveliness of objects.”² Numerous theorists attempt to overcome what speculative realists call the “correlationist” gap, which abjures the possibility of accessing the “noumenal” realm, and what new materialists frame as idealist and constructivist assumptions, which ignore the importance of bodies, matter, and other nonhuman “actants” in favour of language, discourse, and culture.³ Of the of-

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- 1 I am grateful to Paul Wake and Jonathan Newell for comments on this material.
 - 2 Steven Shaviro, “The Universe of Things,” *Theory & Event* 14, no. 3 (2011): 3.
 - 3 For summaries of these critiques see: Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, “Towards a Speculative Philosophy,” in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 1–18. See also Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” in *New*

ferings across speculative realism and new materialism, those of interest in this chapter include Graham Harman's object oriented ontology and Jane Bennett's vital materialism.⁴ The latter theorist expounds an approach to things that provides a useful mid-point between object-oriented and relational ontologies, both of which offer valid routes beyond correlationism and constructivism. With their very different conceptions of objects, Harman and Bennett negotiate what Steven Shaviro identifies as the "paradoxes of nonhuman actants, of vital matter, and of object independence."⁵ Such written speculation on the nature of reality and nonhuman things is well and good but how to make contact with objects such that both the anthropocentrism of Western philosophy and the every-day or common-sense realism it engenders might be disrupted? How to forge an encounter with the "weird reality" Harman suggests lies beyond the gap endemic in Western philosophy?⁶ How can humans be jolted out of the hubris that Bennett suggests frames matter as instrumental and results in "earth-destroying consumption?"⁷

This chapter contends that there is at least one human activity alert to the vibrant, strange, and elusive nature of objects: game-playing. In his field-defining analysis of the play-element in culture, Johan Huizinga asserts that gameplay comprises a "temporary abolition of the ordinary world" not merely for the production of a childish fiction but, oftentimes, taking on a ritualistic aspect that "brings about an order of things higher than that in which [we] customarily live," where play, Huizinga suggests, might be a "cosmic happening."⁸ The temporary, ritualized

Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, Politics, eds. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 1–46.

- 4 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010). See also Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011).
- 5 Shaviro, "The Universe of Things," 3.
- 6 Graham Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2012), 2.
- 7 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, ix.
- 8 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Kettering: Angelico Press, 2016), 12, 14.

demarcation of space in play is fundamental in live-action roleplaying (LARP), a niche, gaming activity distinct from table-top roleplaying games and video games. LARPs are physically enacted roleplaying games that require players to enter a specific location — demarcated as “in-game” — as designated “characters.” LARPs may last anything from a few hours to a few days, during which time player-characters must respond to dramatic events, puzzles, and crises through an immersive, embodied performance. The resulting improvised narrative interacts with a ludic structure — that is, the rules of the game — comprising game-play mechanics that govern player-character actions, including some aspects familiar from video and table-top roleplaying games such as health stats and combat skills. LARP is popular in various genres and includes “high” and “low” fantasy games, murder-mystery scenarios, post-apocalyptic and regency-era “polite society” settings to name just a few.

The focus of this chapter is “survival horror” LARP and, specifically, what is often called, by players and organizers, “Cthulhu” LARP, after Lovecraft’s fiction and its legacy. Huizinga’s phrase defining play as a “cosmic happening” is particularly apposite for “Cthulhu” LARP, which incorporates as theme and content a horrifying encounter with the outside, aiming to produce in players what Lovecraft describes as “cosmic fear.”⁹ Indeed, “Cthulhu” LARP fits into the category of “dark play,” a term that game studies scholars use to describe “dangerous” forms of play that exploit the tension between order and chaos, evoke subversive or otherwise “deviant” themes, and often deceive players such that the boundary between “play” and “not play” becomes very porous.¹⁰ Because it requires constant frame switching as

9 H.P. Lovecraft, “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” *The H.P. Lovecraft Archive*, <http://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/essays/shil.aspx>.

10 “Dark Play” is a concept defined by Richard Schechner in *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002). I synthesize a definition from comments by Miguel Sicart in *Play Matters* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 19 and Jonas Linderth and Torill Elvira Mortensen in “Dark Play: The Aesthetics of Controversial Playfulness,” in *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments*, eds. Torill Elvira

players negotiate in-game and out-of-game elements simultaneously and a big commitment to the suspension of disbelief that can often create moments of “bleed” between the world of the game and the world beyond, LARP certainly has the potential to disrupt constructed, social reality and provoke psychological stress.¹¹ However, the Lovecraftian themes also make such play potentially disruptive of players’ deeply embedded ontologies, of the common-sense realism that operates in their everyday lives.

Objects and things in the form of game props are central to the success of LARP and key to its potential for metaphysical speculation. Props provide the objects on which ludic mechanics operate, they contribute to the production of a shared narrative, and help transform the space in which the game takes place, specifically, its demarcation from the world of the everyday. Finally, props are central to the production of immersion for the players such that they might feel “cosmic fear” within the game. Props in “Cthulhu” LARP include objects such as an eldritch tome containing information about ancient gods and rituals, fragments of “alien” rock or parts of an ancient “spacecraft,” an array of disturbing monster costumes such as a series of “shoggoth tentacles” made from latex and foam, elements of set-dressing such as laboratory equipment, a projected video with ambient sounds used to simulate a shared vision, floodlights and sound-effects to simulate the arrival of a military helicopter. These are a few examples from my own experience. As a LARP designer who also theorizes their practice, I follow Kendall Walton and Chris Bateman in the assertion that props are generative: they prescribe specific imaginings, trigger emotions,

Mortensen, Jonas Linderth, and Ashley M.L. Brown (London: Routledge, 2015), 5.

11 On the disruptive effects of frame switching in LARP, see Chloé Germaine Buckley and Laura Mitchell, “Weird Experience: Transformations of Space/Place in ‘Lovecraftian’ LARP,” *Studies in Gothic Fiction* 7, no. 1 (2020, forthcoming).

and generate the fictional world of the game.¹² Walton's "prop-oriented" view of "make-believe" counters "content-oriented" approaches in that it proposes that objects have independence over and above their role in a story. Indeed, Walton goes as far as to reverse the hierarchy of story and prop, suggesting that props might become the focus of attention such that the act of make-believe is a tool through which we understand the prop. This inverts the view that the prop is a tool through which we understand the story.¹³ This view of props as agentic and generative suggests their affinity with the notion of "object" or "thing" expounded in some speculative realisms and new materialisms. Bennett, for example, suggests that "things" manifest traces of "independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience."¹⁴ In "Cthulhu" LARP, props explicitly manifest their independence or "outside-ness." Examples from my experience include encountering a strange, meteor-type rock that resisted geological analysis and acted to create some kind of barrier preventing player-characters from escaping a certain location. In another LARP, players uncovered unidentifiable archaeological fragments with strange markings. Together, the fragments comprised a beacon or transmitter that exerted disturbing psychical effects upon player-characters who came into contact with them. The game entirely revolved around putting together the fragments.¹⁵

In addition to their generative function, there is a certain naïveté embodied by props in LARP that accords with the various turns from doubting modes of philosophy explored herein. Indeed, the various (re)turns to materiality and reality represented by speculative realism and new materialism are often

12 For an explanation of what Bateman calls "prop theory," see Kendall L. Walton, "Metaphor and Prop Oriented Make-Believe," *European Journal of Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (1993): 39–57 and Chris Bateman, *Imaginary Games* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011), 100–103.

