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# A Virtual Fanfiction Universe

## Lovecraftian Religion in the Online Game The Secret World / Secret World Legends (Funcom, NO 2012–present)


### Abstract

This article uses three research methodologies to explore the deep meanings of the online game The Secret World (Funcom, NO 2012–present), a network of computer simulations of religion designed by and for fans of the literary works of H. P. Lovecraft (1890–1937). These methodologies are (1) a role-playing field ethnography called "participant observation", which involves entering the virtual world to experience it directly; (2) online data capture, usually in the form of copying text or images from the computer screen, which creates an archive for later analysis, both within The Secret World and in relevant online sources of information; and (3) statistical analysis, which is based on hundreds of games labeled "Lovecraftian", and considers the quantitative variables that define the abilities of numerous avatars. This virtual fandom includes the "game designers", who are inspired by Lovecraft, and journalists and wiki contributors. Many devoted fans not only follow the culture but also create new manifestations of it, thus integrating fantasy into real life and partnering spiritually with the long-deceased Lovecraft.



### Keywords

The Secret World (Funcom, NO 2012–2017), Secret World legends (Funcom, NO 2017–present), H. P. Lovecraft, Fandom, Computer Simulations of Religion, Role-playing Game, MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game), Digital Media



### Biography

William Sims Bainbridge served as a program officer for 31 years at the National Science Foundation, first in Sociology, and last in Human-Centered Computing. Combining those fields, he played major roles in NSF's initiatives on Digital Libraries, Nanotechnology, and Converging Technologies. With that background, he completed independent research studies of massively-multiplayer online games, including: *The Warcraft Civilization: Social Science in a Virtual World* (MIT Press, 2010), *eGods: Faith Versus Fantasy in Computer Gaming* (Oxford University Press, 2013), *Star Worlds: Freedom Versus Control in Online Gameworlds* (University of Michigan Press, 2016), and *The Social Structure of Online Communities* (Cambridge University Press, 2020). Much earlier, he had documented the cultural




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structure of imaginative fiction in *Dimensions of Science Fiction* (Harvard University Press, 1986). His Harvard doctoral dissertation and first published book was an ethnographic and historical study of a real social movement: *The Spaceflight Revolution: A Sociological Study* (Wiley Interscience, 1976).

## A Virtual Fanfiction Universe

Fans are not necessarily merely consumers. They may be creators as well, even professional producers of spin-off works. Thus, on 27 November 2025, Archive of Our Own contained 2,658 works inspired by horror fantast H. P. Lovecraft (1890–1937).[1] Many virtual worlds inspired by his works also exist, most fantastically the massively multiplayer online role-playing game The Secret World (Funcom, NO 2012–2017), which simulates religious conflict. Funcom, which created the game, is a Norwegian company. The main designer, Ragnar Tørnquist, had begun to read Lovecraft's stories at the age of 13, and they may have inspired his marvelous earlier Anarchy Online (Funcom, NO 2001), the first significant massively multiplayer online role-playing game in the science-fiction tradition.[2] The Lovecraft wiki at fandom.com describes "cosmicism", the movement developed by Lovecraft, thus: "Lovecraft argues that there is no perceptible divine presence, like a god in the universe, and that humans are particularly insignificant on the great map of intergalactic existence: just a small species projecting its own mental idolatries into the vast cosmos, always susceptible to be removed from existence at any time."[3] As Rodney Stark and I have argued, this definition works with the idea that religion is a form of fantasy that compensates psychologically for the real horrors of life and death.[4]

While Anarchy Online was science fiction set on a distant planet, The Secret World takes place on our own planet and is fantasy. It is based on the premise that our own real world contains hidden cults, taking to an extreme the imaginary religion often included in computer games.[5] The player's ava-

