Introduction

Somehow - don’t ask me how - I managed to confuse the word “Bradensbrook” with the word “Ravenholdt” when submitting this abstract. Or maybe it was “Black Rook Hold” with “Ravenholdt”. Or it might have been “Rooksguard”... or “Ravencrest”...

Thing is, this confusion allows me to make a point. *World of Warcraft* is awash with these ominous, Gothic-sounding corvid-based names, rattling them out at a rate of knots, drawing on a fantasy roleplaying tradition that goes back to *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*’ ‘Ravenloft’ in 1983. Ravens - or Rooks - are oversubscribed, as co-ordinates go.

I’m borrowing this term ‘co-ordinates’ from Tanya Krzywinska’s 2015 piece in *Revenant* - ‘The Gamification of Gothic Coordinates in Video Games’. There, it refers to points in a complex web of discourses, expectations and cultural semiotics that are acting within any given game environment. The coordinates here relate to the imaginary “headspace” that circulates around a videogame, as well as to the locations within the game’s virtual world.

Krzyswinska’s paper issues a call for deeper and more sustained engagement with individual games - rather than the broad generalisations which have characterised the rush toward workable theories of computer games. It calls for a move away from pure ludology, and the polemical entrenchment between narratology and ludology, towards a more diverse and focused reading of game texts. Kryzwinska’s analysis “attends to the experiential “doing” element of what it is to play a game in order to make its argument that games have the capacity to bring a new dimension to Gothic – even if that capability is by no means fully realised”. She claims that “Gothic is always rhetorically constituted… there are more coherent claims on the nomenclature than others, and that these must be identified if we are to understand in what form Gothic appears in games.”
The gist of her argument is this. When video games draw on Gothic, they deploy the genre’s semiotics to varying degrees of success for an audience that’s varyingly familiar with them. Kryzwinska asks us whether a superficial, aesthetic, purely semotic presence is enough to deem a particular video game 'Gothic'.

She also mentions *World of Warcraft*, the behemoth among Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games - MMORPGs to their friends - and this is where I come in.

According to Kryzwinska, “Gothic is used in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004) with the Undead race to demonstrate moral relativism… *Warcraft* and *World of Warcraft* players might recognise Arthas’ journey from Hero to False Hero as one way that this game calls on and makes use of the Gothic.”

Which it is. But we can go further, and talk about spaces.

*World of Warcraft* - I'm going to call it *WoW* from now on, because I'm bound to start doing that out of habit even if I try to use its full name - is of interest to me as a player and a storyteller and a critic because it has so much *work* to do.

It has a player base numbered in the millions. (Somewhere between three and ten million - Blizzard are reluctant to reveal exactly how many and there’s constant churn as people unsubscribe, resubscribe, stop playing but don’t cancel their subscription and so on). All of these players have varying levels of literacy and literary inclination. Some are interested in the minutiae of story. Some only care about how many bearskins they have to collect for their next quest. Some of them are hardcore roleplayers who want to feel involved in the game’s narrative and actively resent being told they’re a Champion of Azeroth when they would rather be just one cog in a big machine. Some of them couldn’t give a rat’s ass - not a quest collectible yet, but give them time - about their
presumed status, but still react to the aesthetics of the environment, the ethical quandries in which the game makes them complicit, and how well the mechanics of play integrate with all that.

When *WoW* decides that it wants to be Gothic, it has to make the semiotics of the genre work for a huge variety of reader responses and readerly techniques. It has to make them work as a game space, creating a set of Gothic coordinates to which players can find their way from a variety of starting points, and with a variety of navigational and interactive techniques.

Those co-ordinates can be geographical, within the game’s virtual space. They can be ethical - video games having this capacity to make a Gothic anti-hero out of us all, to ask as *WoW* asks “what would you have done differently?” They can also be ludological. Game mechanics surrounding location and character death can have intrinsically Gothic qualities to them, or at least be a point from which the Gothic coordinates are triangulated.

Each of these three ideas - geography, ethics and ludology - underpin a section of the video you’re about to watch. I’ll be talking about the game’s narrative throughout, but I’m conscious that we came here to talk about space and so I’m going to focus on how narrative creates a headspace for the player. Or tries to.