13 Walton, "Metaphor and Prop Oriented Make-Believe," 39.

14 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xvi.

15 This LARP was "X Marks the Spot," written and organized by Eleanor Black for the UK-based LARP club, *Disturbing Events*, in 2017.

self-consciously naïve, rejecting the skepticism of correlationism and the sophistication of constructivism, both of which equate reality with representation or else do away with it altogether. Harman suggests that naïveté ought to replace radical doubt in philosophical thought and Bennett argues that her notion of “thing-power” is advantageous precisely because it calls to mind “a childhood sense of the world.”¹⁶ LARP is likewise a self-consciously naïve activity, a childish game of dress-up and make-believe, which attempts to produce and enact outlandish stories and scenarios using home-made costumes and props. Actual monsters appear and may be fought with latex weapons or replica guns; players pick up mysterious and magical objects made from foam and papier-mâché; and physical space is transformed with theatrical set-dressing, home-made sound effects, and colored lights. It is LARP’s playful naïveté that insists on an embodied and oftentimes visceral encounter with materiality.

Material encounters in LARP can produce “Weird” paradoxes, encouraging blurred responses to objects that unsettle both scientific materialism and metaphysical idealism. By way of an example, I offer a prop I made for a “Cthulhu” LARP titled “Professor Lazarus’s Emporium of Wonders.”¹⁷ This prop, like many others in this genre of LARP, initiated competing and paradoxical encounters for the players. In the game narrative, the prop represented a part magical, part electrical “field generator” that, when switched on, kept a “proto-shoggoth” — a monster we had constructed out of latex, foam, cloth, and an old nylon tent — in an inert state. During the first act of the game, the machine broke, causing the shoggoth to grow out of control and its foam tentacles extended further and further into the game space. Initially, this affected “non-player-characters” who became fused with the creature and attached to one another with grotesque latex umbilical cords. Later, players themselves were subsumed

16 Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 5. See also Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 20.

17 “Professor Lazarus’ Emporium of Wonders” was written by Chloé Germaine Buckley and Jonathan Buckley for the UK-based LARP club, *The Dark Door*, in 2014.

into the monster. The field generator became an important object for the ludic frame (that is, the frame determining the activity as a game composed of a series of challenges to be solved): players needed to fix the machine to destroy the creature. The object also prescribed several imaginings to produce a fictional narrative. Thus, players encountered the prop through at least two different frames: the fictional narrative demanded their characters imagine its mystical purpose and provenance, while the ludic structure suggested the player approach the object as a puzzle to be solved, drawing on in-game skills and rules that need to be role-played accordingly. These competing “in-character” and “out-of-character” negotiations prescribed by the prop suggest something of its strange nature in the context of play.

The strangeness of the object in this case was also visible in its materiality: it looked very much like a prop. We constructed it from an old carriage clock, to which we affixed colored LEDs, wires, brass knobs, and dials that served no real function. We added an electrical transformer and switch kit, packaged to look like an “old-timey” battery suitable for the 1930s setting. Each of these material components were visible and allowed players to identify the item as a prop within the space of the game. Often, players negotiate between in-game props and items native to the game location, for example, spotting a magical tome on a shelf of otherwise ordinary books. Despite its home-made appearance, the object was treated very much as real and potentially dangerous as players constructed an improvised narrative around it. It had obvious real-world components that could easily have been put back together by anyone with a basic knowledge of electronics, but the players roleplayed having no clue about how the machine worked: they were fumbling about, making guesses in their make-believe pretence of fixing it. Finally, like many props in “Cthulhu” LARP, the field generator worked in both the material dimension and in a seemingly supernatural one. Both the simple electronics and the painted mystical symbols had sensible in-game effects in relation to the monster. The object also

prompted quasi-emotional responses from the characters (for example, fear, bewilderment) and real emotional responses in the players (for example, hesitancy). This distinction suggests that props prescribe effects within multiple frames simultaneously, including beyond the world of the game. Some players are often reluctant to interact with an object that could send their character mad or kill them and so end their game experience early. In-game madness is a common feature in “Cthulhu” LARP and it often signifies that props such as the field generator erase separation between normally distinct metaphysical dimensions (the natural and the supernatural, the human and the nonhuman, for example).

In what follows, I will suggest that the ludic interactivity of LARP and its requirement for participants to negotiate multiple and simultaneous frames of experience produces insights about the nature of reality beyond human perception. In short, it has the potential to force its participants to catch a glimpse of a world that is nothing like their common-sense perceptions of it. In line with speculative realist and new materialist philosophies, what encounters with props in LARP may reveal is a curiously unhuman ontology: a world of active, vibrant *things*, to use Bennett’s terminology, and independent, mysterious objects, in the sense employed in Harman’s schema. My investigation is philosophical and auto-ethnographic. I examine variousLARPs I have designed and played, drawing on the intersection between Gothic, horror, and philosophy. I suggest that LARP elucidates some of the speculations in recent philosophy through its affective encounters. That is, horror LARP produces an experiential encounter with the “weirdness” of reality.

