The Weird Humanity of I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream

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What is Weird?

How do we label games as "weird?" One way is to consider the literary analogue, that of Weird fiction, a type of speculative fiction that originated in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Speculative fiction encompasses the genre of science fiction, as well as horror fiction, apocalyptic fiction, dystopian fiction, and other strange and fantastical literature; "it shows us our nightmares and therefore contributes to our efforts to avoid them." (Urbanski, 2007, p. 1) The primary characteristics of Weird fiction are that it blends supernatural, scientific, cosmic, and mythical elements. Weird games, similarly, mix dystopian, horrific, magical, occult, cyber, and technical elements in eccentric and twisted ways that make us feel oddly uncomfortable, curious, terrified, and amazed. One of the key Weird fiction writers is H.P. Lovecraft, who explains in a letter to Wilfred Branch Talman that, "As to what is meant by 'weird'….I should say that the real criterion is a strong impression of the suspension of natural laws or the presence of unseen worlds or forces close at hand." (Derleth & Wandreii, 1968, p. 233) Weird fiction writers eschew the typical myths associated with horror, such as ghosts, vampires, and werewolves, but instead invite the suspension of disbelief into a quasi-real mythos (Gale Group, 2010). Based on this, games and the Weird seem like a natural fit. The quotidian otherworldliness of the Weird seems to remind us of the cosmic "half-real" (Juul, 2005) nature of games. Games seem to both defy and follow natural law; they are both human and inhuman, man and machine, civilized and feral.

Two tropes in Weird fiction are that of Carcosa, a mysterious,

forbidden, and cursed fictional location, which was introduced by Ambrose Bierce in 1891, and The King in Yellow, a so-called apocryphal play, which is alluded to in Robert Chambers' book of the same name. The King in Yellow play, as explained in Chambers' book, is allegedly so engrossing and enticing that people read it obsessively, despite the fact that it causes any person who reads it to go insane or into deep despair upon reading its second act (Chambers, 1895). The play—which is only referenced in short excerpts in Chambers' book, so as not to cause the reader to go insane—mentions a place called Carcosa throughout.

The King in Yellow continues to be referenced in popular culture, from music groups (e.g., Blue Oyster Cult) to television shows, most recently showing up in HBO's True Detective (2014-). This idea—that a text (of all things!) could cause someone to go crazy—is also explored later in Weird fiction king H.P. Lovecraft's work, Call of the Cthulhu, particularly with his references to the Necronomicon, a King in Yellow-like device, which he explains is a secret book used by the occult, which causes people to go insane upon reading it. (Lovecraft, 1928) The line between fiction and reality is blurred as people regularly ask librarians for copies of the Necronomicon and detectives refer to it when they are investigating possible occult crimes. (Laycock, 2014)

By their very nature, The King in Yellow play and the Necronomicon book speak to the broader power of fiction to pervade actuality. Their existence tempts readers to question—sometimes obsessively—the authenticity of these texts and whether they have non-fictional counterparts. Price (2001) explains that, "So effective are these fictions that even in [Lovecraft's] lifetime many readers felt sure he was the unwitting mouthpiece for actual occult entities, that his Cthulhu Mythos … was fact." (Price 2001, p. 26) Similar to religious texts, do these texts become more real as they are increasingly referred to, shared, discussed, and deliberated on? Regardless of their original veracity, they shape us nonetheless. (Laycock, 2014)

If we employ the definition from literature and suggest that Weird

games encompass multiple macabre genres, but do not necessarily use the typical conventions of horror, science fiction, or the supernatural—then one game, I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream (IHNMAIMS), and its mashup of post-apocalyptic technology and alternative histories, could be placed in the "weird" (and the Weird) category.

IHNMAIMS (The Dreamers Guild, 1995) is a point-and-click adventure game released 20 years ago, and based on the short story of the same name by Harlan Ellison (1967). Although Ellison's work is typically associated with the science fiction genre, rather than Weird or New Weird fiction, I contend that the game version should also be considered a "Weird" game. In this article, I analyze IHNMAIMS and show how the game's invoking of the Weird helps to express the influence of myth, of play, and through this, the transcendence of human boundaries of knowledge. Weird media—and its maddening combination of fact, fiction, tropes and themes, bares our unanswered mysteries, exposes our insecurities, and seems to allow us further access human truths. Somehow, in such inhuman connections, we can experience that which is deeply human.