A couple more things before we get stuck in. Methodology stuff.

I take a similar sort of view to Grey Carter and Cory Rydell here: “Ludonarrative dissonance” is not something I think of as a problem. I try not to think about it at all. Game mechanics are not the enemy of story.
You only come to that conclusion if you start off ‘reading’ a video game like a book or film. Do that and you will find moments where the medium doesn’t work in the same way and the techniques you’re used to finding and employing yourself break down. The proper response to this sort of thing is to build new methods of readership, not to decide that videogames are a flawed storytelling medium.

When I read a video game, I prefer to think in terms of two kinds of story. Matthew Tyler-Jones calls them “authored” and “procedural”, although I favour “emergent” over “procedural”, to distinguish it from ‘procedural generation’, the technique Diablo or Bastion use to create environments.

Basically, they’re the story in the game and the story of the game.

Authored narrative is what the developers put in - the semiotic cues and scripted events which provide context to gameplay and provide the hooks for player involvement. Emergent narrative is what arises from play - the events that happen when a player, or group, tackles the game in a particular way.

When we were recording the third segment of this presentation, one of our characters was hit by a rolling ball trap and almost deaded. Her player maintains she did that to make the video more interesting - which I don’t believe for a second.

The presence of the ball in the first place is an authorial decision, but what happens with the ball is an emergent event that becomes part of our narrative. The developers didn’t squash Langwidere - she got in the way of the ball and squashed herself.

That’s the difference.
I’m going to refer to this architecture of story a lot as we go forward. That said: let’s talk geography and revelation.

Geography and Revelation - the Bradensbrook quest chain

The lone escapee dying by the roadside is a classic of the fantasy role playing game - it’s the plot hook for ‘Ravenloft’ for one thing - and it’s already priming us for the experience we’re about to have.

It’s followed by an aesthetic shift in the surroundings, from the bright and colourful woods of Val’sharah to the ominous cliffs and muted tones of Bradensbrook. We’re moving into a more Gothic space already.

Bradensbrook itself is exactly the kind of Gothic Village that Emily Marlow talked about, a location where the Gothic aesthetic is almost everyday. Although there are supernatural events, and they are a problem, they’re a problem because the town is under attack - not because of any innate fear of the supernatural.

There follows some questing where we drive back the ghosts and carrion birds besieging Bradensbrook, and we rescue the Mayor’s daughter and earn his trust. I’ve cut that because it’s honestly not all that interesting unless you really want to watch someone who’s bad at WoW get lost looking for crows to beat up.

The interesting bit starts when Jarod Shadowsong, the chap on the tiger, invites us to ride with him to the Ravencrest Mausoleum. We turn up the path here, and - with some dodgy camera work on my part - we see Black Rook Hold above us, the huge ruined pile, digital Otranto looming large over the landscape. Beneath, we start to uncover a mystery…
We’ve come up here looking for Jarod’s sister Maiev, a hero in her own right who’s disappeared while pursuing the anti-hero Illidan Stormrage. Once we’re up here, though, we learn more about the shared past of these characters, and the character Kur’talos Ravencrest - he’ll do some shouting while we explore the Hold.

This whole layered narrative, in which we the players are experiencing the Hold as it is now, Jarod is reminiscing about the Hold at its best, and the ghosts are reliving its last days, reminds me somewhat of Wuthering Heights or the opening chapters of Dracula or especially Otranto.

(I draw on literary examples here because the tropes originate with them. The sense of what Gothic is comes from books, video games only differ in their execution of the tropes.)

In each of those texts we are several steps removed from the original event - the titular Horror of this presentation. The texts ask us to accept that characters tell their stories to an author who relates them to us, often anonymising their own self in the process.

Video games do this sort of thing a lot too, especially the survival horror genre, as Christopher Scott points out, by activating the experience, making us do something to get it. The norm is the scripted audio log that the player uncovers while exploring, or can uncover as a completionist challenge, with narrative revelation the reward for fully exploring the virtual space that’s created.

What makes it Gothic here is the semiotics of the space itself, and the sense that there has been a Wrong done, something that warrants all this haunting that’s going on.