LARP, Fakery, and the Gothic Tradition

To explore the disruptive nature of props in “Cthulhu” LARP, I want to make some connections between LARP and the Gothic. The Gothic is a literary mode that informs both the fiction on whichLARPs are based (for example, Lovecraft’s stories) and the techniques used to gamify those fictions. Horror LARP uses

strategies key to the Gothic since the latter's inception in the eighteenth century. One such strategy is the production of performed space, which Emma McEvoy argues is central to Gothic. She calls Horace Walpole's converted dairy, Strawberry Hill, a "dramatized building for which audience response and interaction were essential."¹⁸ Walpole's Strawberry Hill was both a material building and a fictional construct, intimately connected to his novel, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), which is widely discussed as the first Gothic novel. Just as that novel purported to be a found manuscript but was an invented fiction, Strawberry Hill was not what it appeared to be. In this former and extended dairy building, wooden crenulations masqueraded as stone masonry and pasteboard walls sported fake, Gothic arches. Walpole freely "mixed and matched,"¹⁹ creating stylistic incongruence by assembling a range of artifacts, or "props" that prescribed a variety of imaginings for the buildings' visitors. Such fakery is necessary in LARP, too, to produce a dramatized or performed space in which an immersive game experience can occur. LARP organizers' comparative lack of budget results in a more home-made affair than Strawberry Hill, though, and the Gothic set-dressing is decidedly more Ed Wood than Tod Browning. That said, the production of space in LARP can have very dramatic effects. Elsewhere, I have discussed the experience of seeing an interior wall crumble as a horde of zombies tore its way through. The wall turned out to be a plasterboard fake placed in a venue solely for the game.²⁰ In another game, organizers bricked up a fireplace in a hired venue just for the weekend so it could be uncovered by players as part of the solution to a ludic puzzle.²¹ Such props vary in their levels of authenticity, but all help pro-

18 Emma McEvoy, *Gothic Tourism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 18.

19 *Ibid.*, 21.

20 See Germaine Buckley and Mitchell, "Weird Experience." The game described was "The Sorrow of Huntingdon Hall," written by Jenny Wilkinson and Lee Wilkinson for *The Dark Door* in 2008.

21 This incident occurred during a game called "God Rest Ye Merry," written and organized by the UK-based organisation, *Crooked House*, in 2015.

duce a performed space that provides narrative effects and ludic challenges in material form.

The production of performed space through fakery (such as pasteboard crenulations or a dummy wall) and incongruence (including the assembling of props from different time periods and contexts) results in the blurring of interpretive frames. Walpole's incongruent stylistic mash-up at Strawberry Hill deliberately muddled distinctions such as that between art and reality, inviting visitors to "walk into a painting" for example.²² In LARP, such perceptual dissonance often occurs at a ludic level, prompting anxiety over whether something is in-game or not. The fake wall was one extreme example of organizers manipulating performed space to produce a particularly dramatic dissonance, a chaotic moment when "in-character" and "out-of-character" responses blurred as players scrambled to escape. In LARP, such blurrings, what players often call "bleed", can function to problematize players' experience of materiality. In addition, some objects are physical and solid, the home-made field generator, for example, or a skin-bound eldritch tome fashioned from painted latex. Yet, other props are more intangible; they might be part "phys-repped" and part described by a game referee, or they might comprise an image projected onto a screen. Yet, within the game world all such objects occupy the same, objectified reality. LARP discloses that which in everyday experience is unseen or unreal.

The practical difficulties involved in materially manifesting some of the objects described in Lovecraft's fiction calls for an ambiguous and loose definition of the word "prop." In Walton's work, the term prop does not only refer to physical objects but anything that "generates a fictional truth."²³ This broader definition works well for LARP, which incorporates some objects that are very physical and others that might be more intangible, like a video projection. Walton's "props" also accord with Harman's

22 McEvoy, *Gothic Tourism*, 29.

23 Walton, "Metaphor and Prop-oriented Make Believe," 59. See also Bate-man, *Imaginary Games*, 95.

“objects,” which occupy the accessible, “sensual” realm and include “the centaur, Pegasus, unicorn, and hobbit” as well as trees and chairs. Harman also admits “larger emergent entities” like the European Union into his definition of sensual objects.²⁴ Peter Gratton has suggested that such comments risk “an idealism worse than anything [Harman] critiques” and that Harman’s extension of the term “object” to anything and everything suggests a “literal nominalism in which words create things.”²⁵ Gratton’s charges suggest serious problems at the heart of Harman’s avowedly realist project, but thinking about LARP props as examples of Gothic fakery and as dissonant objects, drawing out some connections with Harman’s schematics, allows a more generous assessment of object oriented ontology. Harman himself suggests objects exist in multiple realms (the sensual and the real) and that tensions and torsions between objects and realms produce sensible effects. His analysis of Lovecraft’s fiction, in which he elucidates his “weird realism,” also suggests a necessary dose of the imaginary in any philosophical endeavour that seeks access, however indirect, to the “outside.”²⁶ Bennett’s work echoes this insistence on the importance of an “unrealistic imagination” in accessing the outside.²⁷ Certainly, “Cthulhu” LARP attempts to manifest indirect access to the outside in the most material form possible (the foam and latex “shoggoth tentacles” I made for “Professor Lazarus’ Emporium of Wonders” are a good example), but it also insists upon the suspension of disbelief, demanding immersion in an imaginary narrative (i.e., walking into a Lovecraft story) and on players accepting the “fictional truths” prescribed by props, however home-made they might look. In this sense, LARP continues in a tradition of dramatization inaugurated by Horace Walpole. Thus, in its Gothic fakery,

24 Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 7, 16.

25 Peter Gratton, *Speculative Realism: Problems and Prospects* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 99, 102.

26 Harman calls Lovecraft a “great hero to object-oriented thought” because of his explorations of tensions and gaps between real and sensual objects. Harman, *Weird Realism*, 5.

27 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 15.

“Cthulhu” LARP is an exemplary activity in establishing the connections between idealism and materialism that are necessary for any robust realist ontology.

Of course, LARP props might also be so effective that players have no need to roleplay fright or flight responses. Encountering a monster while alone in the subterranean corridors of a crumbling, Northumberland castle prompts an immediate embodied response and a very real, adrenaline injection. In moments where props don't only prescribe “fictional truths” but seem viscerally real, the response of player and character merge and the distinction between game and external reality collapses. Here, LARP most obviously achieves that quintessential Gothic effect described by Chris Baldick as the “sickening descent into disintegration.”²⁸ Lovecraft's stories, too, evoke Baldick's Gothic effect in their depiction of a protagonist increasingly haunted by an eons-dead and long-forgotten truth, drawn to some claustrophobic space (for example, subterranean passages, the strange angle of an attic room, the bell tower of an abandoned church) and that protagonist's eventual descent into madness as they glimpse the terrifying vistas of the cosmos. For all his rejection of clanking chains and skeletons, Lovecraft worked within the Gothic as well as innovating that related mode, the Weird.²⁹ “Cthulhu” LARP likewise draws on both literary modes but almost always evokes a Gothic structure, wearing away at player-characters' sanity and disintegrating their sense of a stable universe as the game progresses, disclosing or gesturing to something chaotic beyond representation and socially-constructed realities. “Cthulhu” LARP also makes the benign “magic circle,” described by Huizinga as central to play, into a claustrophobic trap familiar from Gothic novels. LARP enfolds players in a frenetic twenty-four-hour time-in experience, often ending in their characters' deaths. This kind of LARP does not

28 Chris Baldick, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), xix.

29 For a discussion of Lovecraft's Gothic work, see Xavier Aldana Reyes, ed., *The Gothic Tales of H.P. Lovecraft* (London: The British Library, 2018).

instill the mastery Huizinga and other theorists associate with play culture, but rather produces as the intended outcome the disintegration of a coherent, anchored sense of identity. In this thoroughly “dark play,” such disintegrations of selfhood are not simply psychological, but potentially metaphysical.

