MAIDEN, MOTHER, AND CRONE:

ABJECT FEMALE MONSTROSITY IN ROLEPLAYING GAMES

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Abstract

Monstrous creatures have always been featured in fantasy games, both tabletop and digital, as enemies for the player to fight. Many of these monsters are overtly or symbolically coded as female and portrayed in ways that reinforce harmful, misogynistic ideologies. While gender representation has long been a crucial area of inquiry in game studies, few scholars have focused on the ways in which monstrosity is interwoven with issues of representation in games. With the understanding that gender representations in games can have deep cultural ramifications, especially as they intersect with representations of sexuality, queerness, body size, disability, mental illness, and age, this dissertation examines the ways that several mainstream "AAA" video games remediate harmful tropes of female monstrosity derived from or inspired by monsters found in mythology, folklore, fairy tales, literature, and popular culture.

Utilizing a close reading methodology employing visual and textual analysis, a thorough critical examination of female monstrosity in several games was conducted focusing on visual design, narrative role, developer commentary, and player reception. Specifically, this dissertation analyzes monsters such as the succubus, siren, broodmother, banshee, harpy, hag, and crone in games which were chosen because they are considered exemplars of the roleplaying game genre, are commercially successful, and have received extensive critical acclaim.

Through an application of key theoretical concepts related to female transgression, non-normativity, and monstrosity, such as the abject, the monstrous-feminine, the *femme fatale*, and the grotesque, this dissertation demonstrates how mainstream games promote misogynistic beliefs via the design of female monsters and how this practice relates to the sexism that is deeply entrenched in mythology, popular culture, the game industry, and gaming culture. The conclusion from this work is that mainstream games re-entrench harmful beliefs about women's bodies and behaviours through their portrayal of female monsters and provide a symbolic enactment of gender-based violence and persecution by positioning the player as a (usually) heterosexual white male "hero" who must slay transgressive monstrous women in order to restore normative patriarchal order and win the game.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to Ursula the Sea Witch, in all her unapologetically fabulous, powerful, and monstrous glory.

And to every person who ever felt more affinity for the monster than for the hero, who saw themselves as the evil witch rather than the beautiful princess, who wanted to play as the boss monster instead of the protagonist—this is for you.

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Introduction:

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> *The monstrous body, which makes a living spectacle of itself, is eminently disposable. The monster is the bodily incarnation of difference from the basic human norm: it is a deviant, an a-no(r)maly; it is abnormal … The discourse on monsters as a case study therefore highlights a question that seems to me very important for feminist theory: the status of difference within rational thought. The monster helps us understand the paradox of "difference" as a ubiquitous but perennially negative preoccupation.*
>
> —Rosi Braidotti (2011, p. 216)

Overview

This dissertation is an analysis of the ways that women are incorporated into digital roleplaying games through the figure of the female monster, or the monstrous-feminine. While much work has been done analyzing female representation in games in terms of damsel-in-distress characters or female heroines, less scholarship has focused on female monsters in games and unpacking their symbolic and overt meanings and connotations. My objects of analysis are critically acclaimed and commercially successful "AAA" fantasy and science fiction digital roleplaying games. I also discuss the tabletop roleplaying game *Dungeons & Dragons* as it was an influential precursor to digital roleplaying games and remains impactful for digital roleplaying game production. Through a close reading methodology and feminist media studies and feminist cultural studies analytical lenses, this project demonstrates that many games remediate harmful, misogynistic tropes found throughout mythology, folklore, literature, and other media related primarily to female embodiment, sexuality, reproduction, and aging. Although the figure of the monster is often inherently ambiguous and contradictory, these games position monstrous

women as transgressive and horrific enemies to be slain, thereby uncritically reinforcing sexist and patriarchal attitudes, values, and beliefs.

Why Monsters?

Monstrosity has been an important focal point of analysis for scholars interested in how certain bodies and behaviours have been policed, punished, or even rejected from dominant social groups throughout history. As Donna Haraway (1991) has argued, "Monsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations" (p. 177). The figure of the monster symbolically polices the borders of what is permissible, and to step outside of social norms risks either "attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself" (Cohen, 1996, p. 12). The "monstrous" has therefore been deconstructed as a broad category of alterity, marginality, deviance, and transgression.

In his book *Monster Theory*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996) has argued for the rich cultural significance of the monster, demonstrating how scholars can read cultures through the monsters they engender. This is because the monstrous body is a cultural body, in that it "quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy" (Cohen, 1996, p. 4). By incorporating these elements, "the monster is difference made flesh" in that it functions as a symbolic Other upon which various kinds of alterity can be inscribed (Cohen, 1996, p. 7). Because the monstrous body is an embodiment of difference, monsters are rich objects of analysis for scholars concerned with media representation and identity politics: regardless of how fantastical they are, they often represent that which is feared, hated, reviled, and repressed while also being fascinating and irresistible figures.

Monstrosity can be symbolic or literal. For example, the word "teratology" means the study of monstrosity, but in medical science it refers to the study of anomalous births, thereby

conflating physical anomaly with monstrosity and demonstrating how non-normative bodies are categorized as monstrous. As Rosi Braidotti (2011) has discussed:

> Monsters are human beings who are born with congenital malformations of their bodily organism … they therefore represent the in-between, the mixed, the ambivalent as implied in the ancient Greek root of the word for "monsters": *teras*, which means both horrible and wonderful, object of aberration and adoration, placed between the sacred and the profane. (p. 216)

As philosopher Michel Foucault thoroughly demonstrated in his oeuvre, controlling the discourse about certain bodies is a way to dominate and police those bodies. Patricia MacCormack (2012) has applied Foucauldian thought to monstrosity, arguing that "monster ontology manifests the truth of the aberrant in order to affirm the shift of the 'normal' from a cultural, arbitrary category to an idealized natural phenomenon" (p. 256). Teratology, as a "science," ostensibly seeks to objectively classify and explain anomalous births; however, given that normative white men have historically always overseen the categorization of certain bodies as aberrant and monstrous, it is impossible to remove all trace of judgement from the process. In this sense, teratology is a manifestation of the desire for discursive control and knowledge over the monstrous Other. The same can be said of monstrosity in mythology or popular culture: although it might be more or less veiled or symbolic, monsters are often designed or described using signifiers that code them in relation to identifiable groups. This is a way of establishing an "us" versus "them" or "Self" versus "Other" dynamic that has historically focused primarily on gender, race, ethnicity, and physical disability. Braidotti (2011) has stated that "the monstrous body, more than an object, is a shifter, a vehicle that constructs a web of interconnected and yet potentially contradictory discourses about an embodied self" (p. 243). She notes that "gender and race are primary

operators in this process" (Braidotti, 2011, p. 243) though I would add physical disability or anomaly to that list, considering the medical meaning of teratology. Given this preoccupation with physical difference, as many scholars of mythology, fairy tales, and horror/monster media and literature have argued, the act of murdering monstrous creatures can be understood as a violent and cathartic re-establishment of the normative, dominant, and patriarchal order. Killing a monster is therefore a way to expel or erase the unwanted "Other" and establish, confirm, and shore up that which is considered "Self"—killing "them" to reaffirm the "us." As Braidotti argued in the opening quote, analyzing and deconstructing the cultural objects involved in this mediated symbolic violence can therefore be considered important components of a feminist, social justice-oriented project.[1]

Monsters in Games

Unlike mythology, literature, or other media, most video games are interactive in that they invite the player directly into the story by having them control an avatar (referred to in this project as a "player-character") and engage in gameplay. While identification with a protagonist

[1] While I am drawing upon Black feminist thought, citing critical race theorists, and adopting concepts of otherness and difference that include race as an identity category, I am not focusing explicitly on race in this project for two reasons. First, the scope of this project would become unwieldy because monstrosity is such a broad category of alterity and because the topic is relatively understudied so there is a lot of ground to cover—the connection between ludic monstrosity and racialized otherness deserves to be its own unique dissertation topic, rather than just one section of this project. The second reason I am not focusing explicitly on race is because I am a white person. That is not to say that I should be excused from considering race when discussing monstrosity (quite the opposite, hence this rather long explanation); rather, it means that I cannot speak from a position of personal knowledge of racist oppression and so my voice is not the one that should necessarily be heard on the subject. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) and bell hooks (1989) have both questioned academic engagement with questions of racial difference and otherness, arguing that the scholar must remove or decentre themselves as "the expert" in order to truly engage with the subaltern. While there are several ways in which I would personally identify as marginalized or othered, my race is not one of those ways. So while I adopt and adapt the theories and concepts developed within Black feminism and critical race theory, particularly regarding physical difference, otherness, and intersectionality because they are so vital for understanding monstrosity, the story of racialized monstrosity is not mine to tell. However, I should note that much of my discussion will involve a close examination of physical hybridity, which is inevitably tied to critical race theory and other discourses around race, blood, purity, and mixing (just as it can be tied to queer theory on gender dysphoria, gender fluidity, as well as anxieties around mutation, contagion, infection, and so on).

can be cogent in any medium, most games make players literally enact the game's events. Although this interactivity does not necessarily allow for agency or freedom of choice since most games are pre-scripted and so react in specific pre-determined ways to player input, it does force players to engage directly with the characters and environments, thereby potentially making them feel as though they are participants complicit in the game's events. Just as films generally encourage audience identification with the protagonist through various cinematic means, games encourage player identification with the protagonist by having them control that character. Many roleplaying games are heavily influenced by the fantasy genre, as well as myths, legends, and fairy tales, and so provide a power fantasy by positioning players as the heroic representative of normative, patriarchal society tasked with slaying villains and monsters in order to save the day. Like many monsters found in mythology and other media, ludic monsters—meaning those related to play or games—are often designed or described with certain signifiers that code them as identifiably women, such as descriptions that refer to them as a woman or female and/or use the pronouns she/her/hers, character models with secondary sex characteristics often associated with biological femaleness, attire and hairstyles associated with femininity, a female actor providing the voice, and so on. Given that many fantasy games are heavily influenced by mythology and popular culture—repositories of ideological meaning and messages—and the fact that most mainstream games are designed by teams composed entirely or mostly of men (IGDA, 2019), it is perhaps no surprise that much of the misogyny inherent in the design of female monsters in mythology and popular culture manifests in games as well.

Addressing a Gap

While much scholarship has been devoted to critically analyzing the monster and its socio-cultural functions in mythology, folklore, fairy tales, artwork, literature, and film, the

monstrous in games has received less attention. Representation has long been a crucial area of inquiry in game studies, especially as conversations about the cultural ramifications of stereotypical or harmful representations have entered popular discourse. Sexualized female characters have been the focus of much critical and scholarly analysis yet the ways female monsters in games embody the same kinds of misogynistic attitudes to women and their bodies has been largely ignored. This gap is surprising given the plethora of scholarship focusing on female monstrosity in film and the relative ubiquity of monstrous creatures in games, especially both digital and analog roleplaying games. This project is an attempt to address that gap by providing a broad yet comprehensive appraisal of female monstrosity in a selection of critically acclaimed and commercially successful mainstream/AAA roleplaying games. I seek to demonstrate how these games remediate the same problematic tropes found in other media and also how ludic monsters provide a unique and arguably more harmful engagement with the monstrous given the way they position players as monster slayers. My analysis draws on work by feminist media and cultural theorists who have unpacked the ways that women are positioned as symbolically and literally monstrous in Western culture. This positioning is specifically in relation to female sexuality, reproduction, and aging, but is really about the ambivalence, fear, distrust, revulsion, and horror directed at female bodies and female power in patriarchal society, especially if those bodies are non-normative, transgressive, unruly, or unacceptable in any way.

In this introductory chapter and throughout this dissertation I seek to explain how women have been and still are positioned, constructed, and framed as monstrous, abject, and grotesque. This positioning is in relation to both behaviour and appearance in the titles I examine and serves to establish, communicate, and reinforce the superiority or dominance of masculinity (especially white, male, heterosexual, and able-bodied normative masculinity). In this sense, the female

monster is a misogynistic construct designed to serve hegemonic, patriarchal ideology and justify the violent oppression and control of women. This introduction begins with an overview of how feminist scholars have theorized female monstrosity and then turns to a brief look at how mediated representations of monstrous women in popular culture are part of this violent process. Games, with their long history of problematic female representation, are no exception—in fact, as I argue later, I believe that games are some of the worst offenders in terms of female monstrosity and symbolic/mediated violence against women. This introduction ends with summaries of the chapters following this one and a discussion of how my own positionality and history has influenced the project.

Teetering on the Brink of Evil: Woman as Monstrous Other

In her ground-breaking work *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1949) argued that man is the default, universal norm while woman is his "Other":

> Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him … She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other. (p. 25)

As de Beauvoir demonstrated, Western philosophy, religion, and cultural traditions have worked to actively oppress women in countless ways. She particularly critiqued ancient Greek philosophy as attempting to justify the near-slave status of women in that society by arguing that women are inherently inferior and corruptible. For example, Pythagoras claimed that "there is a good principle that created order, light and man and a bad principle that created chaos, darkness and woman" (qtd. in de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 114) and Aristotle argued that women are deficient and passive, "weak and powerless" (qtd. on p. 125), and "afflicted with a natural defectiveness"

(qtd. on p. 24). While these texts are certainly dated, they continue to greatly influence Western society, and contemporary "antifeminists," de Beauvoir writes, "draw not only upon religion, philosophy, and theology, as before, but also upon science—biology, experimental psychology, etc." to "prove" women's inferiority (1949, p. 31).

Applying Hegel's phenomenological concept of the Other to the relationship between men and women, de Beauvoir argued that within a masculine worldview, Woman is an ambivalent figure:

> [Man] projects onto [Woman] what he desires and fears, what he loves and what he hates. And if it is difficult to say anything about her, it is because man seeks himself entirely in her and because she is All. But she is All in that which is inessential: she is wholly the Other. (1949, p. 250)

Woman has been positioned as man's ambivalent Other in religious texts, philosophical texts, poetry, mythology, and literature throughout history. Specifically, de Beauvoir argued that women were (and still are) presented as Other through the archetypes of the virgin, angel, mother, wife, priestess, goddess, sorceress, seductress, witch, vampire, siren, etc. These archetypes have persisted throughout history and are ubiquitous in media.

Not only are women often the victims of monstrous aggression in popular culture, they are also commonly portrayed *as* the monsters. Indeed, several feminist scholars since de Beauvoir have demonstrated the ways in which women are *made* monstrous whenever they transgress the heteronormative constraints regarding appearance and behaviour assigned to them within a patriarchal worldview. The monstrous is therefore important to consider for understanding the ways that women have been positioned as other in patriarchal society. As Braidotti (1994) has noted, there exists a "traditional patriarchal association of women with

monstrosity" (p. 80), an observation echoed by Cohen's (1996) point that "the woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role risks becoming a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith, … or Gorgon" (p. 9). The female monster too often functions as a misogynistic construct, used to warn, control, and punish transgressive women.

The Madonna-Whore Dichotomy

In both mythology and popular culture, the victimized woman/damsel-in-distress is generally presented as adhering to her normative gender role and functions as the male hero's reward and love interest—a trope that positions women as passive and helpless, and is found in countless video games. The monstrous woman, on the other hand, is framed as non-normative and/or transgressive and must be punished.[2] Usually the damsel and the monster are two different women in these stories; however, the patriarchal image of woman is fraught with tensions and contradictions—an issue sometimes referred to as the "Madonna-Whore" dichotomy (for example, see Faludi, 2006; Forbes, 2010). Although this is generally posited as an either-or dichotomy (a woman is *either* the Madonna/Damsel *or* the Whore/Seductress), women are often expected or assumed to be potentially both. In this framing, woman is *simultaneously* the innocent, beautiful, chaste, virgin/wife/mother figure (the "Madonna") *and* the seductive, manipulative, transgressive monster/temptress figure (the "Whore"). These are two different "sides" of woman, and so feminine behaviour must be strictly policed within

[2] The difference between a "good" woman/damsel and a "bad" woman/monster is exemplified in the myth of Perseus as recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Andromeda, a beautiful virgin chained naked to a rock as an offering to a sea monster, is the passive, victimized damsel that Perseus rescues and then marries. Medusa, on the other hand, is the monstrous woman, cursed as punishment for being raped by a god, who preys on men in her lair until Perseus defeats her and cuts off her head to use as a weapon and proudly display as a boast and a warning. Note that Andromeda was endangered because her mother boasted that she was more beautiful than the Naiads, Poseidon's daughters, so he sent the sea monster after her. And Medusa was once a beautiful woman who was raped by Poseidon in Athena's temple, so Athena punished *her* for defiling her temple. Poseidon's sexual aggression and pride victimized both Andromeda and Medusa, which lends weight to the interpretation that all women—whether "good" or "bad"—are victims of patriarchal violence.

patriarchal society so that women remain within their stringent, narrow, and clearly defined roles lest the Madonna become a Whore. The policing of these roles occurs through laws, rituals, punishment, and shaming—especially within religious contexts (see Kristeva, 1982)—but also through more symbolic means such as mythology, folklore, fairy tales, and popular culture representations that exemplify what a "good" or "bad" woman looks like, how each behaves, and the reward or punishment each will receive (usually heteronormative marriage and reproduction for the Madonna and rape and/or death for the Whore—see chapter 4). The emphasis on mythology here is important, as Jane Ussher (2006) has noted:

> Mythology, because of its rich symbolism, and its exaggerated lore, is easy to dismiss […as] merely fictions that have no impact on the lives of women. However, this is not the case. Representations reflect and construct the regimes of truth within which women become "woman." (p. 3)

In this sense, the contextualization and narrative framing of a woman determines how she is perceived, as she might be viewed as sexual/sexualized in certain contexts while being seen as chaste/innocent or nurturing/maternal in others. For example, women's breasts are often perceived as sexual and erotic, yet when presented in the context of breastfeeding, they are framed as non-sexual and even revolting within mainstream society, even if they might be fetishized elsewhere (Dolan, 2019). This contradiction highlights the inherent ambiguity of the female body as it has been discursively constructed and framed within patriarchal society: it is both attractive and repulsive, weak and threatening, sexual and nurturing, innocent and sinful, normative and monstrous.

Monsters are usually designed to be both horrifying and fascinating, but this duality and the ambiguity it causes is particularly poignant for female monsters precisely because of the

ambiguous positioning of women and the female body in patriarchal society—as Braidotti (1994) has observed, "the female body shares with the monster the privilege of bringing out a unique blend of fascination and horror" (p. 81). This "unique blend" is most apparent in hybrid monsters, whose bodies are part human woman (usually from the waist up, with exposed breasts) and part animal (usually from the waist down), or blended with both animal and human parts, but is also apparent in monsters that transform from human woman into monstrous creature. With this ambiguity comes precarity: because there is an underlying assumption in patriarchal society that women are always teetering on the brink of evil (Kristeva, 1982, p. 91), transgressive behaviours might render a woman monstrous. Kristeva (1982) has argued that the drive behind patriarchal laws, rules, and rituals—such as those related to biblical impurity regarding menstruating women—is "fear in the face of a power" that is possibly sexual, or perhaps maternal, but either way understood as feminine and inherently insubordinate (p. 91). This power "*might* become autonomous evil but *is not,* so long as the hold of subjective and social symbolic order endures" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 91, emphasis in original). In other words, as long as patriarchy keeps women in check, they are prevented from "being actualized as demonic evil" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 91).

Popular Culture, Representation, and Encoded Meanings

As Jane Caputi (2004) has argued in her book *Goddesses and Monsters*, "popular culture serves as a repository of ancient and contemporary mythic and folkloric images and narratives, personalities, icons, and archetypes" (p. 4). Popular culture is a powerful weapon in the patriarchal arsenal and an extremely effective way of reinforcing the cultural positioning of transgressive women as evil or monstrous. The representation of women in Western media, like all mediated representations, is embedded in the historical context of power, knowledge, and

hegemonic ideology. This context influences representational practices whether they are reflecting, reinforcing, or attempting to subvert that ideology. According to cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1997):

> We give things [and people] meaning by how we *represent* them—the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place upon them. (p. 3, emphasis in original)

These practices of representation involve the "embodying of concepts, ideas and emotions in a symbolic form which can be transmitted and meaningfully interpreted" (Hall, 1997, p. 10). Representation is therefore an "essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture" (Hall, 1997, p. 15). This is relevant for media studies because everything is given meaning through how it is represented, and representations are disseminated primarily through (mass) media. The meaning transmitted through mediated representation gives individuals a sense of their own identities, the groups with whom they belong, and, consequently, how they should relate to others. Hall noted that, as Foucault has demonstrated, this meaning is not incidental; rather, it is purposefully produced and constructed through discourse, which is why it often functions to reinforce existing power relations and hegemonic ideology. One of the primary concerns for media scholars and cultural theorists is to uncover how difference is conceptualized, represented, and interpreted, and how this influences knowledge, society, and politics.

Hall (1997) has argued that the importance of elements that make up representations, like "sounds, words, notes, gestures, expressions, clothes"—and I would add physical appearance, behaviours, actions, and framing—lies not in what they are, but what they do (p. 5). In other

words, scholars must analyze their function: how they operate as signs and symbols, how they construct and transmit meaning, what meanings they communicate, and what they signify. As a semiotic theorist, Hall demonstrates that a visual image is a representational system and can therefore be read "like a language" (1997, p. 5), and the meaning behind that language can be understood as visual discourse. This is the methodological underpinning of this dissertation, as I discuss in chapter 2, as my work here seeks to uncover and analyze the meanings and messages communicated through the visual discourse presented in the games under discussion.

Interpretation, Knowledge, and Meaning

In his paper "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," Hall (1973) argued that ideological meaning is encoded in visual discourse and then decoded by audiences. Hall also noted that there are three different ways audiences can interpret, or "decode" those discursive messages: dominant/hegemonic, which follows the intended meaning and allows media to function as an ideological apparatus; negotiated, which follows the intended meaning but is applied to specific contexts and can therefore potentially deviate from what the content creators intended; and an oppositional decoding, which is when audiences interpret the message in a way which is completely contrary to the intended meaning. So, when a monster is coded as female, or a woman is coded as monstrous, this sends a (dominant/hegemonic) message that the female body, or women in general, are mysterious, dangerous, threatening, ambiguous, and/or abnormal. Since that belief is already present in Western culture, encoding that association into the visual representation of a monster is a "natural," intuitive, or perhaps even subconscious act, and decoding it in the dominant way would be just as intuitive. However, there is considerable space for oppositional interpretations—especially given the inherent ambiguity of the monster as something which both attracts and repulses. For this reason, in chapter 5 I turn to online player

discourse to discern some of the ways in which players have read, interpreted, and reacted to the female monsters in the games under study, and in chapter 7 I discuss the challenge of attempting to reclaim, redeem, or re-envision certain monsters.

Foucault argued that the process of othering involves the creation and maintenance of *knowledge* of the Other through imaginary *representations* of that Other. Those representations, which include verbal discourse, images, texts, and so on, exist to serve structures of power and domination. While Foucault's work was not focused on "representations" in the way Hall and other media scholars use the term (see Hall, 1997, p. 42), his concern for discourses and discursive formations, knowledge and power, and the formulation of the subject is shared by media scholars interested in uncovering the ways that media relate to all three of those categories. Indeed, a representation is a kind of discourse—a way to produce and frame meaning and knowledge about a particular topic (see Hall, 1997, p. 44). The ways that knowledge about a certain topic is produced and framed is intrinsically tied to power and control over that topic and the meanings related to it. This is particularly important when that topic is the existence, experience, and subjectivity of certain groups of people, certain identities and subject positions, or certain types of bodies. The ways specific groups of people are framed, discussed, and imagined (or represented) in discourse—in other words, the ways a society attempts to produce and claim knowledge over that group—shape how that group is perceived and treated. The discourses around and representations of a group of people—which constitute claims of "knowledge" of that group—therefore provide a kind of power over that group and its place in society. Media representation can be understood as a tool of discursive power and although the representation or the meaning behind it might be symbolic, it has *real* repercussions.[3]

[3] It is important to note that individual creators of media objects, like game developers for example, are operating within the discursive formation, or "regime of truth," of their particular culture and period, and of course

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Representation

Encoded as they are with layers of discursive meaning, media are powerful tools for reinforcing (or, conversely, subverting) existing power relations and hegemonic ideology. One of the primary concerns for media scholars and cultural theorists invested in opposing that ideology and promoting oppositional decoding is to uncover how difference is conceptualized, represented, and interpreted, and how this influences knowledge, society, and politics. "Difference" here means deviation from that which is constructed as the norm—in the West, that norm is a heterosexual, cisgendered, able-bodied, neurotypical, slim, young or middle-aged white male. Video games are technological apparatuses which, like all apparatuses developed and utilized within patriarchal society, has been largely guilty of constructing women as objects rather than subjects.

Gender-based game research has demonstrated that women have always been severely underrepresented in video games (Glaubke, Miller, Parker, & Espejo, 2001; Ivory, 2006; Scharrer, 2004), and even when they are present in the game, they are rarely playable characters (Ivory, 2006). In general, female characters more often are designed to appear sexy, with sexualized poses and revealing clothing (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Ivory, 2006; Lynch,

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cultural products embody the discourse of the larger society from which they emerge. In this sense, those who design a female monster in a game are influenced by all the discourses around femaleness and monstrosity they have encountered, directly and indirectly. So a developer coming up with an idea for a monster might consciously or subconsciously draw on various sources for inspiration, like other games, films, television shows, comics, literature, art, fairy tales, folklore, mythology, religion, or even real people. This helps to explain why motifs of female monstrosity keep repeating themselves as tropes. Highlighting the way those tropes are remediated in games *and* uncovering the meaning behind them is the goal of this project. This is not to say that developers are blameless, they are, after all, choosing to uncritically remediate these often-harmful tropes. To speculate, this could be because they are too time constrained to come up with something more original, they do not notice the misogyny inherent in these designs, that misogyny (or perhaps simply the aesthetic of the grotesque) appeals to them, or they think the familiar (or the misogynistic) will appeal to players. Regardless of intent and motive, to be a mainstream game developer (like any kind of content creator) is to wield power, as the institutional apparatuses of the AAA game industry are intimately bound up with power/knowledge.

Tompkins, van Driel, & Fritz, 2016; Scharrer, 2004). This also applies to advertising, as Monica Miller and Alicia Summers (2007) found that in video game magazines women are more often portrayed as supplemental, sexy, and innocent, while men are far more likely to be portrayed as heroic, powerful, muscular, and violent. In Edward Downs and Stacy Smith's (2010) sample of 60 bestselling console video games, only about 16% of characters depicted were women, and those women were far more likely to be depicted partially nude, with unrealistic bodily proportions, and wearing revealing clothing. Similarly, a large-scale content analysis of games from 2005–2006 found that there was a systematic over-representation of adult white men and a systematic under-representation of women: only 14% of the characters were female, and just 10% of games featured female protagonists (Williams, et al., 2009, p. 825). A more recent follow-up to this study found that while female representation had increased in games in 2017, that increase was primarily limited to secondary roles and most characters were still adult white men (Harrisson et al., 2020). Similarly, the more recent games showcased at the Electronic Entertainment Expo—an important trade event for the video game industry commonly referred to as E3—reveal that mainstream games are still mostly either leaving it up to the player to decide the gender of their character or centralizing a male protagonist. Out of the games shown at E3 2015 only 9% had a main female protagonist, and that was a high point: that number fell to 3% in 2016, 7% in 2017, 8% in 2018, and 5% in 2019 (Sarkeesian & Petit, 2019). Unfortunately, as these studies demonstrate, female representation in games has been and continues to be both lacking and stereotypical.

Developer and Player Demographics

Alison Harvey and Stephanie Fisher (2014) have recognized that the continued homogeneity of game production which has led to these patterns of representation are related to the "hegemony of play" (in reference to Fron et al., 2007):

> It is no surprise that the discursively imagined ideal player continues to be a white, middle-class, heterosexual, technologically competent, socially isolated, and violence-oriented masculine subject when those who conceive of, design, program, and produce digital games themselves, by and large, fit this description. (p. 3)

Western game developers are indeed overwhelmingly straight, white, and male: in the United States as of 2019, the percentage is 71% male, 81% white, and 79% heterosexual according to the International Game Developers Association (IGDA, 2019). In the United Kingdom, 70% of people working in the game industry are male, 90% white, and 79% heterosexual (Valentine, 2020).[4]

While this homogeneity is an issue in both mainstream entertainment media production and the technology industry in general (games exist at the intersection of these two areas), a major issue is that these developers seem to want to primarily make games for their own demographic. However, the straight, white, male developer demographic is no longer (if it ever was) reflective of the player demographic. Both women and men play video games: for example, 50% of players in Canada are female (Entertainment Software Association of Canada, 2018), 41% in the United States are female (Entertainment Software Association, 2020), and 50% in the

[4] On the other hand, although arguments about problematic, stereotypical, or lacking representation in games have been commonly linked with the lack of diversity in the digital game industry, Adrienne Shaw (2014) has pointed out that this "presumes that the mere presence of women (or members of any marginalized groups) in the industry will automatically result in more diversity in texts" (p. 5). However, being a member of a particular group is not sufficient to guarantee sensitivity to the nuances of representation. That presumption also suggests that the men already in the industry are incapable of creating texts which are not representations of themselves or their fantasies, and so the burden of creating more diverse representations must rest with marginalized groups.

United Kingdom are female (Ukie, 2020). This suggests that, as Shira Chess (2020) has stated, "video games are primed for change"; and yet, "many of those [female] players don't have a strong sense of ownership over the medium" (p. 4). Regardless of this roughly even split indicating the diversification of the player base, much of the game industry is extremely hostile to those trying to make changes to game content that would better reflect that diversification. Non-male developers have long reported harassment, exclusionary practices, and even sexual assault within the mainstream industry, and even when they are successful, they struggle to push for change in a culture so deeply entrenched in hegemonic masculinity and driven primarily by the profit motive. Harvey and Fisher (2014) have observed that the rhetoric surrounding the success of female game developers is often a postfeminist, neoliberal narrative about individual choice, working hard, and being dedicated to your passion—rhetoric that fails to address the systemic oppression marginalized developers face.

"Gamer" Culture

Although the lack of diversity, the toxicity, and the exclusionary practices in the game industry are undoubtedly primary factors in deterring women from entering into game design, the culture that surrounds video games is another important factor to consider. Game journalists, critics, developers, players, and scholars have been critiquing the rampant misogyny and exclusionary "boys' club" attitude within video game culture for years (for example, see Consalvo, 2012; Jenson & de Castell, 2013; Salter & Blodgett, 2012). As Amanda Cote (2020) has pointed out, many industry professionals and players "see games as a homosocial space in which men can be men, without having to be 'politically correct' or sensitive to the feelings of others" (p. 8). These critiques point to the frequent "ugliness of gamer culture" (Consalvo, 2012, p. 1) and how "misogynistic behaviours are used as operations by the dominant members of the

community as a means of asserting dominance over ‘other’ gamers, maintaining control of the community, and preserving the illusion of male ownership of gamer culture” (Kendrick, 2015, p. 36). Stephanie Kendrick (2015) has observed that these behaviours are multifaceted, including:

> Positioning women as inferior gamers; perpetrating gendered and sexual harassment; using threats of violence; and rejecting women’s concerns about gaming and gamer culture, further hindering the culture’s potential to become a safer environment … with the aim of excluding femininity from the culture altogether, reaffirming masculinity as the norm in gamer culture. (p. 36)

Indeed, many women face violence, hostility, and harassment both within the industry and fan communities, at conventions and expos like E3, while playing online games, and when they write or speak out about sexism in games and in the industry. Jennifer Jenson and Suzanne de Castell (2013) connected these issues to “persistent and resilient structures that position women as precarious subjects of gender-based disadvantage, subordination and exclusion” (p. 80–81). In 2012 Mia Consalvo noted that “harassment of female players has been occurring for quite some time—perhaps the entire history of gaming—but it seems to have become more virulent and concentrated in the past couple of years” (p. 1). As Cote (2020) and many others have observed, this might be a reaction to the shifting demographics of the player base, as that shift is perceived as threatening the medium: “while gaming has long possessed sexist structures, these have become more salient in the face of potential change” (p. 9).

Consalvo (2012) correctly predicted that the harassment against women in gaming culture would “probably only become worse before it (hopefully) improves” (p. 2). Late in the summer of 2014, several women game developers and critics were subject to extremely violent and misogynistic harassment, threats, and attacks carried out anonymously by those who

identified with the movement that came to be known as "GamerGate." The movement was initially organized by anonymous frequenters of online forums on the popular social news aggregators and discussion websites Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan, and quickly expanded into a war over the diversification of gaming culture (Johnston, 2014). This scandal brought public attention to the issues of misogyny, toxicity, and sexism in the game industry, gamer culture, and game content, though unfortunately little has changed in the years since. Recently, several prominent game studios have been the subject of criticism as minoritized developers have come forward with stories of rampant racist and sexist abuse, leading to the resignations of several top executives (Sakellariou, 2020).

The criticism directed at games from feminist critics primarily focused on the ways women have been erased, marginalized, or stereotyped in games—especially as sexualized and/or infantilized damsels-in-distress. Anita Sarkeesian (2013) famously unpacked the problems with the damsel-in-distress trope in games in her series of video essays entitled "Tropes vs. Women in Video Games." Although both the underrepresentation and stereotypical portrayal of women had been critiqued previously by many game scholars (such as Beasley & Standley, 2002; Downs & Smith, 2010; Glaubke, Miller, Parker, & Espejo, 2001; Ivory, 2006; Kennedy, 2002; Lynch, Tompkins, van Driel, & Fritz, 2016; Miller & Summers, 2007; Scharrer, 2004; Williams, at al., 2009), Sarkeesian's public-facing video series gained a lot of notoriety and unfortunately made her a target of organized harassment campaigns orchestrated by members of the GamerGate movement. This speaks to the resistance within gamer culture towards any kind of critique of sexism in games, which may help to explain why the damsel-in-distress or sexualized *femme fatale* tropes continue to be used so frequently in the medium.