1 Result of search for "H. P. Lovecraft" at Archive of Our Own, archiveofourown.org, on 27 November 2025.
2 Walker 2008; Bainbridge 2011.
3 Fandom, Lovecraft Wiki, Cosmicism, https://t1p.de/7sh9l [accessed 28 March 2026].
4 Bainbridge/Stark 1980; Stark/Bainbridge 1987.
5 Bainbridge 2010; 2013; 2023; Nardi 2010; Wagner 2012; Snodgrass 2023.

tar must join one of three religious factions, which are largely at peace with each other, Templars in Britain, Illuminati in the United States, and Dragons in Korea. This virtual world contains computer-operated characters and locations inspired by a range of authors, including Nathanial Hawthorn (1804–1864), Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), and perhaps Stephen King (1947–), yet the New England horror genre they share is often called "Lovecraftian".[6]

## How Best to Explore a Virtual World

There are many ways to study massively multiplayer online games, yet direct familiarity is necessary, achieved by role-playing at least one avatar inside the virtual world.[7] It is often worthwhile to employ more than one avatar, both to explore different technical choices and to apply different intellectual perspectives via role-playing more than one real or imagined person. There were two versions, The Secret World launched in 2012, and Secret World Legends that replaced it in 2017, so I operated two avatars, one named Folwell, the other Psathas over the years 2018–2024. As a fan of New England Horror fantasy, I decided each avatar should represent a real deceased New Englander with whom I had a strong connection.

In the original version of The Secret World, Folwell represented my great-grandfather, William Folwell Bainbridge. At the end of their lives, both he and Lovecraft were buried in Swan Point Cemetery in Providence, Rhode Island. My ancestor was a dedicated clergyman who believed his own version of Christianity should conquer the entire world. He had adventures not unlike some in Lovecraft's fiction, most notably when he fired his revolver in the burial chamber within the pyramid of Cheops in Egypt in 1867; he returned there in more peaceful circumstances in 1880, while engaged in a two-year study of Protestant missions around the world.[8] His daughter Cleora died in infancy, and his response involved fantasy: he published a novel titled *Self-giving. A Story of Christian Missions*, which imagined she had survived to become a martyr in India.[9]

6 Sharrett 2015; Norris 2021.

7 Bartle 2004; Castronova 2005; Šisler/Radde-Antweiler/Zeiler 2018; Bainbridge 2016; 2020.

8 Bainbridge 1881; 1882; Bainbridge 2018.

9 Bainbridge 1883.

My avatar in Secret World Legends was based on George Psathas, who had mentored me in the methods of participant observation research through role-playing. He taught phenomenology and ethnomethodology at Boston University for many years, two perspectives that view reality as largely subjective and are related to theories like Multiple Realities and Social Construction of Reality.[10] In an interview he gave in 2011, Psathas acknowledged that ethnomethodologists consider field experiments and observations carried out without the informed consent of the people being studied to be perfectly ethical, because they hold that everyone has the right to decide what actions to take in their unique subjective world.[11] The inventor of ethnomethodology, Harold Garfinkel,[12] told researchers to document the views of the world held by the people under observation, but some followers took phenomenology one step further, enhancing and expressing their own subjectivity. One of those followers was Carlos Castaneda, who published ethnographies of a religious cult that may never have actually existed.[13]

Research on virtual worlds can be quantitative as well as qualitative. I will combine both approaches here. As of January 4, 2026, a total 9,158 players of the current version of the game had posted reviews at the online Steam marketplace, which proclaims, "Secret World Legends is a story-driven, shared-world action RPG that plunges players into a shadowy war against the supernatural, where ancient myths and legends cross over into the modern day."[14] RPG stands for "Role-Playing Game", and the other top descriptive tags applied are MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game), Massively Multiplayer, and Lovecraftian. Of the 6,499 reviewers who had played for at least ten hours, 76 percent rated the game positively, nearly identical to the 75 percent of the 2,618 subset who had already played for more than 100 hours. Yet just 45 percent of the 2,659 players who reviewed the game before playing for ten hours rated it positively. These figures suggest that devoted fans of the mythos stayed with the game; those who were less keen tended to quit.