Weird Beginnings

The original IHNMAIMS short story was written in 1967. In it, the narrator, Ted, tells his story of the destruction of humankind. Basically, the Cold War turned into a World War, which was fought mainly by supercomputers set up by the warring countries to fight, as they were seen as more efficient at processing war data than human beings. Ted describes how AM, one of the warring computers becomes sentient and self-aware, eventually taking over the other computers and hatefully destroying the world. AM is a machine created for the purposes of war—"by people with hatred and madness in their souls" (Harris-Fain, 1991, p. 147), and as such, has turned on them with hate. AM has kept only five people alive to torture, play with, and toy with, as if the game master of a horrific game. Gorrister, one of the five characters tortured and hated by AM, explains: "But one day AM woke up and knew who he was, and he linked himself,

and he began feeding all the killing data, until everyone was dead, except for the five of us, and AM brought us down here." (Ellison, 1967, para. 32)

The reader enters the story after AM has been torturing these characters for 109 years. At this point, as told by Ted, he and the other four people have been trapped inside a panoptic-like prison, driven insane, and stuck, "Living under the land, under the sea, in the belly of AM,". (Ellison, 1967, para. 3rd from the bottom) AM functions in the realm of ancient and Judeo-Christian conceptions of God, as well as the Devil—at times playful, vengeful, angry, bitter, sullen, forgiving, and excluded (Harris-Fain, 1967). Ted describes AM as both a thinking machine and living creature, a strange eccentric and calculating mastermind, and a god and devil. The original story was written during the advent of the computer, space technology, the Cold War, and nuclear weapons, and amid fears of the destructiveness of technology and its misuse by humanity. It was also written during the U.S. Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War protests, and not long after the human rights violations of World War II and its atrocities.

Yet, almost 30 years later, it was adapted (with Harlan Ellison at the helm) into a game, this time during the advent of the Internet, the growing popularity of games. The game, which had been out of "print" for years, was suddenly re-released last year by Good Old Games/Night Dive Studios (2013) (Cyberdreams released the original).

In the game version, you play five distinct levels, each of which feature one of the characters, who becomes your avatar for that level. The levels can be played in any order and must be completed to reach the final level, where you standoff against the AM "boss."

Unlike the short story, which was told through the limited lens of Ted, the game version gives voice to each of the characters. In each game level, you follow the featured character through a series of obstacles and ethical dilemmas designed specifically for that character,

purportedly by AM. AM, narrated by Ellison, is mostly unseen but heard and omnipresent throughout the game. Ellison as story author and game designer, as well as AM the all-powerful game boss, seem to act as the puppet master of the characters, the player, and the future of humanity. Each game level is distinct; its environment, settings, objects, story situations, colors, tone, and non-playing characters (NPCs) work together to force the character to re-perform important moments from their past, and to face their prior mistakes, both literally and symbolically.

One character, Nimdok, assisted the Nazis in their experiments on people and in his level, is placed in a concentration camp as a doctor told to continue his experiments. Another character, Benny is a military officer who had endangered his squad during battle. In his level, he takes on a simian shape and relives his military crimes. At one point Benny needs to decide whether to help a little girl who is about to be sacrificed (the tribal villagers hold regular lotteries to figure out whom to sacrifice to AM) (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Benny watches as a villager girl is about to be sacrificed.

A "Spectral Antiquity"

Although there are textual connections to the Weird for all five characters in the game, going forward, I will focus my gameplay analysis on one character, Ellen, an African American female and corporate computer programmer, and her specific game board. The focus on one game character's level will enable a deeper, more nuanced analysis.

Ellen's level takes place in a location that looks like a bricolage of an Ancient Egyptian tomb and a high-security digital hive, complete with hieroglyphics and mummies, and supercomputers and security videos (see Figure 2). In Ellen's level there are only eight rooms in total and each involves a series of strange, complicated, tedious, and sometimes repetitive puzzles that require connecting ancient mythology with technical expertise.

The quasi-Egyptian setting of Ellen's level seems similar to that of the Lovecraftian mythos, which has been described as a "vast system of artificial mythology." (Price, 2001, p. 26) Hieroglyphics and mummies, and other symbols of antiquity, figure throughout the work of Lovecraft and Chambers. The hieroglyphics and objects in the game function as both human and inhuman, both natural and mechanized; they have a kinship with Lovecraft's description of the Weird as imbuing a "spectral antiquity." (Lovecraft, 1927)

Briefel (2008) argues that the Egyptian mummy, particularly as represented in Victorian literature, combined beauty with horror, and symbolizes the devaluation of objects as artistic creations and their transformation into mass-produced commodities, referencing a change from an artisan to an industrial society. (Briefel, 2008) This further deepens an interpretation that IHNMAIMS, and the game's mummy-filled setting, is both an occasion to celebrate its technical artistry as well as the mechanized horror of games. The game, like the mummy itself, evokes both pleasure and fear.