Gender, Games, and Monstrosity

Despite this rich history of critical feminist game scholarship, as previously mentioned there is a surprising dearth of research addressing the ludic female monster. I consider this a considerable gap because a) monsters are a ubiquitous presence in many games, especially in the fantasy, science fiction, and horror genres; b) games remediate the same kind of problematic and misogynistic tropes of female monstrosity that have been critiqued extensively by feminist scholars of mythology and other media; c) the misogyny inherent in the design of female monsters is often far more overt and harmful than that incorporated into the design of human female characters, as though monstrosity provides an excuse for not holding back; and d) many games require or encourage the player to *murder* these monsters as an unavoidable aspect of gameplay, a requirement for them to win the game. As Carly Kocurek (2015) has argued, monstrosity is used as a dehumanizing label that justifies the execution of countless characters in games (p. 80). This attitude might be excused in stories in which the monster is an invading, disruptive entity that threatens the safety and wellbeing of the protagonists, or even the entire world, like an alien invasion or zombie outbreak. For example, in horror, the monster is generally designed to elicit reactions of shock, fear, and/or disgust, and it also appears in order to disrupt normalcy—it is a singular and unusual mutation, an artificially produced creature, or something that comes from another world. In science fiction and fantasy (SFF), on the other hand, monsters are often normalized as residents of futuristic or fantastical worlds—they exist within the fabric of everyday life *and yet* are hated, feared, and hunted. Rather than a single monster or type of monster that appears and must be destroyed to restore normative order, SFF monsters *live* in the same world as humans, and are often sapient and humanoid, but are framed

as dangerous Others. In this sense they are species, residents, who have every right to live in the world and yet are actively hunted down and murdered—*by the player*.

I argue that a fantasy or science fiction setting for monstrosity is potentially more insidious, problematic, and reflective of reality (and so has more meaningful consequences) than horror. The player is generally invited into the role of hero (or even professional monster hunter/slayer) and forced to confront and slaughter monstrous enemies throughout their journey—an action for which the player is rewarded with loot, experience, and narrative progression. The abject helps to explain the ways in which these monsters are designed to evoke horror, fear, or disgust in order to encourage the player to kill them—to *want* to kill them—and not think of them as people or allegories for real world identity groups (even though monsters in SFF games are usually very clearly partially human or humanoid). This is why I have chosen to eschew horror games in favour of SFF games, despite the fact that I am focusing on monstrosity, which is a theme perhaps more commonly associated with horror. As I discuss in my literature review, female monstrosity in horror games has also received more scholarly attention than female monstrosity in SFF games. However, many of the games I discuss resist generic categorization—while they might have fantastic or science fictional settings, they incorporate thematic elements common to the horror genre. I am not overly concerned with genre in this project, rather I am more interested in the role and function of the female monster, her visual design, and the misogynistic archetypes of female monstrosity she embodies. This project is structured around monster archetypes rather than around specific games or genres.

The Maiden, Mother, and Crone: The Structure of this Dissertation

In patriarchal society, women are placed into archetypal categories based on their age and behaviour. This categorization is most apparent in the mythological imagery of the Triple

Goddess, a triunity that embodies the three female aspects of the Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone. While this triad has been reclaimed by some Neopagan and Wiccan practitioners as the three faces of the Goddess, it is inherently problematic in that it forces women into deterministic categories that presume a cis-heteronormative female development understood in relation to fertility and heterosexual male desire. The Maiden is the young, fertile, nubile woman—unmarried and so available for heterosexual courtship. If she is chaste and virginal, she is idolized as the Madonna and worshipped as the pinnacle of youthful beauty and grace. The Mother is the woman's reproductive destiny, who is again worshipped and idolized as the Madonna as long as she remains the angelic and self-sacrificing maternal figure. The Crone is the wizened older woman, acceptable and perhaps even celebrated if she is a kindly, grandmotherly figure. These categories imply that there is nothing else in a woman's life besides being virginal, maternal, and old. Since the categories exist in relation to fertility, it also suggests that as soon as a woman is post-menopausal and no longer fertile, she is suddenly a "crone"—which is an inherently negative word, as I discuss in chapter 6.

The female monsters I discuss in this dissertation also adhere to three broad categories: sexualized and seductive monsters like the succubus, vampire, or siren; pregnant and maternal monsters like the "broodmother"; and monstrous old women, usually referred to as hags or crones. The fact that these correspond to the Maiden-Mother-Crone archetypes is no coincidence: given that women are always both Madonna and Whore, or teetering on the brink of evil, if women transgress or fail to adhere to or accept their roles in patriarchal society, they are depicted as monstrous and therefore serve as a warning to other women. Since the female body in all its various stages is the object of such close scrutiny, a common way in which cultural boundaries are drawn around what is considered "normal" and acceptable is by presenting any

"abnormal" or transgressive female sexual development as deviant and monstrous. If the Maiden is sexually liberated instead of virginal and chaste, she becomes a succubus, siren, or vampire; if the Mother is not self-sacrificing and angelic, she becomes a mad, pregnant monstrosity; if the older woman has too much power, she becomes a hag or crone (though this is not much of a downgrade since she was always doomed to become a Crone). This dissertation seeks to demonstrate how women are made monstrous in relation to their refusal to adhere to the stringent requirements for normative and/or acceptable female sexuality, reproduction, and aging.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 2 begins with a discussion of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks guiding my research, which are grounded in gender and sexuality studies and feminist cultural studies. Because I am focusing on female monstrosity, I explain my approach to both biological sex and gender, femaleness and femininity, which is informed by the work of Teresa de Lauretis, Anne Fausto-Sterling, Judith Butler, and Gale Rubin. I also discuss my use of the abject as read through the work of both Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed, and explain how and why I am engaging, or more accurately not engaging, with psychoanalysis in this project even though the abject is a psychoanalytical concept. I elaborate on how I draw on Mikhail Bakhtin's literary/aesthetic concept of the grotesque primarily through Mary Russo's feminist interpretation and application, and weave it together with the abject as complementary concepts for unpacking the visual design of monstrosity. This chapter also introduces the more contemporary idea of social abjection and how it works together with disgust to create a hierarchy of power. Finally, I explain how and why this project is intersectional, examining sexism as it intersects with several other axes of oppression, especially heterosexism, ageism, and ableism. The second half of chapter 2 elaborates on the methodology, methods, and

analytical frameworks employed while conducting my research. It explains my use of textual analysis, an interpretive approach that is widely used in media studies to examine the ways that particular groups of people are represented, as well as the specific steps I took in conducting this analysis. I end the chapter with a consideration of how feminist media studies and feminist cultural studies provide the foundational analytical frameworks for this project, emphasizing the importance of subjective interpretive analysis, highlighting symbolic meanings, and positioning each object of analysis within a cultural and historical context.

Chapter 3 consists of a thorough review of the literature on mediated female monstrosity that this project builds upon and is shaped by. Specifically, I chart the history of the study of female monstrosity in media from early film studies scholarship through to more recent game studies scholarship. This begins with theories of the monster as sexual Other in horror film by Robin Wood, Linda Williams, and Barbara Creed, whose work on the monstrous-feminine forms an important basis for my own. It then addresses more recent work on the female monster in popular culture, with scholars like Jane Caputi, Erin Harrington, and Christina Santos demonstrating the ways that the various tropes of female monstrosity found in mythology, folklore, and older visual media continue to manifest in contemporary media. The second half of this chapter focuses on game scholarship related to monstrosity in general, theorizing the role and function of the ludic monster, especially the figure of the zombie. The chapter ends with a look at some work that specifically addresses female monstrosity in games, though it is an understudied topic. Although female monstrosity has not garnered the level of attention in games as it has in film, this literature review demonstrates that there is a rich history of unpacking the symbolism behind mediated monstrosity and that it is a fruitful object of analysis for media scholars.

After setting the stage with chapters 2 and 3, the rest of my dissertation is divided into three chapters that correspond to the Maiden-Mother-Crone triad before ending with a concluding chapter that reiterates the importance of this kind of analysis and considers some alternative visions of monstrosity. Chapter 4 focuses on the Monstrous Maiden—hybrid sexualized and seductive monsters that, as I argue, are all iterations of the succubus, which is one of the oldest archetypes of female monstrosity. This chapter analyzes the succubus in *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax & Arneson, 1974), *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), and *The Witcher* series (CD Projekt Red, 2007–2015); the siren and female vampire in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015); Empusa in *God of War: Ascension* (Sony Santa Monica Studio, 2013); the succubi and their "mother" Cydaea Maiden of Lust in *Diablo III* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2012); and the Temptresses and Cleopatra from *Dante's Inferno* (Visceral Games, 2010). These monsters are all part beautiful woman and part animal or transform from a beautiful woman into a monster. They therefore not only draw on the fear of female sexuality, but also embody the contradictory positioning of woman within patriarchal ideology as simultaneous attractive and threatening, beautiful and deadly. The human parts of these monsters adhere to normative ideals of white feminine beauty, including youthfulness, and are designed with "conventional" heteronormative sexual appeal in mind, and so I consider them as twisted manifestations of the Maiden archetype.

Chapter 5 analyzes the Monstrous Mother, highlighting how female reproductive processes are framed in association with the horrific through an analysis of pregnant and birthing monsters. These monsters are not designed to titillate the player, rather they evoke reactions of horror, disgust, and revulsion as well as draw on masculine anxieties regarding female parthenogenetic reproduction. The portrayal of these monsters—referred to as "broodmothers"—

also presents pregnancy in relation to body horror tropes of infection, mutation, and transformation. This chapter focuses on the ways monstrous pregnancy is featured in dark fantasy and science fiction games produced by BioWare, discussing the broodmother in *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare, 2009) and *Dragon Age: Origins – Awakening* (BioWare, 2010) and the Banshee in *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012). Considering this chapter in relation to the Mother aspect of the Triple Goddess is particularly apt given that one of the monsters—the main antagonist from *Dragon Age: Origins – Awakening*—is unironically named "The Mother."

Chapter 6 examines monsters at the intersection of ageism, ableism, and sexism in the form of the monstrous hag or crone figure. This kind of monster embodies the fear, horror, and disgust directed at the aging female body but also incorporates fears regarding aging female sexuality and reproduction, thereby demonstrating that the categories of Maiden, Mother, and Crone are not distinct but are fluid and overlapping. The objects of analysis in this chapter are the hags from *Dungeons & Dragons*, the Hagravens from *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), and the grave hags, water hags, and Crones from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt.*[5] These monsters all speak to a cultural and psychological fear, disgust, and revulsion directed towards powerful old women, especially those who are ambiguous witch/goddess figures like the infamous Baba Yaga from Slavic folklore or the three Fates from Greek mythology.

In my concluding chapter, I reiterate why all this matters for games as a medium and for popular culture in general and discuss how the cultural positioning and representation of monstrosity has been gradually changing. Although this project is highly critical, in the final chapter I spend some time discussing the potentials for independent games to approach

[5] Note that this dissertation follows the capitalization for monster names and titles as used in the games they are from.

monstrosity in more nuanced ways. Chapter 7 ends this dissertation with a reflection on the potentials for a feminist reclamation, re-framing, and re-envisioning of the monstrous, although it remains clear that most mainstream games are doing little to foster this kind of redemptive reading of the monstrous, which places the burden of reclamation on the shoulders of players and independent game developers.

So Why Female Monsters in Games?

As an interpretivist method, textual analysis is highly subjective. In other words, there is no neutral, objective way to analyze, interpret, and critique media. This is perhaps a positive step for game studies, as Emma Vossen (2018) has argued regarding her own use of autoethnography:

> I feel that more subjectivity in game studies and games criticism is both necessary and positive as our identities change the way we interact with game texts and games culture as well as the way we are treated within the culture. (p. 39)

Because this project employs a subjective, interpretive analytical approach such as textual analysis, it is important to spend some time discussing who I am and why I have chosen this topic. As Sandra Harding has asserted throughout her career, feminist researchers have an obligation to disclose who they are, why they have chosen a specific topic, and the subject position or vantage point from which they are conducting their research.

Donna Haraway (1988) has argued that researchers only ever have partial understandings of the world shaped by their social identities and the particular conditions in which their work was produced, and so knowledge must always be situated rather than presented as objective or universal. This idea has deeply shaped feminist media studies, as Alison Harvey (2020) has explained: “feminist media critique is premised on the idea that our social realities are shaped by our experiences and contexts within an unequal system of power based on gender and other axes

of oppression" (p. 33). So, my work on games is grounded in a consideration of the social, cultural, and historical contexts of their production and reception and I, as a researcher subject to the same gendered power relations I am critiquing, "bring into the research process [my] embodied realit[y], [my] differently politicized subject [position], and [my] uneven access to power in the social systems [I am] operating in" (Harvey, 2020, p. 38). In this sense, my own positionality shapes my analysis and the conclusions I draw in this project, and I try to maintain this reflexivity throughout. I am a bisexual, white, able-bodied, cis-gendered female in my thirties. My physical appearance fits into a normative assumption of white womanhood, and I have benefitted from the privileges associated with that.

My Stake in this Project

Although white women such as myself are heavily represented in mainstream Western media, much of that representation is fraught, especially with the Madonna-Whore dichotomy I previous discussed. As a gamer who has been playing games since early childhood, the representation of women in games—who have been predominately white women who look somewhat like me (blue eyes and light skin), thereby adhering to white supremacist beauty ideals and the assumption of a white male consumer demographic—has always been at the forefront of my mind. Although not seeing yourself in media is extremely harmful when growing up, seeing yourself in media portrayed as only either a victimized damsel/trophy—either infantilized or sexualized—or as a *femme fatale* villain is also very harmful. The games I have played throughout my life, which are mostly fantasy and science fiction roleplaying games like the ones under study in this project, insisted that I play as a man who rescues the Madonna and defeats (or tames) the Whore. The makers of those games clearly assumed that someone like me would not be playing them and so left no room for me to see myself as the hero rather than as the victim,

trophy, love interest, or villainess. I am not alone: this is an issue that has been lamented for years by female gamers and feminist game scholars and was clearly demonstrated by Vossen (2018) in her dissertation on the cultural inaccessibility of games and gamer culture.

In many ways, this has meant that being a gamer, a woman, and a feminist has been an extremely difficult path, as the countless feminist gamers and game scholars who have written on this issue can attest. As Sarkeesian (2015) has argued, "it's not only possible but important to be critical of the media that you love, and be willing to see the flaws in it, especially the flaws that reflect and reinforce oppressive attitudes and unexamined ways of thinking in our culture" (para. 3). Scholars who are also fans of the media they analyze must confront these issues regularly—especially those who are fans of notoriously problematic genres like horror, fantasy, and science fiction. Katherine Farrimond (2020) has explored the difficulty of being both a feminist and a horror fan, noting that, like video games, the presumed relationship between the media object and its audience is a gendered one in that "men are positioned as the genre's natural audience, while women's engagement with horror is presented as more fractious" (p. 149). Although horror—which, importantly, includes the "monster movie" subgenre—"has long held a reputation as a genre inhospitable to female audiences" (p. 150), it is interesting to note that women actually make up a considerable portion of the horror film audience, and are the most likely to enjoy horror films and identify horror as their favourite genre, at least in the UK (Farrimond, 2020, p. 150). While this is likely not the case for mainstream roleplaying games, many women do enjoy playing these kinds of games, myself included.

Perhaps this explains my stake in this project: I want these kinds of games to "do better." Although strides have been made in gaming culture in terms of the representation of women—at least in Western games they are significantly less scantily clad or helpless as they once were,

perhaps due to feminist discourse entering into popular culture—monstrosity and villainy still seem to be used as justification for a kind of "anything goes" attitude. So, while I no longer have to look at scantily clad heroines with comically enormous breasts (unless I am playing particular genres of roleplaying games, unfortunately), I still have to hunt down and murder naked or scantily clad sirens, succubi, or vampires who also try to seduce me; broodmothers and their offspring or other kinds of screaming pregnant monstrosities; and old hags and crones with drooping breasts and hunched backs. These moments of dissonance—in which I am playing a game I love but forced to do something I hate—are motivation to engage in that feminist critique of media I enjoy. All this is to say that my subject positionality, my fandom, and my embodiment influences both my interest and stake in this topic as well as how I navigate my analysis in terms of interpretation and evaluation. The way I read each monster's design, dialogue (if any), and narrative role is therefore shaped by my own expectations, experiences, sensitivities, and biases. However, my discussion of these monsters and the ways their designs evoke or encourage associations with certain bodies and subject positions will be informed and guided by theory, particularly the work of theorists who specialize in and embody those positions. In the next chapter, I elaborate on those theories as well as the concepts, methodologies, and analytical frameworks utilized in and guiding this project.

Chapter 2

Reading the Monstrous Body:

Theoretical Concepts, Methodologies, and Analytical Frameworks

> *A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the monstrum is etymologically "that which reveals," "that which warns," a glyph that seeks a hierophant. Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again.*
>
> —Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996, p. 4)

In this chapter, I discuss the theoretical concepts and analytical frameworks shaping and guiding this project as well as the methodologies and methods utilized to conduct the research. The chapter begins with the theoretical concepts that inform my approach to my objects of study, which are grounded in gender and sexuality studies and feminist cultural analysis. This includes a discussion of my approach to gender and biological sex, my application of the concept of the abject to my objects of study, the ways I engage (and do not engage) with psychoanalytic interpretation, how I weave together the abject with the concept of the grotesque, and my expansion of the abject into theories of social abjection and disgust. I then elaborate on my approach to intersectional feminism and highlight how intersectional theory influences my project. In the following section I outline my methodologies and methods, discussing how and why I apply a close reading or textual analysis methodology, elaborating on the methods I employed, and highlighting the ways in which my approach is shaped by the analytical framework of feminist media and cultural studies.

Theoretical Concepts

Gender

As a feminist project, this work is embedded in gender and sexuality studies and preoccupied with the ways that certain bodies are represented, constructed, framed, and positioned. This project focuses on female-coded monsters—that is, monsters that are voiced by female actors; referred to with feminine pronouns; designed with cultural markers such as long hair and feminine attire; part of traditionally female archetypes like succubi, sirens, banshees, harpies, hags, and crones; and designed with physiological markers that are associated with presumed biological femaleness, such as breasts, vulvas, and vaginas (Fausto-Sterling, 2000)—and the way their design, presentation, and reception relate to the misogyny inherent in patriarchal society. While there are countless male-coded monsters in video games as well, the ways in which they are rendered monstrous and horrific do not usually involve associating their biological maleness with that monstrosity.[6] Female monsters, on the other hand, are often monstrous in relation to their female physiology: 1) they are almost always portrayed with exposed breasts (see chapter 4); 2) they are menstruating, pregnant, giving birth, or breastfeeding, usually in a non-normative or otherwise disturbing way (see Creed, 1993a); and/or 3) they have or are designed to look like monstrous vaginas (see Creed, 1993a; Vossen, 2018). The monstrosity of these creatures is therefore tied directly to their biological femaleness, or to a warped, exaggerated aspect of the female body. This undoubtedly relates to patriarchal anxieties

[6] There are certainly exceptions to this, especially in Japanese games. Mara and Mishaguj from the *Shin Megami Tensei* series (Atlus, et al., 1992–2018) are both monstrous penis-shaped demons. *Mara* is also Japanese slang for "penis" and so doubles as a visual joke, though some translations of the game and some fan-made wikis use female pronouns in their descriptions of the demon. Mara is a demon of temptation and Mishagui has a skill called "cursed emission." *Shin Megami Tensei* is also full of particularly disturbing female monsters who are either walking vaginae dentatae or women covered in countless breasts. As Chris Alton (2020) explores in his dissertation, the *Resident Evil* series also features phallic monsters, thereby presenting a kind of inversion of Creed's monstrous-feminine—the monstrous-masculine.

around (and attempted control of) female sexuality and reproduction, and so the portrayal of biological femaleness will be the focus of this project.

However, monstrosity can be directly tied to both femaleness *and* femininity—that is, monstrous women are framed as horrifying, repulsive, or evil not only through their appearance but also through their rejection of, or inability to adhere to, expected or normative feminine gender roles. In other words, female monstrosity is constructed in relation to both appearance and behaviour. While femininities are often used as markers for female bodies, they are more specifically the performance of certain gender roles and behaviours that may or may not relate to presumed physicality. As has been thoroughly demonstrated in gender studies, biological sex is distinct from gender. Gender is a performance, a naturalized enactment situated within a wider network of power relations which is interpreted socially as relating to the "masculine" or the "feminine," not an innate human quality. Importantly, both sex and gender are social products that are constructed (Rubin, 1984)—that that is, the understanding, reception, and interpretation of both are shaped by cultural discourses, beliefs, assumptions, norms, and values (Butler, 1993). Media are powerful producers of cultural discourses (de Lauretis, 1987), determining and promoting representations of gender and sex which are then accepted and internalized by individuals, similar to de Beauvoir's famous declaration that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1949, p. 273). Assumptions are made about people based on both their physiological markers and the ways they perform their gender, and this results in an oppressive gender hierarchy that generally privileges maleness and masculinity and oppresses women and sexual minorities (Rubin, 1984).

When I use the word "female" as an adjective I am referring to biologically female bodies, and when I use the term "woman" or "feminine" I am generally referring to gender,

which can but does not necessarily correspond to physical femaleness. This distinction is important because certain common aspects of the monsters I discuss, especially hybridity and transformation, can be connected to several themes, including the fear of female-coded bodies and potential procreative abilities, anxieties around gender fluidity and the ways that women transgress the gendered roles they have historically been forced into within patriarchal societies, and even transphobic depictions of trans women. For example, as I discuss in chapter 3, the hybrid monstrous woman is presented using tropes related to a surprising and unpleasant reveal of her highly unexpected and frighteningly monstrous "true" form. In this way, she can be read as a representation of the misogynistic trope of woman as *femme fatale* deceiver and—she disguises herself as a "normal" woman to seduce her male victims and then kills/devours them—a trope that has more to do with gender roles than biology. At the same time, the way she initially appears as a beautiful, normative woman to seduce her victims before transforming into monstrous creature could be read as a transphobic fear of the "bait-and-switch" or "trap" of a trans woman who "passes" fully but does not have the normative female genitalia her male lover was expecting.[7] As a result, although the monster's design is tied to expectations related to biological femaleness, it can be interpreted in a myriad of ways that all relate to a preoccupation with and fear of women's bodies as a potential threat to heterosexual masculinity.

These theories that analyze and articulate the distinctions and relationships between sex and gender, appearance and behaviour, and how they relate to the oppression of women are vital for my project because if there is no such thing as fundamental or "natural" biology, anatomy, or

[7] The idea of trans women and "passing" is a problematic belief fraught with both transphobia and misogyny, and a "trap" is a pejorative term for a trans woman or drag queen who "passes" too convincingly as a woman. The term comes from an internet meme drawn from anime culture and references the idea that these women could lure straight men into their "trap," thereby tricking or conning them into having sex in a way they were not expecting (i.e., sex they would perceive as gay). In this sense, these women are seen as posing a particularly dangerous threat to straight men—one that might compromise their likely fragile sense of heterosexuality.

physiology in the real world—i.e., as Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) has demonstrated, biological sex is as culturally constructed as gender is—it certainly does not exist for designed, modelled, and rendered digital bodies. Rather, the developers of the games under discussion *chose* to design bodies in certain ways, including ways that overtly signal biological femaleness and associate or juxtapose it with monstrosity. That signalling is related to cultural assumptions about how sexed bodies are "supposed" to look (Fausto-Sterling, 2000) and what is considered desirable or attractive. In this sense, even when speaking about biological femaleness I do not attempt to discuss the ways that bodies *are*, rather how they have been and are represented and interpreted. In this sense my project mirrors Noël Carroll's (1990) foundational analysis *The Philosophy of Horror*, in which he is primarily concerned with how audiences and on-screen characters react to the monster in order to demonstrate the relativistic nature of that which is considered monstrous. In other words, he shows how the text positions the monster as unnatural, disgusting, horrific, and terrifying, often in relation to its appearance, thereby encouraging audiences to also see the monster that way. My preoccupation in this project is therefore reading what Butler (1990, p. 416) described as the "surface politics of the body"—the physical design of the monstrous women encountered by the player—combined with their narrative framing and role, what developers have said about their design processes and inspirations, how players have interpreted and reacted to them, and how they remediate tropes present in other cultural objects. My interpretation and evaluation of those designs—what feelings those designs evoke, the cultural traditions they draw from, and how they are related to oppressive power structures and discourses—primarily uses the abject or abjection, a long-established and widely utilized theoretical concept in feminist media analysis. In the next section I will introduce the concept of abjection and discuss how I am applying it to my analysis of female monstrosity.

The Abject

In her book *Powers of Horror* (1982), feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva drew on Lacanian psychoanalysis to articulate the abject as that which disrupts, disturbs, and is rejected by the normative, patriarchal realm of law, order, and propriety. That normative realm, or social world, is referred to by Lacan as the "symbolic order," and existing within or aligning with that symbolic order is considered necessary to function in society and to interact with others. The abject is situated outside of the symbolic order and is instead associated with the "real"—the state of nature in which animals exist and in which humans existed as pre-linguistic infants. This primal, natural, pre-linguistic state is threatening to the symbolic order, just as nature has always been considered in opposition to culture within patriarchal society. Facing the real also reminds people of their own materiality and mortality, since it is connected to bodily rather than mental existence. Thought, culture, language, and law are all associated with the symbolic order, the phallus, and the masculine; the real, on the other hand is associated with the primal, bestial, physical, embodied experience, as well as the feminine and the abject.

The abject marks a "primal repression": it recalls the real and threatens a falling back into that state, a questioning of one's sense self, and a loss of connection to the symbolic order (Kristeva, 1982, p. 10). The abject disturbs identity and threatens the borders that have been established between human and animal, culture and nature, self and other. In signalling this categorical breakdown, the abject draws one "toward the place where meaning collapses" and so "is radically excluded" from normative society, thought, and behaviour (p. 2). Facing the abject is therefore a traumatic experience, and a common reaction to it is disgust and horror. Any activities or substances which evoke disgust or horror are all part of the abject, such as bodily fluids and excrement, disease, open wounds, death and decay, cannibalism, bodily alteration or

transformation, mutation, hybridity, dismemberment, and even sexual perversion. However, the abject is, paradoxically, associated with both fear and *jouissance*, as people are often both disgusted by and drawn to that which is abject. This helps to explain the popularity and attraction of the horror film, the most abject of genres—what Carroll calls the paradox of horror (1990)—as well as the interplay between sexual arousal and fear or disgust.

Body horror is a particularly abject subgenre of horror, as it focuses on uncontrollable bodily transformation, mutation, or alteration and so may seek to remind viewers of the malleability of their own bodies and the precarity of their own bodily autonomy. The horror and revulsion experienced at the sight or experience of bodily mutation—as in, for example, David Cronenberg's 1986 film *The Fly* in which a scientist combines his own genetic information with that of a housefly and begins gradually transforming into a grotesque monster—can be particularly deep and visceral, resulting in the urge to vomit or look away. By transforming from a human into a monster, *The Fly*'s protagonist embodies the fear of transforming from the human to the animal—the symbolic to the real—or breaking down those categories altogether. Most importantly, the abject monster elicits reactions of both fear *and* disgust—fear alone is not enough to signal the abject. Although this dissertation does not focus on horror games, many of the monstrous creatures I discuss are designed using tropes commonly found in body horror and so evoke the abject by weaving together fear and disgust in the same way (see, for example, my discussion of the broodmother in chapter 5 or the Crones in chapter 6). This threat of categorical breakdown and the implicit anthropocentric assumption that becoming animalistic or monstrous means a reversion or devolution is connected to the fear of the primal and bestial within one's own psyche. The abject is therefore tied to the fear that if humans stop repressing that primal, bestial, monstrous, *feminine* aspect of themselves, they will lose control. According to

psychoanalysis, then, this belief in an ongoing struggle between the physical and the mental is why so many aspects related to bodily needs, processes, and urges are considered abject, disgusting, and threatening.

The abject is a useful concept for understanding the psychological and cultural preoccupation with and disgust towards otherness, especially regarding bodies that are non-normative, hybrid, mutated, altered, excessive, or transformed—bodies that are considered "monstrous" within a normative worldview. However, normative female bodies are also subject to this same disgust and repression: reproductive processes such as menstruation, pregnancy, birthing, and breastfeeding, as well as menopause and aging, are all especially aligned with the abject. Kristeva's work specifically demonstrated the ways in which female bodies, particularly menstruating and maternal female bodies, have been treated as abject within cultural and religious traditions, and discussed how rituals of purification relate to patriarchal control over those bodies. The process of abjection frames biologically female bodies as unclean, impure, repulsive, and out of control, thereby positioning femaleness as something that should be reviled, repressed, and controlled by patriarchal power and societal structures that favour male bodies and masculine identities and harness reproductive processes for patriarchal purposes. This division between the embodied, natural, impure/unclean feminine and the mental, "civilized," pure/clean masculine reinforces the taxonomical patriarchal hierarchy which places women beneath men.[8]

[8] While there is much feminist writing that valorizes the association between the female body and the natural, the visceral, and the primal, these associations can still betray an underlying misogyny (see Russo, 1994). As Laura Mulvey (1991) points out, "the female psyche may well identify with misogynistic revulsion against the female body," meaning that regardless of whether the developer/player identifies as female, female monstrosity is still often designed and interpreted as horrifying and abject (p. 146).

This repression and control stems from fear: female bodies are considered mysterious, dangerous, powerful, and threatening to patriarchy—i.e., male dominance, control, and lineage—and masculine identity, which is expanded to include all humanity, since man has been positioned as the universal human default within that patriarchal framework. This was made clear by Kristeva (1982) when she stated that "fear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power" (p. 16). The archaic mother, or the primal mother, is the mother of earliest infancy—whom Freud (1949) called the "first nourisher and first seducer" (p. 188)—and is a repressed presence in the human psyche and, unsurprisingly, a common monstrous presence in many horror films (Creed, 1986; 1993a). Accordingly, psychoanalytic theory argues that children must reject their mothers in order to form their own identities and become part of the symbolic order, which is represented by the "imaginary father" with whom they must identify. At the moment the child rejects the mother for the father, the mother becomes abject. Of course, with her female body, she was always already abject.

The abject is a category defined in opposition to perceived normalcy, it is what people are taught to fear and reject. However, that fear stems from the knowledge that what is thought of as the self—the pure, clean, correct self—is precarious, subject to changes and experiences that are mostly out of one's control, and only barely removed from that which is categorized as other. In other words, people fear the abject because they fear becoming abject or they fear the ways in which their bodies are already abject. As a theoretical concept, then, the abject is useful for pinpointing why certain things—bodies, creatures, objects—evoke fear, horror, and disgust and how this evocation, and the design choices behind it, functions as a tool of oppression. In that sense, the abject provides a way to understand the psychological impetus behind cultural behaviours, norms, and representations. It is a framework for understanding reactions to certain

bodies and why those bodies are represented in certain ways. However, the abject is also embedded in psychoanalytic theory, which is somewhat difficult to reconcile with feminist analysis. In what follows I discuss the problems with psychoanalysis and clarify the ways I will be engaging with it—or, perhaps more accurately, *not* engaging with it—in this project.

The Abject and Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalytic theory was initially applied to the academic study of film in the 1960s when film studies was establishing itself as a discipline, with emphasis on subject positionality, the unconscious, castration anxiety, and the screen as mirror-stage. Although psychoanalysis has been widely critiqued and debated, its influence in the study of film, literature, and television is extensive. In film studies, psychoanalysis seemed capable of accounting for the ways in which patriarchal ideology had influenced and delineated the representation of women, allowing for a deeper analysis beyond "reflection theory"—that a film acts as a mirror for the society which produced it—which was considered too superficial. The study of cinematic horror has since been dominated by psychoanalytic models of interpretation (Harrington, 2014, p. 2–4, 30–31; Neale, 1980, p. 98). In his article "Psychoanalysis in / and / of the Horror Film" Stephen Jay Schneider (2004) has insisted that horror is so intimately bound up with psychoanalysis that it must necessarily remain a key aspect of horror scholarship, and in her book *Maternal Horror Film: Melodrama and Motherhood* (2013), Sarah Arnold has suggested that psychoanalytic theories are essential for studying the mother figure in film. However, psychoanalysis has its share of problems. Apart from the inherent heterosexism in psychoanalysis, as applied to film it assumes that spectators occupy a hegemonic (and therefore "neutral" masculine) position: as Erin Harrington (2014) has noted, "the ideological position inherent in the apparatus becomes the ideological position shared by the viewer—so, for instance, when the image of women becomes

spectacle, the spectator becomes complicit in this" (p. 32). Stephen Prince (1996) has similarly argued that psychoanalytic film theory relies too heavily on the notion of an "ideal," passive spectator and leaves no room for considerations of oppositional or resistant viewing strategies.

Although the abject is embedded in psychoanalysis, a patriarchal theory developed by men and preoccupied with understanding the masculine and marginalizing the feminine, the concept can be, and has been, used to analyse visual media without the trappings and assumptions that accompany psychoanalytical approaches. For example, Creed (1986, 1993a) applied the concept in her analysis of the "monstrous-feminine" in horror films (i.e., representations of the abject which construct monstrosity in association with female reproductive functions, sexual difference, and castration anxiety) while remaining critical of both Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis.[9] Most importantly, Creed (1993a) has emphasized her stance that "the association of woman's maternal and reproductive functions with the abject [is] a construct of patriarchal ideology … Woman is not, by her very nature, an abject being" (p. 83). I also take this stance and so like Creed I use the abject as a tool to identify harmful tropes that are tied to patriarchal fear of and disgust towards female bodies; however, rather than trying to understand *why* the female body horrifies the human psyche (Kristeva, Creed, and others have done that work already), my aim is to highlight, deconstruct, interpret, and critique the ways game developers utilize and remediate the popular culture aesthetic, thematic, and narrative tropes of

[9] For example, Creed has challenged the notion that women are feared because they are castrated and has suggested instead that they are terrifying because "man endows her with imaginary powers of castration" (p. 87). Creed considered the image of Medusa's head as a representation of the *vagina dentata* and as *femme castratrice* and noted that such forms of monstrosity look to the "*difference* of female sexuality as a difference which is grounded in monstrousness" (p. 2, emphasis in original). Kristeva also pushed back against problematic assumptions in psychoanalysis: as Rina Arya (2014) has observed, Kristeva "radically reworked the narrative of psychoanalytical development" because she was dissatisfied with its limitations and also worked to emphasize the importance of the maternal in social development (p. 31). However, she still upheld certain misogynistic beliefs, such as the necessity of rejecting the maternal to form individual identity—a harmful idea that Creed and several other critics have vehemently rejected.

monstrosity that render the female body abject. This is, therefore, more of a feminist cultural and media studies project than a psychoanalytic reading of games. While I do adopt the abject specifically from Kristeva's work, I also read it through Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine, as this approach allows me to divorce it from much of the ideologically fraught context of psychoanalysis and apply it specifically to visual representations of monstrosity. As I discuss in the following section, I also weave together the abject and the grotesque, as they are complementary concepts for analyzing monstrosity in relation to gender.