That revelatory aspect is a key technique in the Gothic.
The wandering through dark corridors uncovering lost heirlooms, secret documents, signifiers of what took place here before, reporting them back to a reader, remediating them even as they go through their own discovery process, and the auto-triggered logs in the Hold make it that kind of Gothic space.

All of this is embedded on the authorial part, but it also operates in the emergent sphere. The player character is exploring the ramparts and courtyards and dungeons of the Hold, becoming the Jonathan Harker figure, who’s part of the narrative’s outermost layer and uncovers the layers beneath, remediating them to the player.

It’s the same storytelling device as the Gothic novel, but we’re a step further in - we’re viewpoint character as well as reader, doing the legwork of uncovering for ourselves.

Whether or not we’re the Gothic hero is another matter.

We can argue that Jarod is the Gothic hero of this narrative - it’s his sister we’re looking for, after all - and that numerous characters are jostling for the role of Gothic anti-hero or villain, depending on which layer of the authorial narrative we’re currently looking at.

There’s a distinction between ‘hero’ and ‘protagonist’ which is hardly unique to videogames, but useful in thinking about them - it was first pointed out to me by Lawrence Miles’ 2011 essay “Everyone’s A Destroyer Of Worlds These Days.”

If we’re talking about the Gothic we’re definitely in the territory where a protagonist may or may not be a ‘goodie’ in the modern sense of the word ‘hero’, and where the antagonist is more likely to be the larger-than-life, too-weird-to-live too-rare-to-die Classical Greek sense of ‘heroic’.
But beyond that, there’s also a question of narrative function - why are we, the player character, even **here**? What’s our stake? What’s our incentive?

If the developers of *WoW* or a similar MMORPG want to author a narrative, tell a distinct story for themselves rather than relying on players to do the heavy lifting, which I think is what we’re seeing in Black Rook Hold, they have to leave a kind of player-shaped hole in it.

They’re telling a story which has to leave room for millions of player characters, who might be from either of the game’s two factions, from any of its twelve classes or thirteen playable ‘races’. It has to appeal to players with a wide base of what Blizzard’s dev team call ‘class fantasies’ - they peddle a distinct idea of what it is to be a Warrior or a Warlock or, in my case, a Monk, but those ideas are interpreted by players and coloured by preferred choices of in-game activities.

It’s entirely possible that a given character might have no direct connection to the Hold or its story, no reason to bite on any of the hooks being offered, save the rewards of experience, gold and treasure.

I play a Blood Elf Monk. I don’t really have any in-universe reason to be concerned about the doings of night elves, other than sheer curiosity (and, I suppose, the last request of a dying woman…), so it’s a good job I’m both nice and curious - or at least easily led.

In practical terms, this means Blizzard has to engineer a Gothic story which *could* resolve itself without the player character - in case the player is largely indifferent towards it, and the story needs to drive itself - hence Jarod’s commentary on the various bits and bobs of Maiev’s equipment, and his ability to arrive at various points before you do. He **could** get this done himself, but we’re here and we helped him before.
The presence of a player character is superfluous to the authorial narrative, but has to feel integral to the emergent narrative. We can’t just be dragged along in Jarod’s wake. We have to be doing something that helps him out and gives us a dynamic role in our own emergent narratives.

Considered as Gothic, though, this creates an odd distance between the viewpoint character and the events. Jonathan Harker or Emily St. Aubert or Catherine Morland are integral to the plots they move through, whereas we are awkwardly co-existing with an authored figure performing the same role.

It’s not that *World of Warcraft* can’t integrate the protagonist functions of its authored and emergent narratives, but in this case it doesn’t fully integrate them. It’s a balancing act, with Blizzard leaning one way or another to keep the game moving. In this case they erred on the side of the gameplay and the class fantasy. In the next segment we’ll see another approach to resolving this problem of protagonism - one which is arguably better at being Gothic, but worse at being an MMORPG.

Heroes and Protagonists - Illidan, Jared and the Player Character

Little bit of context for what’s happening here. The content you’re currently watching takes place during a later visit to Black Rook Hold, as part of another plotline.

