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approach with caution! this poster is a snapshot of a work in progress

the purpose of this study

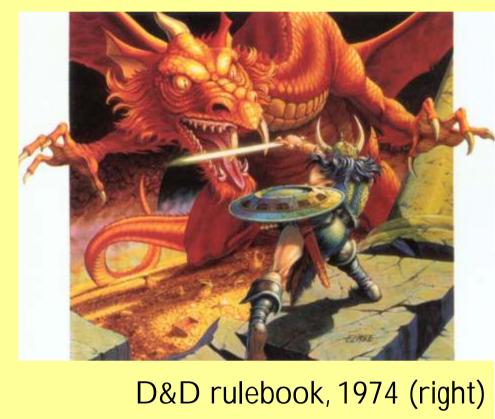
- monsters have been a part of human culture and imagination since the dawn of humanity
- games are heavily populated by monsters
- many of today's popular monsters appear or originate in video games
- many video game monsters are 'adapted' from other media (titans, colossi, vampires)
- how do video game monsters relate to other kinds of monsters and how can they shape our concepts of monstrosity and otherness?

the method

 theoretical investigation and comparative analysis of monsters from mythology, religion, high and popular

monsters in video games

- provide challenge
- narrative motivation (to overcome the monster)
- they structure gameplay (bosses and minibosses)
- they personify the hostile environments in 'player vs. environment' games
- games are a procedural medium: monsters are usually parts of the game's fiction and rules



40% / 50% 55% / 40%

D&D rulebook, 1974 (right) score of six or less indicates the Dragon will bite, but a seven or better indicates it will breathe.

thinking about monsters

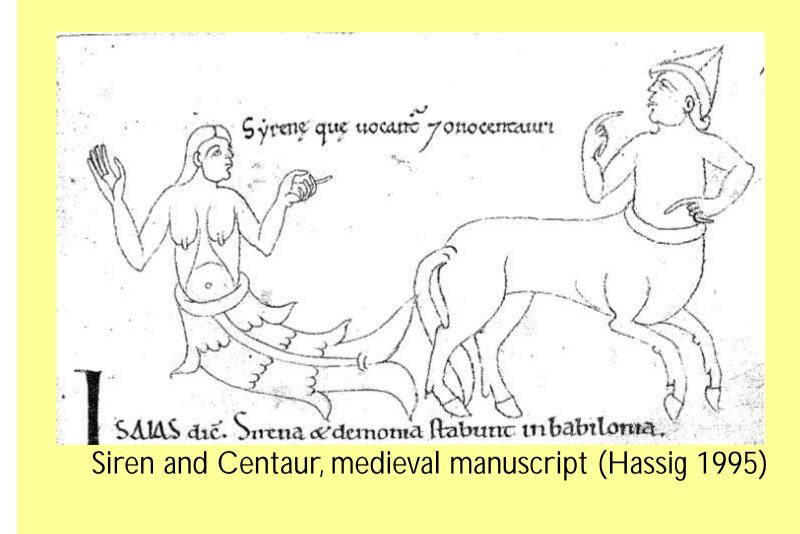
- since ancient times, monsters have been representations of otherness, e.g. Stoker's Dracula was a representation of the other that threatened to destroy the English (and Western) way of life and family values (Beal 2002)
- related to gods and the supernatural
- antagonists in epics (Beowulf vs. Grendel, his mother, the dragon)

philosophy

- monsters as phenomena
- monsters are projections of our unconscious fears
- they are 'by definition unrecognizable [...], unnatural, transgressive, obscene, contradictory, heterogeneous, mad' (Kearney 2003)
- Plato: monsters evoke wonderment and terror

cultural history

- studies of medieval bestiaries (Hassig 1995)
- description of monsters is often procedural in nature:
- unicorn can only be captured by a virgin
- lion resuscitates his dead cubs after 3 days
- Christian bestiaries use monsters instrumentally, most were accompanied by a morality
- structurally, bestiaries inspired early RPG game monster manuals





religious studies

- Beal (2002): the monster is a paradox
- 'They are in the world, but not of the world. They represent the outside that has gotten inside."

structuralist literary theory

- the monster fulfils a role in a narrative
- there is a repertoire of roles a monster can play in a folk tale (see Propp 1958)
- recurring patterns in both folk tales and game design (i.e. the multi-part boss fight)

References

Beal, T. 2002. Religion and Its Monsters. London: Routledge. Fernandez-Vara, C. 2010. Dracula Defanged: Empowering the Player in Castlevania: Symphony of the Night. in Loading..., Vol. 4., No. 6. Hassig, D. 1995. Medieval Bestiaries: Text, Image, Ideology. Cambridge. CUP. Juul, J. 2005. Half-real. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Kearney, S. 2003. Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness. London: Routledge.

Propp, V. J. 1958. The Morphology of the Folk-Tale. Bloomington: Indiana UP. Non-digital games: Dungeons & Dragons, Advanced Dungeons & Dragons rulebooks by Tactical Studies Rules (TSR).