The Abject and the Grotesque

Together with the monstrous-feminine, in this project I also read some female monsters as evoking the artistic tradition of the grotesque. In Western aesthetic theory, the grotesque challenges traditional or normative notions of beauty. The grotesque body often involves the combination of incongruous parts, the transformation from one form to another, and disproportionality, excessiveness, and exaggeration—in this way, it resembles the abject as both concepts involve crossing or dissolving boundaries. It also points to monstrosity, as many of the monsters I discuss are hybrid creatures, undergo transformations, and have exaggerated or "excessive" bodies. In this sense, grotesque bodies are, like monstrous bodies, indicators of difference and otherness, and underscore Western society's preoccupation with physical appearance. In *Rabelais and His World*, one of the most influential studies of the grotesque in literature and visual culture, Mikhail Bakhtin (1968) coined the phrase "the grotesque body," arguing that it violates "natural boundaries" by being hybrid, excessive, or exaggerated in size and proportion (p. 40). An example of a grotesque creature is the mythical Chimaera, a hybrid being composed of lion, goat, and snake body parts. Like the abject, the grotesque is also related to "the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs" and "it

therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth … it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving" (p. 21). Importantly, Bakhtin demonstrated that the grotesque is not an ahistorical concept, as it shifts along with changing cultural perceptions of the body, physical difference, the comedic, and the monstrous. Although it is a literary trope, the grotesque is not simply a source of terror or laughter, rather Bakhtin saw it as a philosophy or way of life that could potentially lead to political autonomy (see Edwards & Graulund, 2013, p. 25).

Just as I read Kristeva's abject through Creed's application of it to the monstrous-feminine, I also read Mikhail's grotesque body through Mary Russo's work in *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (1994). Russo examined the concept through the lens of gender and located women's bodies in Western cultural discourses and expressions of the grotesque. Since the term "grotesque" comes from the word "grotto," she noted that it evokes the "hidden, earthy, dark, material, immanent, visceral" and "as bodily metaphor, the grotesque cave tends to look like (and in the most gross metaphorical sense be identified with) the cavernous anatomical female body" (Russo, 1994, p. 1). Her interpretation of the female grotesque was provoked by Bakhtin's image of the "senile, pregnant hag"—a figure which embodies the abject, the monstrous-feminine, and the discursive intersection of ableism, ageism, and sexism as well as being the "deepest expression of the grotesque" (p. 29). This is unsurprising because the grotesque, in its association with the abnormal, the marginal, and the monstrous, is often linked to the feminine (Russo, 1994, p. 5–6). Specifically, the grotesque body is a feminine or feminized body, anchored in the spectacle, subject to the male gaze, and controlled by gendered power dynamics. However, since the grotesque female body is disturbing and unsettling, Russo (1994) emphasized the agency exercised by the unruly woman "making a spectacle of herself,"

forcing the male gaze to turn away from her strange body and challenging gendered power dynamics by simply existing as unapologetically monstrous. Classic male standards of beauty are contained, closed, and static, whereas the female grotesque is boundless, open, and dynamic. The grotesque is therefore powerful because it can challenge masculinist visions of women's bodies and redefine social categories through the loss of boundaries—especially because an understanding of the "normal" is dependent on the existence of the "grotesque" as its opposite.

Just as the abject forces a confrontation with fears and anxieties relating to bodily purity, conceptual categories, and the fluidity of identity, the grotesque body encourages a reconsideration of what it means to be human or "normal," and what it means to deviate from the norm and challenge the category of "human." This suggests that the grotesque offers a creative space for conceptualizing ambivalence, distortion, exaggeration, excessiveness, abnormality, anomaly, and the bizarre. Ambivalence is key: just as the abject causes an experience of horror, revulsion, and macabre fascination all at once, the grotesque can encourage simultaneous disgust and amusement, anxiety and laughter. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986) have theorized the grotesque as a liminal category that is not entirely monstrous Other, rather it is a "boundary phenomenon of hybridization or inmixing, in which the self and the other become enmeshed in an inclusive, heterogeneous, dangerously unstable zone" (p. 193). As a boundary phenomenon, the grotesque is liminal—it exists between multiple worlds or bodies, like the Chimaera—and because it permeates, crosses, and dissolves those boundaries, it is similar to the abject.

Things and bodies become abject when they are rejected and expelled—they are not inherently horrific or abnormal, rather they cause a reaction of disgust or horror because they are a reminder of a collapse of identity, boundaries, and meaning. The grotesque, on the other hand, is an aesthetic that is inherently abnormal and unsettling, designed to force a confrontation with

and question of the very nature of "normalcy." While using either the abject or the grotesque as labels risks reinforcing a binary approach to what is "normal" and "abnormal," by combining fascination and attraction with disgust and repulsion, the ambivalent nature of these categories leaves space for creativity, transgression, subversion, interpretation, and reclamation. For example, a hybrid creature is both grotesque and abject in that it combines incongruous parts and therefore signals categorical breakdown. As previously mentioned, the hybrid monstrous woman represents misogynistic attitudes towards non-normative women's bodies; however, she is also sometimes presented as a queen or goddess figure, like the infamous villainess Lolth from *Dungeons & Dragons* who is part beautiful woman and part giant spider. Although she is a villain, her attitude, design, and positioning make her a fan favourite and the subject of much celebratory fan art. In this sense, the game frames her as abject—a horrific hybrid monster—while players have reclaimed her as a powerful feminist goddess—a grotesque woman who embraces her hybrid monstrousness and threatens patriarchal society.

Using the abject and the grotesque together is not unusual, as, according to Rina Arya (2014), "by definition, the grotesque is abject" because grotesque beings are heterogenous, ambiguous, and anomalous (p. 89–90). Russo has also discussed Kristeva's work, arguing that the grotesque body is "monstrous, deformed, excessive, and *abject*" (p. 9, emphasis added). Russo has noted that "the privileged site of transgression for Kristeva, the horror zone par excellence, is the archaic, maternal version of the female grotesque" (p. 10). Edwards and Graulund (2013) pointed out that "the process of abjection is … associated with deformed bodies and oozing bodily fluids" and "the abject, or the state of abjection, is articulated in, and through, grotesque language" (p. 33). Like the abject, the grotesque is ambiguous, ambivalent—it resists categorization and explodes boundaries—and it similarly has the potential to destabilize

ideological norms. It is also a historical, political concept, related to the historical (and ongoing) exclusion and marginalization of certain bodies. This ambiguity renders any kind of generalized theory of monstrosity impossible, yet together the grotesque and the abject provide useful conceptual frameworks for analyzing the design of monstrous bodies in media. As I discuss in the following section, along with combining abjection with the grotesque, I also engage with an expanded conceptualization of the abject to consider more real-world implications of categorizing certain bodies as abject and reacting to them with disgust and revulsion.

Expanding the Abject

While the abject has been primarily applied to the analysis of female bodies and positionality, it has also been used to understand the cultural positioning and representations of non-normative and marginalized identities more broadly. In her revision of Kristeva's theories on the abject, Tina Chanter (2008) has argued that the "imaginary father" of identification who represents the symbolic order can be understood as "any ... socially sanctioned script endowed with the capacity to render some individuals inferior to others" (p. 45). These social texts, which "typically privilege whiteness, male heterosexuality, or the middle class," are mediated by social processes that are "dictated by structural features of economic social life, infused with divisions of poverty, racialized hierarchy, and gender/sex taboos" (p. 46).[10] The abject can potentially challenge and dissolve the adherence to those imaginary boundaries by revealing the ambiguity and arbitrariness of the borders that separate one's social identifications. However, as Josh Dohmen (2016) has argued in his discussion of Kristeva and Chanter, while the abject has the potential to "contest and even revise one's identifications," there is also that danger that "in

[10] Like Chanter, I understand the imaginary father and the symbolic order in relation to social norms, beliefs, values, and ideology. This approach is important for an analysis that utilizes a psychoanalytic concept without getting bogged down in psychoanalytic assumptions and jargon.

response to the abject one instead reconsolidates one's imaginary boundaries, violently rejecting, and thus performatively recreating, that which is abject" (p. 770). The abject and its resulting affective responses (disgust, horror, fear, etc.) are fundamentally ambiguous: the abject has been used to alienate and marginalize groups of people, yet it can also be used as a tool to challenge and dissolve ideological assumptions and norms, blur boundaries separating bodies and positionalities, and reveal the potentialities within hybridity, liminality, and ambiguity. In this sense, as Dohman argued, abjection allows for hope: "by opening up the imaginary space in which boundaries are blurred, the abject *might* provide the impetus for forming new boundaries, for identifying (oneself and others) differently, for problematizing the slippery associations between others with whom one disidentifies" (p. 773, emphasis in original).

Relatedly, Sara Ahmed (2004) has developed a theory of abjection as that which threatens the fantasy of ontological integrity and argued that the reaction of disgust functions as both the cause and effect of borders: "borders need to be threatened in order to be maintained, or to even appear as borders, and part of the process of 'maintenance-through-transgression' is the appearance of border objects" (p. 87). Abject persons serve as those border objects and it is their perceived threat of transgression—a threat which is, for example, represented through the disturbing appearance and violent behaviour of the mediated monster—that reinforces the borders keeping them marginalized. In reference to William Ian Miller's (1997) work, Ahmed has argued that abjection and disgust also work to create a spatialized hierarchy of power: objects of disgust are associated with "belowness" vis-à-vis the subject, preserving the "aboveness" of said subject (p. 89).

Ahmed also recognizes the power of the signifier—abject bodies as represented indirectly or symbolically, like monsters in video games—in this process when she discusses

performativity as "the way in which a signifier, rather than simply naming something that already exists, works to generate that which it apparently names" (p. 92). That performance, according to Ahmed, relies on the repetition of norms and conventions—and tropes and motifs, such as the monstrous mother or the *femme fatale*—and generates a community bound by the intelligibility of disgust. That community is bound by its own security as being "above" and "normal"—the "us" rather than the "them" or the "Self" rather than the "Other"—and follows the imperative to reject and expel the object of disgust.

Social abjection has been defined as "the abjection of people(s) in social spaces" which "involves the exploitation, marginalization and expulsion of certain social groups to reinforce ideas of cultural hegemony" (Arya, 2014, p. 145). This concept has been applied to the study of film: for example, David Sibley (1995) reads Martin Scorsese's 1976 film *Taxi Driver* as reinforcing anxieties around certain groups—particularly those found on city streets at night, such as sex workers and people with drug dependence—by having the protagonist view them as "filth," "garbage," "animals," and "scum" (p. 61). Arya (2014) reads the film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Forman, 1975) as exploring the exploitation and marginalization of people with mental illnesses through the mapping and use of abject spaces like a mental institution (p. 145–6). Arya interprets the protagonist McMurphy as abject "because he calls boundaries into question and threatens the cohesion of the asylum" (2014, p. 146). As a concept, the abject therefore connects the disgust, horror, fear, and anxiety felt when confronting the abject to marginalization and social exclusion. The identities that are presented as abject go beyond a preoccupation with sexual difference and include potentially any marginalized or othered identity. As such, the abject is a fundamental concept for understanding how certain identities become marginalized, especially through media portrayals that reinforce an association between

those identities and fear, disgust, and rejection. As I demonstrate in this project, there is considerable overlap between abjection and monstrosity and so the monstrous, like the abject, can function as a tool of oppression. Specifically, as a psychological concept, abjection helps to explain the ways in which monsters evoke horror (that combination of fear and disgust) in order to encourage the player to *want* to kill them, and to not think of them as people. As I explore in the next section, this application of the abject to an analysis of cultural attitudes and representations of marginalized groups means that it can be used as a conceptual tool for an intersectional feminist project.

Intersectionality and Abjection

When engaging with the processes and consequences of othering certain groups of people, focusing solely on gender can result in an analysis that lacks nuance. Indeed, monstrosity is a particularly fruitful category because, as Cohen (1996) has noted in his book *Monster Theory,* "any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body" (p. 7). In order to pursue an intersectional project and engage with an expanded conceptualization of the abject into social abjection, I explicitly highlight the ways in which my objects of study are rendered monstrous not only because of their femaleness but because they are female *and* otherwise non-normative: fat, old, physically anomalous, disabled, mentally ill or mad, and/or queer.[11] Sometimes the monsters I discuss display all these identity signifiers at once, sometimes only one or two. However, understanding the ways in which, for example, ageism and sexism intersect to produce hateful representations of elderly women as hags and crones offers a far more nuanced understanding of symbolic patriarchal violence and oppression

[11] I use the term "non-normative" here to emphasize that the "typical" idealized female character portrayed in Western popular culture has traditionally been a slim, able-bodied, cis-gendered, heterosexual, neurotypical, young woman.

as manifested in video games than simply looking at a hag character as only female or only old. While this seems self-evident, the point has been clearly articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term "intersectionality": "the way we imagine discrimination or disempowerment often is more complicated for people who are subjected to multiple forms of exclusion," therefore "we might have to broaden our scope of how we think about where women are vulnerable, because different things make different women vulnerable" (2017).

Crenshaw argued for the importance of considering race and gender together, as Black women in the United States experienced a specific kind of discrimination in the legal system because they were women *and* because they were Black. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) built on the concept of intersectionality—interrelated and overlapping social institutions like gender, sexuality, race, and class, and their forms of oppression—to develop and expand her articulation of Black feminist thought. Collins referred to the "overall social organization within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained" as the "matrix of domination" (1990, p. 227). The intersection of racism and sexism (as well as classism and heterosexism) is therefore at the heart of intersectionality, although it has since been expanded to include (potentially) all physical and social identity categories. Indeed, as Crenshaw (1991) later argued, her "focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (p. 1245).

In more recent work, Crenshaw, together with Sumi Cho and Leslie McCall (2013), have further expanded the concept of intersectionality into an "analytic sensibility" (p. 788). In other words, it is also useful "as an analytic tool in addressing other marginalized communities and other manifestations of social power" (p. 788). As they note:

> What makes an analysis intersectional—whatever terms it deploys, whatever its iteration, whatever its field or discipline—is its adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power. This framing—conceiving of categories not as distinct but as always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power—emphasizes what intersectionality does rather than what intersectionality is. (p. 795)

As an analytic sensibility primarily concerned with oppressive power structures, "intersectionality helps reveal how power works in diffuse and differentiated ways through the creation and deployment of overlapping identity categories" (p. 797). While an intersectional project does not have to address *all* possible overlapping identity categories, in a talk she gave for the Netroots Nation conference, Crenshaw (2017) acknowledged that "there are many, many different kinds of intersectional exclusions—not just Black women, but other women of color. Not just people of color, but people with disabilities. Immigrants. LGBTQ people. Indigenous people." That expanded understanding of intersectionality is at the heart of my research, as I am particularly concerned with the way monstrosity captures the cultural fear of and hatred towards bodies that exist at the intersection of femaleness and physical difference.

Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall have argued that the future of intersectionality studies is "dependent on the rigor with which scholars harness the most effective tools of their trade to illuminate how intersecting axes of power and inequality operate to our collective and individual disadvantage" (2013, p. 795). Accordingly, my project harnesses the tools of my trade—a close reading methodology drawn from feminist media studies and cultural studies—to illuminate how multiple forms of oppression and discrimination come together in the design of ludic

monstrosity. In the following section, I discuss my methodology and methods, as well as the analytical frameworks that shape and inform this project.

Methodology, Methods, and Analytical Frameworks

Methodology

The methodology deployed in this dissertation is textual and visual analysis, which consists of close readings of media objects in order to analyze how they represent the world. My experience with this methodology is largely drawn from film studies, especially the work of David Bordwell (1989) and feminist film theorists (Williams, 1991; Creed, 1993a), and adapted into game studies (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011; Carr, 2009, 2017; Consalvo & Dutton, 2006). Textual analysis was employed to identify, interpret, analyze, and evaluate the monsters under study and to develop a nuanced and detailed reading of their design and function within the games. As Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2011) have described, close reading "is a continuous process of creating contingent meaning from potential meaning" which involves transforming "symbolic and representational input into meaningful ideation" (p. 2). In this sense, I read representational forms "as aesthetic objects in the context of the creation, manipulation, and interpretation of signs and symbols" (Myers, 2006, p. 48). My methodological approach follows the social semiotics-oriented work of cultural theorists like Angela McRobbie (1978) and Stuart Hall (1997), and film theorists like Bordwell (1989) while also taking into account the mechanics and processes of play that surround and structure engagement with those representational forms, as demonstrated by game scholars who have effectively used textual analysis to analyze the problematic representation of marginalized identities, such as Carr's (2009) analysis of disability in *Dead Space* (see the following chapter for more details on this).

Textual analysis is particularly useful because it is concerned with the way things are represented in media, and game scholars who use it also recognize that games are multimodal texts that involve audiovisual and haptic synthesis (see Serafini, 2011). Textual analysis also inevitably centralizes the researcher's (or the viewer's) own interpretation of the mediated content, a long-established aspect of studying media. As early as 1952, Siegfried Kracauer—who introduced the term "qualitative content analysis"—argued for the necessity of interpretation and argumentation in order to understand the meaning of a media message. He maintained that while it is important to study the manifest content that is communicated in media, it is equally important to investigate the latent meanings of a message—meanings that are not necessarily explicit but arise through the reader's/viewer's/user's interpretation. As Alison Harvey (2020) has discussed in her book *Feminist Media Studies*, critical understanding of a media text requires this interpretive analysis that goes beyond a surface-level reading:

> A close analysis of the signs, codes, and symbols of media texts and how they construct and present the world provides a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the functioning of representation than simply asserting that the presence of images of particular people indicates fairness, equality, or justice. (p. 41)

The researcher therefore takes on an interpretive role when analyzing the media object and that object itself is understood within its social context (for more on this, see Harvey, 2020; Malliet, 2007). As Martin Barker (2003) has emphasized, that interpretative role should be open and transparent, while theory and analysis should be integrated in a meaningful and convincing way. As I discuss in the final section of this chapter, feminist approaches to media analysis, especially those found in feminist film studies, have been particularly influential for my research

methodology, as they emphasize the centrality of identity and positionality in their interpretive analysis, and work to connect mediated messages to real world oppression.

Questions of identity and positionality in the context of close reading are important because reactionary and conservative members of the gaming community have insisted that video games should be "just for fun" and pushed back against reading "too much" or "too deeply" into games and their meaning. This pushback has been directed in particularly hostile and violent ways towards feminist critics and scholars who interpret video game narratives or characters as misogynistic, such as in Sarkeesian's "Tropes vs. Women in Video Games" series (2013–2017). Indeed, as Bonnie Ruberg (2019) has noted, close reading of video games "is still controversial work":

> The ever-looming accusation of "over-reading" continues to deter many would-be close readers from exploring games as textual objects (loosely termed) with significant attention to detail. This is especially true when it comes to interpreting games through socially engaged lenses. (p. 56–7).

Backlash against interpretive analysis has also happened to film scholars: in the early 1990s, Alexander Doty worked to defend the right of scholars to interpret and critique cinema through a queer lens. He lamented the skepticism he faced, particularly when he would be accused of "pathetic and delusional attempts to see something that isn't there" (Doty, 1993, p. vii). Because of this, Elizabeth Freeman (2010) has argued that close reading is a queer process of unfolding: "to close read is to linger, to dally, to take pleasure in tarrying, and to hold out that these activities allow us to look both hard and askance at the norm" (p. xvii). In the context of game studies, Ruberg (2019) has applied a close reading methodology to reveal the hidden queer meaning within video games. Similarly, I use it to reveal and highlight how the design of female

monstrosity in games reinforces misogynistic ideologies in various ways. Some of those ways are overt while many are symbolic and hidden, requiring a close reading "between the lines." In this sense, close reading in this project is both a methodology and a political stance.

Methods

The games under study in this project are *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax & Arneson, 1974–ongoing), *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED, 2015), the *God of War* series (Sony Santa Monica Studio, 2005–2015), *Dante's Inferno* (Visceral Games, 2010), *Diablo III* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2012), the *Mass Effect* series (BioWare, 2007–2012), the *Dragon Age* series (BioWare, 2009–2014), and *The Elder Scrolls IV: Skyrim* (Bethesda, 2011). These games were selected because they feature female-coded humanoid monsters as regular enemies and as main antagonists and boss monsters, thereby centralizing them in the narrative and gameplay. They are also well-known, successful, and acclaimed games that are exemplary models of mainstream Western ludic fantasy and science fiction. In this way, they are important examples for the consideration and analysis of how gendered monstrosity is represented by the game industry.

In addition to their popularity, acclaim, and success, these games were also chosen because they centralize female monstrosity in a fantasy and science fiction generic context, rather than within the horror genre. I am eschewing horror games in favour of science fiction and fantasy (SFF) games because, while still generally understudied, monstrosity in horror games has been addressed by several game scholars, many of whom apply psychoanalytic film theory to their objects of study following in the tradition of gender-focused horror film scholarship. Although more can certainly be done in that area, gendered monstrosity in fantasy and science fiction games has not received much scholarly attention, as is demonstrated in my literature

review chapter, and so constitutes a considerable gap in game studies scholarship. This is important because the function of the monster is very different in horror than it is in SFF, as I discussed in the previous chapter.

I played all the games under study myself, recording key gameplay segments—those involving encounters with humanoid monsters, whether during random battles, major boss battles, in conversations, or in noninteractive cutscenes—and taking hundreds of screenshots for close analysis. Since many of the games I played are hundreds of hours long, I did not record the entirety of my gameplay sessions because that would have required extensive data storage and much of that content was not important for analysis (such as inventory management, quests and side quests where the player-character does not interact with or encounter monsters, periods of time in which I paused the game to take notes, etc.). I have played all the games under study previously, so I knew when the major segments involving encounters with monsters would occur, and whenever an encounter happened that I did not expect or recall, I was able to quickly record the footage by using the game capture function that starts the recording 10 seconds before the record button was pressed. During and after these key segments, I paused the game and took detailed hand written gameplay notes in a journal, specifically focusing on the following aspects of the encounter: gameplay mechanics (how does the game make the player interact with the input devices in order to fight the monster?); the abilities, weapons, and items afforded to the player-character, the player-character's companions if any, and the monsters; how the monsters are framed and presented, such as in the backstory or lore, in dialogue, in the in-game descriptions and images of the monsters (for example in the bestiary), and in the paratextual or marketing materials (for more on why paratext matters, see Consalvo, 2017); the details of every direct encounter with the monsters including audio-visual portrayal, atmosphere, music,

dialogue, and mise-en-scène; and the ways the player-character engages with, fights, and kills those monsters, including difficulty level and frequency of appearance (do they come in endless swarms or are they unique, singular boss fights?).

These notes and screenshots were used to determine the most commonly recurring (and broadly identifiable) tropes of female monstrosity, which feature as distinct chapters in this dissertation: sexualized and/or seductive hybrid monsters, maternal monsters, and the hag/crone figure. Sexualization, hybridity, transformation, fatness, madness, and non-normative or anomalous physicality are design tropes which cut across, or intersect with, the three broader categories and so are discussed within each chapter. Individual monsters that embody those tropes are closely analyzed and discussed in relation to representation, monstrosity, the abject, and the grotesque. Because I am primarily concerned with *how* monstrous women are represented (rather than, say, *how often*), this project uses textual analysis rather than content analysis. I am therefore not preoccupied with recording precise numbers of encounters—an effort which is particularly difficult in games with randomly generated enemies—though I do note if the monsters under study are encountered only once or several times throughout the games, and whether they appear alone or in groups or "swarms," as these aspects can influence how those monsters are read and interpreted. For example, a singular mutated monster might be interpreted as a one-off threat to be dealt with, whereas fighting an entire species of monstrous creatures can be interpreted as genocidal or parallel with causing extinction. I also highlight whether a monster is presented as a generic enemy "type" to fight, centralized as a major boss enemy, or designed as a character with dialogue and backstory and explore the meaning behind the different ways of presenting and framing those monsters. These categories often overlap; for example, in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, Hagravens are regularly encountered as enemies to

fight as the player traverses the world, but during specific quests the player-character can speak with a unique, named Hagraven. While these conversations may also end in a fight with that Hagraven, it is noteworthy that she is given a name and a voice as those aspect distinguish her as a character to interact with rather than simply a creature to kill. In each chapter I elaborate on the details of that monster, its portrayal and role in the game, why its design and presentation are important or noteworthy, and how it fits into my analysis.

Finally, to continue adding nuance beyond my interpretation of the game texts, I examined online player, developer, and critic/journalist discourse regarding the games and monsters under study. This information is woven together with cultural/historical considerations and contexts to give an idea of authorial intent and other players' interpretations and reactions. For this aspect of the project, I also took an interpretive approach to analyzing developer blogs, interviews, and forum posts; player blogs, forum posts, and comments; and critical/journalistic writing (McMillan, 2000). While I could find few developer interviews and posts, those that I did find revealed some of the inspiration for and rationale behind the female monsters under study, such as the video elaborating on the design of the succubus Empusa as discussed in chapter 4. Critical writing specifically on ludic female monstrosity is also relatively uncommon, though most decry the misogyny inherent in monstrous designs (and a look at the comments section of such posts is always enlightening). Most of the online discourse is in the form of player commentary, which demonstrates which monsters are generally considered the most terrifying, horrific, or disgusting. This analysis also reveals what adjectives are used to describe female monsters, as opposed to male monsters, which provides insight into the affective experiences and responses players had when encountering these monsters.

Analytical Frameworks: Feminist Media and Cultural Studies

As previously mentioned, the approach I take in this project is informed by feminist media studies—an approach to media analysis that uses gender as an analytical lens to uncover the ways in which patriarchal ideology shapes media content, production, and reception. Feminist film scholarship is especially important for this project, as it has tended to focus on the representation of women in order to demonstrate how misogyny manifests. Sometimes misogyny is overt, as in hypersexualized female love interests who exist only as damsels-in-distress or as trophies for the heroic male protagonist; other times it is slightly more subtle, with dangerous women or *femmes fatales* who exercise agency by threatening or manipulating the male protagonist, but must be tamed or killed by the end of film (see Doane, 1991); and sometimes it is symbolic, such as an egg-laying giant alien monster whose mouth looks like a vaginal opening lined with teeth (see Creed, 1993a). In my work I am primarily concerned with the more subtle or symbolic misogyny—women presented as monstrous, hybrid, powerful, threatening—as this ambiguity leaves room for interpretive flexibility and the potential for oppositional readings and feminist reclamations.

That symbolic misogyny, especially in the form of nonhuman and/or monstrous representation, is less frequently addressed in game studies—I am one of the few scholars who have analyzed monstrous women in games (for other examples of scholarship focused on female monstrosity, see my literature review chapter).[12] Although the monstrous creature may be enormous, painstakingly designed and animated, or even a major or final boss, she is often not

[12] Racialized monstrosity has been a slightly more popular focus of critical work, especially directed at games like *Dungeons & Dragons* and *World of Warcraft*. For example, see Higgin (2009) and Young (2016). As a result of critical backlash, Wizards of the Coast has recently announced that their future modules will no longer categorize some races within the game, such as Orcs and Drow, as "evil." See https://dnd.wizards.com/articles/features/diversity-and-dnd for details.

read as a *woman* when considering questions of female representation. For example, in criticism of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015), critics and scholars have focused on analyzing Yennifer and Triss—human sorceresses who are the male protagonist's love interests—and the way they are framed and treated in the game, yet the sirens, female vampires, succubi, harpies, and hags the protagonist continuously slaughters throughout the game are not addressed. Labelling these women as "monsters" seems to make them invisible, easier to hate, fear, and kill. I am invested in making this invisible kind of female representation visible, something Annette Kuhn (1994) considers the fundamental project of feminist film analysis:

> Given the argument that in a sexist society both presences and absences [of women in film] may not be immediately discernible to the ordinary spectator, if only because certain representations appear to be quite ordinary and obvious, then the fundamental project of feminist film analysis can be said to centre on making visible the invisible. (p. 71)

I argue that monsters are invisible in games, perhaps due to their ubiquity or perhaps because they are almost always presented as simply something to kill or flee from. Killing a monster seems ordinary and obvious—we have been telling stories about killing monsters since antiquity. However, it is important to ask why feminist scholars have ignored the female characters who are framed as subhuman, hybrid, hideous, horrific, and monstrous. What can be said about these characters who exist in the game only to be slaughtered by the player? Moreover, most of the female monsters I discuss in this project are not simply "symbolically" female like the previously mentioned alien monster; rather, they are overtly coded as female in their visual design and voice acting, which is why my analysis focuses on humanoid monsters. Numerically, there are far

more female monsters in a game like *The Witcher 3* than any other kind of female character, yet because they are not human and appear only to be killed, they remain invisible.

As Harvey (2020) has demonstrated, "feminist media studies has a long-standing investment in the method of textual analysis" because "scrutinizing how audio-visual texts frame and organize stories through their content and structure—including what they leave out—can reveal how we make meaning of our social world" (p. 39). Although much can be gleaned from the text itself, especially in unpacking the meanings behind its symbols, codes, and signifiers, since games are always played in associative contexts—that is, there is always a "relationship between the connotations embedded in the text of the games, and the associations made by the player" (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011, p. 3)—I also place these monsters within a cultural/historical context. This is important for my project because the design and reception of these monsters are based on shared cultural knowledge, which highlights the importance of connecting in-game design tropes with the tropes of female monstrosity in Western culture, including popular culture, art, and mythology. The knowledge that arises from my close reading of the games under study is therefore situated within its cultural context and framed using analytical perspectives drawn from feminist theory and cultural studies. More specifically, I follow the approach taken by Creed (1993a), who combines a psychoanalytical interpretation with a cultural analysis, reading the monstrous-feminine in popular culture as remediations of mythological female monstrosity. My analysis is also informed by Jane Caputi's (2004) work, in which she unpacks the ways that female or feminized monsters in popular media are remediations or reflections of mythological female archetypes and goddesses. In this sense, she and Creed both performed a close reading of contemporary mediated monstrosity in order to consider how the same kinds of misogyny present in myths, legends, and folklore find their way

into film and television. However, as Erin Harrington (2014) has noted, while Caputi's approach is in many ways similar to Creed's:

> Caputi explores numerous theoretical positions and feminisms, and in doing so allows us to contextualise the myths of "woman" within the wide plethora of human narrative tradition, without necessitating a wholehearted reliance upon (or acceptance of) psychoanalytic tradition. (p. 39)

This connection to cultural and historical traditions combined with elements of psychoanalysis adds nuance and depth to interpretive close reading. It also allows me to connect ludic design choices to tropes, assumptions, beliefs, and associations that are deeply embedded in Western culture, and thereby unpack how these games relate to broader socio-cultural issues.

I conclude this chapter by underscoring that feminist media studies and feminist cultural studies are both interdisciplinary fields. Like my theoretical framework, the methods that I employ to perform this feminist media/cultural analysis are also interdisciplinary. Although my methodology draws from feminist media scholarship and the cultural analysis of monstrosity, my focus on abject, feminized monstrosity in games seeks to not only analyze the monsters themselves, but to also consider how games can encourage new ways of thinking about the abject and monstrosity. As this chapter has discussed, in this project female-coded monsters in a selection of critically acclaimed and commercially successful fantasy and science fiction roleplaying games are analyzed through the lenses of gender, the abject, the grotesque, and intersectionality. In other words, I analyze the way that these monsters are remediations of tropes of abjection found in popular culture and mythology, specifically regarding the ways their abjection is tied to their gender and other intersecting identity markers such as age, body size, physical non-normativity, and queerness. In this sense I am reading the design of these

monsters—their aesthetic, their formal features, their narrative roles, and the broader tropes they embody—through and alongside key concepts in feminist media studies. My purpose here is to provide a thorough examination of the ways their design adheres to and so remediates problematic tropes while also providing space for considering the potential ways they challenge or complicate those tropes and the symbolism behind them. Now that my theoretical concepts, methodology, and analytical frameworks have been discussed, in the next chapter I turn to an overview of the previous scholarship on mediated female monstrosity that this project is informed by and builds upon, thereby setting the stage for the analysis that follows.

Chapter 3

Female and Feminized Monstrosity in Popular Culture:

A Review of the Literature

> *The concept of the border is central to the construction of the monstrous … that which crosses or threatens of cross the "border" is abject. Although the specific nature of the border changes from film to film, the function of the monstrous remains the same—to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability.*
>
> —Barbara Creed (1993a, p. 11)

> *Popular culture serves as a repository of ancient and contemporary mythic and folkloric images and narratives, personalities, icons, and archetypes. Narrative-driven, image-rich, celebrity-populated, hero-worshipping, and monster-mad popular culture is a prime playing field for myth and ritual … Many of us are attracted to popular entertainment because these forms and stories—sensual, symbolically overblown, often vulgar, and truly fantastic—allow us to enter, even in the midst of our organized, bureaucratic, and rationalist world, into a "dreamtime," a state of consciousness characterized by the play of the mythic imagination.*
>
> —Jane Caputi (2004, p. 4)

Monsters have always played central roles in our mythologies, folktales, and legends, so it is perhaps unsurprising that monstrosity has been a fundamental and transdisciplinary subject of cultural scholarship since antiquity. The study of monstrosity has addressed monsters in history, mythology, religion, philosophy, medical and scientific knowledge, literature, art, and popular culture. While an analysis of female video game monsters inevitably involves a discussion of mythological monstrosity and historical teratology, this chapter focuses on works that deconstruct female monstrosity in popular culture. Much of the scholarship on gender, sexuality, and monstrosity has focused on literature, especially in the Gothic tradition (such as Halberstam, 1995), and art (such as Dijkstra, 1986), but because my project involves close readings of female monsters as visual representations, narrative devices, and ludic elements, scholarship on monstrosity in film and games forms the primary foundation of my work.