We’re going *back in time*, having a vision of the terrible events which took place thousands of years ago, and traumatised all these ghosts-to-be we encountered on our first trip. This being a video game, we’re able to uncover events from the game’s past in a variety of ways.
Discoverable documents, dialogue with NPCs, quest text, cinematics, or - as we see here - actually playing through them, being projected into the past of the fictive environment.

I find this to be the best, most gamified way to deliver exposition or revelation in this medium. It’s a direct, experiential exposure to the tragedy that made this Gothic space what it is. It allows us to inhabit multiple perspectives within and around that space and its narrative. There’s us, the player-stroke-reader; there’s our character, the avatar of our readership and the mediatory ‘discoverer’ of the revelatory narrative within the fictive universe, and the awkward co-protagonist of that narrative; and now there’s Illidan here, the anti-hero we’re steering through his defining moment of sacrifice and cruelty and desperate expedience.

(I’ve cut a lot of Illidan’s backstory, because the quest line takes about forty minutes to play through, and there’s only so much I have time to show, but take my word for it - he’s a Gothic anti-hero. Grand destiny, spurned in love, feels second-best to his brother, pursues forbidden knowledge and power to compensate, decorated hero of the world-shattering conflict du jour, leader of a feared but effective military elite; you know the drill. It’s all there.)

It's an effective design choice because in an interactive medium like this, allowing the player to directly access and experience events is more respectful of the general point of the enterprise than dumping a cinematic on us and expecting us to passively receive what Tyler-Jones calls “narrative atoms” - discrete bits of gameplay and context that join up to make a sort of “molecular” story.

It’s also effective because it allows us to be the Gothic anti-hero, rather than witnessing his deeds and misdeeds either second-hand or on the receiving end.
We’re controlling Illidan here - we’re complicit in what he’s doing. When he drains the life out of these Moon Guard because it’s that or get stomped by demons and fail to save the world, and he’s choosing the lesser of two evils, it’s our finger on the button.

I think this is something games can do that most textual forms can’t - induce that sense of responsibility in the reader, or player, or participant - and I think that can be an effective deepening of the Gothic that’s only possible in interactive texts.

While we’re talking about Gothic roles, though, I want to bring up my earlier question.

If Illidan’s the anti-hero, who’s the hero? Jarod, still? He’s fighting alongside Illidan in this battle, but at the last he rejects Illidan’s methods, decides he went too far, and it’s Jarod’s return to the Hold in the fictive future that kick-starts the narrative as we’ve experienced it.

But if he’s the hero, what are we?

This makes me think of Manuel Aguirre’s observation that “Gothic abides by fairy tale narrative rules; it is only that Gothic individual who crosses over into the Other is no real hero … a key to Gothic thus resides in its centring the flawed character as protagonist [while] the standard hero of traditional tales is often demoted to a helpless or passive stance.”

That’s our in. Jarod may be our Gothic hero but he is not the protagonist. He can afford to be that helpless and passive figure whose story is only resolved when a player - either in their own avatarial guise or, as here, inhabiting Illidan - comes along.

Protagonism here works in the sort of drifter sense: the hero who’s just passing through, resolving other people’s stories along the way.
Maybe I’m sticking my neck out here, but I’d argue that if, at any point, the "protagonist" of a video game is anyone other than the player character or characters, the developer has failed. Many do. There’s a long and noble tradition of such failures in fantasy roleplaying that’s about as old as the hobby itself. The old j’accuse for these people is “failed novelist”, a claim that goes back to Gary Gygax. They don’t want you to make your own story; they want you to finish theirs, providing the impetus and motivation to a narrative they can’t resolve.

The problem, for our would-be Gothic game developers, is integrating protagonism into the narrative architecture of the Gothic while leaving space for players to move, and execute decisions, and interpret, and project “the fantasy” - whatever that might be for them - and otherwise exercise their agency, and in so doing, create an emergent narrative.

Gothic is a fundamentally authored genre - the defining tropes of location, character and plot events almost have to unfold in a particular way, or along particular lines at least, in order for a text to be functionally Gothic.

Video games have, as I’ve said, a kind of molecular structure to their storytelling - narrative atoms are associated with a particular gameplay task, a mission or quest or match, and the movement of the authored narrative is contingent on players completing the task and moving on to the next atom.