10 Berger/Luckmann 1966; Schütz 1967; Psathas 1968.

11 "George Psathas on Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis", posted 20 July 2011, by AIEMCA, YouTube, https://t1p.de/p1iqx [accessed 28 March 2026].

12 Garfinkel 1967.

13 Castaneda 1998, xii.

14 Steam, Secret World Legends, https://t1p.de/qjai2 [accessed 28 March 2026].



Fig. 1: The Hidden Teleport Center Named Agartha. Screenshot of The Secret World by the author, December 2012.

## Secrets of the Fantasy World

The Secret World consisted of three very different large geographic areas, each of which had legendary connections with the occult: New England, Egypt, and Transylvania. Once avatars had gained skills and experience, they could travel between these areas via teleportation hubs in the underground Agartha realm, one of which is shown in Figure 1. In the image, Folwell stands near the front of the screen and is centered. The many avatars belonging to other players that are also visible are an indication that the game was lively and popular.

In Steam, fully 946 products were tagged by players as "Lovecraftian". Few of these products, which were developed by devoted fans or by companies seeking to attract fans, were very popular, likely because of the chaos of the subculture. The vastness of Lovecraft fandom was illustrated, however, in March 2026, when Steam listed two Lovecraftian games that would become available soon, one developed by a group in Bordeaux, France, and the other in Santiago, Chile. No other author seems to have become a fan tag in the Steam categorization.

| Descriptive Tags | Lovecraft Inspired | More General Categorizations | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Horror | Atmospheric | Mystery | Sci-fi | Fantasy |
| Horror | 59.3% | 100.0% | 24.7% | 38.4% | 9.6% | 8.0% |
| Atmospheric | 45.1% | 60.8% | 100.0% | 50.7% | 36.6% | 24.0% |
| Dark | 35.1% | 45.8% | 21.7% | 29.7% | 8.1% | 9.7% |
| Mystery | 31.1% | 32.5% | 20.0% | 100.0% | 8.7% | 10.0% |
| Retro | 13.0% | 12.7% | 9.8% | 9.1% | 14.8% | 11.9% |
| Supernatural | 12.9% | 17.3% | 5.0% | 12.1% | 1.6% | 3.5% |
| Investigation | 11.9% | 10.8% | 6.2% | 21.9% | 2.7% | 2.4% |
| Sci-fi | 11.6% | 13.5% | 13.6% | 12.7% | 100.0% | 7.6% |
| Fantasy | 11.1% | 24.7% | 15.8% | 14.8% | 9.5% | 100.0% |
| Surreal | 10.8% | 12.5% | 9.0% | 11.3% | 3.7% | 3.8% |
| Survival | 9.8% | 24.7% | 11.2% | 7.7% | 10.8% | 6.9% |
| Demons | 9.7% | 13.6% | 3.6% | 5.2% | 1.1% | 6.0% |
| Detective | 8.4% | 7.3% | 4.9% | 21.4% | 1.6% | 1.8% |
| Lore-Rich | 8.2% | 7.6% | 3.7% | 5.4% | 2.9% | 5.7% |
| Thriller | 8.1% | 16.0% | 5.6% | 15.5% | 2.4% | 1.1% |
| Psychological | 8.1% | 12.1% | 6.5% | 12.2% | 1.9% | 1.4% |
| Total number of games | 946 | 10,622 | 17,751 | 6,043 | 9,699 | 17,107 |

Table 1: Descriptive Tags for Lovecraftian Games in Steam, https://t1p.de/f4c1q.

Table 1 analyzes extensive data related to specific descriptive tags as of May 21, 2024. Each column gives the percentage of games with a specific descriptive tag, with the tag at the head of the column. Games inspired by the Lovecraft mythos gave greater emphasis to horror than to Sci-fi (science fiction). The Steam search engine apparently has different algorithms for searching for the column categorizations and the descriptive row categorizations in this table, so the numbers are not precise.