What follows is an overview of the scholarship on monstrosity in popular culture that connects to this project. This review begins with the way monstrosity has been theorized in film studies, specifically with the monster as "sexual Other." This is followed by a close examination of the association between women and monstrosity, the monstrous-feminine, and the feminized monster. The next section moves into more contemporary work specifically on female monstrosity, including some that builds upon Creed's work and some that eschews psychoanalysis in favour of more socio-historical or mythic approaches. The second half of this chapter focuses on monstrosity in game studies, beginning with theorizations of ludic monstrosity. This is followed by an overview of how scholars have discussed player violence in relation to the zombie and otherwise mutated/infected monsters. Next is work specifically on female monstrosity in games, beginning with scholarship that applies psychoanalytic theories to specific game series. The chapter ends with work that most closely mirrors this project, in that it looks at sexualized and abject female monsters in games, including the *vagina dentata*, and connects them to tropes in other media and mythology. Overall, this chapter provides an overview of the key literature on female monstrosity in film and games upon which this project builds.

The Monster as Sexual Other

Most of the scholarship on monstrosity has focused on horror media, which makes the monster in horror a necessary starting point even though my project focuses more on fantasy and science fiction. Modern scholarship on the horror film genre began in the late 1970s and was steeped in psychoanalytical theory, like nearly all film scholarship in that period (Gledhill, 2007, p. 347). Canadian film scholar Robin Wood's 1978 article "Return of the Repressed" marked the beginning of the critical application of psychoanalytic theories to the American horror film. He

argued that the horror film functions like a nightmare through the repression of something threatening and sexual: “in a society built on monogamy and family there will be an enormous amount of sexual energy that will have to be repressed” but “that which is repressed must always strive to return” (Wood, 1978, p. 27). Most importantly for this project, Wood connected this mediated sexual repression to the monster figure, such as the bestial hybrids in transformation films like *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Mamoulian, 1931), *The Wolf Man* (Waggner, 1941) and *The Island of Dr Moreau* (Taylor, 1977).

In Wood’s book *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (1986), he expanded on his previous work to demonstrate that otherness “functions not simply as something external to the culture or to the self, but also as what is repressed (though never destroyed) in the self and projected outward in order to be hated and disowned” (p. 66). The figure of the monster therefore embodies a “dramatization of the dual concept of the repressed/the Other,” which he finds most frequently manifests as sexual Others, such as women, bisexuals, and homosexuals (Wood, 1986, p. 66–68). The monster film is therefore often a manifestation of misogynistic and/or homophobic anxiety, and Wood specifically highlighted the vampire in Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922) and the monster in Whale’s *Frankenstein* (1931) as implicitly identified with repressed homosexuality. His basic formula for a horror film is that “normality is threatened by the Monster” and he identified normality as “the heterosexual monogamous couple, the family, and the social institutions (police, church, armed forces) that support and defend them” (Wood, 1986, p. 71). Wood’s work popularized the reading of cinematic monsters as representations of our “collective nightmares”—our shared cultural and psychological fears and anxieties (Wood, 1986, p. 78). While Wood did not specifically focus on female monstrosity, his work on the monster as sexual Other is foundational for later scholarship on cinematic monstrosity.

Female Monstrosity and The Horror Film

For the question of woman-as-monster and horror specifically, two key pieces of feminist film theory—Linda Williams' 1984 article "When the Woman Looks" and Barbara Creed's 1986 article "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," which culminated in her 1993 book *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*—have had a profound influence.[13] Williams' discussion of female spectatorship draws on film theorist Laura Mulvey's foundational 1975 article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Mulvey was concerned with using feminist theory to problematize the "gaze" in cinema and the way the cinematic apparatus influenced audience identification with on-screen characters. She coined the term "male gaze" to argue that in classical Hollywood cinema the spectator position offered by filmmakers is a heterosexual masculine one. Female characters, in contrast, are positioned as objects of desire through the eyes of the male characters and through the cinematography, framing, and lighting. This framing is done through the "look" of the camera/director, such as when the shot lingers on the legs or face of a female character, thereby positioning her body—what Mulvey calls a "perfect product … stylised and fragmented by close-ups"—as the "direct recipient of the spectator's look" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 15). As she has explained:

> Going far beyond highlighting a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself. Playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing), cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire. (p. 15)

[13] Carol J. Clover's 1992 book *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* is often cited in work on gender and horror, but she does not address female monstrosity and so will not be discussed here.

Mulvey's theory is based on Freud's concepts of scopophilia, the sexual pleasure derived from looking at erotic objects; fetishism, seeing woman as a substitute for "the lack" or the underlying psychoanalytic fear of castration; and voyeurism, the sexual pleasure derived from looking while not being seen. Using these concepts, she argued that classic Hollywood films allow only for the fetishization of female characters as objects of sexual desire (for both the male characters and male audience members) and for the male audience member to narcissistically identify with the male protagonist. The male characters are given an active gaze as the "bearer[s] of the look," while the female characters are positioned as passive receivers of the gaze, or "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 9).[14]

Building on Mulvey's work, Williams (1984) considered woman's "to-be-looked-at-ness" in horror film, arguing that female protagonists in classic horror films tend to look away from the threat, thereby failing to return the monstrous male gaze. However, Williams also argued that when the female protagonist *does* look back at the monster—like when Christine stares in horror at the revealed face of the Phantom in *The Phantom of the Opera* (Julian et al.,1925) —she is paralyzed with fear. This is because, according to Williams, she associates the monster's horrific nature with her own sexual difference: in this sense, the monster functions as "a distorted mirror-reflection of her own putative lack in the eyes of patriarchy" (Williams, 1984, p. 25). Therefore, even though classic horror cinema generally positions women as victims, there

[14] Controversially, Mulvey argued that for a woman to enjoy these films, she must necessarily identify with the male protagonist. She also claimed that the female gaze is the same as the male gaze, in that women look at themselves through the eyes of men, thereby perpetuating patriarchal norms. Many film theorists have critiqued Mulvey's work, asking where the pleasure of the female spectator is situated within the forms of representation which have been seemingly made mainly by men and for men, and how the theories might change for queer spectators. Indeed, Mulvey was clearly writing with the assumption that these films were made by and for heterosexual men. In 1981, Mulvey addressed these concerns in her article "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)," suggesting that there may exist a metaphoric "transvestism" in which a female viewer might oscillate between a male-coded and a female-coded analytic viewing position.

is also an underlying affinity and identification between her and the monster. For example, in F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), Nina seems to wait by the sea for her husband's return, but it is the vampire arriving by ship to whom she reaches out her arms. Later in the film, she and the vampire stare at one another through a window, until Nina finally opens it, letting him in to drain her blood. The female victim stares at and reaches out to the monster, recognizing that they are both similarly positioned as Other "in patriarchal structures of seeing" (Williams, 1984, p. 85). Importantly, this offers more space for subversion on the part of both the female protagonist and spectator than that suggested in Mulvey's article, because this association between woman and monster implies that women are potentially just as threatening to hegemonic, patriarchal culture (the symbolic order and the phallic power that upholds it) as the monster in the film. Indeed, Williams has argued that the fear of the fetishized horror monster is really a fear of the potency of female sexuality and of woman's sexual difference. While Williams' article assumes a correlation between gender and biological sex, as well as a strictly heteronormative reading of the woman victim-male monster relationship, hers was the first work to suggest that women might identify with the monster and therefore to acknowledge both their marginalization *and* their potential disruptive power as Other. Williams' theory that women might identify with the cinematic monster laid the groundwork for Creed's reading of explicitly female monstrosity in horror film.

Creed and the Feminized Monster

In 1986, Creed published an influential and foundational analysis of female monstrosity—what she termed the "monstrous-feminine" —in horror film. Up until that point, scholarship on monstrosity in cinema had focused on the male monster who terrorizes female victims, while the female monster had been ignored. Although critical of Freudian and Lacanian

psychoanalysis, Creed effectively applied the psychoanalytic concept of the abject, as theorized by feminist scholar Julia Kristeva in her book *Powers of Horror* (1982), to a wide selection of well-known horror films. In her application of abjection to the monstrous-feminine in film, Creed observed that "all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (1986, p. 44). Her analysis includes the primordial Archaic Mother in *Alien* (Scott, 1979) and the Monstrous Womb in *The Brood* (Cronenberg, 1979), which both represent the fear of female generative power; the Possessed Monster in *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973) and the Witch in *Carrie* (De Palma, 1976), which both embody the cultural association of female sexual maturation with corruption and sin; and the Vampire in *The Hunger* (Scott, 1983) and the Castrating Mother in *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), which both directly threaten male sexual identity.

Importantly, Creed pointed out that these are all more than just female versions of male monsters, as "the reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his audience" (1993a, p. 3). Creed argued that it is the transgressive female physicality of these cinematic monsters that is so disturbing and abject, particularly monsters that reproduce without male input. In addition, female monsters who possess phallic symbols and penetrate or castrate their victims evoke male anxieties about being emasculated and feminized. This is an important deviation from traditional psychoanalytic theory, which assumes that the fear generated by the mother is due to her own "castration" —she embodies the lack that the male psyche fears. Creed demonstrated instead that cinematic female monsters are terrifying because they *possess* the power to castrate and/or to reproduce on their own. Accordingly, as Creed has observed, "the feminine is not per se a monstrous sign; rather, it is constructed as such within a patriarchal discourse which reveals a great deal about male

desires and fears" (1986, p. 70). Creed's book *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993a) remains one of the most thorough studies of female monstrosity in film and serves as a central foundation for much of the feminist teratology that followed.

Building on her previous work, Creed (1993b) also analyzed male monsters in horror film in her chapter entitled "Dark Desires: Male Masochism in the Horror Film." She found that they too embody the abject because "in the process of being constructed as monstrous the male is 'feminized'" (Creed, 1993b, p. 121). In other words, "whenever male bodies are represented as monstrous in the horror film they assume characteristics usually associated with the female body: they experience a blood cycle, change shape, bleed, give birth, become penetrable, are castrated" (Creed, 1993b, p. 118). This particularly evident in the vampire—a sexually-ambiguous figure closely associated with blood, lust, sexual predation, and reproduction (Creed, 1993b, p. 122). As Creed noted, historical vampire myths were commonly related to menstruation, and "Dracula's need to replace his blood at periodic intervals suggests he experiences a form of menstrual cycle" (1993b, p. 123). Dracula exemplifies this association: when he bites his victims, who are almost always young virgins lying wan and pale in bed, their blood flows freely and they "rise from their beds filled with a new energy which is both predatory and sexual" (Creed, 1993b, p. 123).

Creed also analyzed the representation of female homosexuality in film in her 1996 chapter "Lesbian Bodies: Tribades, Tomboys and Tarts," arguing that "within homophobic cultural practices, the lesbian body is constructed as monstrous in relation to male fantasies" (p. 87). This is unsurprisingly connected to the female vampire, such as Miriam from *The Hunger* (Scott, 1983), who has been portrayed as lesbian or bisexual and threatening to men since her first literary manifestation in *Carmilla* (Le Fanu, 1872). Creed has observed that the association between female homosexuality and female monstrosity (which specifically threatens male

victims) has existed since antiquity. She has also noted that lesbian monsters are doubly framed as the sexual Other, because they are both female and queer, and the fact that so many mythological and mediated female monsters live in all-female communities or covens while preying on male victims reinforces their threat to patriarchal society.

While these texts are somewhat dated, they provided the foundation for later scholarship on monstrosity, which has remained a popular topic in film studies. Embedded as it is in psychoanalytic theory, much film scholarship on monstrosity has continued to focus on the monster as a representation of woman as the "sexual Other" and to build on the foundational work by Wood, Williams, and Creed. Psychoanalysis has remained a popular framework for deconstructing and explaining gendered monstrosity—again primarily in the horror genre because psychoanalysis lends itself particularly well to horror—but other scholars have eschewed psychoanalytic theories in favour of socio-cultural or mythological approaches. Regardless of methodology and framework, most scholars have continued to connect representations of female monstrosity with "unnatural" or "transgressive" sexual behaviour and reproduction. The root of the horrific as it is commonly constructed in popular culture is an encounter with the feminine, and as such the transgressive female body is often presented as monstrous, grotesque, abject. Now that the early foundational texts have been discussed, this chapter will turn to scholarship on female monstrosity from the 21st Century, followed by a review of monstrosity in game studies.

Contemporary Female Monstrosity

Caputi and the Goddess-Monster

Connecting cinematic monstrosity to the abject has remained a popular approach in film scholarship since Creed's foundational work, particularly because abjection can be mobilized to

rethink normative identities (Thomas, 2008). However, not all studies of female monstrosity use a psychoanalytical approach or focus on the abject. In her book *Goddesses and Monsters*, Caputi (2004) has unpacked the framing of the female goddess-monster within mythology and its connections to popular culture. Her work explores the ways in which patriarchal myth resurfaces in film, advertising, art, literature, and news, and how the primal, powerful mother-goddess figure has been systematically transformed and maintained as a monstrous *vagina dentata* or a seductive *femme fatale* in popular culture.

Caputi analyzed the film *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975) alongside others like *Aliens* (Cameron, 1986), *Species* (Donaldson, 1995), and *Independence Day* (Emmerich, 1996) to demonstrate how filmmakers have symbolically connected female reproductive organs with monstrosity (2004, p. 23–36). She has also discussed the ways in which films remediate the "patriarchal rewritings of egalitarian myth" which "recast goddess as devil, monster, and whore" (Caputi, 2004, p. 13). For example, she reads the gaping, sharp-toothed maw of the shark in *Jaws* as a threatening *vagina dentata* but also a reference to ancient mythological sea goddesses who ruled over both life and death, such as Tiamat from Babylonian mythology. In this sense, she argued that the ocean is the primal womb—the source of all life—but also a deadly abyss that contains unknown horrors, like giant sharks. Similarly, she has argued that the *femme fatale*, such as the seductive, lethal, shape-shifting alien from *Species*, is "a popular incarnation of the Fates" (Caputi, 2004, p. 328)—three ancient goddesses who control the cycle of existence—since *fatale* or "fatal" is etymologically linked to "fate." The *femme fatale* is a character archetype that was popularized in cinema in the *film noir* genre—such as Brigid O'Shaughnessy (Mary Astor) in *The Maltese Falcon* (Huston, 1941)—but encompasses any kind of dangerous, deceptive, seductive, self-serving woman who tempts and uses the male protagonist for her own gain (Doane, 1991).

Caputi's work has convincingly argued that this act of transforming goddesses into monsters and *femmes fatales* is a means to systematically disempower women, undermine female power, and therefore serve patriarchal ideology. Indeed, the historical degradation of female potency paved the way for "the popular manifestations of women as snaky femmes fatales, dragon ladies, monsters, and witches" (Caputi, 2004, p. 328). While there are several overlaps between Caputi's work and earlier psychoanalysis-based scholarship, she has demonstrated that the mythic, rather than the psychological, also provides a rich methodology for considering cinematic female monstrosity.

Santos and Female Sexual Development

In her book *Unbecoming Female Monsters*, Cristina Santos (2017) connected the various stages of the female sexual maturation cycle to monster archetypes such as vampires, werewolves, and witches. Her analysis focuses on monstrous female anatomy because, as she has argued (echoing Creed though she does not cite Creed's work), "woman is not *born* monstrous but is *constructed* as such" (Santos, 2017, p. xiii). This construction occurs through what Santos identifies as the "cult of the female body" and the "patriarchal anxieties around its reproductive malleability and sexual power" (Santos, 2017, p. xiii). She demonstrated how phallocentric discourse exercises dominance over the female body by depicting women "who fail to accept their predefined roles within their culture and society as monstrous" (Santos, 2017, p. xv). Namely, Santos' work demonstrated how the ugly old woman becomes the crone, witch, or hag if she is too intelligent; the beautiful young woman becomes the siren if she is too expressive; the sexually promiscuous woman becomes the succubus or vampire; and the monstrous mother or step-mother becomes the fairy tale witch (2017, p. xvii). As Santos has argued, each of these kinds of women are archetypal "insofar as they are recurring images that are encountered

throughout history; examples of this can be found in our earliest oral traditions and mythologies … Those women performing outside of these established roles become 'monstrous'" (2017, p. xvii). This obsession with defining, categorizing, and policing the female body involves placing it as the object of the male gaze in popular culture (Mulvey, 1975) and therefore framing it as an object for cultural consumption. In this way, my project mirrors Santos' in its focus on how ludic female monsters are designed in relation to a presumed female maturation from Maiden to Mother to Crone through the archetypes of the succubus, broodmother, and crone/hag.

Santos has also argued that although female monsters in popular culture have been designed according to "particular androcentric codes protecting male dominant power structures," current trends may support a positive re-appropriation of female sexualization. In this way, she has shown that women can "un-become" the monster (2017, p. 159). As examples of these trends, she has pointed to contemporary media that retell the story of the evil queen/wicked witch as "a victim of her sociocultural environment and patriarchal standards of beauty" (Santos, 2017, p. 105) such as the films *Mirror, Mirror* (Singh, 2012), *Snow White, The Fairest of Them All* (Thompson, 2001), *Maleficent* (Stromberg, 2014), and the television series *Once Upon a Time* (2011–2018).

Harrington and Gynaehorror

Erin Harrington (2018) built on Creed's work to discuss female monstrosity in contemporary horror films, though she also critiques the dominance of psychoanalytical frameworks in the study of gender and horror. Throughout her book *Women, Monstrosity, and Horror Film: Gynaehorror*, she provides a schema for understanding what she terms "gynaehorror"—the entanglement of technology, monstrosity, female reproduction, and horror. Like Santos (and this project), her analysis explores various stages of normative cisgendered

female sexual development, including virginity, pregnancy, birth, motherhood, and menopause as they are symbolically or literally represented in film in order to shock and horrify. Her work is both a feminist interrogation and counter-reading of gynaehorror, "that both accounts for and opens up new spaces within a mode of representation that has often been accused … of being misogynistic" (Harrington, 2018, p. 3). She has offered gynaehorror as an interpretive lens but also as a mode of aesthetic, cinematic expression, and in this sense her book functions as a more contemporary reworking of Creed's efforts. Accordingly, she has looked at cinematic "sacrificial virgins, menstrual mothers, and ravenous succubi" as well as films which render the vagina as both "a site of terror: rotting and dying, or filled with teeth or snakes" (Harrington, 2018, p. 7). For Harrington, gynaehorror is a category that marks women as monsters, as well as victims and heroes, "in ways explicitly bound with their femininity, their woman-ness and their reproductive capacities, affects and potentials" (2018, p. 7). It is also a discursive construction that marks the female body as always-already monstrous, no matter its age.

Throughout her analysis, Harrington asks how gynaehorrific narratives chart anxieties about the nature of female subjectivity but also how they might offer space for challenging negative constructions of the female body (2018, p. 12). She found that ideas about normative female (hetero)sexuality are presented in simplistic, binary terms as either fetishized and contained through images of the "tenacious virgin-hero" and the "chaste, feminine sacrificial virgin" or presented as dangerous and threatening through the image of the *vagina dentata* (Harrington, 2018, p. 14). Harrington (2018) also found that horror films about pregnancy "set up a strong oppositional relationship between the pregnant woman and the foetus inside her" (p. 15) and construct motherhood itself as monstrous (p. 17). Finally, she also focused on the understudied topic of the ageism/sexism at work in horror films that exploit the figure of the

older woman, the witch, the crone, the hag, and otherwise "abject barren bodies"—colloquially known as "hagsploitation" (Harrington, 2018, p. 223–270). These kind of gynaehorrific films associate elderly women with disease, madness, deficiency, and a loss of femininity, thereby presenting a particularly negative and harmful view of an already extremely marginalized identity.

Film scholarship on female monstrosity has focused on the monster as sexual Other and the ways in which the female body—especially female sexuality and reproductive processes—is rendered monstrous in popular culture. This involves a process of symbolically and literally representing women as monsters in order to establish and police the boundaries of acceptable feminine behaviour and sexual development; to disempower woman, especially as goddess and/or mother; and to reinforce misogynistic ideology regarding the female body and its position as (dangerous, threatening, overpowering) Other. Game scholars, on the other hand, have paid considerably less attention to the female monster, or ludic monstrosity in general. This is a notable gap in game scholarship, given the popularity of horror, science fiction, and fantasy games that feature monsters the player must avoid or kill. This chapter will now turn to an overview of games scholarship on monstrosity, with a particular focus on work that addresses the connection between abject bodies and monstrosity.

Games Scholarship on Monstrosity

Most of the games analyzed in this project follow a common narrative in which straight, cis-gendered, able-bodied, slim/fit, white male heroes slaughter monstrous Others. As I have previously discussed, scholars have recognized that this narrative, common to almost all Western storytelling media, serves to reconstruct and reinforce the boundaries that separate groups of people and further the marginalization and alienation of those who have been labelled unwanted,

unclean, dangerous, abject, monstrous, and Other. As this project will demonstrate, this process is re-enacted in both tabletop and digital games as well, and the violence directed towards othered, abject, grotesque bodies is particularly potent because games encourage players to embody the "normal" and enact that violence themselves. Some of these ideas have been explored by game scholars interested in ludic monstrosity, and this section provides an overview of that work. It begins with a look at how ludic monstrosity has been theorized, followed by work done on horror games, then scholarship that has connected violence and the zombie or mutated/infected monster, and ends with work specifically on abject female monstrosity in games.

Ludic Monstrosity

Jaroslav Švelch (2013) has explored the particularities of ludic monstrosity in his chapter "Monsters by the Numbers: Controlling Monstrosity in Video Games." Švelch argued that games render monstrosity knowable and objective because ludic monsters function as algorithmic procedures which follow the principles of informatic/database control. In this sense, video games provide players with monsters that can be analyzed, understood, and defeated—thereby disempowering the threat and granting players the fantasy of control. He engaged with Kristeva's work to argue that although monsters are normally abject, video game monsters follow computational rules and are therefore knowable and unambiguous—and no longer abject. By turning monsters into objects of play based on logical operations and numerical representation, games dispel their mystery. Indeed, as players learn the rules and mechanics of a game, they can also learn how to defeat monsters by memorizing their attack patterns and learning their weak spots (Švelch, 2013, p. 201). Švelch has observed that:

> Monstrosity is now under the control of the empowered player. Although video game monsters are still made to *look* disgusting or awe-inspiring, their behaviors are dictated by algorithms that can be analyzed and described. They are slain by the hundreds and turned into rewards and mementoes of players' efforts and skills. (p. 202; emphasis in original)

Švelch is one of the few game scholars who has focused on ludic monstrosity in general, whereas most others have chosen to focus on themes adapted from generic horror or to perform close readings of specific games.

For example, in a presentation entitled "Coming to Play at Frightening Yourself," Bernard Perron (2005) argued that "the figure of the monster is at the core of the videoludic experience of fright" (para. 8). On the action level, monsters in horror video games are physically threatening, while on the narrative level they function as "psychological, moral or social menaces by their attempt to destroy one's identity and moral order" (Perron 2005, para. 9). In his widely-cited edited collection entitled *Horror Video Games*, Perron (2009) has observed that the monstrous element is what distinguishes horror from other genres—though of course the monster is ubiquitous in science fiction and fantasy as well—and that the confrontation with the monster is inevitable in survival horror (p. 126). Indeed, confronting the monster in video games is an aspect of gameplay, as the player is forced to either flee or kill it to proceed in the game. Even if the player is frightened, Perron has noted, they cannot cover their eyes like a spectator of a film as they must hold onto the controller and react quickly to the threat (2009, p. 137).

The *Resident Evil* series (Capcom, 1998–2005) and the *Silent Hill* (Konami, 2000–2004) series have some of the most grotesque monsters, which Perron connects to Noël Carroll's (1990) description of art-horror monsters as impure and interstitial:

> They transgress distinctions such as inside/outside, living/dead, insect/human, flesh/machine and animate/inanimate. They are meant to be disgusting and disturbing, both through their look and sounds as they scream and growl, uttering cries of rage, fury and pain, making noisy and creepy movements, etc. (Perron, 2009, p. 129)

In the face of the monster's savagery, Perron has argued that the player-character has no choice but to violently retaliate, and boss battles are particularly unavoidable (2009, p. 130). As he has noted, "no one gets out of a nightmarish adventure without having defeated the final, most horrible and most threatening creatures" (Perron, 2009, p. 130), since the game cannot end without this final victory. Often, this confrontation is extremely violent: "as much as the evil enemies make every effort to scare and to tear the player character to pieces, they mutilated equally in return" (Perron, 2009, p. 130). For example, zombies in several games must be shot in the head, the Necromorphs in *Dead Space* (IronMonkey Studios, 2011) must be torn limb from limb, the player-character must decapitate her enemies in *Blair Witch Volume 1: Rustin Parr* (Terminal Reality, 2000), and so on. Perron argued that this ludic violence forces players to confront *themselves* as monstrous, especially in the more gruesome games, since "battling monsters is a highly veiled odyssey of self-exploration" (Vorobej, 1997, p. 293, qtd. in Perron, 2009, p. 130).

Monstrosity, Violence, and the Zombie

The violence enacted by the player and directed at monstrous bodies is an important aspect of game scholarship precisely because games incorporate the player as an active, and therefore complicit, participant. The violent relationship between player and monster is especially apparent in games in which the player kills hordes of mindless zombies. The zombie is a particularly popular video game enemy in the speculative fiction genre, and game scholarship

which has unpacked the function of the monstrous has focused largely on the figure of the zombie as an ideal enemy (Krzywinska, 2008), a recognizable remediated monster (Carr, 2009), and as a ubiquitous allegorical trope (Backe & Aarseth, 2014). As Tanya Krzywinska (2008) has argued, zombies are the perfect video game enemy because "they are strong, relentless, and already dead; they look spectacularly horrific; and they invite the player to blow them away without guilt or a second thought" (p. 153). However, Backe and Aarseth (2014) have observed that this approach is as politically charged in games as it is film: "as a group of (literally) voiceless, mentally and physically sub-human Others, it is hard not to read them as a stand-in or euphemism for threatening but too human Others" (p. 2).

Similarly, Carly Kocurek (2015) has pointed out that monstrosity, like "zombification," is used as a veil to mask and justify the violent murder of countless characters in games. She argued that constructing video game enemies—who are the victims of player violence—as monsters enacts a type of dehumanizing cultural violence that justifies their execution (Kocurek, 2015, p. 80). She used the downloadable content for Rockstar's acclaimed Western-inspired game *Red Dead Redemption*, entitled *Red Dead Redemption: Undead Nightmare* (2010), as an example. By maintaining the spaghetti Western style and aesthetics of this shooter but replacing the player-character's enemies with zombies, the developers metaphorically suggested that the "undesirables" of the West were themselves monsters. As Kocurek (2015) has stated, "the depiction of the American West as a vast expanse populated primarily by monsters and undesirables is removed only by degrees from the propaganda that justified the extermination and forceful relocation of American Indians that made Westward expansion possible" (p. 84). In this sense, "the broad deployment of monstrousness as a justification for killing in video games implicitly suggests that those who can be killed are inherently monstrous" (Kocurek, 2015, p.

88). Depending on their setting, games that portray enemies as monstrous can therefore be read as echoing historical propaganda strategies that were deployed to justify real-world violence against specific groups of people.

The focus on zombies is unsurprising given the popularity of games set in post-zombie-apocalypse worlds or games featuring monsters that embody anxieties around contagion, infection, mutation, and the loss of bodily autonomy and integrity. Although zombies in film have generally been read as metaphors for political, economic, and/or racial Others (Christie & Lauro, 2011), because of these themes, they (alongside other mutated/infected monsters) can be connected to the ableist trope of using representations of disability to shock and horrify. An excellent example of the analysis of this kind of monster is Diane Carr's (2014) article "Ability, Disability and Dead Space," in which she discussed the connection between the abject as articulated by Kristeva, imagery of physical disability, and the precarity of able-bodied identity in the game *Dead Space.* Like much horror media, *Dead Space* features physically anomalous, infected, and mutated reanimated corpses—called Necromorphs—as enemies. Drawing on Williams' (1991) work on cinematic body genres like pornography, melodrama, and horror, Carr demonstrated that the game falls into the long-standing popular culture tradition of presenting physical disability as horrific and abject. The Necromorphs—who move in eerie ways, roar, moan, spasm, discharge toxic fluids, and burst—are assembled from the disparate parts of several infected and mutated dead bodies, and so while they are somewhat humanoid, their bodies are abject (Carr, 2014, para. 14). The game also frames able-bodied identity as precarious, as the Necromorphs constantly attempt to bite, pierce, mutilate, and infect the player-character (Carr, 2014, para. 17). In addition, locations associated with corporeal assessment like clinical and medical facilities are presented as tainted, contaminated, and deadly—covered in blood and

gore, used for horrific experiments, and teeming with abject monstrosities (Carr, 2014, para. 26–27). Overall, Carr's use of textual analysis to closely read the ways the game uses abject aesthetics to generate sensations common to generic horror, like fear, anxiety, and dread, has demonstrated that while these enemies are not classic zombies, they are reanimated and mutated corpses, and so fall into the same kind of category.

Abject Female Monstrosity in Games

Carr is not the only game scholar to apply psychoanalytic theory to the study of monstrosity in games. In their discussion of the *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill* series entitled "Playing with Ourselves," Marc Santos and Sarah White (2005) identified the monstrous creatures encountered in those games as representations of the repressed and the Real which the player must defeat to defend the symbolic order. They argued that these games allow "players, positioned as upholders of the symbolic order [to] kill threatening abject Others, thereby safeguarding necessary psychic boundaries" (Santos & White, 2005, p. 70). When the zombie gazes at the player, they must annihilate the monster before it can physically or psychically annihilate their sense of stable self. Importantly, in both series the player is pitted against "all-powerful phallic (m)others, the ultimate manifestation of the Other that threatens our subjectivity and the stability of the symbolic order" (Santos & White, 2005, p. 72). The final boss battle of *Resident Evil: Code Veronica* (Capcom, 2000) so perfectly embodies Kristeva's abject maternal and Creed's monstrous-feminine that the description given by Santos and White is worth quoting at length:

> We watch the beautiful yet deranged Alexia Ashford undergoes a series of hideous mutations. Alexia first becomes a gigantic stem violently bursting through the floor of a precarious platform. In the second stage of her transformation, she gives birth to herself,

> as her human form slithers from the mouth of the stem—like a baby from its embryonic sac. Next, she mutates into a massive plant-animal hybrid with what appears to be a throbbing womb. Thus, she represents both monster and mother: doubly mother since after giving birth to herself, she gives birth to a number of other hideous creatures. (Santos & White, 2005, p. 73)

Silent Hill similarly culminates with a final boss battle against an abject mother, and the authors have observed that in these games players are tasked with doing more than just shooting "bad guys," as they allow players to "confront the most horrible abjection, witness the symbolic order dissipate, [and] 'enjoy' the thrill of killing" in a "safe space" that allows for fetishistic play (Santos & White, 2005, p. 77).

In his article entitled "'Did this game scare you? because it sure as hell scared me!': F.E.A.R., the abject and the uncanny" Steve Spittle (2011) used the Freudian concept of the uncanny and Kristeva's articulation of the abject to explore how the game *F.E.A.R.* (Monolith Productions, 2005) works to situate the player in an unsettled psychological state using a ghostly, horrifying female antagonist who takes the form of both a child and a mother. He has pointed out that both the uncanny and the abject are heavily gendered concepts, and that *F.E.A.R.* remediates existing horror tropes rooted in psychoanalytic themes. The game specifically draws on motifs found in much body horror, especially those which express anxieties around birth and its association with fear, violence, and death (Spittle, 2011, p. 315). Spittle explored the various uncanny and abject aspects of the game, especially in the form of the malevolent long-haired little girl, Alma, and read them as indicators of contemporary concerns over identity and difference (2011, p. 318). Although Alma appears in the game as a little girl, she is the ghost of a woman who is controlling her living son from beyond the grave: "the mother as an abject

monster, the repressed that is returning" (Spittle, 2011, p. 320). Late in the game, the little girl version of Alma transforms into a naked adult woman, whose touch is fatal to the player-character. The player-character learns that he is her son, though he must still try to kill her, and Spittle has therefore read her as representing "the fury of maternal abjection" (2011, p. 322).

Although she does not engage closely with the abject, in her video entitled "Sinister Seductress," Sarkeesian (2016) conducted an analysis of several female monsters and villains, connecting them to mythological female monsters—a project which closely resembles my own. She has discussed the trope of the woman-spider hybrid monster in several games, including *Doom 3* (id Software, 2004) and *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* (Starbreeze Studios, 2013). In *Doom 3*, The Vagary has a female humanoid upper half and a spider's lower half, and is also pregnant with a monstrous foetus in her abdomen. The development team behind The Vagary—which is the only female enemy in the game—used the formula "sexy + gross = creepy" in her design, an idea I will return to throughout this project (Sarkeesian, 2016, 01:20). In *Brothers*, one of the brothers is seduced by a young woman who lures him into lair only to transform into a hybrid woman-spider monster and attempt to eat him. Like my analysis in chapter 4 of this dissertation, Sarkeesian connects this seductive monster—and the trope of the evil seductress in general—to the mythological siren or succubus, and the common mythological framing of women as deadly and deceptive.