(In the course of play, choosing to ignore the quest objective and instead creating a chain of emergent narrative atoms is totally valid - but if you want to find out what happens next in the story in the game, as opposed to the story of the game, at some point you have to turn that quest in.)
The author has more control over the emergent narrative than a purely theoretical understanding of authored and emergent storytelling might suggest.

In the current case, those discrete narrative atoms are links in a molecular chain which leads Illidan from crisis to decision to renewed crisis to desperate decision. His crimes - his descent into Gothic anti-heroism - are pre-destined by the architecture of the game. Unless the player wants to faff around this flashback being Illidan Stormrage forever, they'll either have to abandon the quest chain that brought them here, or complete it.

Predestination of this kind - the fictive universe having it in for a character, shaping them into what the story needs - is arguably the heart of the storytelling process. It’s also quite appropriate to the genre, really, as an explicit force and factor in the Gothic anti-hero’s arc. Siting the player’s perspective inside Illidan allows for a more concrete Gothic experience, and also reasserts the Hold as a space where Gothic things happen in preparation for our next visit.

That next visit is going to highlight a challenge faced by all computer games, but especially multiplayer games, and especially multiplayer games which have gone out of their way to facilitate instantaneous shifts between modes of gameplay, as WoW has.
Ludology: Modes of play and means of dying

Our third visit to Black Rook Hold is a group activity - a dungeon!

For those not in the know, this is a game mode for multiple players who fight their way through groups of fairly trivial foes, and a number of more significant antagonists - boss fights.

The bosses are minor characters. Each has an amount of story, implicit in their brief snippets of dialogue during the dungeon, and a greater amount of story tucked away in the Dungeon Journal, an in-game function which explains a bit more about where we are, who these big scary people are, and gives us a heads up on their mechanics.

In the earliest days of WoW, dungeons were difficult, poorly explained, and not exactly easy to get to. Your avatar had to travel to the dungeon over land and sea, with limited fast-travel options, and you had to arrange a group of four other brave heroes to come with you, meet you there, or take your chances with a Pick Up Group - a PUG - at the entrance.

Thing is, dungeons take time to design, develop, flesh out, test, rebalance and make ready for play. After a while Blizzard realised they were putting a lot of time and money into content which wasn’t being seen on the reg by many players - apocryphally, I’m told only one or two per cent of the player base even saw the original forty-man raid dungeons, back in the day.

So they implemented a queuing system, whereby player avatars can join an automated matchmaking service which teleports them all to the dungeon of their choosing - or a random one - once the right number and combination of characters has been reached.
They also provided incentives, such as bonus loot, collectibles, accelerated experience and reputation gains, and achievement awards, for engaging with the random group finder, deliberately steering players into new habits.

You can still do things the old way, and Blizzard has steered back toward this ground with the Mythic dungeon and the Challenge mode for pre-made groups to test themselves against, but the prevailing model for most players is the random group, visiting the random dungeon.

I bring this up because it’s created an air of disposability around the dungeon experience. The nature of a game’s virtual space, how easy it is to enter and navigate, creates a headspace in which genres and narratives can take root - or not.

This is not about dissonance between gameplay and narrative, but about the kind of emergent narratives that the gameplay encourages, and the dissonance between those emergent narratives and the narrative the developers are trying to author. It’s story vs. other kind of story.

It’s easy to take dungeons for granted, see. You probably didn’t choose a specific one, unless you were following a ‘breadcrumb quest’ that led you in there as part of a molecular narrative chain. You probably aren’t doing it with people you know, or who share your basic attitudes to and interpretations of the game, or even care about the story at all.

I had to do this with guildmates because trying to pace a PUG, capture all the dialogue, have time to read and show the dungeon journal, simply doesn’t work. People want to come in, ‘speed run’ - skip as many of the incidental enemies as possible and complete the boss fights with minimal fuss - collect their loot and their bonus reward, and be on their merry way.
This headspace makes Gothic storytelling in *WoW*... challenging. It’s hard to evoke an atmosphere of pathetic fallacy and all-pervading gloom when some barely literate stranger, with an avatar named something like Cuckmeister and dressed in the skimpiest armour imaginable, is bouncing around demanding a speedrun and cluttering up the screen with slurs and automated damage reports if you dare to slow down.