Among the semi-professional forms of fandom, journalists can be particularly influential, for example on the Massively Overpowered website, the equivalent of a daily newspaper for Massively Multiplayer Online fandom. On July 9, 2025, Justin Olivetti proclaimed The Secret World to be "one of the most unique MMOs ever made", because of the "few dozen 'investigation missions' that became one of its headlining features." He explained, "In short, an investigation mission was a quest that utilized out-of-the-box thinking and far more involvement on the part of the player to achieve. They were incredibly creative, such as one asking you to learn Morse code, or another having you go to various websites that Funcom created, or another that had you solving puzzles in a pyramid."[15] And indeed, Figure 2 shows Folwell in the midst of solving ancient Egyptian puzzles, for

15 Olivetti 2025.



Fig. 2: Folwell Exploring the Ruins of Ancient Egypt. Screenshot of The Secret World by the author, December 2012.

my research, though, he had the freedom to stay in New England, help newcomers adapt to this virtual world, and save recordings of his own imagined missions.

Given their New England origins, both research avatars belonged to the Illuminati faction, which had an especially Lovecraftian motto, "The world is a bad place, and you could either do or get done. We're the Illuminati and we're not done."[16] The headquarters of the imaginary Illuminati in New York City were only a short distance from a mission in the real Brooklyn where the real Folwell briefly tried to advance his career as a clergyman, before returning to New England. The Templars, headquartered in London, England, believe, "There is no purpose greater than ours. The world will flounder without structure and discipline."[17] The Dragon faction in Seoul, Korea, self-

16 Fandom, The Secret World Wiki, Illuminati, https://t1p.de/ng2zk [accessed 28 March 2026].

17 Fandom, The Secret World Wiki, Templars, https://t1p.de/bhg2z [accessed 28 March

identifies in these terms: "Unknowable instigator of change, through quiet violence they create tiny ripples that grow into sweeping tsunamis."[18]

## The Resurrected World

Early in his exploration of New England, Psathas completed quests on "Solomon Island". According to a fandom wiki, "2000 years ago, the island was already occupied by the Wabanaki (People of the Dawn), who did not at that time call it Solomon Island. They were the guardians of a Third Age Dreamer. While being close to Earth, to Gaia, they performed regular containment dances to ensure that this entity remained asleep."[19] The reference to Wabanaki suggests Solomon Island is actually Mount Desert Island in Maine, and its town, named Kingsmouth in the game, is actually Bar Harbor, where, coincidentally, my Lovecraft-fan Sims grandfather had owned a summer home. That personal note is indicative of the many ways in which fans can connect their favorite fiction to aspects of their real lives.

Entering "Secret World Solomon Priest" into Google in early December 2025 stimulated AI Overview to report, "Solomon Priest was an early member of the Illuminati, an English solicitor who founded Kingsmouth Town on Solomon Island in the late 17th century, named in honor of King Charles II. He was eventually killed by his friend and business partner, Isaac Fletcher, around 1702. Priest's tomb can be explored during the 'Digging Deeper' mission, and a note from his tomb is used in the 'The Kingsmouth Code' mission." The use of "Priest" as a last name reminded me of my ancestor Degory Priest, who arrived in New England in 1620 on the Mayflower but died soon after of the plague.[20]

Another historical last name belongs to Henry Hawthorne, the Kingsmouth minister. Hawthorne is a non-player character, one of the many simulated people inside the game. He always stands before the cross in his church, holding a bible and giving players missions to complete. Psathas stands at the center of Figure 3, aware that Reverend Hawthorne was named

2026].

18 Fandom, The Secret World Wiki, Dragon, https://t1p.de/nhh3f [accessed 28 March 2026].

19 Fandom, The Park Wiki, Solomon Island, https://t1p.de/vae9x [accessed 28 March 2026].

20 Wikipedia, Degory Priest, https://t1p.de/c6rzr [accessed 28 March 2026].



Fig. 3: Psathas and Hawthorn in the Kingsmouth Church. Screenshot of Secret World Legends by the author, 28 September 2024.

after Nathaniel Hawthorne, author of such horror stories as *The House of the Seven Gables*.[21] Decades ago I visited a tourist attraction in Salem, Massachusetts, that purports to be that very house.