Sarkeesian has observed that connecting femaleness and monstrosity is a historical-mythological tradition which serves to demonize femaleness itself and suggest that women are inherently deceptive, manipulative, or evil. She connected these tropes back to the Greek myth of the first woman, Pandora, who was created specifically to punish man and was responsible for releasing all evils into the world—similar to the Judeo-Christian myth of Eve (Sarkeesian, 2016,

02:20–02:51). The kinds of monsters she discussed—what she called "grotesquely female" —incorporate "highly gendered or sexualized elements in ways that are specifically intended to be creepy or disgusting" (Sarkeesian, 2016, 04:00–04:08). She pointed out that while there are plenty of male characters designed to elicit disgust, the monstrous nature of those characters is not tied explicitly to their gender: "they don't function to suggest that maleness itself is inherently disgusting or dangerous" (Sarkeesian, 2016, 04:45–04:58). Sarkeesian also provided some examples of female villains whose evilness is not tied to their sexuality—such as Kreia in *Star Wars Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2004), GLaDOS from the *Portal* series (Valve Corporation, 2007–2011), and Carmen Sandiego from the series of the same name (Brøderbund, 1985–1993)—to demonstrate that there are ways to allow for female villainy without resorting to misogynistic tropes.

Finally, in her dissertation entitled "On the Cultural Inaccessibility of Gaming: Invading, Creating, and Reclaiming the Cultural Clubhouse" Emma Vossen (2018) has similarly demonstrated how the motif of abject female sexuality in the form of the *vagina dentata* has been remediated in games. She pointed out several examples of monsters that resemble female reproductive organs and connected them to J.R.R. Tolkien's female spider-monster Shelob using the framework of Creed's monstrous-feminine (Vossen, 2018, p. 85–97). Vossen has demonstrated that the *vagina dentata* appears in various forms in countless video games, arguing that "depictions of both the vagina dentata and the monstrous feminine are one of the most inescapable tropes about women within contemporary video games" (2018, p. 91). Due to the ubiquity of monstrous representations of female genitalia, she pointed out that:

> Male dominated mediums [*sic*] such as video games (consciously or not) use these tropes to make these texts very subtly (or not so subtly) inaccessible to women (and terrifying to

> all genders) by depicting them as the enemy and by boiling them down to their grotesque sexual organs. (Vossen, 2018, p. 92)

The ways in which women and their bodies are "leveraged as a source of primordial fear for readers, viewers, and players" (Vossen, 2018, p. 94) in science fiction, fantasy, and horror reinforces the cultural assumption that these are male-dominated genres—made by and for men.

This literature review has demonstrated that monstrosity has been a particularly fruitful object of analysis for media scholars. Work on monsters in film studies remains rooted in the horror genre and in psychoanalytic theory, with Creed's work serving as the most influential foundation. In game studies, monstrosity has been a less central topic, though it has received some attention from scholars interested in the particulars of ludic monstrosity, the horror video game genre, and zombies and player violence. Regarding female monstrosity specifically, some scholars have followed in Creed's footsteps and applied psychoanalysis and the abject to a close reading of games, though this approach is not as common in game studies as it is in film studies. This review, together with the previous chapter, has established the formative basis for the analytical chapters that make up the rest of this dissertation. The next chapter addresses the "Monstrous Maiden" archetype, examining sexualized hybrid female monsters in games, which, as I demonstrate, are all iterations of the succubus—one of the oldest and most notorious female monsters in Western culture.

Chapter 4: The Maiden

Sexualized Hybrid Monstrosity: The Succubus as Femme Fatale

> *The femme fatale is situated as evil and is frequently punished or killed. Her textual eradication involves a desperate reassertion of control on the part of the threatened male subject. Hence, it would be a mistake to see her as some kind of heroine of modernity. She is not the subject of feminism but a symptom of male fears about feminism.*
>
> —Mary Ann Doane (1991, p. 14)

> *The succubus is the despoiler of all human decency, a blood-sucking, evil demon who seduces a man in order to possess his phallic power, and murders infants and mothers. … The succubus legitimized male control of society and justified the oppression of women. She is the means by which the patriarchy has maintained power for the last seven thousand years.*
>
> —Mary Ayers (2013, p. xiii)

This chapter explores the ways that women are othered and made monstrous while simultaneously being presented as desirable for the presumed straight male player and the (often) straight male player-character. The monsters I analyze in this chapter are remediations or iterations of the quintessential seductive female monster archetype: the succubus. These monsters might be called "succubi" or something similar like "temptresses," or they might instead belong to other categories of equivalent female monsters, such as sirens—beautiful women with fish tails instead of legs who lure men to their deaths. Like the *femme fatale* or the "black widow," these monsters almost exclusively prey on men and exist to send the message that women are deceptive, seductive, and sexually predatory. Their hybridity dehumanizes them and renders them both abject and grotesque. In addition, they are often revealed through a "bait-and-switch" in which their attractive human parts are shown first—usually their face and breasts, as they are almost always naked—before their full bodies are displayed, or they initially appear as fully human women to lure their male victims before transforming into their "true" monstrous selves.

As an evil, demonic, and predatory seductress/temptress, the succubus and her various iterations are what Mary Ayers (2013) has called "one of the most crudely dehumanizing images of woman" (p. xiii). They are dehumanized through their partially animal bodies, while their naked or scantily clad bodies as well as the way they are framed and revealed sexualizes them. The contradictions and juxtapositions of their bodies are important, as their design can be interpreted as a literal manifestation of the contradictory and ambiguous positioning of women within patriarchal society. In the games I discuss here, these women are either designed primarily to titillate the male player-character and the presumed male player controlling him or they are designed to be simultaneously alluring and disgusting. The succubi in the latter category adhere to Sarkeesian's (2016) observations about the "sexy + gross = creepy" formula used by game designers to create misogynistic female monstrosities, and, most importantly, they exist for the most part to be either controlled or slain by the player in a re-enactment of the heteropatriarchal violence directed at sexually liberated and transgressive women. In this way, these games symbolically represent the victory of patriarchal control over female sexuality, thereby alleviating the sexual anxieties these monsters embody—just as the cinematic *femme fatale* is eradicated to re-assert masculine power, as discussed by Doane (1991) in the opening quote. Consequently, I read these monsters as twisted manifestations of the "Maiden" archetype; namely, the period of a woman's life when she is in her sexual "prime" from a patriarchal perspective—young, nubile, and sexually desirable. If that sexually desirable young woman remains obedient, chaste, and virginal then she is presented as an object of courtship and marriage (male desire and possession). However, if she is transgressive—that is, is she resists heteropatriarchal norms by being sexually liberated—then she is instead framed as a predatory

and seductive demoness who tempts and threatens men and so is positioned as an object of male shame, horror, and violence.

The Succubus: The Original *Femme Fatale*

The mythological succubus is a demonic woman who seduces and destroys men through life-draining sexual activity and also kidnaps, harms, or murders pregnant women and infants. The name of this monster is derived from the Latin *succubare* ("to lie under") and she is often depicted as a beautiful young woman with animal aspects, like claws, a serpentine tail, or bat-like wings (Davidson, 2012, p. 40).[15] This female monster archetype is ancient: "a universal image that appears throughout world history in mainstream and marginal cultures, acquiring a multiplicity of faces and coming to be known under many names" (Ayers, 2013, p. 3).[16] Indeed, the succubus has taken many forms in mythology, folklore, and popular culture from around the world, but she is always a woman who poses a threat to men through her sexual appeal as a temptress; her use of sex and seduction as a tool for manipulation, deception, and destruction; and her sexual deviancy in terms of overt lust and dominance. As such, she embodies misogynistic distrust and fear of female sexuality—especially the threat it poses to heterosexual men—as well as patriarchal attempts to control that sexuality by framing it as monstrous and

[15] The name of the male version of this monster, called an incubus, is derived from *incubare*, meaning "to lie upon." This reinforces the idea that women should occupy the passive "bottom" position during sexual intercourse while men should be in the active "top" position.

[16] One of the first known succubus legends is that of Lilitu, described in ancient Sumerian, Assyrian, and Mesopotamian writings as an evil female wind spirit or night demon associated with both serpents and birds (Carvalho, 2009, p. 21). Lilitu was likely the inspiration for Lilith, the first woman and Adam's first wife in Jewish mythology, created at the same time as he was, before Eve was made (Schwartz, 2004, p. 216). Lilith refused to submit to Adam as her husband or to lay beneath him during intercourse, so she fled the Garden of Eden and supposedly became an evil, dangerous, sexually predatory "demon of the night," or "night hag" (Schwartz, 2004, p. 216). In other words, Lilith's sexual "deviance"—her desire for sexual equality and her refusal to submit to male power in the form of her husband and her creator/father/god—made her monstrous. Since the early Middle Ages, Lilith has been the most prominent and detested demoness in Jewish mythology, depicted as the Queen of Hell and the mother of all demons and monsters. Christian mythology similarly constructed her as an incarnation of evil, temptation, and lust, a depiction which influenced European art and literature, and continues to manifest in contemporary popular culture. Lilith's association with succubi is somewhat ironic given that the term *succubare* means "to lie under" and yet Lilith refused to do so with her husband.

evil. Other kinds of similarly beautiful and seductive female monsters can be therefore understood as iterations of the succubus, such as female vampires or sirens—beautiful half-bird or half-fish women who would use their enchanting voices to lure unwary sailors to their deaths.[17] In fact, any *femme fatale* (or maneater, vamp, black widow, enchantress, etc.) stock character—a beautiful, seductive, self-serving woman who uses her beauty, charm, or sexual appeal to manipulate men—can be considered an adaptation of the succubus archetype. Unsurprisingly, there are countless examples of this archetype in games, but for the purposes of this chapter, I focus on monsters explicitly described or designed in relation to their sexuality, sexual appeal, or lust.

The "Chaotic Evil" Ludic Succubus

The succubus has been a monster in *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax & Arneson, 1974; hereafter *D&D*) since its beginning: the first edition of the game's bestiary, the *Monster Manual* (Gygax, 1978), includes a hand-drawn picture of a naked woman with bat wings, horns, and fangs, striking a seductive pose (fig. 1). The description notes that "a succubus in its natural form appears very much like a tall and very beautiful human female—although the bat-like wings immediately show the observer its true character" (1978, p. 18). Her true character is presumably evil, given that her moral alignment is "chaotic evil,"[18] a detail that connects her to common

[17] Sirens were originally half-bird women. In the *Liber Monstrorum* bestiary from the seventh century sirens were instead described as having fish tails in place of lower legs, and by the Middle Ages the siren had inspired the more popular and enduring mermaid figure—though of course there is no real difference between them: The word for "mermaid" is the same as that for "siren" in the Romance languages. The mermaid is less frightening than the siren, perhaps because of her association with fairy tales, such as Hans Christian Anderson's 1837 story "The Little Mermaid," which positions her as a beautiful young woman who pines for a human prince and dies because of her unrequited love. This pitiful heroine—willing to give her voice and life, as well as endure extreme pain, in order to win the love of a man she barely knows—is a far cry from the mythological siren on which she is based. Indeed, a siren would probably have eaten the drowning prince rather than save him.

[18] In *D&D* all characters and monsters are given a moral alignment along the "good, neutral, evil" and "lawful, neutral, chaotic" axes. This alignment is meant to give some guidance regarding that character or monster's behaviour, desires, motivation, etc.

misogynistic framings of women as both evil and chaotic (as well as the unfortunate Western cultural association of bats with evilness) that stem from antiquity. Her wings and horns are important aspects to her design, as they suggest that she is both animalistic and demonic. Horns, wings, and tails have long been used to literally demonize groups of people: animal-human hybridity functions as a way to dehumanize and therefore justify the oppression, exclusion, and persecution of others (see Bertman, 2009). In addition, the inclusion of a succubus—who, again, is basically just a sexualized naked woman with a few animal parts attached to her—in a bestiary alongside other monstrous creatures and dangerous beasts is part of a long history of categorizing and classifying women alongside animals and other elements of the natural world in an effort to justify male dominance and female subjugation (see Kristeva, 1982; Hassig, 2000; Stang & Trammell, 2019).

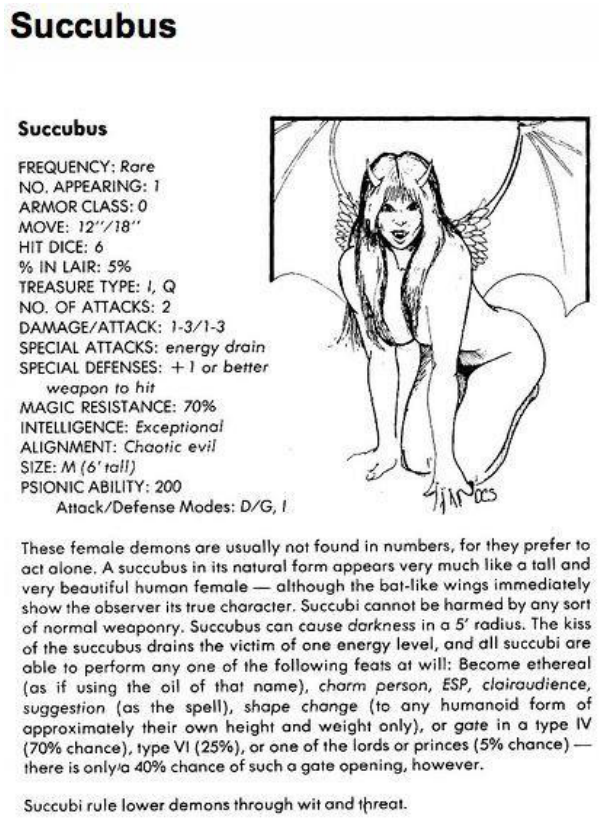

Figure 1. The succubus from the original *Monster Manual* (1978) for *Dungeons & Dragons.*

Interestingly, the succubus in the 5th edition of the *Monster Manual* (Perkins, 2014)—the most recent edition as of this writing—can change its form at will between female succubus and male incubus, though "most of these fiends do have a preference for one form or the other" (p. 284). The entry for this entity includes a depiction of both the female and male versions, both wearing at least some clothing this time, mostly consisting of revealing black leather, thigh high boots, chokers, and black gloves—garments that recall imagery of the dominatrix figure and BDSM sex. While the existence of gender fluidity is remarkable in a game that traditionally adheres to heteronormativity, these sex demons are still described as "lascivious dark-winged fiends" who corrupt mortals "in veiled, insidious ways," including "whisper[ing] forbidden pleasures" so that "victims are tempted to give in to their darkest desires, indulge in taboos, and feed forbidden appetites" and eventually stealing the victim's soul (Perkins, 2014, p. 284). In this sense, the more contemporary *D&D* succubus goes beyond the straightforward misogyny of the original and presents gender fluidity and/or transness as sexually threatening, corrupting, and evil, thereby reinforcing harmful cultural attitudes towards non-cis/non-normative gender identities and performances.[19] Like the first edition's succubus, these creatures are almost entirely humanoid: the only aspects that visually signal their monstrosity are their large bat-like wings, small horns, sharp claws, and pointed tails—and, of course, their presence in the *Monster Manual*.

[19] The association between transness, sexual "deviance," predatory lust, and villainy is especially apparent in the cinematic trope of the crossdressing or trans serial killer (see Creed, 1993b). For example, Norman Bates in *Psycho*, Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs*, Robert Elliott in *Dressed to Kill*, Angela Baker in *Sleepaway Camp*, Leatherface in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation*, and Parker Crane in *Insidious: Chapter 2*. Transness, crossdressing, and gender variance/non-conformity have also been commonly associated with villainy in animated films (see Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2003; Putnam, 2015) and in video games (see Adams, 2018).

The Digital Succubus: Pets and Lovers

Turning to digital games, succubi are unsurprisingly featured in several roleplaying games, as many developers were either directly inspired by or drew on tropes established in *D&D* or designed enemies based on well-known mythological monsters. In the Massively Multiplayer Online roleplaying game *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004; hereafter *WoW*), which is heavily inspired by *D&D*, succubi are a demonic race of attractive, purple-skinned women that are available as "minions" or "pets" for warlock class players to summon. The succubus uses a whip as a weapon, evoking dominatrix imagery, and has bat-like wings, large horns, pointed ears, and goat's hooves for feet (fig. 2). Her idle animation is notoriously sexual: she will pose, admire her nails, and occasionally squeal "oooh!" then wiggle her hips and spank herself while gasping with pleasure. The succubus' abilities changed over the various versions of the game, but include "lash of pain," a whip-based attack; "soothing kiss," which reduces enemy aggression; and "seduction," which prevents the enemy from acting for up to thirty seconds. When damaged, she makes a noise that sounds like a mix of pain and pleasure, and when summoned or given orders she says provocative lines like "couldn't resist, could you?" "you're in trouble now," "say please," "let's have some fun," "being bad never felt so good," "don't touch what you can't afford," "try not to miss me too much," and "I hope it was good for you."[20] While these lines suggest sexual dominance that once again evokes the dominatrix, her line "as the master wishes" when summoned is a reminder that she is the player's *pet.*

[20] A full list of quotes can be found at https://wowwiki.fandom.com/wiki/Summon_Succubus.

Figure 2. Screenshot of a succubus from *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004).

On the fan-made *WoW* wiki,[21] the succubus—"a stunningly beautiful woman"—is described in a highly sexualizing way:

> Her voluptuous form is squeezed into a tight leather-bodice. Large bat wings unfurl from her back, and she lets out a short gasp as she cracks a small whip against her milky thigh. A succubus is pleasure and pain rolled into one deadly package. Like all demons, she enjoys bringing death and misery to the mortal races—but that doesn't mean she cannot have fun with them first.

This description was written by a fan of the game, and since any player can edit a wiki entry it can therefore be understood as a description that has been collectively accepted by the game's

[21] The following quotes are taken from https://wowwiki.fandom.com/wiki/Succubus accessed on September 27, 2020.

fan base. In other words, aside from the odd choice of describing her thigh as "milky" when her skin is clearly purple—a choice that likely points to white supremacist beauty ideals—players clearly enjoy her appearance. The description continues, painting a particularly misogynistic picture of out-of-control, jealous slave who falls in love with her master:

> Many warlocks choose a succubus as a fellow companion for their ability to manipulate those weak of will. It is not uncommon for a succubus in a mortal's servitude to fall uncontrollably in love with him or her; this occurrence is not always to the master's advantage, though, for a devoted succubus can be prone to fits of extreme jealousy, especially when her master deals with those of the opposite sex.

Considering that succubi seem to fall in love with female warlocks as well, this description suggests that succubi are bisexual. The game thereby utilizes the offensive trope of bisexual women being particularly seductive, lustful, and sexually dangerous (see San Filippo, 2013).

While the succubi in both *WoW* and *D&D* are positioned as monstrous creatures, given that they exist in game worlds alongside several kinds of humanoid "races," it is telling that they are monsters and pets rather than playable characters. That is, it is interesting to ask why an orc—a large, green-skinned humanoid with pointed ears, claws, and tusks—can be chosen as a playable character while a succubus cannot.[22] As I have argued in my previous work, as an instrument of classification the bestiary in general and the *Monster Manual* specifically "works as an apparatus of abjection, which itself normalizes our culture of misogyny by explaining over and over, in matter-of-fact naturalistic descriptions complete with tables, pictures, and statistics, that women are monsters and the female body is horrifying" (Stang & Trammell, 2019, p. 14).

[22] It is important to note here that while orcs might be a playable race, they are still designed and presented as incredibly offensive racial stereotypes and for most of *D&D* and *WoW*'s history, they were described as evil, "barbaric," and "savage" with "flat, wide noses" and "angry, slanted eyes" (https://wowwiki.fandom.com/wiki/Orc_(playable)). For more on this, see Young (2016).

Indeed, women have historically been compared to, associated with, and positioned alongside animals and mythological creatures in bestiaries, which were used as a mechanism for othering certain bodies and policing sexual behaviour. As Debra Hassig (2000) has argued, the allegories within bestiaries would compare women to animals through creatures like the succubus or the siren, associate animals with an unkempt and lustful sexuality, and equivocate that sexuality with evil (p. 72). Female monsters therefore function to literally dehumanize women and present their sexuality as evil. While the *Monster Manual* is arguably the most well-known ludic bestiary, many digital games—including those under discussion here—have similar bestiaries, either found through in-game menus or available as paratextual material.[23]

The images and descriptions of the monsters included in the bestiary reveal much about the ways they are framed as either sympathetic or not. For example, the game world of *The Witcher* series, like that in many fantasy games, is populated by countless sapient nonhuman beings, from elves to trolls to vampires. The player adopts the role of Geralt, who is a "witcher" or professional monster slayer. Succubi in this series are conventionally attractive women with horns and goat's legs who wear revealing clothing or nothing at all and are also covered in spiral markings or tattoos (fig. 3), though their beauty is not enough to keep characters from referring to them as "hoofed hags" (*The Witcher 2*).[24] According to *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*'s (CD

[23] Creatures usually do not appear in the in-game bestiaries until they are encountered and defeated by the player-character for the first time, meaning that these murdered women are collected like trophies. Like the *Pokémon* series' imperative "gotta catch em' all," a dedicated player will likely want to fill their bestiary with all the possible enemy types. These games thereby encourage players to seek out these monsters and slay them—even invading their communities, lairs, or nests without provocation in order to murder them. The idea of "collecting" women in this way is not limited to monstrous women: in the first installment of *The Witcher* series, the player also collects a "romance card" or "sexcard" as a trophy for each woman he sleeps with. This can be interpreted as a symbolic equivocation of death and sex—penetrating a woman with either a penis or a sword is considered a kind of male conquest within the game.

[24] Specifically, a notorious womanizer named Dandelion is tasked with being bait for a succubus. He demands of Geralt "Are you crazy? You want to see a hoofed hag ride me to death? On the other hand… We all have to die of something." Later, he says that he "can't wait to meet this monstrous beauty" even though Geralt warns him that "her beauty's killed several men." Although he knows of the dangers, Dandelion is intrigued because he's "never ploughed a succubus." This brief conversation reveals the ambivalence towards sexualized female

Projekt Red, 2015) bestiary, succubi do not mean any harm to humans, unlike other monsters. Rather, “they are motivated by one thing and one thing only: an insatiable lust. They try in vain to slake this by engaging in sexual acts with any other humanoid species they encounter.” While this is pleasurable for their “victims,” their never-ending desire has “pushed more than one man to madness or even death.” Although they do not kill their lovers, succubi do need their “vital energies” to survive—they give men pleasure in exchange for those energies and can hold them spellbound for as long as they wish.

Figure 3. Screenshot of a succubus from *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* (CD Projekt Red, 2011).

In the few side quests in which Geralt interacts with succubi, the player can choose to either fight and murder them or let them live in peace. In *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* (CD Projekt Red, 2011), the player can even choose to have Geralt sleep with a succubus who

monsters: they are referred to with misogynistic terms like “hag” but having sex with them is still considered an appealing prospect.

describes herself as “a feast for all the senses,” as she offers sex as payment for his help. In *The Witcher 3,* however, a succubus that Geralt can once again either choose to help or kill refuses to have sex with him in exchange for his aid. As she says, she “detests when men reek of blood,” and witchers in particular reek of monster blood—what she calls the blood of her “brethren.” If the player chooses to spare her, Geralt claims that he does so because even though she is a monster, she is “a sentient one, and basically harmless.” However, the succubus accuses Geralt of only sparing her because she has “ample breasts and a pretty face.” Several times in the series, Geralt claims that he does not kill sentient creatures—though of course he does if they have a harmed a human, a human has paid him to murder them for any reason (even if their presence is simply an inconvenience and they would have posed no threat if left undisturbed), or if he happens to stumble upon their nest or lair while exploring or treasure hunting. True, most creatures will usually attack Geralt on sight, but he is the one who invaded their home and, since he is a witcher—a *professional monster slayer*—they would likely automatically perceive him as a threat. Occasionally, Geralt can converse with sapient monsters (the game’s writers always use the word “sentient” when they mean “sapient”) and in the dialogue options the player can choose violence or a peaceful resolution, either by letting them be or convincing them to leave the area. Nonviolent resolution is offered as an option to the player only for certain peaceful sapient creatures like trolls, sylvans, doppelgangers, or succubi, but in general monsters are a threat to be destroyed.

“A monster in a beautiful woman's body”

Ample breasts and a pretty face are not enough to save all monsters, however. For example, the siren is another sapient species of conventionally attractive women with animal body parts, yet the player is allowed no opportunities to show them mercy or even converse with

them. While the bestiary insists that the succubus means no harm even if her rapacious sexual appetite can be dangerous, sirens (and lamias, which in *The Witcher* is a closely related species) are literal maneaters:

> Like skilled hunters setting out wooden ducks to lure in drakes, sirens and lamias lure men near—using their own bodies as decoys. They can transform to resemble beautiful human maidens, though with tails covered in silver scales instead of legs. Once a naive sailor gets within arm's reach of these beautiful creatures, their fair faces suddenly turn to fang-filled, fish-like maws, and lovely tails promising unknown delights become sharp, death dealing talons.

According to legend, as described in the bestiary, sirens were once friendly and even occasionally romantically interested in men. They grew aggressive, however, "perhaps soured by the numerous kidnappings" carried out by frustrated men, presumably in order to rape them (fig. 4).

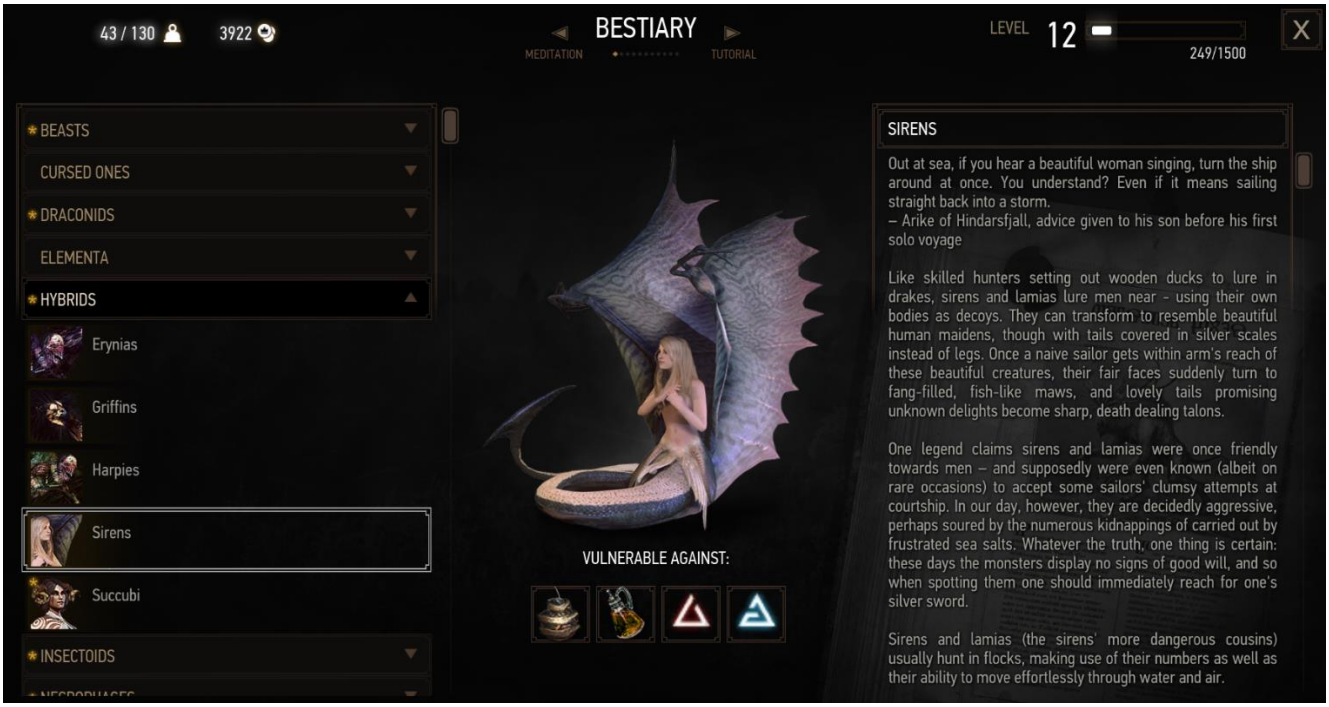

Figure 4. Screenshot of the bestiary entry for sirens from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015). Note how they are categorized as "hybrid" monsters alongside succubi, but they are not treated with mercy or sympathy.

That they use "their own bodies as decoys" is important, because as Doane (1999) has argued, femininity is used as a masquerade in order for non-normative women—especially queer women—to survive in a patriarchal world:

> The very fact that we can speak of a woman "using" her sex or "using" her body for particular gains is highly significant—it is not that a man cannot use his body in this way but that he doesn't have to. (Doane, 1999, p. 139)

This type of masquerade, in which a woman plays up her sexuality to manipulate men, "is aligned with the *femme fatale*" and "regarded by men as evil incarnate" because it represents a power that women can potentially use against them (Doane, 1999, p. 139). In the case of the siren, the masquerade is their alluring half-human form used to hide the phallic power they wield

once they shed that disguise and transform into fully monstrous creatures, with their sharp teeth, claws, and strength in numbers (fig. 5).

Figure 5. The more monstrous form the siren takes when she attacks in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt, 2015). Note the gaping mouth, sharp fangs, and the way her body appears withered.

Sirens are all-female and hunt in flocks, adhering to the classic imagery discussed by Creed (1996) of "the lesbian as a deadly siren who waits for her male prey while savouring an erotic embrace with her amoral sisters" (p. 86–87). While sirens might be framed as "amoral" monsters deserving of death in the decidedly patriarchal world of *The Witcher*, their anger at men seems justified—they were being *kidnapped*. Although the game's narrative insists that they prey on men, their hostility is justified given that they use their monstrous bodies to fight off men who would invade their homes and kidnap, rape, or murder them. The bestiary, however, leaves no room for mercy or sympathy and instead encourages the player to immediately reach for their sword once they have spotted a siren. Threatened sirens let out a horrifying, ear-piercing shriek that can stun the player-character while they attempt to escape—a twisted version of the alluring

siren's song, though just as dangerous. Although their appearances and shrieks are inhuman once they shed their attractive disguises, when they die their upper bodies revert to their more human form (fig. 6) and they occasionally let out a lengthy human scream when they die. This scream conveys their agony and fury and, together with their human appearance, reminds players that they are murdering women who are nearly human.

Figure 6. Screenshot of a siren's corpse floating on the water in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt, 2015). Note how it has reverted back to its more humanoid appearance, thereby suggesting that this is the siren's "true" form and they only adopt the more monstrous form pictured in figure 5 when they are threatened.

From the corpses of these women, the player can harvest body parts—their vocal cords and hair—to use in potions. When witches in the game use human body parts to brew potions and soups, it is framed as evil and revolting (see chapter 6), but when Geralt harvests monster body parts to brew, it is unquestioned and accepted, even when those parts are from the human

halves of those monsters. This resemblance to humans means nothing in the world of *The Witcher*, however, because as with many fantasy games, the world is populated by sapient, humanoid beings that are treated with disgust or consternation. The sirens are regularly called "sea whores" and "cunts" by non-player characters—nasty, gendered insults that are somewhat ironic given that sirens do not have sex with men, nor do they appear to have human genitals. These insults serve to highlight the fact that within this world, sirens are indeed seen as women, but they are unacceptable women deserving only punishment and death. Perhaps the succubus is tolerated simply because she, unlike the sirens, is still willing to have sex with men.

The Witcher series seems particularly preoccupied with the idea of female monsters disguising themselves to deceive their male victims. Female vampires or "bruxae"—again, sapient creatures capable of speech—initially appear as beautiful young women but transform into naked, emaciated women with sharp teeth, long claws, and grey skin stretched taught across muscle and bone, thereby once again embodying the trope of the female monster being both seductive and deceptive, with a horrifying "true" or alternative form when she attacks. *The Witcher 3*'s card game features a bruxa card that reads "a vile, bloodthirsty, man-eating hag. Kind of like my mother-in-law" thereby indicating the game's casual misogyny as well as its use of terms typically associated with the monstrous-feminine: vile, bloodthirsty, man-eating, hag (fig. 7). Creed (1993b) has observed that female vampires are "both predatory and sexual" (p. 123) and, given their tendency to "drain" their victims, vampires can be interpreted as the same kind of manifestation of the monstrous-feminine as the succubi or the siren.

Figure 7. Screenshot of the bruxa playing card from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015).

Described as a "womanoid" and "a monster in a beautiful woman's body" in the game's bestiary, the bruxa slashes at Geralt with her claws and bites him with her fangs, but her greatest threat is her ability to turn invisible—again, a form of deception—and her voice, since she "can screech with such force that the shockwave will knock even a huge man down, making him easy prey for the vampires." This stunning, shocking, paralyzing shriek, screech, or scream is a common weapon in the monstrous-feminine arsenal, as it is used most often by female monsters. That a woman's scream could be so stunning or shocking as to render the player-character immobile and therefore vulnerable speaks to its power even though it is a feminized weapon. Terms like "screech," "shriek," "scream," and "wail" are often used to refer to female voices, whereas, as Michel Chion (1999) has noted in *The Voice in Cinema*, a man's cry is often called a shout rather than a scream, suggesting aggressive power or primal marking of territory. The

man's shout is therefore voluntary, calculated, and purposeful, whereas "the woman's cry is rather more like the shout of a human subject … in the face of death" (Chion, 1999, p. 78). The cinematic woman's scream, then, reveals her weakness and fear—she cannot act, she can only utter a non-linguistic, involuntary scream. In this way, even the voice is used as a tool to establish male primacy, dominance, and superiority while subjugating and victimizing women.