Even my guildmates, who are as a rule interested in stories and immersion and integrity, have a tendency to spam cosmetic effects whenever they have to stop moving for more than a minute.

I do know people who roleplay in dungeons - who approach them in-character, proceed at a snail’s pace, and invest seriously in the events taking place around them. These people are a tragic minority - and to be honest, I've tried it and know I can't keep it up while concentrating on actually *playing the game*.

Despite this dissonance between forms of narrative, most of the bosses in Black Rook Hold represent a credible effort at authorial Gothic, even in an environment where player behaviour means the emergent narrative is likely to be nothing of the sort.

The Amalgam of Souls is a cluster of tortured ghosts, valiant defenders of the Hold who - once defeated - separate into their component identities and unlock the rest of the dungeon.

The winding corridors of the Hold's interior lead us from this mausoleum-like space into the presence of Lord Ravencrest's daughter, herself a tragic anti-heroine in the vein of Illidan Stormrage, who’s returned to her father’s castle and is defending his delusional reality from intruders like what we are.
The final fight - against Lord Ravencrest himself and his most trusted advisor - occurs at the pinnacle of the Hold. In a rooftop battle, we free Ravencrest by destroying his resurrected body, and reveal his advisor to be an agent of the Burning Legion - the demons who ruined the Hold in the first place, and have been the architects of all our pain.

Ravencrest is undisputably the victim here, although his position as a final boss - and his ghostly condition - mis-represent him as a Gothic villain in his own right. This is a pretty basic subversion of gameplay expectations, all things considered, but not an unsatisfying one, and we've been well primed to expect something fishy by the confusion various Ravencrest associates have displayed on the way here.

I imagine that if one hadn't bothered to read the dungeon journal, it might even come as a surprise - although if Blizzard didn't provide a dungeon journal, players would be sure to datamine the dungeon during testing, and spoil the surprise for everyone by posting guides to the optimal strategy. After all, why wouldn't you? It's a game; the point is to beat it.

This, as Kryzwinska tells us, is the fundamental issue of video game Gothic. To quote: Games and puzzles are built on the notion that there is a solution, a winning condition, and many games that we might easily call Gothic... are therefore caught up within a polarization between the generic vocabulary of games, where players are catalysts for redemption, and the inescapable sense of loss and entropy that characterizes Gothic.

This is a problem in headspace and attitude. A problem of Game Stories vs. Gothic Stories.
Gamers, as a rule, don’t like Pyrrhic victories. It’s a broad generalisation, I know, but unless the less-than-desirable outcome is framed as an obvious sequel hook, I feel we prefer the authored narratives of our games to come out in victory. We **definitely** like the emergent narrative to come out in victory. We want to beat the game.

There’s an added complication in that **death**, for a player character in an MMO, cannot be permanent. (Not unless the player has *chosen* it to be so, by subscribing to a challenge like *WoW* Iron Man or a set of roleplaying rules, anyway.) The expectation in this genre is that death is merely a setback - avatars’ equipment will take some damage, and they may have to “corpse run” back to where they died, or ask very nicely to be resurrected, but they’re not **dead forever**.

There are whole plot points that turn around it. The game goes so far as to explain that some characters - like all playable Demon Hunters - can’t actually be killed, justifying the game mechanic within the imagined world.

I still think the term ‘ludonarrative dissonance’ is bunk, but I also admit that the relative **cheapness** of death in *WoW* creates a practical problem for storytellers.

Once death is no longer a permanent or even particularly significant outcome, the consequences of death start to lose their weight. Grief is not a particularly strong emotion when the first thing that springs to mind upon a death is “can’t you just resurrect her?”

It’s just as true for the emergent narrative as for the authored. I could cry for Langwidere when she’s butchered by the Amalgam of Souls (and *WoW* provides me with a sardonic emote for doing so) - but my resurrection ability is **right there** and for us to get on with the dungeon, our errant healer must live.
The novel *Mogworld* by Yahtzee Croshaw is set in a *WoW*-like MMO, and centres on this idea, poking and prodding at the meaning of death in a world where nobody really dies. In a closing flourish, a fictional review of this fictional game in his own acerbic style, Croshaw points out that permanent death completely throws off our sense of how MMORPGs should work.