Finally, “Cthulhu” LARP and the Gothic are both forms that draw attention to surfaces and to the strange disjunctions between presence and absence that manifest on the surface of sensual or perceptual experience. Exploring this surface of experience, which is so heightened in LARP, is the route to speculating about what lies beyond the correlationist gap, as this is where we encounter emerging and withdrawing objects, where we glimpse the vibrancy of things and feel the effects of their agency. The mechanics of LARP and the fakery of the Gothic alike evoke an awareness of the surface. For example, the use of explicit fakery in LARP asks players to be immersed in a narrative but also recognize certain objects as props, an act that would seem to puncture immersion within the game but actually aids it. That is, such puncturing through recognition is necessary for the ludic mechanics: players need to recognize game props as such in order to negotiate the game.³⁰ This recognition echoes techniques found in the Gothic mode, which habitually draws attention to itself via meta-textuality. Walpole inaugurates such meta-textual playfulness with his first preface to *Otranto*, announcing the novel as a found manuscript.

Eve Sedgwick notes that Gothic’s concern with the surface is also seen in its emphasis on tropes and not depths. She argues that Gothic draws attention to the veil rather than the face underneath, for example, evoking “a sense of doubleness where

30 Here my arguments echo Janet Murray’s comments on immersion and narrative. Murray is often maligned in game studies, but two of her insights are valuable here. First, she suggests that interactivity and immersion reinforce one another. Second, she argues that we must be able to define the boundaries of a narrative before we can become immersed within it. See Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 114, 129.

singleness should be.”³¹ Another way of understanding Sedgwick’s claim is that Gothic is interested in the objects that manifest on the surface and on their surface effects, and not, as has been most often understood, on treating those objects as ciphers or metaphors that reveal human psychology. Gothic doubleness materialized at a horror LARP I played that was held at an ex-military bunker.³² The bunker was already populated by items that looked appropriate for the setting of the game. However, the bunker was also a museum, so players were not allowed to touch the native items. Consequently, players needed to differentiate between game items and museum exhibits as they navigated the space. Prop fakery became a signifier of narrative authenticity and, in the process, the bunker became a doubled space. In-game objects formed a layer over the real objects, which receded from the game world into a spectral background that, paradoxically, remained on the surface of experience. Lovecraft’s fiction pays attention to such disjunctive surface layers in stories such as “From Beyond.” Here, with the help of a machine, the protagonist becomes aware of a second terrifying world of experience that over-layers that of the everyday.

Paradoxical Props: Object Oriented Ontology

Thus far I have suggested some of the technical and thematic ways in which “Cthulhu” LARP props produce paradoxical and disjunctive experiences for players. Reading these experiences alongside Harman’s object-oriented ontology suggests how LARP might constitute a disruption of everyday, common-sense conceptions of reality for human perceivers and that it offers its own challenge to correlationist thought that would “debunk objects and deny their autonomy.”³³ Harman, contends that materiality is composed of paradoxical objects that are not only fig-

31 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York: Methuen, 1986), 13.

32 This game was “The Atlantis Legacy,” written and organized by David Garwood for *The Dark Door* in 2014.

33 Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 6.

ments of the mind of a human perceiver, nor “mere aggregates” of smaller pieces.³⁴ In his metaphysical schema, objects are autonomous, something more than only their “pieces,” and always partly withhold themselves from relations with other entities.³⁵ Such objects are paradoxical because they both have and do not have the properties they are ascribed in classical metaphysics, that is “accidents, qualities, relations and moment.”³⁶ Harman’s object oriented ontology suggests that objects reveal themselves in contact with other objects and that this contact includes but is not limited to human perception. Objects are tricky because they are both noumenal and phenomenological, relational but with an essential kernel that evades all relations; they also possess a surface “eidōs” but are comprised of shifting surface qualities that elude totalisation. Much of Harman’s work focuses on exploring these tensions. Indeed, Gratton suggests that the term “tension” is key to Harman’s metaphysics; it “brings together (fusion) and it drives apart (fission) the object within itself.”³⁷ These tensions become apparent in the way props function in LARP and are central to the form’s affective dimension and mechanics of immersion.

LARP props reverse everyday experiences of the material world in which objects tend to withdraw from conscious access. The conception of reality as “withdrawn” is one coordinate of Harman’s metaphysics and one of the sources of tension within and between objects.³⁸ For Heidegger, objects withdraw from conscious access, only coming to notice when they cease to function properly. Harman designates this coming-to-notice as the result of failure, but suggests it can never be addressed since our becoming conscious of things never grasps “the whole of their reality.”³⁹ LARP illuminates the tension of “withdrawal” and “failure” in that it initially reverses the usual conditions in which hu-

34 Ibid., 7.

35 Ibid., 19.

36 Ibid.

37 Gratton, *Speculative Realism*, 102.

38 Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 39.

39 Ibid.

man perception operates, demanding that normally withdrawn objects make themselves known. While in our everyday lives, books on a shelf recede into murky noumena and exist beyond conscious perception; in a LARP, they might contain a vital clue such as a scrap of paper or some journal pages hastily stuffed inside or between them. Thus, the shelf of books must obtrude into the players' experience. Sometimes, the recognition demanded by the ludic frame achieves such obtrusion on its own and players search the seemingly innocent bookshelf because it is likely something could be hidden there. At other times, work is needed to bring withdrawn objects to notice. At one game, a referee placed a magazine we had all been ignoring near an open door, so the wind would ruffle its pages: she was becoming quite frustrated that we had not picked up the magazine or realised that it contained important information! Games are also littered with broken objects that obtrude in unhelpful ways. Broken radios, out-of-order telephones, and generators that have run out of fuel are a few examples of suddenly obtrusive objects that exert agency and work against the players' chances of successfully solving the game scenario. Failure is central to "Cthulhu" LARP, and props are often used in the wrong way, especially if they are of eldritch provenance. Players have many theories about what an object is or how it might be used, but they are always guessing, or only partially understanding the object's provenance and purpose. Even if they manage to put together a partial solution that successfully unlocks one of the object's powers, they will not have grasped the whole of its reality.