The bruxae and sirens do indeed scream in agony once Geralt kills them; however, when they use their voices as weapons to disarm the men who threaten them, they are not revealing weakness or fear, rather it is an example of that supposedly masculine calculated tactic and one way in which they claim phallic power for themselves. This echoes a tactic taught in many women's self-defence courses, as victims are encouraged to shout and scream to startle their attackers and give them an opportunity to escape or fight back. While female monsters in these games rarely try to escape, they do use the moment in which the protagonist is stunned to fight back, usually by clawing, stabbing, or biting the player, thereby using their bodies as weapons—as opposed to the metal weapons used by the male protagonists of these games—to claim and wield the penetrative phallic power that women are typically denied in patriarchal society. Even the female scream, which normally functions to signal distress or vocalize terror is turned against the protagonist and used to harm him. In this sense, the danger the monstrous-feminine poses—in the form of deadly teeth, claws, and screams—is associated with embodied, natural, primal, and animalistic power, whereas masculine danger is in the form of a tool used *by* the man's body.[25] Of course, these female monsters all lose in the end, slain by the protagonist wielding his apparently more powerful, inorganic, metallic phallic symbols. He serves and restores the

[25] Screaming, clawing, and biting have also long been associated with the "hysterical" female body in Western medical science as well as Hollywood cinema. If not hysterical then monstrous or possessed, but either way out of control: *The Exorcist* is a particularly clear example of this association, and even features a priest as a saviour-father and heroic representative of the patriarchal symbolic order (Creed, 1993a, p. 31–42).

symbolic order, while the transgressive female monster is punished with death for attempting to take phallic power for herself, using her hybrid body.

Ambiguous Hybridity

While the succubi discussed so far are hybrid, their hybridity is usually restricted to specific animalistic elements—horns, bat wings, claws, goat legs, and sometimes tails—but their face and breasts remain human. That carefully delineated hybridity certainly renders them monstrous and reinforces the previously discussed dehumanizing association between women and animals, but it does not seem to detract from their sexual appeal. Rather, given the popularity and ubiquity of sexualized women with bat wings and horns in popular culture, it is likely that this actually enhances their appeal. In the case of *The Witcher*'s siren, while she is in her "alluring" form, she still has a fish tail—one which, apparently promises "unknown delights" as described in the bestiary quoted above. This speaks to the fetishization of certain animal body parts or aspects combined with human female forms. As long as the upper body is still human and normative, then the animalistic parts are acceptable or even desirable additions.

This fetishization of "monster girls" is exemplified in the New York Times bestseller *Monster Musume: Everyday Life with Monster Girls* manga (2012–ongoing), and its anime adaptation, in which a male human protagonist lives with a harem of anthropomorphic and sexualized female monsters. The manga features nudity and erotic content, but the fan art—of which there is plenty—tends to be considerably more pornographic (see Toniolo, 2017). Notably, a popular, fully illustrated, fan-made bestiary inspired by the manga, entitled *Monster Girl Encyclopedia* (Kenkou Cross, 2010), is particularly pornographic and misogynistic, with countless hybrid monsters like the succubus consuming men's "spirit energy" by eating their semen.

The fetishization of hybrid woman-animal bodies—again, restricted by the stringent requirement that the torso and face must be human and conventionally attractive—is ubiquitous, and the succubus is a particularly popular iteration of female hybridity. This popularity unsurprisingly flourishes on the internet.[26] As Hank Pellissier (2012) has written, the succubus is "a desired fantasy role in virtual worlds" and some women adopt the role of succubus for the purposes of their online sex work. For example, a well-known and celebrated *Second Life* user with a succubus avatar, Khannea Suntzu, is herself entranced with the succubus figure she embodies and notes that it represents a "nasty" fantasy or fetish (Pellissier, 2012, para. 8). Suntzu sees her succubus self as simultaneously "assimilat[ing] the hyper-sexualized feminine, and the hyper empowered predatory state" (qtd. in Pellissier, 2012, para. 17). She argues that the succubus embodies the stereotype of the dominatrix or "unmitigated bitch" (qtd. in Pellissier, 2012, para. 37) and while she enjoys this performance, it means that dominant, sexually liberated women are once again framed as "bitch" or "demon."

On the other hand, rarely is the word "monster" used to describe the kind of succubus found in games like *WoW*, and even in *The Witcher 3* Geralt admitted that the succubus is not really a monster in the traditional sense. However, as indicated in the description of the siren, once approached they transform into inhuman monstrosities—once that transformation occurs, they are no longer desirable or alluring, they are only enemies to be destroyed. And yet the fact that they revert to their human appearance upon death suggests that their "true" forms are that of

[26] The popularity of monster girls on the internet is interesting considering that mainstream popular culture does not leave much room for female monstrosity to be portrayed in a romantic or sexual way. On the contrary, monstrosity tends to be limited to dangerous and exciting male love interests, like the Beast from *Beauty and the Beast*, the creature from *The Shape of Water*, or the countless male vampire and werewolf love interests from works like the *Twilight* series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *True Blood*.

beautiful women with fish tails, and they only become monstrous when approached and threatened by men—perhaps an understandable response given the dangers men pose.

While most games adhere to a less monstrous or horrifying version of the succubus in order to maintain her sexual appeal (although she is included in bestiaries and so technically considered a "monster") some games break free from the "sexy woman with bat wings" trope in favour of a more horrific design. In *God of War: Ascension* (Sony Santa Monica Studios, 2013), the succubus Empusa—a version of the Greek demi-goddess/mythological creature of the same name who seduced young men and devoured them while they slept—is a naked woman with horrific spikes for legs and elongated, insect-like arms whom the player-character Kratos must fight and kill. Empusa's designer Izzy Medrano has stated that, as a succubus, she was intended to be "enticing to men and that's how she manages to get close and suck their blood" (PlayStation, 2013, 01:19–01:23). He describes her design, noting that "everything in the core is very sort of standard feminine ideal and then as it gets out to the extremities you can see it gets real [*sic*] twisted and freaky" (PlayStation, 2013, 01:23–01:33; see fig. 8). He pitched a reveal for Empusa that involves Kratos approaching her to initiate the "sex minigame"—a notorious activity in the *God of War* series which has the player press buttons in a quick time event to have sex with women—"and then the reveal is BOOM [*sic*] it's this horrific, awful monster" (PlayStation, 2013, 01:35–01:43).

Figure 8. The character designer for Empusa from *God of War: Ascension*—a man who apparently designs "some of the best boobs in the industry"—points out how the monster's "core" adheres to a "standard feminine ideal" (PlayStation, 2013).

In his explanation of how he modelled Empusa, lead character artist Patrick Murphy notes that they focused on her breasts and face, and that Medrano "concepts some of the best boobs in the industry, so there's a good roadmap there" (PlayStation, 2013, 02:36–02:49). They focused on her breasts and face to make her "feminine" while her monstrous aspects were "easy" because "creature stuff is just fun" (PlayStation, 2013, 02:50–02:54). The way these male developers discuss their design processes reveals their assumptions about what ideal femininity should look like, their delight in combining the "best boobs" with a "twisted and freaky" appearance, and their belief that the player would be a heterosexual male, hence the need to create a creature that would be "enticing to men"—as opposed to, say, enticing specifically to Kratos. While it is unsurprising that the game's developers would draw on established tropes related to the mythological succubus figure, their commentary regarding their design process and

the fact that they seem to enjoy the juxtaposition between Empusa's sexualized body—especially her large, exposed breasts—and her monstrous limbs demonstrates the "sexy + gross = creepy" design philosophy mentioned by Sarkeesian (2016, 01:20). The tension caused by being simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by a creature speaks to the way this monster evokes the abject, as the abject subject arouses contradictory feelings of horror and fascination, disgust and *jouissance*. This is one reason why it is such an effective tool for body horror media, as it allows filmmakers to access that elusive state in which audiences struggle to tear their eyes away from the screen, even if they want to.

"Both beautiful and grotesque in appearance"

That incongruous and disturbing combination of sexy and gross elements exemplified in Empusa is certainly a kind of body horror, as it suggests her once beautiful form has been twisted and mutated into this monstrosity. It is a reminder that the succubus is, in many interpretations and iterations, a demon—a succubus is often framed as a being that was once a human woman but was cursed or sinned or lost her soul and became less human, or at least something other than human. In this sense, she is the embodiment of the patriarchal religious association of women with sin, women's bodies with lust, and women's sexuality with evilness. This religious misogyny is fully embraced by the developers of both *Diablo III* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2012) and *Dante's Inferno* (Visceral Games, 2010)—both games set in Hell.

In the *Diablo* series, the succubi are designed as conventionally attractive women with bat wings, G-strings, and thigh-high boots. While they have bikini tops in the second installment, in the first and third games their breasts are completely exposed. The only succubus in *Diablo III* without exposed breasts is the Queen of the Succubi, who, like in *WoW*, the player can summon and use as a pet. Allowing the player to own and use a succubus, especially a succubus *queen*, is

unsettling for several reasons. Apart from the problematic aspects of owning a sapient humanoid (again, they are basically just women with wings in this game) and treating them as a pet, owning a succubus specifically feels disturbingly akin to sexual slavery. The succubi are likened to sex workers in several ways, including the fact that they have offensive titles like "stygian harlot" and are portrayed as "fallen women." For example, In *Diablo III*, the player encounters a human woman named Lady Victoria in the House of Deep Sorrow and witnesses her soul being drained by male-coded demons. After, she claims that she has been stripped of her humanity and then she screams in agony while transforming into a succubus called "The Doomed Woman"—a transformation that of course makes her lose almost all of her clothing, leaving her clad in nothing but a G-string (fig. 9). The player must kill her, and this segment suggests that succubi were once human women who had been "stripped of their humanity," rather than a specific species of monster, and that becoming a succubus is an undesirable fate or a punishment.

Figure 9. Screenshot of the succubus called "The Doomed Woman" in *Diablo III* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2012).

This misogynistic association of female sexuality with evil and monstrosity is exemplified in one of *Diablo III*'s major bosses and another leader of the succubi, whom she calls her "daughters": Cydaea, Maiden of Lust. Not only is she a demon who rules over succubi and is entirely defined by her "uncontrollable" sexuality, her hybridity is significantly more abject than just bat wings and horns. Cydaea is a "spider centaur" in that her upper body is that of a conventionally attractive woman wearing skin-tight black leather, while her lower half is that of a giant spider (fig. 10). The game's flavour text describes her as "both beautiful and grotesque in appearance, with the torso of a woman and the legs of a spider. Her voice is said to be as smooth as honey, but she only speaks words of death." She is also a consort/concubine of the Lord of Sin and a non-player character from the game describes her as simultaneously beautiful and hideous to look at, thereby voicing the disturbing and abject ambiguity inherent in her design. In this sense she is like Empusa from *God of War,* with her spiked, insect-like arms and legs, and is another example that demonstrates the "sexy + gross = creepy" design trope.

Figure 10. A promotional image of Cydaea Maiden of Lust from *Diablo III* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2012).

A spider woman like Cydaea could be read as particularly unsubtle version of the *femme fatale* or, in a more literal interpretation, she can be understood as a "Black Widow." Widow spider females have potent venom and occasionally exhibit the behaviour of sexual cannibalism, in which they devour the male spider after copulation—hence the name "widow." Because of this behaviour, the phrase Black Widow is used in popular culture and in police investigations to refer to women who murder their husbands or lovers for monetary gain.[27] As the "Maiden of Lust" who rules over succubi in Hell, Cydaea fits into a long tradition of blaming women for the existence of lust, sin, and death—such as Pandora, the first woman in Greek mythology who released evil into the world; Lilith, Adam's first wife in Jewish folklore who became a succubus and mother of demons; and Eve, the first woman in Abrahamic mythology who is blamed for original sin. There is also a long tradition of portraying "evil" women as monstrous and hybrid, like Sin from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the daughter of Satan who is a woman from the waist up and a serpent from the waist down, with snapping, barking dogs attached to her middle that periodically enter her and devour her from the inside.

In *Dante's Inferno*, as the title suggests, the player-character Dante must journey through the regions of Hell and fight horrific creatures and demons along the way. In the Circle of Lust, sounds of women moaning permeate the air, and since the majority of enemies the player fights there are female, the game is implying that only women are at fault for the sin of lust. The most common enemies Dante encounters are Hell's succubi, called "Temptresses," who are described

[27] While the gender is not explicitly mentioned, the Federal Bureau of Investigation refers to black widow killings as an example of a kind of serial murder committed for financial gain, see https://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/serial-murder. The phrase is often used in high profile cases of women convicted for murdering their husbands. It is also the name of a perk in *Fallout 3* that lets female player-characters do more damage to male enemies and also unlocks special, sexual dialogue options while conversing with male characters, thereby allowing the player to seduce and manipulate them.

in the game as "shameless abominations [that] trumpet their hunger, their yearning" and are "ripe as rotten fruit." These demonic women, who were lustful in life and so in death have been punished with uncontrollable carnal desire, appear as voluptuous figures with a bloody red wound slicing vertically down their torso. Players are introduced to this grotesque figure through a cut-scene showing a Temptress emerge from a vaginal opening in the wall and moan and stroke herself before gasping when a large, thick, phallic tentacle that ends in a scorpion-like barb bursts from her lower abdomen (fig. 11). As she continues to moan, she rubs the tentacle against her own face before sucking it back into her body and closing the "lips" of her gaping wound. The game's wiki even describes this wound as resembling human genitals:

> The torso-spanning opening greatly resemble[s] what was once a female vulva while the inside resemble[s] a vagina and the tendril resemble[s] a human (albeit pointed and barbed) phallus, truly a manifestation of the corruption in both types of human genitalia.[28]

In her analysis of John Carpenter's *The Thing*, Creed (1993a) has observed that horror films seem to delight in the portrayal of a monstrous creature possessing "a large vaginal opening whose lips are peeled back to reveal a phallic-shaped bony structure hidden inside" (p. 50). She relates this to "the infantile phantasy of the phallic mother who … is thought either to possess an external penis or to have a penis hidden inside her body" (p. 50–51). While the Temptresses are certainly more sexual than maternal, they do embody this exact kind of phallic/vaginal horror as they scream and moan while attacking the player-character with long metal claws or bending over backwards and whipping and stabbing at him with their retractable tentacles.

[28] The wiki entry (https://dantesinferno.fandom.com/wiki/Temptress) was likely written by a fan and reveals much about how players interpret the horror of the Temptresses as distinctly sexual. The fact that the Temptress' body appears to be a normative woman but then is revealed to contain a penis-like appendage within a vaginal opening could be read as framing an intersex body as monstrous or representing the transphobic fear of the previously-discussed threat of the "bait-and-switch" or "trap."

Figure 11. Screenshot of the Temptress and her pointed tentacle in *Dante's Inferno* (Visceral Games, 2010).

The Temptresses serve Cleopatra, based on the historical woman who has been portrayed in film (and in history books) as one of the most infamous *femmes fatales.* Cleopatra is the queen of Hell's Circle of Lust following a deal she made with Lucifer—just as Cydaea is the Maiden of Lust and mother of the succubi in *Diablo III*. Cleopatra appears in the game as a giant, purple-skinned, slightly corpse-like woman, who climbs the outside of a phallic tower like a demonic King Kong to attack Dante. As the Queen of Lust, her monstrosity is centred around her secondary sexual characteristics—her naked breasts and large, dark nipples. However, these normally sexualized body parts are instead presented as revolting and abject during the fight against her: Cleopatra's nipples open into black holes with protruding black tongues, out of which periodically crawl undead demonic "Unbaptized Babies" that attack the player-character. Because she is naked and gigantic, her breasts occupy much of the screen and her abject design

is clearly meant to simultaneously disgust and titillate the presumed heterosexual male player and the decidedly heterosexual male avatar he controls (fig. 12).

Figure 12. Screenshot of Cleopatra from *Dante's Inferno* (Visceral Games, 2010).

Cleopatra is both sexualized and revolting, and her placement as Queen of Lust, a circle of Hell reserved for those who had been too lustful in life, functions as a commentary on how these game developers connected female sexuality and sexualized monstrosity. As Dante climbs his way to the top of the tower to fight Cleopatra, he also must confront and choose to either absolve or punish Semiramis, the legendary queen of Assyria. It is noteworthy that the two main damned souls in the Circle of Lust are powerful queens who ruled empires at a time when women rulers were rare if not unthinkable. Both women became associated with lust, promiscuity, and incest in the Middle Ages under Christian ideology, hence their damnation in Dante's *Divine Comedy* upon which this game is based. This demonization of powerful women

in association with their supposedly uncontrolled sexuality is a particularly misogynistic way that patriarchal institutions have attempted to disempower, control, and weaken the legacy of women perceived as transgressive or threatening. Of course, within this worldview, transgressive women must be punished, usually with rape and/or death—in *Dante's Inferno*, these two punishments are intertwined with Cleopatra's disturbingly sexual death scene. At the end of the battle, Cleopatra shrinks back down to human size and Dante overpowers her. He pins her down and she begins to moan and push his hand against her breasts, using it to stroke them in an apparent attempt to seduce him. Dante thrusts and she arches her back and gasps before the camera pans out showing his blade penetrating into her ribcage (fig. 13).

Figure 13. Dante stabs Cleopatra off screen in *Dante's Inferno* (Visceral Games, 2010), making it look like he is penetrating her in a different way. Screenshot.

Conclusion: "Rotten underneath her façade of beauty"

The ubiquitous imagery of the evil, seductive, hybrid, monstrous woman like the succubus or the siren serves to inform women that "this game is not for you, games are not for you" and that "men are good, women an evil to be overcome" (Vossen, 2018, p. 92). Whether the developers intended to send this message or not, the glee with which the creators behind *God of War: Ascension* articulate the design of their female monsters, from their perfect boobs to their "twisted and freaky" body parts; the inclusion of rape-like death scenes in *Dante's Inferno*; the portrayal of women as sexy pets and minions or vicious monstrosities; and the continuous association of women with sin, death, lust, and predatory sexuality demonstrate a complete lack of critical awareness of how off-putting such designs might be to female players. In the end, intentionality does not really matter:

> No matter the intentions, women and their bodies and leveraged as a source of primordial fear for readers, viewers, and players in a way that enforces the already existing us vs them dynamic of men and women within games culture. (Vossen, 2018, p. 94)

Like Vossen, I am not arguing that there should be no female monsters in games; I am advocating for female monsters that are not monstrous in relation to their sexuality. There are almost never seductive male monsters in Western games; rather, male (or better yet, gender-neutral) monsters are designed with more creativity and variety—their horror is not always sexual.

The ambiguous dual nature of woman—her positioning as both Madonna and Whore—is literally embodied in the succubus and her various iterations, in that her body is part alluring woman and part deadly creature. She is "sexy," but she is also "gross" and so in the end, she is "creepy" and must be destroyed. Her beauty is framed as a lure, a trap, a deceptive manipulation

serving only to trick men into falling for her—or wanting to rape her, apparently—so that she can tear him to pieces, drink his blood, feast on his flesh. To survive, she must become a pet or a minion, willing to have sex with men but not pose a threat to them. This option is not available for all female monsters, however: the siren, a "sea whore" who is unwilling to have sex with men after too many betrayals; the female vampire, "a vile, bloodthirsty, man-eating hag"; and the more monstrous "twisted and freaky" succubus are not given a chance to survive. No mercy without sex, it seems.

These games are all drawing on mythological figures—a rich resource for inspiration since mythologies from around the world feature female characters, goddesses, and monsters that are part woman and part animal, or they transform into an animal (see Caputi, 2004; Neumann, 1963). This hybridity or transformation and their inherent ambiguity are central to the abject's disturbance and appeal and also highlight the association of the feminine with the natural world.[29] Feminist scholars have long noted that nature is symbolically gendered female and that female bodies are categorized as more animalistic and primal as compared to men's bodies. Indeed, women's bodies have been "forever associated with unholy, disorderly, subhuman and

[29] The concept of hybridity has been centralized in discussions of racial mixing as well as postcolonial theory to address the liminality and ambiguity of culture and identity (Bhabha, 1994). In this sense, just as women are positioned in a dichotomous way within a patriarchal worldview, so are racialized people presented through "sharply opposed, polarized, binary extremes—good/bad, civilized/primitive, ugly/excessively attractive, repelling-because-different/compelling-because-strange-and-exotic" (Hall, 1997, p. 229). These tropes of representation—which rely on stereotyping, exoticization, and presenting the racialized body as spectacle—are recognizable across media, speaking to a constant and recurring preoccupation with and anxiety around racial difference. Within these stark binaries there is an evident relation of power, with whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality consistently presented as the norm, and everything else as Other. The hybrid monster embodies these same extremes, which is not surprising given that, as scholars of teratology have long noted, the label of "monster" has been used to support xenophobic and discriminatory attitudes towards other cultures and races, the members of which were often portrayed as hybrid animal-human creatures (see Strickland, 2013). However, the human upper bodies or illusory forms of the monsters I discuss are all white women. This is likely because they are designed by (mostly) heterosexual white male game developers to be "conventionally" attractive and especially appealing to the presumed heterosexual white male player, and so are a result of homogeneity among Western game developers as well as white beauty standards and the white supremacy that underpins them.

unsightly phenomena" (Braidotti, 2011, p. 80). Like all unsightly bodies, a monstrous woman like the succubus or siren—or any of their various iterations—is fascinating even as she is abhorrent, simultaneously both desirable and repulsive. Powerful women, especially those who are sexually liberated, transgressive, or use their sexuality to manipulate men, signify a threat to patriarchal society and so must be made monstrous and therefore dehumanized and categorized as evil (Caputi, 2004, p. 315–341). An extremely effective way of dehumanizing someone is to make them literally half animal, and this violation of natural boundaries also categorizes them as both an abject subject who is "heterogenous, animal, metamorphosed, altered" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 207) and a grotesque creature "blended with the world, with animals, with objects" (Bakhtin, 1968, p. 20).

The abject is that which "does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). The sexually liberated woman does not respect the rules, so she is demonized as a duplicitous *femme fatale*, a man-eating succubus or vampire, a beautiful-but-deadly siren. In this sense, she is misogyny made manifest, embodied: women who are fetishized, sexualized, and lustful but also demonized, punished, and made monstrous in relation to their sexuality. While these creatures embody feminine power, the way they are framed, represented, and distorted within a patriarchal worldview has rendered them monstrous, evil, and deserving of death:

> Even though the goddess/monster is killed off in most patriarchal stories, she is dynamically immortal. Thus, although most patriarchal religions deny any possibility of female divinity, the oral tradition has never really stopped talking about her, even if the story is distorted by the usual stereotypes. In these, the primordial serpent goddess of the underworld becomes the Devil … The androgynous or bisexual Divine is sidelined to

> freak and drag shows. The Lady of the Beasts is caged and domesticated. The Sex Goddess is straightened out, reduced to a fertility fetish, scorned as Jezebel and whore, made into a pornographic object to be stripped, spread, surveyed, sold, and even snuffed. The potent Bitch Goddess becomes the high-heeled and tightly bound dominatrix, safely contained in a pornographic dungeon. The Death Goddess is hated as a castrating and ravenous monster … the femme fatale, rotten underneath her façade of beauty. (Caputi, 2004, p. 19)

The succubus is the ancient archetype of the sex/bitch/death goddess and these games allow players to enact masculinist power fantasies by owning her, controlling her, or murdering her.

Ayers (2013) has similarly argued that these kinds of sexualized female monsters serve to disempower female goddesses. As such, she sees the succubus is an important component in the history of patriarchal development, but she has also argued that the succubus is a result of masculine desire, shame, and fear of losing power. The succubus is a repository for, or projection of, masculine shame and so men see the defeat of the succubus as a way to regain control (Ayers, 2013, p. 146). This is why, as Ayers (2013) has made clear, the succubus takes so many forms and is found across so many cultures and time periods:

> She is the dark feminine inspiration for the femme fatale, castrator, dominatrix, vixen bogey, witch, enchantress, blood sucker, seductress, villainess, scarlet woman, beguiling abomination, preening temptress, predator, demon bride, impure female, Hell's rose, or black widow. More recent names might be bimbo, eye candy, career bitch or feminist. (p. 3)

Indeed, I see many parallels between the way the succubus, the bruxa, and the siren are presented and the way feminists are framed and demonized in contemporary culture. This is particularly

true within the context of games, because, as countless feminist game scholars have pointed out, game culture is rife with misogyny—among players, industry professionals, and in game content itself. As I discuss in my next chapter, this misogynistic framing does not end with female sexuality but extends into female reproduction. The succubus is a twisted, misogynistic version of the Maiden archetype and, as I demonstrate, the broodmother and similar iterations of the ludic maternal monstrous-feminine are a horrifying, mutated take on the Mother archetype.

Chapter 5: The Mother

The Monstrous Reproductive Body: Broodmothers and Banshees

> *Throughout history, and across cultures, the reproductive body of woman has provoked fascination and fear. It is a body deemed dangerous and defiled, the myth of the monstrous feminine made flesh, yet also a body which provokes adoration and desire, enthralment with the mysteries within. We see this ambivalent relationship played out in mythological, literary and artistic representations of the feminine, where woman is positioned as powerful, impure and corrupt, source of moral physical contamination; or as sacred, asexual and nourishing, a phantasmic signifier of threat extinguished. Central to this positioning of the female body as monstrous or beneficent is ambivalence associated with the power and danger perceived to be inherent in woman's fecund flesh, her seeping, leaking bleeding womb standing as a site of pollution and source of dread.*
>
> —Jane M. Ussher (2006, p. 1)

This chapter focuses on the monstrous reproductive female body and how it manifests in mainstream digital roleplaying games. Through an analysis of some particularly egregious examples from critically acclaimed and commercially successful BioWare games, I demonstrate the ways in which the transgressive pregnant body is constructed as a horrific and abject threat to be confronted and slain. Although BioWare is not the only game studio to feature maternal monsters in their games, their two most successful franchises, the *Dragon Age* (2009–2015) and *Mass Effect* (2007–2017) series, are particularly preoccupied with transforming both the reproductive and infertile female body into something monstrous. To explore the close association between maternity and monstrosity, I draw primarily upon Kristeva's conceptualization of the maternal abject, Creed's analysis of the monstrous-feminine in horror film, and Ussher's (2006) book *Managing the Monstrous-Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body,* which makes extensive use of both the abject and the monstrous-feminine as conceptual frameworks. While monsters that evoke the fear of bodily transformation and female reproduction are common in Western mythology and popular culture, through a deep exploration

of these monstrous mothers, including their design, narrative roles, and reception, this chapter demonstrates that their use in video games is particularly harmful because players must actively murder these women (and their offspring) in order to proceed. In this sense, players are forced to *enact* misogynistic violence not only against pregnant bodies, but against women who are already victimized and made monstrous against their wills. Players are rewarded for enacting this violence—which is framed as necessary, just, and heroic—and while the games might present the monstrous women as pitiable, they offer no chance for players to actively support or identify with them.

The Mother of the Monstrous Brood

Video games have always struggled to represent motherhood. While fathers are often featured as heroic player characters—a trend known in game criticism as the "dadification" of games (Brice, 2013; Joho, 2014; Voorhees, 2016; Stang, 2017)—mothers are generally absent, deceased before the story begins, killed off during the game, or portrayed as villains or monsters. This tendency has become so common that some critics have demanded to know where the mothers are in video games and why they are portrayed so poorly when they are present (Campbell, 2016; Gray, 2017; Smith, 2014). The portrayal of pregnancy in games is even more rare than that of motherhood, outside of simulation games like *The Sims* series, and when it is incorporated it is usually not the playable protagonist who is pregnant (Cruikshank, 2015). When labour and birth are portrayed in roleplaying games, as Lauren Cruikshank (2015) has discussed, they are often presented in relation to pain, danger, death, and horror. In this way, video games that incorporate these portrayals "largely replicate the misrepresentations, distortions, deletions, and exaggerations around birth that occur in other media portrayals" (Cruikshank, 2015, p. 32).

While killing off mothers to spur the protagonist on his hero's journey certainly points to patriarchal ideology in game narratives, when mothers are present but framed as evil or monstrous the misogyny becomes particularly palpable. The trope of pregnant or birthing female monsters is clearly tapping into a cultural/psychological revulsion and fear towards female fecundity, particularly when that birth is non-normative, when the mother or her offspring are transgressive in any way, and when the mother reproduces independently. Female reproduction without male input is, understandably, a particularly potent fear in patriarchal society. Like most fears and anxieties, it has manifested in horror media; as such, the birth-as-horror trope is so widespread that it has proven a popular subject for feminist film scholarship. For example, in writing about David Cronenberg's 1979 body horror film *The Brood*, Creed (1993a) points out that:

> The mother's offspring … represent symbolically the horrifying results of permitting the mother too much power. An extreme, impossible situation—parthenogenetic birth—is used to demonstrate the horrors of unbridled maternal power. Parthenogenesis is impossible, but if it could happen, the film seems to be arguing, woman could give birth only to deformed manifestations of herself. (p. 47)

While parthenogenetic reproduction might seem to empower the mother, giving her uncontested control over her offspring, it generally comes at a high price. Her unconventional pregnancy is often the result of infection, contamination, or mutation and causes abject transformations, madness, and, eventually, death at the hands of the protagonist.

This chapter's focus on transformation is purposeful because one of the primary ways that pregnancy itself is associated with the abject is through the fear of transformation. Namely, this is the abject as related to the realization that bodies can change and are not static or

consistent, nor are they really under a person's conscious control (which is related to the fear of fatness as well, as will be discussed shortly). The shifting, growing, changing, morphing, pregnant body is terrifying not only because it recalls general bodily precarity but also because the male psyche is afraid of what the female body is/can do. Many monsters in fantasy games are presumably born monstrous, part of a monstrous race or species. In this sense, although they appear half human, they are not human (and worse, their attractive human half is just meant to lure straight male victims to their deaths, like the siren and succubus as discussed in the previous chapter). Occasionally they appear fully human and then transform into their "true" monstrous selves like the bruxa, but the assumption there is that their human form is a consciously adopted disguise. This appears again when crones temporarily appear as beautiful, young (or even just "normal") women only to eventually reveal themselves as monstrous (and more importantly *old*), I discuss in the next chapter. In these cases, transformation is used as a tactic to deceive men, reinforcing the misogynistic cultural positioning of woman-as-deceiver or "bait-and-switch."

One cannot be born pregnant, one *becomes* pregnant. The process of pregnancy results in bodily transformations that, as long as the pregnancy occurs within the confines of heteronormativity, are often celebrated. Celebrated, but still subject to patriarchal control and taboo—pregnant bodies become spectacles, stared at and touched without consent as visible manifestations of that person's sexual activity and reproductive power. Pregnant bodies are also subject to the (often male) medicalized gaze, dictating that they should stay home, stay in bed, and do all the correct things (even neglecting their own wellbeing) to protect the all-important fetus. As the presumed sacred purpose of a woman's entire existence within that patriarchal worldview, pregnancy is heavily policed, regulated, and controlled. Those transformations are

celebrated but hidden, a necessary but disturbing reminder of woman's power over the continuity of the species, of what a fertile female or intersex body can do that a male body cannot.

This celebration of female fecundity is precarious and can slip very quickly from a cultural framing of the pregnant body as a sacred vessel to pregnancy as a terrifying, mysterious ability that women might use to empower themselves. And so, just as body horror media frame physical transformation as abject and abhorrent, when a pregnancy occurs in an unusual, violent, or transgressive way, the transformations and the body that undergoes them are not celebrated but feared and loathed. Like the succubus being a damned soul, punished for her lustfulness in life, transformation can be an undesirable process undergone not to tempt and manipulate men but as a way to punish women for their transgressions. Transforming women into monsters through or for the purposes of reproduction is therefore a way to tap into this cultural and psychological fear of pregnancy as both a form of uncontrollable, abject bodily transformation *and* as a terrifying, mysterious way that women could claim power for themselves.

Returning to *The Brood*, Nola is infected/impregnated by her own psychotic rage caused by the abuse she suffered from her parents. She uses her monstrous offspring to try and reclaim her daughter from her husband who wants full custody of the child. To save the girl—and keep her for himself—the husband murders Nola, though the final scene of the film reveals that the daughter has begun to show symptoms of the same infection which plagued her mother. Although Creed is writing about a film, those "deformed manifestations of herself" created by the mother who reproduces parthenogenetically—along with the themes of enraged and abused women, horrific maternity, bodily transformation, and infection-as-impregnation—are clearly paralleled in BioWare's critically acclaimed fantasy roleplaying game *Dragon Age: Origins*

(hereafter *Origins*), and its expansion *Dragon Age: Origins – Awakening* (hereafter *Awakening*), in the figures of the broodmother and the Mother, respectively.

In *Origins,* the player (enacting the role of a heroic "Grey Warden" whose race and gender are customizable) must fight and defeat the monstrous broodmother—an enormous multi-breasted female creature who exists to give birth to litters of twisted and evil Darkspawn, the primary enemies in the game (fig. 14). The player fights this monster—who attacks by screaming, spewing vomit and saliva, sending her Darkspawn children to attack, and grabbing with her tentacles—in the fleshy, pulsating, pink walls of her lair. The Darkspawn breed by capturing women of various "races" (human, elf, dwarf, or Qunari), force-feeding them poisonous Darkspawn blood, body parts, as well as flesh from their own people. This process kills most captives, but some survive the Darkspawn poison—called the "Taint"—and mutate into cannibalistic Darkspawn broodmothers. Each race of broodmother gives birth to a specific type of Darkspawn, a twisted manifestation of the monstrous mother herself, just as Creed described in her discussion of *The Brood*.

Figure 14. Screenshot of the broodmother from *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare, 2009).

This segment is rife with abject symbolism and grotesque aesthetic design. First, the broodmother is an animal-human hybrid, with tentacles and a spider-like protrusion: as previously discussed, hybridity, liminality, and categorical breakdown all signal both the abject and the grotesque, especially in terms of challenging the boundary between human and animal (Kristeva, 1982, p. 207). Second, she resides in a lair that is clearly coded as vaginal or uterine: dark, dank, fleshy, pulsating rooms and corridors are particularly common visual motifs in horror and reference the psychoanalytical "archaic mother" (see Creed, 1993a, p. 18). Third, she spews vomit and saliva: bodily substances are abject and so it is no surprise that they are framed in the game as both a deadly threat and a revolting mechanic (Creed, 1993a, p. 2–3). Finally, she has been transformed through torture, cannibalism, and consuming "tainted" blood: bodily transformation and cannibalism are both abject—again, signaling the breakdown between Self

and Other—but the Darkspawn blood is a particularly powerful abject symbol. Blood itself is an abject bodily substance (Kristeva, 1982, p. 3), but tainted blood can be read as a reference to menstrual blood, which both Kristeva and Creed discuss at length as being particularly abject in patriarchal society as a symbol of female fertility, sexual maturation, and sexual difference. Kristeva (1982) has written that "blood, as a vital element, also refers to women, fertility, and the assurance of fecundation. It thus becomes a fascinating semantic crossroads, the propitious place for abjection" (p. 59). Creed (1993a) has similarly noted that "in the horror genre ... menstrual blood is constructed as a source of abjection: its powers are so great it can transform woman into any one of a number of fearful creatures" (p. 83). The most fearful of creatures is, of course, a monstrous mother who parthenogenetically spawns monstrous offspring. Naturally, those offspring are loyal only to her and pose a threat to the player-character, who serves as the representative of normative, patriarchal society.