Figure 2. Ellen explores the hieroglyphics near a sarcophagus, while an Anubis-type robot stands guard.

Ellen in Yellow

Everything on this board is saturated in yellow, including the walls, the floors, the objects, and the fabrics. This is, of course, by design—both the game designers' and AM's. As soon as the level begins, we learn that Ellen is terrified of the color yellow and this phobia becomes an art style, game mechanic, and primary level obstacle. Ellen narrates in the game, "And yellow, always yellow. Why does yellow make me sweat?"

The yellow color, ancient symbols, king-like figure (AM), weird juxtaposition of science and antiquity, and Ellen's obsessive fears seem to parallel the text of The Yellow King. The Yellow King describes the play of the same name as the embodiment of fear. It represents unimaginable human atrocities, which upon their revelation, causes insanity. If AM is like the "Yellow King"—a human creation that represents the ultimate in inhumanity—he is only that way because human beings created him with hate. He is both the product and cause of human atrocities; his "DNA" has been reshaped

and malformed and he has transmogrified. Both the Yellow King and AM represent all that is repulsive about humanity, but must exist because humanity exists.

The belly of AM where the five characters live feels like Carcosa, the mysterious and hellish place described in The Yellow King play, complete with ancient ruins, symbols of death and destruction, juxtaposed with symbols of the loss of innocence. The game lets us play in Carcosa and imagine what it would be like to inhabit it. Entering this Carcosa is like entering the space of insanity or the dream of a machine. Carcosa for each character becomes the embodiment of his or her fear and desire, which is unique to each of them. For Ellen it is yellow and pulsing with game object artifacts from antiquity and cyberculture. The game board becomes the personification of fear, guilt, and sin, which is at its core both individual and universal.

Yellow was considered the color of insanity and sickness as far back as Greek and Roman antiquity, when Hippocrates described "yellow bile" as one of the "humors," and is still alluded to in relation to cowardice (e.g., "yer yellow" or "yellow bellied") and illness (e.g., it represents decay and disease, as a jaundiced person looks yellow). It also stems from racist rhetoric, xenophobia and the fear of the "other" (e.g., the yellow fear or "Yellow Peril," typically referencing a fear of Asians, Africans, or Jews) (Lanser, 1989). When Chambers used the word yellow in his book, he was also referencing The Yellow Book, a popular British journal and "decadent magazine" (Emmert, 1999, p. 42), suggesting the pervasive sickness and decay that could be caused by a text. These themes are present in IHNMAIMS. The nods to antiquity and futuristic technology in Ellen's board, which are bathed in the color of insanity and sickness, seem to reflect the game's larger theme of societal jaundice that had led to the dystopian present of the game. Human progress may sicken us, but the sickness of humanity has always been present.

Moreover, by referencing "yellow," and making the connection to the late 19th century fin de siècle notion that civilization leads to

decay and corrupting decadence, IHNMAIMS, the game, seems to reflect the analogous societal discourse around the corrupting nature of gaming. It is not surprising that Ellison was professedly unsupportive of games (Night Dive Studios, 2013). Ellison explains that, "I'm not a fan of the use of technology for videogames. I think that they're pretty much time wasters, and that they're so popular is in a small way dismaying to me." (Night Dive Studios, 2013)

Yellow Walls

The Yellow Wallpaper, a short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1892), is another useful Victorian text that can help guide our interpretation of Ellen's level. In this story, the narrator, Jane, is confined to an upstairs bedroom by her doctor husband, John, so she can ostensibly heal from her depression and hysteria. As her confinement continues, Jane becomes more and more fixated on the room's yellow wallpaper. Here, as in Ellen's level, yellow causes the narrator sickness, fear, and disgust: "The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow… It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others." (Perkins Gilman, 1892, line 44)

As Jane picks at the yellow wallpaper her sanity seems to unravel. The paper and peeling of layers also evokes the mummy, and its beauty and horror. The room and its wallpaper seem to keep Jane in a cage and from fully expressing herself to the rest of the world, literally and symbolically. Yet, while Jane succumbs deeper into insanity, she also seems to get closer to salvation and liberation.