Harman's insistence upon "tension" also suggests that objects are not unified, but in strife with their internal qualities. Harman describes this as "fission": "the qualities of the thing break off from the thing as a whole."⁴⁰ Another formulation of this tension is that it manifests a gap between the sensual object and its sensual qualities, that is, an object we encounter in the perceptual realm via our senses but that has myriad and shifting qualities. As Harman points out, Lovecraft's writing is re-

⁴⁰ Harman, *Weird Realism*, 242.

plete with such gaps; his “language is overloaded by a gluttonous excess of surfaces and aspects of the thing.”⁴¹ The stylistic world of Lovecraft is one in which real objects are in tension with the crippled powers of language and where visible objects “display unbearable seismic torsion with their own qualities.”⁴² This crippled language suggests a narrator’s inability to correlate the multitude of surfaces and qualities they encounter into a unified whole. LARP organizers try to replicate Lovecraft’s gluttonous excess of surfaces through the creation of elaborate monster costumes, which aim to evoke an encounter for players in which they are unable to take in the whole of the creature, to fully make sense of its seeming myriad qualities. Practically, this involves layering latex onto foam and adding mixed media materials to produce lumpen, glistening, uneven shapes. Monster costumes made for a single person to wear might include stilts to add height, extra limbs, or protruding tentacles. We might add LED lights, programmed to display random patterns in the darkness. Monsters should never be fully seen, especially not in the daylight. They are most effective when encountered as a series of fragmented and disjointed qualities: strange lights in the darkness beyond the house, a bulky shape in the doorway, an impossibly tall shadow, the swipe of a glistening limb as you try to escape.

Another weird aspect of objects is described by Harman as the “interbreeding between real and sensual realms.”⁴³ This is when the normally inaccessible, “real” object, as opposed to the accessible “sensual” object, slides into the accessible realm, exerting force there. This prompts a form of indirect contact with the real through a tension Harman describes as “fusion”: “Instead of the direct sort of contact that we have with sensual objects, there is an allusion to the silent object in the depths that becomes vaguely fused with its legion of sensual qualities.”⁴⁴

41 Ibid., 25.

42 Ibid., 27.

43 Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 105.

44 Ibid., 104.

Lovecraft's fiction explores such fusion through its allusion to the existence of inter- or extra-dimensional beings. Cthulhu influences dreamers from his sunken hibernation in the depths of the Pacific in "The Call of Cthulhu," for example, and Crawford Tillinghast is seemingly consumed by some creature that emerges briefly when his "resonance generator" fuses the human sensual realm of the everyday with another, more terrifying realm, in the short story "From Beyond." "Cthulhu" LARP draws on these Lovecraftian scenarios in its themes and plots, of course, but it also produces strange moments of fusion in its attempts to render in physical form interdimensional monsters. Briefly, a "real" object might emerge from a bundle of sensual qualities. Something like this happened to me when I assisted a friend as he prepared an elaborate monster costume, intended to represent a "Hound of Tindalos," a creature invented by Frank Belknap Long. We were in the basement of a dilapidated, Georgian property, away from the players who were immersed in the game a few floors above. I helped my friend attach each separate piece of the costume to his body, which included some comic struggling with awkward stilt-like limbs that attached to his arms. I did not register anything strange about the components, and I was not immersed in the game narrative, only assisting behind the scenes. However, something occurred when my friend donned the last segment of the costume. He hunched over and placed the forearms of the stilt-like limbs on the ground, producing a distinctly unhuman shape and posture. I stepped back to view the effect and felt a moment of horrifying shock, a little rush of adrenaline, the desire to flee the basement. Then, my friend spoke, tightened a fastening, and the effect was dissipated. Whatever horrifying, real object had momentarily emerged, disappeared. The incident recalls Harman's imaginary scenario in which qualities fuse "with an object that we do not normally associate with them. [...] [T]his results in an object that *feels* real simply because it is too difficult to register vividly as a normal sensual object."⁴⁵ The Hound of Tindalos costume

45 Ibid., 240.

in its entirety was, however briefly, difficult for me to register as a normal, sensual object: it was genuinely frightening. Here, the many sensual qualities of the monster costume, which I had no trouble accounting for earlier, momentarily fused with a more disturbing whole. Of course, the incident required a human perceiver to disclose the real object. Moreover, the moment of disquietude I felt was the result of an involuntary performance of the man in the costume adjusting his posture to produce an effect something like the emergence of a real object. In this sense, the incident illustrates what Harman calls the “allusive” nature of Lovecraft’s writing. Often, his stories present a phenomenon (for example, the appearance of an Old One that cannot be fully described by a narrator) that offers indirect access to the noumenal realm.⁴⁶ Such is the difficulty of getting outside the closed circle of correlationism, limiting Lovecraft, and Harman, to an “oblique sort of access to reality” via objects as they appear in the perceptual realm. At the same time “things in themselves must have autonomy from their relation to us, or they are not the things in themselves.”⁴⁷ What is interesting about the incident I describe, however, is that it occurred outside the narrative frame of the game and so did not only rely on the agency of a human perceiver in the form of a story narrator or player-character. That is, when I was frightened by the Hound of Tindalos I was under no obligation to suspend disbelief because I was not immersed in a story. The encounter was prompted by the object that coalesced from the costume components, suggesting a link between Harman’s fusion and Bennett’s “thing-power.” This latter concept provides another way of getting beyond the correlationist circle, evinced by Bennett’s description of stumbling upon a collection of stuff discarded in the street. She describes how the collection of objects “exhibited” its thing-power: “it issued a call even if I did not quite understand what it was saying.”⁴⁸ The

46 Ibid., 25.

47 Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 53.

48 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 4.

intrusion of thing-power not only points to non-human actants but to the outside of human experience and understanding.

Of course, most affective encounters with props occur within the game and narrative frames of LARP. The in-game narrative of a “Cthulhu” LARP often revolves around an important prop that operates both in the sensual realm and in a realm beyond human perception: the field generator and archaeological fragments discussed above, for example. The fragments turned out to be parts of a damaged beacon from an ancient alien spacecraft that had crashed thousands of years ago. Individually, the fragments exerted physical and psychical effects upon players, making them visibly unwell and affecting their behaviour. Some properties of the fragments could be investigated using in-game medical and scientific skills, but to unlock their more esoteric secrets, players had to find other ways of accessing the object. An in-character, drug-induced trance led to some revelatory visions and began to gesture towards the elusive, real essence of the objects we had uncovered. Although Lovecraft has been characterized as a strict materialist, the monsters and artifacts in his stories are not mere “arrangement[s] of electrons.”⁴⁹ Harman’s objects, too, cannot be reduced to their atoms and electrons. LARP scenarios often draw out this irreducible materiality through props that suggest a reality beyond the measure of the scientific method. The scientist and the medical doctor could only reveal so much: in this game it was the hippy and the philosophy student characters whose visions allowed the players to “fuse” the fragments into a whole, making the beacon function, and allowing the plot to progress.