The connection between blood, transformation, fecundity, monstrosity, and the female body is worth exploring further. Ussher (2006) has observed that:

> Menarche marks the point at which a girl becomes a woman; when childhood innocence may be swapped for the mantle of monstrosity associated with abject fecundity. The physical changes of puberty—breasts, pubic hair, curving hips and thighs, sweat, oily skin, and most significantly, menstrual blood—stand as signifiers of feminine excess, of the body as out of control. (p. 19)

The transformations undergone by the broodmother are particularly excessive: she swells in size, grows multiple breasts, her lower body transforms into tentacles, she becomes violent, and she apparently loses the ability to speak (she only roars and grunts, like an animal). In other words, the process that turns her into a mother also makes her monstrous (or vice versa).

The transformation process itself is articulated in the game by Hespith, one of the Darkspawn's prisoners:

> We tried to escape, but they found us. They took us all, turned us. The men, they kill... They're merciful. But the women, they want. They want to touch, to mold, to change until you are filled with them. They took Laryn. They made her eat the others, our friends. She tore off her husband's face and drank his blood. And while she ate, she grew. She swelled and turned gray and she smelled like them. They remade her in their image. Then she made more of them. Broodmother...

This part of *Origins* clearly slips from dark fantasy to horror, drawing from themes common in body horror films. More importantly, this segment presents a particularly gendered danger, and although it is not expressly stated, the poem repeated by Hespith suggests that the victims are raped during the transformation process that makes them into broodmothers:

> First day, they come and catch everyone.
>
> Second day, they beat us and eat some for meat.
>
> Third day, the men are all gnawed on again.
>
> Fourth day, we wait and fear for our fate.
>
> Fifth day, they return and it's another girl's turn.
>
> Sixth day, her screams we hear in our dreams.
>
> Seventh day, she grew as in her mouth they spew.
>
> Eighth day, we hated as she is violated.
>
> Ninth day, she grins and devours her kin.
>
> Now she does feast, as she's become the beast.
>
> Now you lay and wait, for their screams will haunt you in your dreams.

While they could be spewing blood into her mouth, and the "violation" could be referring to the entire process, the poem could also be interpreted as implying repeated sexual violence. The lead writer of the *Dragon Age* franchise, David Gaider, admitted that although the broodmothers were his idea, he had not thought of how particularly chilling this segment of the game might be for "female Wardens" (or female players, for that matter). He notes in an interview that he "could definitely see a female Warden who would rather kill herself than allow for the possibility that she could be transformed into a Broodmother" (Ashfae, 2012). Gaider goes no further, however, and no interviewer has asked him why he thought it would be a good idea to have women in his game who are tortured and apparently repeatedly gang-raped until they become pregnant monstrosities that must endlessly give birth to the very thing that tortured and violated them until they are murdered by the player.

It is also unclear whether, after their initial transformation, broodmothers begin to reproduce parthenogenically or not; however, the Darkspawn appear to be loyal only to their mother, sacrificing themselves to try and stop the player-character from killing her. As the broodmother dies, Hespith finishes her story: "that's where they come from. That's why they hate us… That's why they need us. That's why they take us… That's why they feed us." The line "that's why they hate us… That's why they need us" is particularly potent here, as it also articulates the contradiction inherent in misogyny, especially revulsion and hatred towards the maternal. However, even after learning that these broodmothers are tormented victims, the player is not given an option to be merciful. The creepy build-up, unsettling mise-en-scène, and narrative framing of these monsters are designed to encourage the player's feelings of disgust and horror, to make them *want* to kill the broodmother, and to foster feelings of satisfaction and relief upon her defeat. Online player commentary from Reddit's subreddit r/dragonage regarding

this section of the game reveals how successful the developers were at making this a horrific and memorable experience:[30]

> Broodmothers are the creepiest and most disturbing creatures in the series. (deleted user)
>
> The creature itself is nasty, but nothing really compares to the building of dread before you ever get to it. (desacralize)
>
> I've done that fight several times. Still freaks me out. (Bkrugby78)
>
> I hated the whole Deep Roads section (in a good way), and the Broodmother was just puke icing on the shit cake. (Guh-nurt)
>
> When I first went trough [*sic*] the deep roads Hespith's poem creeped me out and when I found the broodmother I went full on WHAT THE FUCK. Bloody hell. (Phelanii)
>
> I remember wanting to vomit after hearing [Hespith's] poem. The music in the area also does a great job of making you feel tainted. (Deleted user)
>
> The first time I saw the Broodmother, I paused the game and had to take a breather, it was shocking and it was amazingly lore entrancing, I was in the game. I was terrified. I lost several times and had to keep fighting and fighting her, it was something I never experienced in an RPG before and I loved it! (voltronforlife)
>
> The broodmothers were so fucking frightening and disgusting to me but they were perfect for such a dark and gritty game. (ObeseMoreece)

And more commentary from another thread in r/dragonage asking which creatures in the *Dragon Age* series are the scariest reveals that most players who commented felt that the broodmother was the most horrifying enemy in the game. Some players articulated the effectiveness of combining creepiness and fear in the monster's design:[31]

[30] The following 8 comments are all taken from: https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/7vgnwo/spoilers_all_the_other_broodmothers/ accessed on March 30, 2019.

[31] The following 4 comments are taken from: https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/9nwqkp/spoilers_all_scariest_creature_in_da/ accessed on March 30, 2019.

> The Broodmother is hands down the most chilling and scariest monster in the franchise. The game had me on edge before I even saw the thing and then... there it is. And I just... ugh. (melisusthewee)
>
> The Brood Mother is just so fucked up. Dragons I can accept, they're scary but straight forward. Brood Mother's [*sic*] combine terror with *creep* though, and that's just too much. (Kumqwatwhat)
>
> Honestly the broodmother lore is absolutely disgusting. Darkspawn vomit in women's mouths? Force feed tainted flesh to them too...pretty sure they also straight up rape them. I think in that deep roads poem it mentions "touching, feeling" or something to that end. Somebody is one sadistic fuck in that studio to come up with that. (deleted user)
>
> Maybe they're not exactly scary, but they're creepy, horrifying and the worst part is knowing how they were made. (not_a_damn_robot)

Finally, in a similar thread asking which creature is the "creepiest thing ever" from the series, most commenters again chose the broodmother. These players similarly emphasize the creepy factor, as well as the combined feelings of horror and sadness they experienced while playing through the segment. Some players even noted that the experience influenced the rest of their gameplay and that it felt especially unsettling if they had a female avatar:[32]

> I remember being so icked [*sic*] out by this part. I thought about it for a long time. When you get to the part when you know the mother of each type of darkspawn... every time I killed one, I thought of the mother. Every. Time. (Bhrunhilda)
>
> Broodmothers are one of the most disgusting but at the same time most sad creatures you'll ever meet in DA. (IsabelleEste)
>
> That made it so much creepier to me, playing as a female warden. Not only is it a horrific story, but it also forces you to put yourself in her shoes as a character. She has to face to possibility that if she fails, she could end up as a broodmother herself. And knowing she's feeling that dread as she approaches just makes the whole encounter more intense. (Leagle_Eagle)

[32] The following 9 comments are taken from: https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/5xudjm/spoilers_allthe_creepiest_thing_ever_from_the/ accessed on March 30, 2019.

> The creepiness quotient of this part of Origins had me wanting to nope the fuck out of there. I've never felt that sort of dread at any other time while playing this series. (MoiraCousland)
>
> 100% this is the stuff of nightmares. (dropbears)
>
> This is definitely the creepiest thing ever from the DA series, but also possibly the creepiest thing in games in general. I don't think I've ever stumbled upon anything like this playing other games. (K505)
>
> Man, I HATE the Deep Roads. Probably my most hated area so far in any RPG or any other singleplayer I played. This shit spooked me so hard. (DoomHeraldOW)
>
> Yeah, after I learned about broodmothers, I reeeeally resisted taking any female party members to the deep roads with me (which was rough during my rogue playthrough!). I just... Christ on a cracker, that was some dark shit. I dislike the term "fate worse than death," but... no, yeah, it applies here. (Proserpina)
>
> Never before has the design and lore of a boss been so soul-shatteringly horrifying. (deleted user)

The comments by Leagle_Eagle and Proserpina are particularly interesting. Leagle_Eagle notes that the gendered nature of this segment made them experience the horror more profoundly because they had a female avatar and Proserpina states that after the encounter, they did not want to bring their female party members into the Deep Roads. Because the broodmother was transformed into this monstrosity against her will, the dynamic operating in this segment is potentially more complicated than it is for other kinds of monsters. Although she is now abject and grotesque, she was once a person and so is a victim of evil rather than an evil creature herself.

The recognition and dread that their own female character could turn into this pregnant monstrosity is notable. While players could see ending her life as a mercy killing, it could also be a desire to destroy a creature that reminds them of their own precarity, their own potential victimization, infection, and transformation. Although IsabelleEste felt both disgusted and saddened by the broodmother, none of the commenters mention any reluctance towards wanting

to kill her and certainly no one admitted to identifying in any way with her. Even if they secretly did identify with her, the game offers no opportunity for players to enact that identification if they wish to keep playing. Players must murder the broodmother to proceed in the game. On the other hand, the act of murdering this tortured and mutated woman is perhaps rendered less disturbing because she does not speak, she only shrieks and screams. What if she could vocalize her own agony? As it turns out, players still have to murder her even as she speaks to them: in the following game in the series—featuring a familial drama in which the maternal is pitted against the paternal—the main antagonist and final boss is a uniquely self-aware and fully sapient broodmother.

The Mother vs. The Father

The main antagonist and final boss of *Awakening* is unironically called the Mother. She is a unique, self-aware broodmother who can speak but has been driven mad by her own mutations. Her dialogue and narrative function reflect common ableist tropes of madness in video games (Chang 2017; Goto 2015; Lindsay 2014): she laughs to herself, repeats herself, speaks in the third person, and is, of course, *evil.* Her character design is similar to the broodmother in *Origins* in that she is also a half human-half tentacle/spider monster hybrid with multiple breasts (fig. 15). However, the Mother's human half is thin whereas the original broodmother is fat (though the Mother is much larger in size), her skin is less pink, and her face is more human. She also has a comparable combat style, grabbing and swatting at the player-character with her tentacles, spewing vomit and saliva, shrieking loudly to stun the player-character, and sending waves of her Darkspawn children to attack.

Figure 15. Screenshot of the Mother from *Dragon Age: Origins – Awakening* (BioWare, 2010).

Although some players named the Mother as one of the "creepiest" monsters in the *Dragon Age* series in the above threads (PsychoFlashFan, for example, notes that "She made my skin crawl"),[33] she is not mentioned nearly as often as the broodmother. Commenter Luidaeg explains that:

> The more a monster like the broodmother gets shown, the more it loses impact. Nothing will ever recreate that moment of, "what the fuck. WHAT THE FUCK," when I first encountered it in DA:O. Repeatedly showing them would eventually make them just

[33] https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/9nwqkp/spoilers_all_scariest_creature_in_da/ accessed March 30, 2019.

> another monster, you know? By DA:A, even, I was more bemused than horrified by The Mother.[34]

This suggests that the impact is lessened in *Awakening* because players have already encountered a broodmother in the previous game. It is important to reiterate that the main differences between the broodmother and the Mother are that the former is fat and does not speak, while the latter is thin and given a voice. Although the broodmother's fatness is rarely pointed out by players (Gibbie42 calls her "Jabba the Hut with boobs" and TheSage12021 says that "The jiggle physics haunt me to this day"[35]), fat bodies are more closely associated with both the abject and the grotesque:

> The obese body speaks of its own transgression (or "sinfulness"), and it speaks loudly … This transgression of the boundaries of the proper human being thus frequently draws on images from the repertoire of the grotesque, the monstrous or the alien … the obese person is represented as belonging to "another species", as monstrous or abject, but also as socially irresponsible. (Scholz, 2009, p. 67)

Certain bodies are more often presented as abject, grotesque, frightening, pathologized, and monstrous in our media. Fatness is particularly targeted because it has been framed in our society's biomedical discourse as an entirely negative or unnatural state of being, a product of personal choice, bad habits, laziness, and a lack of self-control, implying some kind of moral failing or even sin.

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[34] https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/7vgnwo/spoilers_all_the_other_broodmothers/ accessed March 30, 2019.

[35] Both comments taken from https://www.reddit.com/r/dragonage/comments/5xudjm/spoilers_allthe_creepiest_thing_ever_from_the/ accessed on March 30, 2019.

Lesleigh Owen (2015) has observed that "monsters exist to scare us, and fat bodies are held up in popular and medical cultures as cautionary tales to help scare good girls and boys into normalcy" (p. 3). The fat body is particularly vulnerable to cultural stigmatization because it is visibly othered—like the aged body or the physically disabled body, the fat body is a reminder of corporeal precarity and malleability, how bodies can change and be changed. That the broodmother is rendered monstrous *and* fat through the force-feeding of body parts and blood as well as cannibalism points to the trope of monstrous orality or monstrous (i.e., compulsive, unnatural, cannibalistic) eating common to horror media. However, like the abject and the grotesque, fatness is ambivalent:

> We are taught to hate corpulent bodies, to find them hideous. Yet, at the same time they repel us, fat bodies exert a strong pull we are unable to refuse. Fat persons are monsters, neither quite human nor devoid of humanity … as such, they are disturbing and ambivalent beings that exert the twin and opposite forces of attraction and repulsion. (Owen, 2015, p. 7)

While this ambivalence could suggest potential for empowerment, reclamation, or identification, the broodmother is rendered entirely monstrous and not given a chance to plead her case. Her story is told through the voice of another, Hespith, but all the broodmother can do herself is shriek, scream, growl, and grunt. She is closely aligned with the bestial, whereas the Mother, on the other hand, is given a personality and dialogue, thereby aligning her more closely with the human. She is the main antagonist and final boss of *Awakening* so it is perhaps unsurprising that she was given a personality and dialogue—a villain who cannot speak might not be as compelling. But why is she designed with a more normative, or conventionally attractive, human half? It may relate to the previously discussed "sexy + gross = creepy" design choice: the

blending of "female sexuality and fertility with elements designed to be unsettling or horrifying" (Sarkeesian, 2016, 01:05–01:12). As discussed in the previous chapter, the tension between a conventionally attractive, naked female upper half and a grotesque, monstrous, and/or animalistic lower half is not just a shocking juxtaposition, it is meant to evoke a particular reaction to the abject—fear and disgust *and* fascination and attraction. It is also no coincidence that it is the woman's lower half that is nonhuman and monstrous, as female genitalia are a site of anxiety related to both sexual power and reproduction. While the Mother does not have a *vagina dentata*, her tentacles are similarly horrific, representing the more phallic, but no less emasculating, threat of penetration rather than castration.

In *Awakening*'s narrative, the Mother's desires are contrasted with those of the Architect, a paternal, male Darkspawn who is also uniquely intelligent and self-aware. The Architect was responsible for granting sentience to the Mother. This caused her to remember who she once was and the fact that she was forced to devour her own family when she was mutated into a broodmother, a realization that drove her mad. Both characters control hordes of Darkspawn, but the Architect is presented as calm, logical, and wanting only peace for his "children," whereas the Mother is portrayed as mad, evil, emotionally unstable, and using her children as tools for her own desires. Although the Architect refers to the Darkspawn as his children, and the Mother even refers to him as "the Father," he cannot reproduce. The Mother, on the other hand, gives birth to uniquely mutated Darkspawn called the Children who are protective, obedient, and loyal only to her.

While the Mother has awakened Darkspawn who follow her and call her "mother," her real offspring are more monstrous and abject than regular Darkspawn, who emerge from normal broodmothers as monstrous toddlers. The Mother's Children are born instead as worm-like

Darkspawn called “childer grubs” that hibernate in cocoons after birth before emerging to devour nearby prey and evolve into fully grown “childers” (fig. 16). By making her offspring even more repulsive, monstrous, non-humanoid, and abject, the game reinforces the message that she is worse than the Architect, and that she must be stopped before she covers the world in these monstrosities that are loyal only to her.

Figure 16. Screenshot of an Adult Childer from *Dragon Age: Origins – Awakening* (BioWare, 2010).

Regarding the Architect, the Mother states that “he claims he wishes the darkspawn to be free. What he truly wants is to correct them!” The Architect, on the other hand, argues that “I do not seek to rule my brethren. I only seek to release them from their chains.” Although this may appear to be a noble goal, the Darkspawn will never co-exist peacefully with the other races in the world given the grotesque and violent way in which they procreate. While the player can choose to agree or disagree with the Architect, there is no room for understanding in the player’s interaction with the Mother. This is perhaps because she is physically far more monstrous than

the Architect (fig. 17) and she is framed as delusional and described as "mad" by other characters.

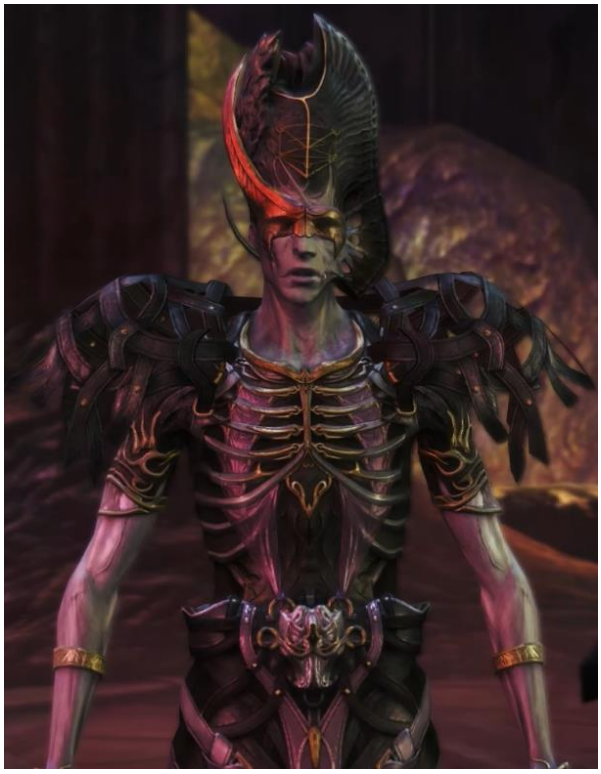

Figure 17. Screenshot of the Architect from *Dragon Age: Origins – Awakening* (BioWare, 2010).

The Architect describes the Mother as his "most flawed creation," explaining that "freedom drove her mad, and she has poisoned the minds of others." Before killing her, the player has the option to call the Mother a horror and say she must die, or to say that "even were she not mad, the Mother would still be disgusting." She deserves to die, apparently, because she is a horror, because she is mad, or because she disgusts the player. Interestingly, none of the dialogue options refer to her Children as a reason for killing the Mother. The motivation for killing her is therefore because she is abject or mad rather than the actual threat her offspring pose to the world. In this sense, the game's developers assumed that the player would not feel

pity or sympathy for the Mother, let alone agree with her desires. Yet, if players are familiar with the first game in the series, they know that the Mother must have once been a human woman who was tortured and mutated against her will. Importantly, the Mother speaks to the Architect and the player, so even if the game forces players to murder her, she can at least vocalize her anger and pain. Indeed, when the final battle with her begins, the Mother tells the Architect that he cannot hurt her any more than he already has, suggesting that the greatest pain he could ever have inflicted upon her is to make her aware of her own abjection. She then opens up her mouth like an alien and screams (fig. 18)—the gaping, screaming, toothy mouth is a common image of monstrous female orality, as well as a reference to the *vagina dentata*. The player is then forced to fight her, and when she is defeated the player-character kills her by stabbing their sword deep into her throat or electrocuting her while she screams in agony.[36]

[36] Note that this death scream is similar to the sirens' horrifyingly human scream of agony when they are killed in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, as discussed in the previous chapter. When she is attractive and alluring, the female monster "sings" or perhaps "calls," but when she is meant to instill disgust or fear in the player, her voice becomes a shriek or scream. As previously noted, male monsters rarely scream in the same way, rather they tend to grunt, growl, and roar.

Figure 18. Screenshot of the Mother's Final Scream in *Dragon Age: Origins – Awakening* (BioWare, 2010).

This narrative framing of the father as good, trustworthy, logical, and calm and the mother as evil, mad, emotional, controlling, and abject demonstrates the patriarchal fear of the maternal, birthing body as well as the misogyny embedded in the game. Kristeva (1982) argued that the logic behind patriarchal power structures is to contain female generative powers within strict behavioural codes due to the underlying assumption that women—again, always teetering on the brink of evil—want to create children that are loyal manifestations of themselves (p. 91). The maternal body is a nexus of abjection and existential anxiety, the cause of an abject fear that the makers of *Awakening* remediated by uncritically representing the mother as a literal monster. This is even more cruel considering that it is not her fault that she is monstrous—she was transformed into a broodmother against her will and the Architect's actions made her become mentally ill. At the end of the game, the Mother refers to the player-character as "the instrument of the Father" and while she is referring to the Architect, this could also be interpreted as her

recognition that she, a deviant, mad, hybrid, victimized monstrous mother, is being slaughtered by a servant of patriarchal ideology. Indeed, the game frames the player-character in that way, allowing only for an (admittedly very suspicious) alliance with the Architect. The player is never given an option to agree with, support, or even sympathize with the Mother. Murdering her by stabbing a phallic sword down her throat as she screams and opens her mouth up in a horrific, alien manner reinforces the player's position as a dominant, masculine, and violent representative of the patriarchy. And this positioning is not optional: to progress in *Origins* and to "win" *Awakening,* the player is *forced* to slay these deviant mother-figures, along with their unnatural, monstrous offspring.

Although it might be tempting to scoff at the fact that *Awakening* is so un-self-aware that the developers actually named the final boss "Mother" and write it off as a particularly misogynistic (or Freudian) text, it is not the only Western game in which a major or final boss is pregnant. I already mentioned The Vagary from *Doom 3* and Cleopatra from *Dante's Inferno,* who births monsters from her nipples, but there is also Alma from *F.E.A.R. 3* (Day 1 Studios, 2011), a pregnant ghost and central antagonist whose contractions cause nightmarish chaos to manifest around her; monsters called Pregnants from *Dead Space* (Visceral Games, 2008–2013) with distended stomachs full of tiny monsters that will burst out if the Pregnant is shot in the torso; and Mother from *The House of the Dead: Overkill* (Headstrong Games, 2009), who releases bloated mutant offspring. Mother is also the final boss of the game, and when she dies her son, the game's main antagonist, crawls up her giant vagina. There are also several acclaimed Japanese games that feature this trope: for example, the main antagonist in *Parasite Eve* (Square, 1998) is a mutated woman with multiple arms and breasts who is pregnant with a monstrous fetus; the final boss of *Resident Evil: Code Veronica* (Capcom, 2000) is an insect-like mutant

woman who releases parasites from a large, fleshy sac on her lower abdomen; and the final boss from *The Evil Within 2* (Tango Gameworks, 2017) is a giant monstrous woman called the Matriarch who spawns spiderlings that burst from her stomach. Horrific, mutated, monstrous pregnant women are a common trope in mainstream video games, and they are always presented to the player as a major or even central enemy to be slain. That all of the games listed here feature a male player-character simply adds to the games' inherent misogyny, though BioWare has demonstrated that allowing for female player-characters does not mean the game will be any less hostile towards female bodies.

Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't: The Monstrous Infertile Female Body

The reproductive female body is certainly a common motif for monstrosity, as powerful single mothers who control their offspring pose a threat to patriarchal society and must therefore be tamed or slain. At the same time, however, the opposite figure—the infertile female body—has been similarly rendered abject and monstrous. Indeed, Adrienne Rich (1976) has noted that the archaic word *barren* "suggests a woman eternally empty and lacking" (p. 29) and Erin Harrington (2018) has similarly argued that:

> The barren body refuses to "behave" in a culturally-sanctioned manner … Therefore, the barren body both excludes *itself* from the dominant social order and is *excluded* because of its failure to comply to a reproductive imperative that positions self-sacrificing motherhood as the ideal form of ideologically complicit female subjectivity. (p. 225, emphasis in original)

Women's existence has always been carefully controlled, and only the "acceptable" social-biological progression for her is virgin-wife-mother-grandmother. Even then, she must be careful, as the virgin should be pure but also sexually appealing (but not *too* sexually appealing)

or she is seen as a *femme fatale* or a siren, vampire, or succubus; the wife must be docile and submissive but still able to keep her husband's interest; the mother must be self-sacrificing but not controlling (and of course willing to accept her own abjection); and the grandmother has to define herself only through her familial relations, since old women are easily reframed as hags, crones, or witches if they get too powerful or independent (or, heaven forbid, are childless). As discussed in the introduction, the archetypal categories of Maiden, Mother, and Crone are not separate, rather they are fluid and overlapping. The previous chapter showed that the succubus is monstrous and threatening primarily in relation to her sexuality as an evil temptress, but she is also associated with harming children and pregnant women as well as being a mother of demons. In the following chapter I discuss the hag as a ludic fairy tale witch figure who is positioned as a monstrous mother because she too threatens children and babies, stealing and/or eating them to overcome her own apparent infertility or regain lost youth. The witch/hag/crone is also commonly presented in opposition to her beautiful, youthful daughter-figure, whom she envies.

As the middle stage of the triunity, the Mother archetype is the bridge between the Maiden and the Crone. This is exemplified in the Ardat-Yakshi from BioWare's *Mass Effect* series (hereafter *ME*) and the monstrous Banshees they become in the third installment. I have already discussed how sexually active young women become framed as the seductive, predatory black widow or *femme fatale*—or, in monster terms, the vampire, the siren, the succubus. The following section demonstrates the slippage from sexualized monster into maternal monster.

Predatory and Monstrous Sexuality

The Asari are an all-female humanoid alien species that feature heavily in the *ME* series (fig. 19). They are often encountered as either enemy mercenary soldiers or sexualized exotic dancers (fig. 20). While they look almost entirely like slim, conventionally attractive human

women, their alienness is signaled through a semi-flexible head crest and "exotic" skin colour (usually blue, but also purple, teal, or green). This fits into a long-established science fiction trope of coding characters as alien through skin colour and some kind of anomalous facial feature (sometimes just through skin colour, in particularly low budget productions). This unusual skin colour—usually blue, green, purple, or red (see fig. 21 for some well-known examples)—distinguishes them from the human characters (who are overwhelmingly white in Western science fiction media with *ME* being no exception). The Asari can reproduce with any other gender and with any other species through a form of parthenogenesis, albeit a considerably less monstrous form than that demonstrated in *Dragon Age.* Through a process of "melding,"—mentally connecting with another person's nervous system—the Asari copies the genetic information from her partner and passes selected traits from that partner's DNA onto her offspring. The offspring are always Asari as no actual physical DNA is taken from the partner, yet Asari-Asari reproduction, or "pureblood" reproduction, is heavily frowned upon as it risks a form of genetic mutation that could result in an Ardat-Yakshi, which means "Demon of the Night Winds."[37]

[37] The name "Demon of the Night Winds" evokes Lilith, who, as mentioned in the previous chapter, was referred to as a "demon of the night" (or "night hag") in Jewish mythology. Lilith was feared for both her sexual predations and for stealing and murdering babies and endangering pregnant women, perhaps because she was unable to have "normal" children of her own and was instead the mother of demons, monsters, and hybrid half-human, half-demon children. It is interesting to note that Lilitu, the Mesopotamian succubus and child-murderer upon which Lilith was based, is also the inspiration for the Greek Lamia, a woman who became a half serpent monster after the death of her children and who also preys on men during sex and murders babies. The slippage between sexual monster and maternal monster is therefore ancient and very well established across patriarchal cultures.

Figure 19. Screenshot of Morinth, an Ardat-Yakshi Asari from *Mass Effect 2* (Bioware, 2010).

Figure 20. Screenshot of Asari as exotic dancers in the *Mass Effect* trilogy (BioWare 2007–2012).

Figure 21. Some alien women with "exotic" skin tones from popular culture, including *Guardians of the Galaxy,* the *Star Wars* franchise, *Avatar,* and the *Star Trek* franchise.

The Ardat-Yakshi are the game's version of a *femme fatale*—a succubus or vampire who, like the black widow or preying mantis, cannot help but consume her partner as she mates with them but becomes stronger as she does. The similarities to the succubus archetype are striking, as something in the Ardat-Yakshi's physiology makes them infertile and unable to control their own powers when melding, causing them to overwhelm and harm or even destroy their partner's nervous system. Most Ardat-Yakshi are given a choice between execution or being exiled to a monastery where they are kept as prisoners to prevent them from melding. Although it is ostensibly to protect others, this imprisonment is really enforced to keep the Ardat-Yakshi a secret, since they are an embarrassment for the otherwise seemingly perfect Asari.

One side quest requires the player to hunt down a serial killer black widow Ardat-Yakshi named Morinth (at the behest of her mother, who wants her dead and has been hunting her), but the game gives the player the option to instead recruit her (in which she case, she kills her mother). Morinth tries to seduce the player-character and will kill them if the player is unable to

resist her, but like the Ardat-Yakshi in general, Morinth is presented as evil or cruel, addicted to the power she gains and pleasure she experiences every time she melds, and a victim of her own genetic mutation and the social stigma and psychological trauma she experienced because of it. To recap, Morinth is framed as "defective," addicted to pleasure, an unfortunate embarrassment and social pariah, and an evil black widow serial killer. Her choice was between continuing to engage in deviant sexual activity and to be hunted by her own mother or *to live in a monastery.* This information would already overtly code Morinth as queer, and the game does not shy away from this presentation: Morinth almost exclusively engages in sexual relationship with women. The only time players see her flirting or melding with a man is if they are playing as a male player-character. Through conversation with both Morinth and her mother, players discover that Morinth had convinced an entire village to worship her and to offer their daughters to her as sacrifices. The player catches Morinth by investigating the death of her lover, a young female artist who died melding with the Asari. Although no one would accuse BioWare of designing particularly nuanced characters, they are especially ham-fisted when it comes to representing queerness.[38] Again, Morinth is a predatory, deviant, nymphomaniac, bisexual or lesbian *femme fatale* black widow/vampire/succubus—an offensive and harmful stereotype of female queerness that Mary Ann Doane (1991), Lynda Hart (1994), and Chris Holmlund (1994) unpacked decades ago and has been more recently critiqued by Katherine Farrimond (2012) and Liz Millward et al.

[38] Adrienne Shaw (2015) has argued that games like those made by BioWare which allow only for optional queer content that needs to be sought out by the players themselves (and therefore can be easily missable or avoidable for heterosexual playthroughs) are a form of pluralism rather than diversity. Brianna Dym (2019) has similarly critiqued BioWare's tendency to place the burden of creating/finding/reading queer romances, experiences, and characters on the players themselves. Given the heteronormativity that dominates the game industry, the fact that BioWare allows for queer romances in their games—even if their queer characters are stereotypical and their queerness is often dependent on player choice—is important. They are in fact one of the very few mainstream game studios that are willing to create space for overtly queer characters at all. However, while BioWare does sometimes design more nuanced romanceable queer characters, lesbian *femmes fatales* like Morinth are just remediations the same harmful tropes and stereotypes that were critiqued in film studies decades ago.

(2017). However, while this *femme fatale* is evil and cruel, she is not really framed as *monstrous.* She is given a voice, and the player is allowed to choose to side with her rather than murder her. There is room for sympathy and pity for the Ardat-Yakshi. It is not until the third installment in the series that these "defective," predatory women become truly monstrous.

Screaming Pregnant Banshees

As if having a genetic mutation that makes them infertile, turns them into social pariahs, and dooms them to either a celibate life in a monastery or a violent life as a serial killer black widow/*femme fatale* were not enough, the Ardat-Yakshi become victims of a form of techno-infection that turns them into "Banshees" (fig. 22). The main antagonists of the *ME* series are the Reapers—a race of giant, ancient, highly advanced, artificially-intelligent machines who corrupt organic minds through a process called indoctrination. This process brainwashes some characters, turning them into spies for the Reapers, but most people are indoctrinated at an accelerated pace using cybernetic implants, transforming them into violent zombie-like cyborgs. The Banshees are created specifically from the Ardat-Yakshi, thereby rendering these women—who are already presented as dangerous, predatory, defective, and mutated—even more monstrous. This of course means that even the "good" Ardat-Yakshi who turned themselves in and lived a life of celibacy in the monastery are punished for being deviant, defective, different: turned into actual monsters, stripped of their agency, and then murdered by the player. If the player chooses to spare Morinth in the previously mentioned side quest, she appears as a Banshee in *ME3* (2012) and must be killed. In this sense, Morinth is doomed even if the player chose to spare and join forces with her—there is no redemption for the murderous lesbian *femme fatale.*

Figure 22. Screenshot of a Banshee from *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012). Note her naked body and distended belly.