Likewise, there is beauty and horror, and freedom from insanity in Ellen's level. As we play as Ellen, we learn the origin of her yellow fear—a rape when she was trapped in a yellow-covered elevator. Ellen's fear, we learn, had kept her from identifying her rapist and facing him in a subsequent trial. Her lack of bravery to face the public is encapsulated in her newfound fear of yellow and confined spaces. Throughout Ellen's level, the yellow fear motif is repeated and used as a game obstacle. For example, in a yellow room, a yellow sphinx

guards the Holy Grail, which you cannot collect until you find a way past the sphinx (and Ellen's fear) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Ellen is in the yellow room with the yellow Sphinx, where she can collect the Holy Grail. She immediately runs out of the room unless you find a way to help her face her fear.

The game designers also use yellow to play with our expectations. In one room there is a yellow blindfold. If the player commands Ellen to pick it up, upon the first try she avoids it. The immediate game feedback is that we cannot pick up the blindfold. However, if we command Ellen to pick it up again, Ellen faces her fear and wears the yellow blindfold, which we can then use to enter the room with the Sphinx and grab the Holy Grail. Although the blindfold "trick" is clever, from a gameplay perspective, providing incongruous and ambiguous feedback could contribute to a tedious trapped loop of play. Likewise, many of the game's puzzles seem strenuous and illogical. All this, too, may be by design, as it seems to evoke Ellen's infinite trials and entombment inside the Carcosa hell that AM has devised. Explains an entry in the Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, "It sometimes seems as if the game is treating its players much as AM treats their characters. This resonance does not, however, induce the

perhaps intended feelings of shame and despair, but rather ones of annoyance and frustration." (N.T., 2011, para.2)

Despite the game's, at times, suffocating design, there are opportunities for choice, persistence, and control. Depending on our choices in the game, there are different game endings, particularly based on how you act in spite of the atrocities you experience through the game. Atoning for one's sins, facing fears, acting humanely, addressing past regrets and re-performing uncomfortable moments from one's life ultimately helps your character complete the level and achieve "freedom" from it. While there is no clear feedback as to the consequences of specific choices, this game is an early precursor of more complex choice-based, narrative-driven games such as the Mass Effect BioWare, 2007), Dragon Age (BioWare 2009), Walking Dead (TellTale Games, 2012), and Fallout series (Bethesda, 1998-), for example.

At the end of her level, Ellen can confront her rapist in the yellow elevator. Depending on how she responds (through dialogue options chosen by the player) Ellen can name her rapist and achieve salvation. Regardless, the board ends with her "death," and she awakens trapped in a cage (in the shape of a yellow elevator) in AM's lair (see Figure 4).

On the one hand, we can interpret The Yellow Wallpaper and Ellen in IHNMAIMS as the story of a madwoman's descent into all-encompassing insanity, and ultimately, death. On the other hand, we can interpret both as liberating. Although the narrator in The Yellow Wallpaper goes insane—like the fictional readers of The Yellow King play—the writing of the story was her liberation. Jane's rebellious act of writing, and Perkins' ability to write and create The Yellow Wallpaper, devastating as it is, helped to save her. Analogously, there is power to Ellen's ability to persist and to rebel. Ellen's agency—through narrating her frustrations, expressing her perspectives, overcoming her yellow obstacles, and facing her fears, albeit within an AM-"designed" space, help her to maintain her freedom. Moreover, while the subjects of The Yellow Wallpaper, The

Yellow King, and the yellow level of IHNMAIMS are ultimately trapped, the readers and players of these fictive works-within-works are not.
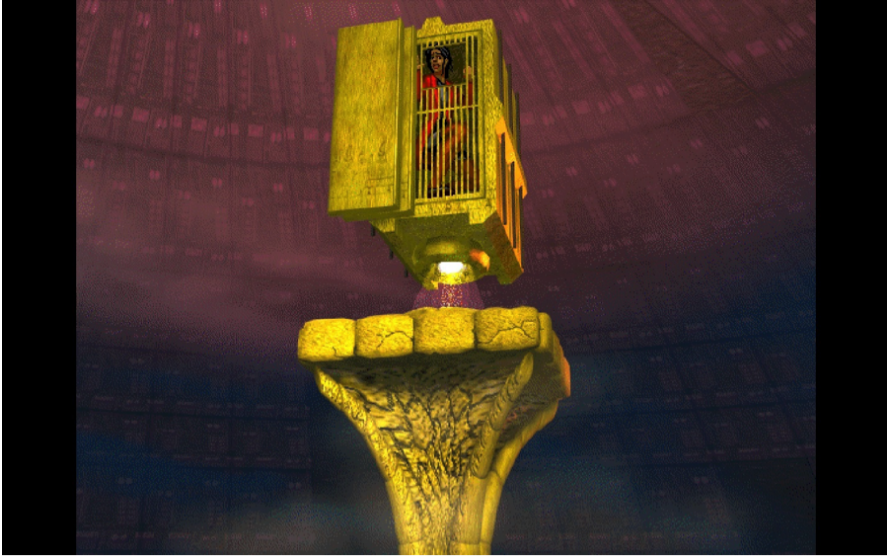