Non-Separation: LARP and the “Magic Circle”

Although Harman presents his metaphysics in the form of four quadrants, his account of tensions between real and sensual objects implies a dualist ontology, a reality comprised of

49 Michel Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* (London: Gollancz, 2008), 32.

two realms. At the same time, Harman's concepts of "fusion" and "fission" also suggest non-separation between these realms. Lovecraft's fiction likewise invites a Kantian interpretation wherein the phenomenal realm of human perception gives way to the murky noumena of eldritch beings and unplumbed space, but this separation of noumena and phenomena simplifies the paradoxical maneuver that is a Lovecraftian encounter with the "outside." As Eugene Thacker suggests, horror fiction has long been engaged in confronting the paradoxical proposition that the world is, in reality, a "world-in-itself" beyond the access of human thought. Horror fiction confronts the human-centric concept of the "world-for-us" with a nebulous "world-without-us," a simultaneously "impersonal and horrific" zone between the "for-us" and the "in-itself."⁵⁰ This horrific "world-without-us" discloses that the "great outdoors" is not out there, but already within and around us. It is just that we fail to recognize this fact. Thacker suggests that the trope of the magic circle in horror fiction reveals something of this hidden yet omnipresent world-in-itself. Analyzing examples from William Hope Hodgson's Carnacki stories and Lovecraft's "From Beyond," Thacker argues that the magic circle, traditionally held to serve as a protective barrier for the human occultist, becomes a portal to "another dimension," focusing and intensifying the passage between seemingly separate realms. In "From Beyond," the effect of Tillinghast's resonator is to expand the parameters of the magic circle such that the non-separation expands outwards into infinity.⁵¹ In this story, the bounded nature of the experiment dissolves entirely, playing havoc with the Kantian separation of phenomena and noumena.

Magic circles are a common prop in "Cthulhu" LARP. They may provide the means through which players open the passage between what is designated "natural" and "supernatural," or function as a device for summoning or expelling interdimen-

⁵⁰ Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy, Volume I* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011), 5, 6.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 62, 72, 77.

sional creatures. Often, the magic circle is a source of in-game entrapment: in one game I designed, we placed a circle of marker stones around the boundaries of a property. These had been activated to provide a circle of protection by a non-player-character, but because our player-characters had been “infected” by a monster’s spawn, they were not able to leave the confines of the circle.⁵² Beyond the game narrative, however, the magic circle performs a structural and ludic function. Indeed, LARP itself produces a ritually enacted space in which players are bound for the duration of the event. Huizinga draws on the metaphor of the magic circle to describe the ritualistic aspect of play: it suggests play is a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all its own.⁵³ Later theorists see this magic circle as constructing a “psychological bubble that allows for a playful mindset” or a “social contract” to manifest in space and time.⁵⁴ “Cthulhu” LARP often exploits and emphasizes this ludic structure, marking out the game space in materially distinct ways to emphasize feelings of entrapment. Props such as the boundary marker stones in “Who Do You Think You Are?” merge player and character frames by providing an in-game reason for staying within the game space, otherwise, a sensible character would probably run away, necessitating their player leaving the game, while also creating affect around the themes of isolation and claustrophobia. Thus, LARP transforms the structure of play’s “magic circle” into a ludic challenge (find a way to escape) and a source of horror. A form of “dark play,” the psychological bubble and social contract of the play space become sources of in-game punishment, stress and fear. The magic circle in “Cthulhu” LARP is not simply a psychological or social device, suggesting that the laws and customs of everyday life no longer count for the duration of play. It is a structure that reveals the usually “hidden” non-separation of different orders of reality. When players enter a “Cthulhu”

52 This game was “Who Do You Think You Are?” written and organized by Laura Mitchell and Chloé Germaine Buckley for *Disturbing Events* in 2009.

53 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 8.

54 Linderoth and Mortensen, “Dark Play,” 5.

LARP they do not know what will happen to their characters, but they can expect some form of cosmic horror. The bounded nature of LARP (an activity of limited duration that demands immersion, taking place in a relatively constrained space) blurs character and player experience of space, time, and objects in ways that are designed to feel unsafe, challenging, that seek to expose player-characters to the “outside” of human experience. As Thacker states, the magic circle in “From Beyond” reveals the already existing non-separation between natural and supernatural, the “here and now,” and the “beyond.”⁵⁵ In Lovecraft’s story, the climax turns upon a magical-scientific prop, Tillinghast’s machine, which renders visible a monstrous reality that constitutes the “outside” of human perception. Most horrifying is the revelation that the two worlds are not separate at all, but that the “beyond” is already within and around us. Turning on the machine brings the protagonist into Tillinghast’s magic circle, a bounded space, that paradoxically dissolves separation and expands such that the bounded nature of the experiment also dissolves: the protagonist becomes immersed in another realm that was already there. LARP likewise functions to invite players into a magic circle, a discrete space with clear spatial boundaries and temporal limits. Game organizers call “Time In” and “Time Out” to signal the beginning and end of play. They also mark the borders of the play space, indicating, for example, that a particular copse of trees at the boundary of a property is “in game,” but the road beyond a fence post is not. Nonetheless, once play begins such boundaries dissolve in the construction of a shared narrative. Almost always, the player-characters encounter a threat “from beyond” that will engulf or consume the game world, a world that extends far beyond a copse of trees or a fence post. Likewise, though player-characters may be trapped within a house, they might experience a terrifying vision of the cosmos or catch a glimpse of an eons-dead world, of vistas of incalculable dimensions, reminiscent of descriptions from Lovecraftian fiction. These “visions” are often narrated by game

55 Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet*, 77.

organizers and such in-game “set-pieces” function to suggest the “cosmic” scale of the game. The initially bounded play space (Huizinga’s magic circle) becomes what Thacker describes as a “magic site,” no longer a strictly demarked location marked by “human governance” of the borders between apparent and hidden worlds.⁵⁶ The magic site is where the hidden world intrudes into the human world; it creeps forth with unhuman entities and independent objects, and threatens expansion beyond its porous edges.

