



THE MONSTER AND THE SYSTEM

Representations of Monstrosity in Game Mechanics

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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



DRAGONS: There are six varieties of Dragons, each with separate characteristics in particular and other things in common. The varieties will be dealt with first:

Dragon Type	Breath Weapon	Range & Shape	Hit Dice	Talking/Sleeping
White	Cold	8' x 3' cone	5-7	25% / 60%
Black	Acid	6' x 12' line	6-8	40% / 50%
Green	Chlorine Gas	5' x 4' cloud	7-9	55% / 40%
Blue	Lightning	10' x 12' line	8-10	70% / 30%
Red	Fire	9' x 3' cone	9-11	85% / 20%
Golden	Fire or Gas	(as applicable)	10-12	100% / 10%

Breath Weapons: The Dragon is able to use its breath but three times per day, so sometimes it will bite instead. To determine this simply roll two six-sided dice; a score of six or less indicates the Dragon will bite, but a seven or better indicates it will breathe.

D&D rulebook, 1974 (right)

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



Siren and Centaur, medieval manuscript (Hassig 1995)



D&D rulebook, 1974

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



Making an Alpha Wyvern lose her hit points, Dragon Age (BioWare 2011)

- video games are rule-based systems
- video game monsters are made converted into an algorithm, driven by patterns or AI
- 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 exclusively

the monster as a puzzle



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 *monsters-as-puzzles*, but the reason for their destruction is questioned

the monster in charge of the system



System Shock 2 (Looking Glass 1999)

- the main antagonist of *System Shock 2*, the rogue AI *Shodan*, makes her presence felt throughout the game world
- typical of 'AI 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)