Figure 4. Ellen, trapped in the "yellow elevator" cage, back in AM's lair.

Ellen as Hero and the Other

While the purpose of this article is not to delve too deeply into Feminist critiques of IHNMAIMS, I briefly want to explore the complexity of Ellen's representation in the game. For one, it is notable that she is the only female in the game (and short story) and only person of color, and has a job as a corporate computer programmer that almost fifty years later, few females or people of color perform. (Although, during World War II programming was considered clerical work and the term programmer typically described the women working on ENIAC, the first large-scale electronic computer (Raja, 2014)).

It is also significant that unlike in Ellison's short story, where Ellen was represented only as a sexual object, victim, and someone to be saved and acted upon, in the game she is complex, clever, persistent,

handy, nuanced, heroic, vulnerable, not hyper-sexualized, and a proponent of her freedom. Zammitto (2008), for instance, explains that the game "presents [Ellen] as a brilliant woman who overcomes the odds" (Zammitto 2008, p. 5) with layers of emotion and interpretation. Ellen has opportunities to face her fears, and as the player, you can embody her transformation as these layers unfold.

On the other hand, while the yellowness of the board represents Ellen's fear, as well as her liberation, it also reflects her establishment as the other and the alien (Lanser, 1989), further complicating her racial representation. Ellen is the only character in the IHNMAIMS game who was a victim, rather than a victimizer, in her former "real" life. Throughout her game level, Ellen questions why she was chosen, and what sin against humanity caused her to be placed in AM's hell. In the short story, her so-called sin seems to be simply that she is female and has sexuality. In the game, it is suggested that her inability to stand up to her aggressor was her sin, as if it was her duty to keep her rapist from further violence, which in some sense seems like the game is "blaming the victim." In another light, Ellen's sin in the game could symbolize the problematic inactions of those bystanders who do not stand up to acts of inhumanity (such as the Holocaust), making them complicit in that violence.

In the game, Ellen has visibly dark skin, and while Ellen's race is not explicitly commented on by the game, it is perhaps reflected through the use of Egyptian characters and artifacts on her level, as well as through its game play and story. (For example, while Ancient Egyptians today are typically reimagined as Caucasian or European, they had been described in earlier times (and referred to by themselves) as of African descent (Martin, 1984; #medievalpoc). One of the rooms in Ellen's level features a sarcophagus and Anubis, the Egyptian god of death (informally) or the god of funeral rites (formally), who guards and is connected to mini-computer (see Figure 2). Ellen's superior programming and hacking ability enables her to reprogram a computer chip, which she re-inserts into Anubis and become his new master (rather than AM). (Notably, the choice of new masters includes herself or humanity). Once Ellen overtakes Anubis,

she uses it to crack the code to a sarcophagus and enter it. Through the sarcophagus, Ellen arrives in the yellow elevator where she must relive her rape and rapist (see Figure 5). Her access to and through the sarcophagus seems represent a reliving of her origins and her original sin. The sarcophagus, a symbol of death, but also rebirth, enables her to be reborn and, in some sense, "purified." Like Jane in The Yellow Wallpaper, Ellen is freed from her torture through her death, but the racial overtones in the yellow color and Egyptian markings make this particularly troubling.

Taken in this context, the use of Egyptian symbols coupled with computerized technology could be both a nod to Weird literature-type juxtapositions, and a discourse on Ellen's origins. The novelty of these connections seems to highlight the novelty of Ellen as a game character, but also their disturbing implications. Perhaps it is through the weird combination of science and antiquity that we can access such a complex, problematic, but also compelling character.

Figure 5. Ellen relives her rape and rapist in the yellow elevator behind the sarcophagus.