Video games: see individual images and in-text references

the paradox of the monster 'it is in this world and not of this world'

this leads to two views of monsters

the monster as a part of the system

- rationalization of otherness
- a zoological/etological approach to the monster
- its behavior can be described and it is possible to defeat it



- video games are rule-based systems
- video game monsters are made converted into an algorithm, driven by patterns or Al
- function of monsters depends on gameplay conventions
- players 'demystify' the monster by providing walkthroughs

the monster as a chimera

- the mystical monster, 'impossible, mad', inscrutable
- inspiring fear, awe and wonder
- H. P. Lovecraft's 'non-Euclidean' monstrosity
- for philosophers like Kearney, this is the 'true' monster



fan art based on Lovecraft's horror fiction

- in video games, the uncanniness of a monster can be achieved by making it an anomaly of the system or by manipulating player's perception of it • sanity effects in Amnesia: The Dark Descent and other games: illusion of distortion of the Euclidean space
- narrative cues in the game's fiction
- breaking the fourth wall
- in Metal Gear Solid (Konami 1998): during the battle, the player is forced to plug the game controller into another port in order to avoid Mantis reading Snake's mind

a (tentative) typology of monsters based on game-mechanical representation of otherness

the endemic monster



Dead Rising 2 (Capcom 2010)

- monsters as a part of the environment
- they do not constitute an isolated challenge and blend in with the environment
- they are usually easy to dispose of using conventional strategies
- they tend to be 'homogenous'
- they either do not have weak spots, or their weak spots are obvious (zombies: head)
- their mechanical otherness lies simply in them being non-player and hostile

weak spots & special attacks



Alice: Madness Returns (Spicy Horse 2011)

- monsters follow certain patterns of attack
- can be defeated by identifying and destroying the weak spot(s) and avoiding their special attack(s) by taking the etological approach
- cannon crab from Alice: Madness Returns has to be toppled, then his soft unshielded belly is revealed • this is typical of video game bosses, but not
 - the monster as a puzzle

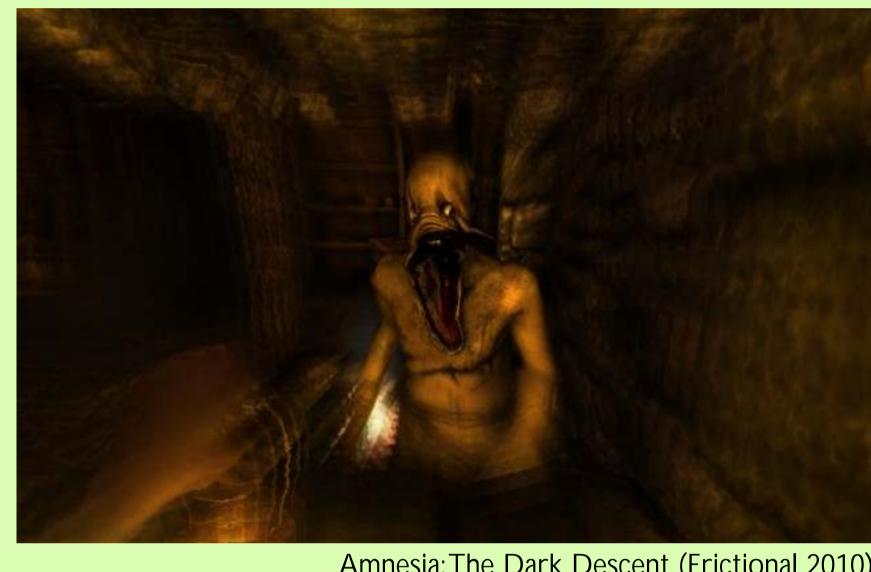
exclusively



Shadows of the Damned (Grasshopper Manufacture 2011)

- a more unique example of a 'weak spots & special attacks' monster than can be killed using a unique sequence of actions
- George Reed in Shadows of the Damned: you kill him in his human form first, then in his 'beast form' • killing him requires ingenuity: 1. he is riding a horse around, attacking the player; 2. the horse excretes horseshit that emanates an aura of darkness; 3. only in the darkness the player can hit a weak spot on George's back; 4. the player shoots it, the horse rears and the player can shoot at the horse's weak spot (marked red); 5. this is to be repeated while avoiding George's attacks

the unbeatable monster



Amnesia: The Dark Descent (Frictional 2010)

- a rare example of a challenge to the trope of monster as an obstacle to overcome
- Amnesia: The Dark Descent the game makes you avoid the monster at all costs there is almost no contact, just a vague
- awareness of the monster lurking • to see the monster is to experience simulated insanity, some players may never see it

the questionable monster



Shadow of the Colossus (Team Ico 2011)

- the game's narrative can change the player's interpretation of battles against monsters
- in Shadows of Colossus, the colossi are monstersas-puzzles, but the reason for their destruction is questioned

the monster in charge of the system



- the main antagonist of System Shock 2, the rogue Al Shodan, makes her presence felt throughout the game world
- typical of 'Al monsters' also in *Portal* (Valve 2007)

the doppelganger



- from a fan video based on Tomb Raider: Underworld (Eidos 2008) • a traditional vehicle of uncanniness: asking who is the monster
- can turn into challenging encounters especially in RPG games, e.g. Dragon Age: Origins (Bioware 2009)