Part of Croshaw’s critical perspective is that highlighting the oddities of game mechanics - accidentally or on purpose - brings them to players’ attention, creating the sort of splinters on which immersion can’t help but catch and become unravelled.

If the game reminds us that we’re playing a game, the integrity of its authored narrative is compromised, while its emergent narrative is tainted by our irritation. *WoW* can’t help but do this when it does death, and it doesn’t have the flexibility to turn a Gothic narrative on much else. (It’s unable, for instance, to talk about rape, or even to *seriously* talk about sexual desire, without sacrificing its suitable-for-twelve-year-olds rating.)

With Black Rook Hold, *WoW* makes Kur’talos Ravencrest the site of defeat, loss and entropy, so that we don’t have to endure them; once again, the weight of the Gothic genre falls on an authored character, leaving the player avatar free to exit the Hold in whatever direction they see fit - undoubtedly toward victory.
Conclusion

I said earlier that siting the player’s perspective in an authored character cements the Gothic, gives it a chance to set properly - that’s the success of using Illidan for one section of gameplay in the Hold. It’s a mechanical commitment by Blizzard; the decision to give us some Gothic gameplay, where our options are either “give up” or “see it through, make the sacrifice, become the anti-hero”.

That’s more difficult to achieve with a player avatar, who might at any moment abandon their current plotline because the player fancies a trip to the arena, or a random dungeon, or a pet battle, or back to town with the click of a finger, because the game has obliged itself to make all these things possible.

Right now, my avatar has come back to Black Rook Hold on a flying visit to complete an arena quest, which is only here because the courtyard of the Hold makes a great location for this kind of challenge and looks interesting and spooky.

The headspace of WoW is built around convenience, access and agency. The virtual spaces it offers have to be re-used regularly to make them worth the investment. This creates a certain kind of headspace, limiting the game’s generic potential. It can imitate the Gothic, but it can’t quite pull it off.

Players have to consciously adjust their expectations and attitudes, committing to the Gothic experience, or be committed to it by an imposed style of gameplay. In WoW, the compleat Gothic can only really prosper in the text-chat-based roleplaying my WoW guild exists to foster. Players have to buy in, and mechanics have to deny them an easy out. It’s not possible to integrate the Gothic fully with the convenience that WoW players have come to expect of their gameplay, or the picaresque emergent narratives the game thrives on creating, with which its mechanics are more in tune.
I do think that an immersive, consequential Gothic videogame is possible - tabletop RPGs have been doing it for years, and have been adapted semi-successfully to digital platforms. The medium has produced some solid attempts of its own - like Christopher I was very taken with Resident Evil 7, and if that had been out when I conceived this paper, you might have sat through a presentation on intimacy and isolation, virtual spaces, and the Southern or sci-fi Gothic instead.

It might have run into the same problem of ** endings, ** but that state of “defeat, loss and entropy” can be achieved if the protagonist walks off into the sunrise alone, winning for everyone but themselves, and I think that fits the genre and audience expectations. I think that delivers. The right authored narrative can create Gothic expectations, and a headspace which fosters a Gothic emergent narrative.

There’s also the option of sandbox games, erring more toward the emergent than the authored, reinforcing a sense that the whole rotten world goes on and on being rotten and we can only win small victories. That might work. Sandboxes also give the lie to Kryzwinska’s suggestion that games have to be winnable - you don’t win a sandbox, you just get bored with it and play something else after a while.

I’m not sure it can be done in ** this ** game, though, the dominant influencer in its genre, which makes me wonder how possible a Gothic MMO is without being dangerously unlike the model of proven success. (Which makes me worried for Paradox Interactive’s upcoming adaptation of ** Werewolf: the Apocalypse ** - but we’ll see.)

** WoW ** prospers by attempting to be all things to all players. Generally, it makes credible attempts - it’s not the best at anything but it’s good enough at ** everything **. Black Rook Hold is an attempt, in that spirit, to make a Gothic space in one little corner of the ** World of Warcraft **.
Player avatars can visit for a while, players can commit to a sustained exploration, but sooner or later we have to emerge, and be in some other genre for a while.

Thanks for watching.
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