Within the game narrative, a magic circle is also a prop that prescribes an affective encounter with the “outside.” Players are often drawn into a dramatic climax whereby they must draw a magic circle to begin a ritual, perhaps to banish a creature to another dimension or close a “portal” that threatens their reality, but once the circle is cast it immediately produces the sense of metaphysical non-separation evoked in “From Beyond,” calling forth the very monsters the ritual is designed to expel. Typically, this situation results in a lone player huddled in the middle of a hastily rendered magic circle, fumbling with various crumpled papers containing scrawled translations and half-legible notes, attempting to deliver a ritual the players have devised over the course of the game, while the remaining survivors fend off attack at the edges of the circle from numerous monsters. At the end, most of the defenders are dead and the caster is likely insane. Hopefully, the ritual has done the trick, with a significant human cost, but often it fails and the game ends in total defeat. Here, the magic circle may have represented an attempt at “active human governance of the boundary between the apparent world and the hidden world,”⁵⁷ but its failure is built into the narrative and ludic tendencies of “Cthulhu” LARP, which echoes its source material in providing little opportunity for victory. The occult themes in “Cthulhu” LARP also blur distinctions between the natural and the supernatural, and science and magic, with players often having to put together magic rituals with

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

fragments of in-game knowledge gleaned from folklore, eldritch writings, and scientific or pseudo-scientific theories. One of the most exhausting and terrifying rituals I have enacted in-game took place in a folk horror setting, but combined elements of folk superstition with real-world mathematics and physics. This game, called “The Black Goat,”⁵⁸ culminated in a ritual held in the pitch-black woods in an attempt to hold back a nefarious and unseen omnipresent power. We stood in a circle beneath the trees and chanted over and over: “Molecules remain in your natural state and vibrate with consistency and constancy.” Thankfully, in this instance, we prevailed, and our molecules remained mercifully unchanged!

Making Monsters: “Thing-Power” in Cthulhu LARP

The vibrating molecules evoked in “The Black Goat” suggest the vibrant or vital materiality expounded by Jane Bennett. While Harman is concerned with orienting ontology around autonomous objects to combat anthropocentric correlationism, Bennett exhorts readers to stop thinking of “matter as passive stuff” and to begin to account for the “active role of nonhuman materials.”⁵⁹ Harman’s recourse to horror literature is explicit: Lovecraft provides an imaginative language of weird monstrosity that allows Harman to elucidate his ontological schema. In contrast, there is nothing necessarily horrifying about Bennett’s account of vital materialism, though it accords with some Lovecraftian themes particularly in its insistence on dismantling “fantasies of a human uniqueness [...], escape from materiality, or of mastery of nature.”⁶⁰ Rather than discrete Newtonian objects extended and moving in a noumenal realm, Bennett describes a paradoxically plural monism, an immanent field composed of “various and variable materialities” that “collude, congeal, morph, evolve, and

58 “The Black Goat” was written and organized by Jenny Wilkinson and Lee Wilkinson for *The Dark Door* in 2017.

59 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, vii, 2.

60 *Ibid.*, vii.

disintegrate.”⁶¹ Bennett is keen to jettison the static term “object” and its implied subject/object binarism, pointing instead to the liveliness of things, to the “strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness constituting the outside of our own experience.”⁶² “Cthulhu” LARP’s evocation of Lovecraftian themes — through encounters with strange props, its material manifestation of weird monsters, and its demand for players to immerse themselves in an affective experience of cosmic horror — attempts its own unique evocation of the nonhuman world Bennett describes. While Bennett attempts to use “argument and other rhetorical means to induce in human bodies an aesthetic affective openness to material vitality,”⁶³ “Cthulhu” LARP encourages its players to experience the strangeness of materiality through the vibrant colors, strange textures, and dissonant sounds used in the production of props.

Although there is a degree of fakery and a DIY aesthetic to many LARP props, they are nonetheless produced to enchant the players, to encourage the suspension of disbelief and immersion in the narrative of the game. Bennett’s ontology emphasizes the importance of such enchantment as a form of affect that might cultivate openness to material vitality. In LARP, props must provoke quasi-emotional responses or, perhaps, even genuine emotional responses in moments of “bleed” when real-world and game-world frames collapse such that player and character respond as one. The crumbling wall discussed above is one such example of “bleed” intended by the LARP organizers to prompt real emotional and bodily affect in the players. Not all moments of enchantment are as dramatic as this. It may be that a player sits for several hours, turning over an object, discussing strange markings on its surface, tracing patterns with their fingers. Perhaps they must spend a significant amount of time “in-character” roleplaying a series of scientific tests to determine

61 Ibid., xi.

62 Ibid., xvi.

63 Ibid., x.

the composition of the rock or the properties of the strange metal. These activities are common in LARP and suggest the enchanting power of props to promote immersion within the game whilst also evoking a Lovecraftian thematic of mysterious “thing-power”: these props offer a glimpse of the outside of human experience and mark the limits of human understanding. Encounters with objects in LARP also evoke the two directions of enchantment that Bennett describes: “the first toward the humans who feel enchanted and whose agentic capacities may be thereby strengthened, and the second toward the agency of the things that produce (helpful, harmful) effects.”⁶⁴ The ludic frame of LARP produces such two-way encounters with objects. Time spent under the spell of an important prop in the game often confers upon player the knowledge or capability to unlock the next puzzle. For example, after meditating for several hours on the carved fragments uncovered at the archaeological dig in “X Marks the Spot,” I was given a vision of how the fragments had come to be buried under the ground and glimpsed their possible provenance and function. There are also less useful moments of enchantment that nonetheless have ludic and narrative effects: a player becomes obsessed with a strange amulet, for example, which exerts a psychological influence driving the character mad over the course of the game. A “mad” character acting under the influence of a strange object is a problem for the other players and threatens their ability to win or survive the game.

Outside of the game, players and organizers devote a lot of time to planning, designing and building props, and developing competencies in various crafts (for example, sewing, painting, working with liquid latex) to improve on props for future games. Often, we are experimenting with mixed media and using what materials we can source cheaply. Sometimes, we are not quite sure what the effects or outcome will be of our efforts. Some prop effects occur by chance, the happy result of how materials congeal or react with one another. I once spent a few weeks covering an old plastic doll in layers of liquid latex, green

64 *Ibid.*, xii–xiii.

paint, and synthetic ivy for “Who Do You Think You Are?” I knew I wanted to make a horrid, plant-baby-creature for one of our monsters to carry around, but I wasn’t sure what I wanted the “baby” to look like or even if I would use the prop as it wasn’t crucial to the narrative. I layered, painted, and sculpted until a “thing” emerged and it turned out to be one of the most terrifying props in the game. On another occasion, an accident with a glue gun, which leaked all over a clay mould, made my “shining trapezohedron” much more horrifyingly effective than in the original design. In both cases material objects (doll, latex, glue gun) and human agency (me as prop-builder) became co-conspiratorial actants in the production of an affective in-game encounter for the player-characters. However, the objects did not become subordinate to a human master: the props that emerged from our encounter were as much the work of the materials as any human intention.