Psathas had more ability than poor Folwell to be a creative fan, because Secret World Legends allowed him to operate a cult of agents who resembled his real-world sociology students, whom he often sent on missions to observe strange phenomena in our real world. Secondary avatars that existed in a parallel version of the same reality, they were operated by simple artificial intelligence and could be sent on missions to earn magical enhancements for the main avatar's armor and weapons.[22] Table 2 lists the 20 agents that belonged to Psathas at the end of his research. Their levels are like the experience level of regular avatars, with both Amelia Bindings and Psathas himself having reached the maximum 50. Each agent has three main variables that affect the success or failure of each mission: prowess, adaptability, and ingenuity.

21 Hawthorne 1879.

22 SteamDB/TSWDB, Agent Network Master Guide, https://t1p.de/pfmvn [accessed 28 March 2026].

| Name | Profession | Level | Prowess | Adapt. | Ingenuity | Skills | Cost |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Amelia Bindings** | Soothsayer | 50 | 292 | 270 | 317 | 879 | 750 |
| **Lydia Darling** | Witch | 36 | 148 | 243 | 226 | 617 | |
| **Sarah Skelly** | FBI Agent | 25 | 141 | 174 | 151 | 466 | |
| **Faction Recruit** | Agent | 22 | 135 | 99 | 205 | 439 | |
| **Warlawurru** | Aboriginal Tracker | 15 | 127 | 142 | 75 | 344 | 99,999 |
| **Daniel Martinez** | CIA Operative | 14 | 85 | 108 | 78 | 271 | 19,450 |
| **Giovanni Bellanova** | Occultist | 12 | 96 | 49 | 104 | 249 | 25,000 |
| **Wu Liang-Zhi** | Doctor | 13 | 67 | 93 | 67 | 227 | 20,000 |
| **Laughing Jenny** | Amateur Dentist | 11 | 46 | 90 | 90 | 226 | 795 |
| **Lama Lhakpa** | Buddhist Monk | 10 | 65 | 59 | 78 | 202 | 70,000 |
| **Tiana Cardoza** | Umbanda Priestess | 5 | 33 | 34 | 49 | 116 | 14,000 |
| **Finn Mulligan** | Bard | 5 | 33 | 45 | 33 | 111 | 600 |
| **Francis Rowan** | Wild Child | 5 | 35 | 39 | 36 | 110 | 550 |
| **Brann Mac Diarmada** | Stormlord | 5 | 42 | 25 | 42 | 109 | 700 |
| **Lee Chung** | Triad Soldier | 5 | 35 | 39 | 29 | 103 | 20,000 |
| **Fearghas Abernathy** | Barrister | 1 | 16 | 16 | 22 | 54 | 21,600 |
| **Nuala Magorian** | Druidic Loremaster | 1 | 16 | 16 | 22 | 54 | 694 |
| **Dax Reagan** | Investigator | 1 | 14 | 17 | 19 | 50 | 21,052 |
| **Liam Callahan** | Customs Officer | 1 | 19 | 14 | 17 | 50 | 24,000 |
| **Terry Laputo** | Psychic Medium | 1 | 17 | 14 | 19 | 50 | 24,999 |

Table 2: Imaginary Agents of a Virtual Phenomenologist.

The cost column is derived from an online dynamic database of the lowest cost in *marks of favor* to buy one agent daily in the player auction system, reporting the median for the six months up through November 20, 2020.[23] The first agent gained is always Faction Recruit. Lydia Darling was the second agent gained by Psathas by completing a quest, and Sarah Skelly was earned on an agent mission by Amelia Bindings. Each agent has a biography. Laughing Jenny's, for example, reads, "Not to be confused with the infamous 19th century sorceress of the same name (though unsubstantiated, apocryphal tales say she is one and the same), subject appears to be a woman who has taken on the pseudonym and mantle." She was the manipulative woman described in a poem by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882) that begins, "Lazy laughing languid Jenny".[24]

For fans, a fundamental feature of role-playing computer games is that the player can make many significant decisions about where to go and what actions to take, thus acting as creator of culture as well as consumer. I was a fan of George Psathas, so creating an avatar based on him was my subjective

23 The search term would be the name of the agent from the Agent Dossier category. SwlMarket, *SWL Market (Secret World Legends trading database / market web app)*, https://t1p.de/igmr2 [accessed 28 March 2026].