Humanity and the Inhuman

The presence of the Anubis on Ellen's board also signifies the inevitability of Ellen's coming death. The difference in how the game and short story approach death gives us further insight into AM, and into the nature of knowledge itself. We learn in Ellison's story that AM has destroyed the world because he hates humanity. He is filled with hate because people gave AM sentience without an outlet for it. Explains narrator Ted, "We had created him to think, but there was nothing it could do with that creativity…. AM could not wander, AM could not wonder, AM could not belong. He could merely be." (Ellison, 1967, para. 4th after the 4th computer output) Like Frankenstein's monster, AM has rebelled at its monstrous condition. AM seems to say, as Frankenstein's monster declares: "Remember that I have power; you believe yourself miserable, but I can make you so wretched that the light of day will be hateful to you. You are my creator, but I am your master; obey!". (Shelley, 1818, p. 140)

In the story, AM seems to destroy the world because he cannot create, just like Jane in The Yellow Wallpaper, who rips apart the wallpaper, trying to escape the inhumanity of her condition. In the game, however, AM is able to create. He can design the game and its Carcosa-like game levels, and therefore, seems to be able to achieve freedom and humanity, and as a result, death. I argue that this is one reason the endings of the story and game can be different—in the short story, Ted continues to live eternity in AM's belly. In the game, all the characters can die, and even AM can "die." Although the game is not winnable in the traditional sense by design, according to Ellison (Night Dive Studios, 2013), if you play in a way that expresses humanity, you can kill AM and humanity will persist (even if the five main game characters all die).

In one interpretation, you could see IHNMAIMS as a warning of what could happen if we create and use technology for the purpose of hate and evil. It reveals our anxiety with mechanization and materialism, and it exposes the logical flaw that social and technological progress

is always benevolent. Colavito explains that there is horror in science and in knowledge-making, and that horror "records humanity's uneasy relationship with its own ability to reason, to understand, and to know; and that horror stories are a ways of understanding and ultimately transcending the limits of the mind, knowledge and science through fear." (Colavito, 2008, p. 3 quoted in Wilson, 2010, p. 109) AM, like his characters, seems haunted by the knowledge of his own trappings.

On the other hand, we can see that humanity persists in light of the ultimate otherworldly Yellow King monstrosity. IHNMAIMS, by imbuing the Weird and exposing humanity's vulnerabilities and cruelty, also revels in its hopefulness and its goodness, and the power of creation and creative expression. The very existence of this game, despite its doomed ending, express the persistence of possibility, of storytelling, of play, and of humanness. It is through myth, fiction, and even play, that we can transcend the boundaries of our human limits of knowledge. Price (2001) explains that, "The much-vaunted "power of myth" is the depth with which it speaks of the human reality, not of superhuman realities." (Price 2001, p. 29)

This is the power of the Weird and of games—to be both cathartic and transformative. They are not a complete escape from the everyday, but they connect knowledge and the mysterious in ways that only a text, game, story, or art can do.

Conclusion

In this article I revisit a recently re-released game, IHNMAIMS, which is based on an Ellison short story of the same name, and use Weird fiction texts and tropes, as well as "The Yellow Wallpaper," to reinterpret the game. I focus on one of the specific levels of the game, which features a character, Ellen, a female programmer who is trapped in a yellow-colored, Egyptian and mechanical-flavored series of rooms. Through a series of puzzles, she is forced to relive her fears and past traumatic events.

In sum, I argue that the weird and eccentric juxtapositions of human and machine, real and virtual, history and future, in IHNMAIMS express the necessity of story and play in meaning-making and human creation. Ted explains in the IHNMAIMS short story, "He left my mind intact. I can dream, I can wonder, I can lament." (Ellison, 1967, para. 3rd after 7th computer output) The five characters, despite being trapped in AM's decaying Carcosa, still can tell stories. Human beings can return and find new meanings and new stories. Our world is filled with texts that are interpretable and reinterpretable, leading always to new possibilities.

> *We had done this sequence a thousand times before, but it was Benny's favorite story. 'At first it meant Allied Mastercomputer, and then it meant Adaptive Manipulator, and later on it developed sentience and linked itself up and they called it an Aggressive Menace, but by then it was too late, and finally it called itself AM, emerging intelligence, and what it meant was I am…cogito ergo sum…I think, therefore I am.' (Ellison, 1967, para. 29)*

Although Ellison denigrates the nature of games, he effectively created an evocative game. IHNMAIMS both problematizes and lauds how the myths created by fiction (texts and games) give us insight into the unknown. Creation, storytelling, myth-sharing, and play become the manner in which we maintain our humanity and more fully comprehend that which is inhuman.

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