Game organizers work with mixed media to create the effect of hybridity, to produce monsters inspired by Lovecraft’s “revolutionary teratology.”⁶⁵ As China Miéville notes, Lovecraftian monsters are a “radical break with anything from a folkloric tradition. Rather than werewolves, vampires, or ghosts, Lovecraft’s monsters are agglomerations of bubbles, barrels, cones, and corpses, patchworked from cephalopods, insects, crustaceans, and other fauna.”⁶⁶ More than this, monsters in “Cthulhu” LARP attempt to convey category disruptions such that life/matter binaries and hierarchies of life forms imposed by human knowledge on the material world are disrupted. Bennett’s vital materialism argues for the same category disruptions, for the recognition of the animate in plants, or the vegetable in animals.⁶⁷ For “Who Do You Think You Are,” we produced a “Dark Young.” This nonhuman, animal-plant hybrid was about seven feet tall. The upper part comprised a “trunk” and “branches”

65 China Miéville, “Weird Fiction,” in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, eds. Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts, and Sherryl Vint (London: Routledge, 2009), 512.

66 *Ibid.*

67 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 8.

made from a plastic and metal frame covered in foam, latex, and paint, to which branch-like tentacles, fake flora, and flashing lights were affixed. We added numerous eyes and mouths rendered in foam and latex. The lower part of the costume was a simple pair of goat-leg trousers made from fake fur and worn over stilts to add height. The inanimate objects (foam, pipe lagging, latex, synthetic fur, and silk plants) produced a seemingly shifting surface of monstrous life and vitality. A similar effect was produced in “X Marks the Spot,” for which the organizers constructed monster costumes from cloth garments covered in foam, latex, paint, and flickering LEDs. In the game narrative, these terrifying creatures had been conjured from the mud and branches that littered the copse of trees behind the house. In this example, the “magic site” physically intruded into the human spaces of the game, invading the house and attacking the player-characters.

Though representing the fundamentally unhuman creatures of Lovecraft’s stories, LARP monsters are almost always material-human hybrids because the costumes must be worn and manipulated by the game organizers. Their terrifying effects cannot be produced through the materials alone. Rather, inanimate materials and human bodies interact to produce the generative prop. As Bennett argues, agency—defined as a source of action or the power to effect other bodies—is almost always the result of a combination of human and non-human “actants.”⁶⁸ A recognition that human agency “is itself a kind of thing-power”⁶⁹ resonates in “Cthulhu” LARP where game themes often revolve upon player-characters merging with or becoming monstrous. In “Professor Lazarus’s Emporium of Wonders” our players were constantly under threat of being absorbed into the shoggoth, becoming part of a monster that comprised all the characters who had died joined together by a network of umbilical cords—made from tangled rope covered in latex and paint—emanating from the body of the shoggoth—a monster

68 *Ibid.*, 9.

69 *Ibid.*

that was itself composed entirely of inanimate materials as described above. “Cthulhu” LARP’s themes also bring to the fore the materiality of the human body, what Bennett describes as “the minerality of our bones, or the metal of our blood, or the electricity of our neurons.”⁷⁰ Bennett notes that we acknowledge this composition but rarely conceive of these materials in themselves as lively and self-organizing.⁷¹ In “Cthulhu” LARP, though, the materials of the human body interact with inanimate props, co-producing a new prop in the course of the game narrative. In such cases, vibrant-material actants congeal with human bodies but do not become subsumed within human agency, retaining something of their thing-power. In “X Marks the Spot,” the characters’ blood was needed, along with a jolt of electricity, to fuse the separate fragments of the alien beacon into a unified object that could communicate with the creatures threatening human existence. Yet, the object retained something of its alienness, never fully disclosing the reality of the unhuman realm from which it originated. Encounters with monsters and props in “Cthulhu” LARP often constitute this kind of demand: they require a response, a reciprocation from the human characters to become receptive to the “outside,” both to the realm of things and to their own thing-power without those material objects becoming wholly subsumed within a world-for-us.

Conclusions

This exploration of the intersection between horror, play, and speculative philosophy suggests the philosophical nature of game playing and the potential of LARP, in particular, to produce embodied and affective experiences that might illuminate both speculative realist and new materialist rhetoric. LARP’s prop-oriented framework emphasizes objects and things as lively, autonomous, and agentic. The relationship between the Gothic tradition and LARP also exposes some of the weird spa-

⁷⁰ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 10.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

tial transformations that props generate during the game. Certainly, Gothic fakery plays a role in the blurring of distinctions between game and reality and thus between materiality and the intangible. LARP props also allow for a generous reading of Harman's object oriented ontology, giving an embodied account of the "tensions" Harman describes between phenomenal and noumenal realms, between the sensual and the real. Moreover, LARP monster costumes and props hybridize the material with the vital, the human with the material, and the plant with the animal, evoking Bennett's "thing-power," itself an effect of the outside of human experience that both speculative realists and new materialists wish to explore. Specifically, "Cthulhu" LARP naïvely attempts to make concrete the processes of allusion present in Lovecraft's writing. Allusion is important to Harman, because it provides access "to something that might be real, but which can never be fully present."⁷² LARP concretizes allusive processes, attempting to produce an embodied and affective encounter with a strange and vibrant materiality, a materiality which humans are a part of but which they cannot master.

Perhaps there is also an ethical dimension to the naïveté exemplified in LARP. LARP is a form of game-playing that demands a child-like surrender of disbelief and a commitment to immersion but also a willingness to engage in "dark play," which may deceive or disturb its players. Bennett, whose work is alert to the essential relationship between ethics and ontology, argues that ethics begins with "the recognition of human participation in a shared, vital materiality. [...] The ethical task at hand here is to cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it."⁷³ The demands LARP makes on its players cultivates this discernment, demanding that they pay close attention to objects' "qualitative moments."⁷⁴ LARP is a form of training to perceive the "invisible field that surrounds and infuses the world of objects," but it is a training that requires a

⁷² Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 68.

⁷³ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 14.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

willingness to “play the fool,” a state Bennett suggests is necessary to correct and “chasten our will to mastery.”⁷⁵ This ethical-ontological dimension of LARP provides a counter to accounts of play that see it as a fundamentally human activity. Miguel Sicart, for example, suggests that play is a humanist mode, a fundamental part of our moral well-being, of the healthy, mature, and complete human life.⁷⁶ Human agency is front and center in this account: humans construct and deconstruct the world through play. In contrast, my reading of LARP suggests the inverse: that such “dark play” forces its players to account for the unhuman nature of reality, to consider that fact that it is the world that makes us.

75 *Ibid.*, 15.

76 Sicart, *Play Matters*, 23.

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