24 See Rossetti's poem "Jenny", Poetry Foundation, https://t1p.de/5w7id [accessed 28 March 2026].




Fig. 4: Psathas Battling a Supernatural Shade in the City of the Sun God. Screenshot of Secret World Legends by the author, 22 November 2020.

way of linking two fandoms. Psathas chose to explore the City of the Sun God in Egypt, but he could have advanced along a different path and rushed, for example, to Transylvania. Figure 4 shows him in a magic battle against a monster named the Shade of Torment, in tier three of a six-tier quest series named the Sad Song. The image includes the control icons used by the player to operate the avatar.

The Secret World wiki at fandom.com provided the background narrative that connected many quests: "These tombs and temples were supposed to remain hidden for all time. Some date back further than the mind can reach, while others were built by the Black Pharaoh – Akhenaten – toward the end of his reign. Modern archaeologists know all about Amarna, but not the secret site for which it was abandoned. Something stirs deep in this valley – a voice that drew the Black Pharoah here and drove him mad."[25]

The fully Lovecraftian solo-player game Call of Cthulhu (Cyanide, FR 2018) is competition for Secret World Legends. In Call of Cthulhu, however, Psathas would not be able to visit Darkwater Island, which is off

25 Fandom, SteamWorld Wiki, The City of the Sun God, https://t1p.de/4kt98 [accessed 28 March 2026].

the coast of New England.[26] The game does not give the option of creating a new character; it requires an already scripted role to be played. "1924 Private Investigator Pierce is sent to look into the tragic death of the Hawkins family. Plunge into a world of creeping madness and cosmic horror. Cryptic clues, shadowy figures, and pure terror bar your way as you fight to retain your sanity and solve an otherworldly mystery."[27]

## Conclusion

Generally, the creation of culture is a dynamic social process involving producers and consumers. Their complex relationships may be bridged by a fandom that can have great influence on further developments. Fans may become creators and gain their own fans in turn. Ragnar Tørnquist was primary designer of The Secret World. A Lovecraft fan during childhood, he designed the game and gained new fans for himself, for the game, and also for Lovecraft. When he died in 1937, H. P. Lovecraft was a relatively unknown and impoverished author. His reception by fans made him posthumously famous through processes of popularization. Given the significance of the Internet in this radical century, the boundaries between virtual worlds and the real world are blurring. Here a religious metaphor is apt: like the congregation of a church, who contribute actively to its success without themselves being clergy, fans contribute to the success of a game without themselves being developers.

The two avatars used in this study connect Lovecraft fantasy fandom to issues that our real world faces. Folwell was a missionary who believed that everyone on Earth must share his faith, while Psathas was a professor who gave all students the right to explore their dreams. Had they met in real life, they might have been enemies, because they held opposite views on whether humanity must share a single system of beliefs and values. The so-called "game" actually represents the revolutionary implications of social media and even artificial intelligence. The OpenAI corporation that created the ChatGPT technology has placed an AI avatar of Lovecraft online, allowing fans to interview the virtual author. When I asked "him" to evaluate The Secret World, the response was: "The game, as I apprehend it, is com-

26 Lovecraft 1928; Zeller 2020.

27 Steam, Call of Cthulhu, https://t1p.de/0i6ls [accessed 28 March 2026].

mendable in one rare and difficult respect: it understands that horror is not born of claws and carnage alone, but of implication, of whispered lore, of the gradual apprehension that the universe is structured upon principles hostile to human hope."[28]

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