The physical appearance of the Banshee is particularly noteworthy for several reasons. First, they are the only clearly gendered mutant—the zombies made from the other alien races appear to become genderless (or read as male) when transformed, whereas the Banshee has visible breasts as well as a visible vaginal opening (fig. 23). The designers of the Banshees clearly wanted to ensure that they would be read as female, to the extent that they created *a graphic texture of female genitals*, as though their intended femaleness was not already obvious enough with the breasts and glowing nipples. Note that none of the other mutated creatures have visible genitals. Second, for an unexplained reason, the Banshees have distended bellies, as though they are pregnant. Since the Ardat-Yakshi are infertile, their design suggests that the developers simply figured that screaming, naked, monstrous women attacking the player would be "freakier" if they *also looked pregnant.* This, combined with the exposed breasts, glowing

nipples, and visible female genitals, serves to highlight the fact that the Banshees are monstrous in relation to their biological femaleness, namely their body parts associated with reproduction—regardless of their supposed infertility.

Figure 23. Screenshot of the Banshee's visible genitals in *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012).

Conclusion: "The depository of all that is transgressive and dangerous"

As a central-yet-feared aspect of socially-mandated normative femininity, female reproduction has always been heavily policed within patriarchal society, and the patriarchal fear of female fecundity and potency has resulted in maternal bodies being strictly controlled or reviled as abject (Kristeva, 1982). Indeed, as Ussher (2006) has pointed out:

> The reproductive body is positioned as the depository of all that is transgressive and dangerous, all that is outside the boundaries of what a good woman should be—an enemy

> to be contained and controlled. No wonder menstruation is deemed woman's curse. (p. xiii)

Just as the broodmothers in *Dragon Age* were infected and mutated by monstrous beings, turned into monsters themselves, and then forced to reproduce, the Banshees are infected and mutated by the Reapers and appear to be pregnant. While the Banshees do not actually give birth, BioWare has clearly embraced the abject maternal, the reproductive monstrous-feminine, and what Harrington (2018) refers to as the "gynaehorrific": horror that is concerned with women and their reproductive bodies. Kristeva (1982) demonstrated the ways that fear and revulsion towards the reproductive body manifest in Western culture, since the fecund female body threatens to collapse the boundary between human and animal, civilized and uncivilized (p. 102). Ussher (2006) added to this when she noted that "the corporeality of the changing pregnant body, the act of birth, the amniotic fluid, afterbirth, and blood, and the hormonal changes and lactation which follow, stand at the pinnacle of that which signifies abjection" (p. 87). Although BioWare has allowed players to choose the gender of their player-character and has offered queer romance options in their games, their female monsters reveal a misogynistic bias among the developers. While these kinds of reproductive female monsters are common in Western mythology and popular culture, I contend that video games are particularly harmful because they force the player to actively murder these women in order to proceed, to "win." The Ardat-Yakshi are presented in a somewhat sympathetic light (except Morinth, as she is presented as a stone-cold serial killer), but once they become monstrous, they lose their voices and their agency, and simply exist for the player to slaughter, like the broodmother and Mother in the *Dragon Age* series.

Kristeva argued that the maternal body is a site of conflicting desires because it is both reassuring and stifling. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that the maternal body is so often presented as a monstrous body. With reference to Kristeva, Ussher (2006) has noted that:

> The apparently uncontained fecund body, with its creases and curves, secretions and seepages, as well as its changing boundaries at times of pregnancy and menopause, signifies association with the animal world, which reminds us of our mortality and fragility, and stands as the antithesis of the clean, contained, proper body, which "must bear no trace of its debt to nature" [Kristeva, 1982, p. 101] … This is not to say that the female body *is* abject or polluted, it has merely been positioned as such, with significant implications for women's experiences of inhabiting a body so defined. One of the implications is the positioning of woman as inherently deviant, or dangerous, because of her fecundity. (p. 6, emphasis in original)

Even infertile women like the Ardat-Yakshi are made into reproductive monsters through horrific, voracious reproduction or by transforming them into monstrous pregnant women. To progress in games such as *Origins*, *Awakening*, and *ME3*, the player is forced to murder these pregnant, maternal figures. These examples of the abject maternal monstrous-feminine demonstrate how the patriarchal fear of and revulsion towards female reproductive powers manifests in the form of video game monsters. While film and literature also commonly utilize these tropes, the fact that the player is the one who must murder these maternal monsters and their twisted offspring—often as a major boss or the final, climactic battle of the game—makes them complicit in the misogyny these games represent. Players must kill these monstrous women to proceed or to win the game, and since they are presented as unquestionably horrific and abject, there is little room for a resistant or oppositional feminist interpretation of these monsters.

The design of the broodmother, the Mother, and the Banshees evokes both the abject and the grotesque, though the transgressive potential of those aesthetics is undermined since these monsters are designed to "gross out" or "freak out" the players, encouraging them to *want* to kill these monstrous women. In this sense, Dohmen's (2016) warning that "in response to the abject one [could] instead reconsolidates one's imaginary boundaries, violently rejecting, and thus performatively recreating, that which is abject" rings true (p. 770). Similarly, this demonstrates Ahmed's (2004) concern that the disgust triggered by abject bodies serves to maintain borders and encourage a violent rejection and expulsion of the object of disgust. The violence directed at these monstrous women is encouraged by their design, narrative framing, and mise-en-scène, and it is also enforced through gameplay. Players *must* kill these creatures to proceed, there is no option for sparing them or siding with them.

This chapter demonstrates that the centrality of reproduction in popular culture representations of femaleness is important to scrutinize. Asking why mothers are so often absent, killed off, or vilified in games and why pregnant bodies are so commonly presented as monstrous Others to be killed by the player allows for the exposure and interrogation of the misogynistic ideologies underpinning these games. This is an important project because, as Ussher (2006) has argued:

> The reproductive body is central to the process by which women take up the subject position "woman"; central to the performance of normative femininity. Women's bleeding, and the embodied changes that come with pregnancy, birth, and menopause, are irrevocably connected to the discursive positioning of female fecundity as site of danger or debilitation, with these signs of fecundity standing as signifiers of feminine excess. There is no "natural" reproductive body that prefigures discourse. (p. 3–4)

In other words, the call for more nuanced female representation in games (and all media) should include a demand for more positive portrayals of diverse kinds of reproductive bodies. This includes making space for players to identify with or at least appreciate the unruly, grotesque, and uncontained pregnant body. This relates to Yaeger's (1992) proposal that women seek a grotesque and sublime feminist aesthetic by embracing their own maternal power. However, as long as the player continues to be positioned as a normative representative of patriarchal society who is forced to confront and slaughter these transgressive monstrous mothers, games will continue to reinforce the positioning of the pregnant body as horrific, threatening, grotesque, and abject.

Chapter 6: The Crone

Hideous Hags, Wicked Witches, and Cackling Crones: The Fear of Aging Female Bodies

> *The figure of the older woman is so profoundly abject that it is not deemed to be reasonable for an audience to identify with her or want to watch her. Instead, narratives about older women are significantly devalued, and their invisibility goes largely unnoticed. The unspoken assumption is: why would anyone want to watch that? My question, instead, is why wouldn't we?*
>
> —Erin Harrington (2018, p. 238)

> *This, to me, is the image of a* really *scary woman—and all my demystified knowledge of the cultural practices that posit her as such do little to demystify or rob her of her negative-affective power to scare me. Subjectively felt, she engenders humiliation and its ancillary horrors. Objectively viewed, she is ludicrous, grotesque. Subjectively felt, she is an* excess woman*—desperately afraid of invisibility, uselessness, lovelessness, sexual and social isolation and abandonment, but also deeply furious at both the double standard of aging in a patriarchal culture and her acquiescence to male heterosexist values and the self-contempt they engender. Objectively viewed, she is sloppy, self-pitying, and abjectly needy or she is angry, vengeful, powerful, and scary. Indeed, she is an* excessive woman*, a woman in masquerade, in whiteface. She is the Leech Woman, the Wasp Woman, the 50 Foot Woman. She is Norma Desmond and whatever happened to Baby Jane.*
>
> —Vivian Sobchack (2000, p. 337–8)

As I have demonstrated in the previous two chapters, female monstrosity in games can be loosely categorized in relation to presumed heteronormative female sexual development. The Maiden archetype, idealized in the chaste virgin/damsel, gets twisted into her monstrous Other, the succubus, siren, or vampire. The Mother, whose perfect form is the angelic, self-sacrificing maternal figure, becomes the monstrous pregnant body, the woman who reproduces parthenogenetically, or the evil mother who controls and uses her children for selfish reasons. There is not much twisting that needs to happen to the third figure in the triad, as "Crone" is already a "bad" word. Even in the *Discworld* series of fantasy novels by Terry Pratchett, in which he attempts to portray the typical three-witch coven in more humorous and humanizing ways, the witches refuse to utter the word "crone" for fear of offending the powerful, wizened witch who occupies that position in their coven. Although the words maiden and mother are

neutral or even positive terms, crone is perceived as an offensive term because more than simply meaning "old woman," it implies an old woman who is, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, "cruel or ugly."

As previously discussed, feminist theorists have long noted that women's bodies are always abject, and in our sexist and ageist society, the visibly aging body of a woman is considered particularly terrifying, abject, and grotesque. The misogyny and ageism underpinning the fear, horror, and disgust directed towards the aging female body coalesces in the form of the crone, hag, or witch—familiar archetypes of female monstrosity. These figures are misogyny manifest:

> Aging with its catalog of fleshly indignities is the human face of death, and it is a woman's face. There is no male counterpart to the witch or hag … or any male figure who rivals the horror and loathing she inspires. She is the scapegoat par excellence for our fear of aging. (Melamed, 1983, p. 54)

Just as there is no male or gender-neutral counterpart to the *femme fatale* or the broodmother, the hag speaks to a particularly gendered fear of aging. As Vivian Sobchack's (2000) semi-autobiographical work on the dread of aging in horror film has demonstrated, the visibly aging female body is presented in ways intended to alienate, denigrate, and humiliate older women, framing their very existence as something that disgusts and terrifies. She argues that "the visibly aging body of a woman has been and still is especially terrifying—not only to the woman who experiences self-revulsion and anger, invisibility and abandonment, but also to the men who find her presence so unbearable" (Sobchack, 2000, p. 343). In this chapter, I analyze the crone/hag figure as she manifests in games as monstrous old women positioned at the fraught intersection of sexism, ableism, "beautyism," and ageism. Popular culture leaves little space for positive or

nuanced portrayals of older women, and the elderly-appearing monster like the hag or crone is particularly abject because she evokes this fear of the aged female body—"so threatening and disgusting a sight that the gaze slides quickly over her and disavows her visibility" (Sobchack, 2000, p. 337). These games do not allow the player to look away from her body, however, as they must act and react, fighting and slaughtering the hag or crone and thereby alleviating the anxieties she represents. Erasing her through violence.

"All that is evil and cruel": The Ludic Hag in *D&D*

According to the *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) *Monster Manual*, "Hags represent all that is evil and cruel," and it describes them as "withered crones … whose forms reflect only the wickedness in their hearts" (2014, p. 176, fig. 24). The description continues, drawing a clear image of women with "withered faces … framed by long, frayed hair" complete with "horrid moles and warts [that] dot their blotchy skin" (*Monster Manual*, 2014, p. 176). The hags' moral alignment is evil, meaning they also exhibit horrid behaviour. They are "wretched and hateful," "sly and subversive," "love to manipulate other creatures into doing their bidding, masking their intentions behind layers of deception," and "take perverse joy in corrupting mortals" (p. 176–7).

Figure 24. Screenshots of a night hag (left) and green hag (right) from the *Monster Manual* (2014).

Hags are immortal, so their aged appearance has nothing to do with actual aging; rather, the writers reveal their ageist perspective by equating this elderly and non-normative appearance with the hags' "wickedness." This is important because, as disability studies scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (2001) have argued, "film narratives rely upon an audience's making connections between external 'flaws' and character motivations in a way that insists upon corporeal differences as laden with psychological and social implications" (p. 96). In other words, the hag's description falls into the long-established trope of equating "ugliness" or physical anomaly with evilness, especially in children's media in which the old character poses a direct threat to children or youth, such as Madam Mim, the self-described "ugly old creep" from Disney's *The Sword and the Stone*—an evil sorceress and arch-nemesis of Merlin, the kindly, wise old wizard who guides Arthur as a child. They are both old, but aged men are seen as wise

and worldly, whereas aged women are presented as mad and dangerous—the word "wizard" has a far more positive connotation than the word "witch." Perhaps the most telling example is the Grand High Witch in Roald Dahl's children's book *The Witches,* whose true form, once she sheds her conventionally attractive disguise (played in the 1990 film by Anjelica Huston), is emaciated, physically anomalous, bald, and seems to have a skin disease (fig. 25). Her appearance is intended to frighten children and demonstrates an ableist and "beautyist" cinematic design approach that reinforces an association between physically anomalous or "ugly" old women and evilness. This design approach—so ubiquitous in media that it has become a trope—is a common aspect to all the games I discuss in this chapter.

Figure 25. Screenshot of The Grand High Witch from the 1990 film adaptation of *The Witches* (Roeg).

Historically, the majority of the tens of thousands of women accused of and executed for witchcraft during the witch hunts of the 15th–18th centuries in Europe and North America were

poor, elderly, widowed or unmarried, and childless (Horsley, 1979). The notion that witches would steal and harm infants and children was embedded in the assumption that they would do so because they could not have their own. Although the Crone archetype is different from the Mother, they are not strictly separate. As the "middle" phase, the Mother is the bridge that connects the three archetypes together, hence why both the Maiden and the Crone are also associated with fertility (or lack thereof), horrific maternity, and threatening children and babies. Harrington (2018) has argued that the figure of the fairy tale hag cannot be divorced from a kind of monstrous motherhood, as often these "wicked, withered presentation[s] of feminine evil" are presented in opposition to the youthful beauty of their daughters or daughter figures (p. 255). Indeed, hags are often presented as a threat to younger women in Disney's adaptations of well-known fairy tales. For example, in *Snow White*, the Evil Queen seeks to murder her own daughter-figure once she starts to become more beautiful than her; in *Cinderella*, Lady Tremaine is positioned as the villain, envious of her daughter-figure's grace and beauty; Ursula in *The Little Mermaid* steals the younger woman's voice and tries to marry her lover; and Mother Gothel in *Tangled* literally sucks the magic out of her daughter-figure's hair to maintain her own youth.[39]

The connection between infertility and baby-snatching is revealed in the aptly named "monstrous motherhood" section of the *Monster Manual*'s entry for hags, described as follows:

> Hags propagate by snatching and devouring human infants. After stealing a baby from its cradle or its mother's womb, the hag consumes the poor child. A week later, the hag

[39] Mother Gothel is particularly noteworthy, as she is a child-snatcher, a cruel and abusive mother, a witch, and an old woman draining her daughter-figure's magic like a vampire in order to keep herself alive and young. Her death at the end of the film occurs because she can no longer use Rapunzel's magical hair: she ages rapidly, so horrified by her elderly appearance that she cries out in agony and covers her eyes after glancing at herself in a mirror, until she disintegrates entirely. A villain who is a witch, kidnapper, bad mother, and vain old woman disguising herself as young would have no male counterpart—these are cliches of female villainy.

> gives birth to a daughter who looks human until her thirteenth birthday, whereupon the child transforms into the spitting image of her hag mother. Hags sometimes raise the daughters they spawn, creating covens. A hag might also return the child to its grieving parents, only to watch from the shadows as the child grows up to become a horror. (*Monster Manual*, 2014, p. 176)

As such, hags eat babies not to maintain their own youth (a common fairy tale trope) but to reproduce, and this parthenogenetic birth creates a daughter who grows up to look and act exactly like her mother—a "horror." It is noteworthy that the daughter's true nature is revealed at age thirteen—the average age that menstruation begins. This may suggest a subconscious belief among the writers that when girls begin to menstruate, they also start to become like their mothers. This is also noteworthy because it circumvents the fairy tale situation in which the witch-mother becomes jealous of the beauty of her daughter, because before the daughter can fully mature, she becomes identical to her mother.

Just as the Crone is not strictly separate from the Mother, she is not entirely removed from the Maiden, either. That is, just as a hag can be a monstrous mother, she is also sexually predatory. Not only are the hags in the *Monster Manual* elderly-appearing women who enact a twisted maternity, they also threaten male victims with sexual violation. In the original *Monster Manual* (1977), night hags can infiltrate the nightmares of impure or evil men and consume them by "riding the victim until dawn" until their bodies wither into larva (p. 73). In the 5th edition *Monster Manual* (2014), they instead "straddle" a victim while they sleep and intrude upon their dreams, continuing these "nightly visitations" until the victim dies in their sleep (p. 178). The hag is, then, a kind of succubus. Like the succubus, hags are deceptive and manipulative, able to

turn invisible and magically alter their appearances and voices in order to attract, manipulate, and deceive mortals.

Although hags do not like each other, they still form covens, give gifts, and share knowledge with one another, and abide by sacred codes of conduct with other hags. This "Dark Sorority" (p. 176) is framed within the *Monster Manual* as posing a deadly threat to the player-character because *of course* the idea of a sisterhood, society, or coven of powerful women who can create identical reproductions of themselves would be considered dangerous within the patriarchal realm of *D&D*. They are more powerful together, consider all members of the coven equals, and get bonuses to their abilities if they are part of a coven and near the other members. However, this communal power is undercut by the fact that they do not like one another—the bestiary explains this by insisting that the hags are vain, petty, inherently selfish, and "arrogant to a fault" and so they limit their covens to three members, otherwise chaos would ensue (*Monster Manual*, 2014, p. 176). This framing of powerful women as competitive and selfish is a way to undercut their collective power, and is repeated with the Hagravens, as I discuss below.

The hags are an important monster in *D&D*, with an extremely detailed description occupying four pages of the *Monster Manual* and managing to incorporate nearly every single aspect of the monstrous-feminine. The hag is therefore arguably one of the most misogynistic monsters in *D&D*. To recap, hags in the *Monster Manual* are evil immortal monsters described as horrifically ugly elderly women, they can change their appearance to deceive and seduce player-characters, they reproduce by literally eating babies and then using them to create copies of themselves, they "ride" or "straddle" victims in their dreams until they turn into larva or die, and they form tense and competitive covens with other hags. They are simultaneously sexualized succubi and "withered" old women, they are deceptive and manipulative sexual predators and

child-snatchers, and they are powerful, immortal sorceresses while also being petty, vain, and competitive.

By naming these powerful, elderly, sexually active, cunning, single mothers "hags" the *Monster Manual* produces a stigma around female strength, intelligence, and independence. It positions "hag" as a negative, grotesque identity and even suggests that sex with hags might emasculate a man and transform him into a "larva" if not outright kill him. In this sense, hags are a quintessential embodiment of misogyny, in that they portray female reproduction, aging, sexuality, and bonding as monstrous, horrifying, and dangerous.

"Cunning, depravity, and repulsiveness": *Skyrim*'s Hagravens

Like the "Dark Sorority" of *D&D,* in the fantasy roleplaying game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), many witch covens are also led by monstrous hags: hybrid creatures called Hagravens—a particularly nasty, ageist take on the harpy. The harpy from Greek mythology is a monstrous half-woman and half-bird creature, like the siren but not beautiful or seductive. Hagravens are described in *Skyrim* as "a terrible conjoining of woman and bird" who "will take through savagery what they cannot win through guile" (fig. 26). The game warns players that "few creatures match the cunning, depravity, and repulsiveness of the Hagravens," thereby signaling that not only are these monsters physically horrific, but their behaviour is also transgressive, and they pose a particular threat because they are intelligent. Hagravens were once mortal women—witches who performed a ritual involving human sacrifice in order to gain access to powerful magic. They rule witch covens as matriarchs, leading young witches who also aspire to become Hagravens themselves. In this sense, Hagravens also "reproduce" by transforming normative women into copies of themselves, though rather than

stealing infants and transforming them, they encourage young witches to empower themselves by becoming Hagravens.

Figure 26. Screenshot of a Hagraven from *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011).

The subtle coding of Hagravens as mother figures becomes more overt during the side quest "Repentance" in which the player, who adopts the role of the heroic Dragonborn, assists a young woman named Illia in stopping her mother Silvia from turning herself into a Hagraven. The player is unsuccessful in stopping Silvia and, in the end, Illia commits matricide, as she would rather see her mother dead than have her turn into a monster. Silvia, as an aspiring Hagraven, is positioned as a monstrous mother whose transgressive desire for power leads to her own murder. Her daughter, alongside the player, functions as a representative of normativity who must slay her own monstrous mother to restore order and, perhaps, to sever her ties to the coven in the hopes that she can resist the call to become monstrous and powerful herself. Illia chooses

normativity for herself and forces her mother to make the same choice or die. Silvia, however, would rather die than give up her quest for power—death was more appealing to her than life as an ordinary human woman. As a transgressive, ambitious woman, Silvia was likely drawn to life in the coven because of the power it offered and, given her clearly strained relationship with her daughter, an alternative family.

Hagravens live in all-female groups—like *D&D*'s hags or Greek harpies or sirens—and while these covens could offer spaces of acceptance, support, alternative familial relationships, sisterhood, and queer love, the game's developers instead push the narrative that witches and Hagravens dislike each other, compete against each other, and betray one another in their quests for power. For example, though the player generally engages in combat with Hagravens without speaking to them, in the quest "The Affairs of Hagravens" the player can speak to a non-hostile Hagraven, Melka. This Hagraven asks the player to murder her sister Petra who betrayed her, stole her tower, and imprisoned her. Melka implores the player to find Petra ("wring her neck, pluck her eyes") and free her to take back her tower in exchange for a powerful staff. However, just as it seems like a questionable and misogynistic choice to have *D&D*'s hags form a sorority full of exact replicas of themselves and yet dislike one another, this portrayal of Hagravens as petty and competitive seems intended to ensure the player interprets them as evil and to send the message that powerful women cannot support each other and work together. If *Skyrim*'s witches live in covens and aspire to become Hagravens, the powerful older women who lead them, why would they shed that sense of community once they transform? If Hagravens are so treacherous and self-centered, why do they lead covens of young witches and teach them how to become Hagravens themselves? If Hagravens hate other Hagravens, why would they want more witches to transform, and why would they call each other "sister"? While these questions cannot be

answered by drawing from game content, if the relationship between witches and Hagravens is being willfully misrepresented, it is likely because groups of women who come together to teach and mentor each other, learn magic, and become powerful beings would be an incredible threat to the patriarchal society of Skyrim. Just as witches and witch covens have been framed as evil in real world societies, *Skyrim* insists that Hagravens must be killed in order to undermine the powerful threat they could pose to patriarchal norms, values, and control. Accordingly, the player-character murders these women in droves, usually coming across Hagravens while wandering through *their* territory or actively tracking them down to murder them for rewards, just like Geralt in *The Witcher* series. It is therefore important to remember that Hagravens are *residents* of Skyrim, yet the game encourages the player to violently remove these powerful, dangerous, and transgressive old women who gather together in covens and guide young women to become powerful older witches like them.

Anti-Hagraven Propaganda

Just as the hags are positioned alongside beasts and other monsters in *D&D*'s bestiary, Hagravens are featured in *Herbane's Bestiary,* a book found within the game. His description provides extended detail and commentary on the Hagraven and is worth quoting at length:

> I have heard a tale most bizarre—a beautiful young woman cast out of town by the thrown stones of accusers for giving in to the dark arts. They say she fled into the Reach and never reappeared, and justly so because they say the devilry of her magic had grown stronger with each new day. Shortly after, a witch of half woman and half bird had been sighted deep in the mountains, and as the sightings increased the young women began to disappear.

> This tale has brought me to the Reach, where this witch they call a Hagraven makes it [*sic*] home. With sword and shield at the ready, for I must see this creature and I must slay it … Deeper into the lair, I heard it first—an unsteady shuffling, followed by a heaving, unforgettable stench … I saw the silhouette of what I thought to be a frail woman on an awkward gait, but the light of the torch revealed something else. This Hagraven was horrifying, almost human but more an abomination of woman and creature fused together, nothing more than a husk of humanity surrendered in exchange for possession of the powers of dark magic. This magic corrupted her greatly, and her dull, glass eyes stared with hate from the visage of an old crone sat atop the body of a contorted, misshapen human body adorned with black feathers. It bristled as it let out a piercing scream, and as a vivid red light began to form in the palm of its talons, it was all I could do to raise my shield in defense of magic most foul. I fought through devilry that seemed to snatch life from me, and the thought that this thing was once a woman seemed to play on my nerves.
>
> Most men would have crumbled, but I do not bend. The Hagraven is a most repulsive creature, and deserving of its fate and its claws that are my trophy will tell the story of Herebanes [*sic*] triumph.

There are several key points to unpack here. The narrator suggests that the Hagraven he hunted was once a beautiful, young woman who was cast out of her village and later transformed herself into this "abomination of woman and creature fused together." He mentions that other young women were disappearing, and it is left unclear whether they joined the Hagraven's coven or were eaten by her. If they joined her coven, it would seem that they were also tired of living in a village that is so steadfastly against women using magic—a markedly sexist attitude in a fantasy

world full of magic users. If she instead preyed upon them, then this female monster who eats only female victims falls into the popular culture tradition of the lesbian vampire archetype (Creed, 1996).[40] Coding Hagravens as queer—which would be an intuitive reading whether they lead covens or eat women, or both—underscores their symbolic threat to the heteropatriarchal society of *Skyrim.* Herbane feels he "must slay" this creature, though "the thought that this thing was once a woman seemed to play on [his] nerves." This chivalric distaste for slaughtering a woman—or what once was a woman, since he does not seem to see the Hagraven as a "woman" anymore—is not strong enough to quell his desire to destroy this "repulsive creature" that he sees as "deserving of its fate." Since the Hagraven is still clearly female, Herbane is not really disturbed by the fact that she used to be a "woman" but that she used to be a young and beautiful woman. His horror is, therefore, more likely caused by the fact that she willingly gave up that youth and beauty—those attributes that heteronormative men most value in women—to become what he sees as a repulsive horror. Becoming a Hagraven, however, is voluntary and clearly desirable: for these young women, trading their youthful and normative appearance for older, hybrid, monstrous bodies is considered a fair exchange.

The description of the Hagraven as having "the visage of an old crone sat atop the body of a contorted, misshapen human body" combined with the focus on her femaleness demonstrates the Hagraven's positioning at the previously-discussed intersection of sexism, ageism, and ableism. *Skyrim* falls into a long tradition of linking old age with physical and mental disability and presenting aging female bodies as horrific and "deformed" (Chivers, 2011). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2002) has explained that "Western thought has long conflated

[40] The female vampire, such as Miriam from *The Hunger*, has been portrayed as lesbian or bisexual since her first literary manifestation in Sheridan Le Fanu's 1872 novel *Carmilla* (see Creed, 1996). See Hart (1994), Holmlund (1994), Farrimond (2012) and Millward et al. (2017) for an unpacking of why the trope of the lesbian *femme fatale* black widow/vampire/succubus figure is offensive and harmful.

femaleness and disability, understanding both as defective departures from a valued standard" (p. 6). That valued standard is the "perfect" default human form: that of an able-bodied man. The connection between disability, physical anomaly, and monstrosity is highlighted by the fact that medical/scientific teratology—the study of monsters—is technically the study of anomalous births. Just as women's bodies are abject, physical disability is abject in that it reminds people of their own bodily precarity. In her article "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and … Vulnerability," Kristeva (2010) has explained why people with disabilities are socially excluded:

> The disabled person opens a *narcissistic identity wound* in the person who is not disabled; he inflicts a threat of *physical* or *psychical death,* fear of collapse, and beyond that, the anxiety of seeing the very borders of the human species explode. (p. 30, emphasis in original)

Similarly, the aged body is abject because it is a reminder of mortality—the aged, disabled or physically anomalous female monster like the Hagraven is, then, the pinnacle of abjection. Unsurprisingly, the player is positioned alongside Herbane as a slayer of these monsters, and the game encourages them to slay the Hagravens without mercy. Just as Herbane takes the Hagraven's claws as his trophy, the player can loot the Hagraven's corpses to collect their body parts—claws and feathers—as rewards. Like Geralt in *The Witcher 3*, the player then uses those body parts to brew potions, which is behaviour normally associated with witches and Hagravens (and with the abject), but of course since the Dragonborn—like Geralt, the heroic representative of normative, patriarchal society—is the one doing it, this morbid desecration is unquestioned, acceptable, and encouraged.

"Aged, deformed women": Hags in *The Witcher 3*

In *The Witcher 3*, the player encounters several kinds of grotesque hag monsters. According to the game's bestiary, grave hags resemble "aged, deformed women"—a generic description that mirrors the way *D&D*'s hags or the Hagravens are described (fig. 27). These women are called grave hags because they devour human corpses and the bestiary delights in how apt this name is:

> Few monsters' names fit as well as the grave hags'. As one might guess, these creatures resemble aged, deformed women and loiter near graveyards and battlefields. Grave hags feed on human corpses and in particular on the rotten marrow which they slurp from human bones using their long, prehensile tongues. Once a hag has devoured all corpses within reach, she turns to killing men and burying them in the cemetery as she waits for them to decompose.

The World of the Witcher compendium (Batylda, 2015b) adds that "grave hags resemble tall, wizened old women, though their disproportionately large heads, bulging eyes, and long arms with huge, clawed hands clearly reveal their inhuman origins" (p. 115). Not only do the grave hags swipe at the player-character with extremely long, sharp claws, they also whip, stab, and lick him with their long, venomous, prehensile green tongues. The bestiary recommends the player sever the tongue with a well-timed counterattack to avoid its damaging and poisonous effects and stop a "maddened hag's claws" with a well-timed parry. Joseph Campbell (1969) has discussed the "phallic mother" as being a counterpart to the *vagina dentata*: "a motif perfectly illustrated in the long fingers and nose of the witch" (p. 73). Although Campbell spoke of the fingers and nose, this motif could be easily extended to include claws and the tongue. Whereas a gaping, fanged mouth threatens castration, the long claws and tongue of the grave hag threaten

penetration. The fact that her tongue poisons the player adds to her positioning as an abject being, something that spreads disease and so threatens bodily purity as "a polluting object" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 76).

Figure 27. A grave hag from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015). Promotional image taken from https://witcher.fandom.com/wiki/Grave_hag

Water hags are another species of monster encountered frequently in *The Witcher 3.* Although they are similar in appearance to the grave hag, the developers clearly intended for the player to dislike water hags more, as the in-game bestiary provides a particularly harsh description:

> Some tales mention water hags and swamp bints masquerading as lost old women to lure travelers back to the rickety shacks they build in the wetlands. In truth, only a blind man, or a sighted man blinded with drink, could mistake the rank sludge and rotting carrion of

> a water hag's den for a cozy cottage, and the hideous hag herself for an innocent grandmother. Their wrinkled, wart-covered bodies stand nearly two yards tall, with skin the color of a long-dead cadaver and stinking of muck and fish. Bony growths two spans long stick out from their backs, with hair like a tangle of seaweed and claws that would make a werewolf proud completing the picture.

The fact that the water hags attempt to masquerade as lost old women but fail miserably at this deception clearly juxtaposes them with the sexualized monsters discussed in chapter 4. While the siren and bruxa are experts at disguising themselves as beautiful young women to lure their victims, the hags' attempts are framed here as inadequate and pathetic. No one could possibly confuse this monstrous creature for an old woman, regardless of how much she is described in relation to aging femininity. *The World of the Witcher* compendium (Batylda, 2015b) adds some more details:

> The withered bodies of these creatures are covered in slime and sludge, and stink beyond comprehension. Their hair resembles seaweed, their maws are filled with crooked teeth (however many they have left), their claws could fit a werewolf, and in battle they sling balls of mud at their foes.

And *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Art Book* (Batylda, 2015a) doubles down on the unpleasant description but also reveals the inspiration for the water hag's design:

> These deformed humanoids dwell in swamps, bogs, and wetlands as well as on the banks of rivers and lakes. In appearance they resemble gigantic, hunchbacked crones with long, claw-like hands, drooping breasts, tangled hair, and gaping maws full of crooked, yellowed teeth. They hunt lone travelers and fishermen, and sneak into human settlements at night to kidnap the unwary and the unlucky. Water hags (*baby wodne* in Polish) appear

> in central and eastern European legends as harmless creatures that peer out at bathing youth. We decided to base our hags instead on tales of creatures such as the infamous Baba Jaga or Baba Drasznica—monstrous old women who feed on human flesh. (p. 172)

While calling the water hag a "deformed humanoid" does not make sense, since they are entirely different species from humans, it speaks to the ableism underpinning the creature's design. The very word "deformed" (as well as "twisted" and "withered") when applied to a person's body is considered offensive among disability activists, and when these terms are applied to a horrifying monster, they draw a clear connection between monstrosity and physical disability. The emphasis on her body as hunchbacked and having crooked yellowed teeth also draws on both ableist and ageist imagery, as these are physical traits associated with both a non-normative or unattractive appearance and an aged body. The unnecessary mention of her "drooping breasts" highlights the ageism and sexism behind the description and art design, in which the water hag's body is naked (fig. 28), and together these descriptions are all clearly intended to evoke a reaction of disgust and loathing in the player.

Figure 28. Concept art for the water hag from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Art Book* (Batylda, 2015a, p. 172).

Elissa Melamed (1983) has argued that "ageism is, in fact, the last bastion of sexism … The last mental barrier to equality is the almost visceral disgust for the older woman as a physical being" (p. 30). This is perhaps why "negative attitudes towards ageing women are widespread and contribute to a social abjection that reveals a cultural sense of disgust at the older body" (Harrington, 2018, p. 238). Disgust is key to the ageism at play here: "there is a clear aversion to naked old bodies" and a tendency "to mock older bodies and present them in derogatory ways" (Hinchliff & Gott, 2016, p. 24). Popular culture and advertising are particularly responsible for reinforcing "the narrative that old bodies, the female body in particular, are undesirable … or unloveable" (Hinchliff & Gott, 2016, p. 24).

The nudity of the grave and water hags therefore serves to highlight and expose their bodies—they are naked like the succubus or siren but because their bodies are not considered to be attractive, they are framed as indecent, shameless, disgusting rather than titillating or alluring. And the repetition of the fact that they *resemble* women but cannot quite pull off the deception reinforces their positioning as abject, grotesque, and uncanny almost-human "freaks" or "mutant women" (see Russo, 1994, p. 6). Russo has argued that "the grotesque, particularly as a bodily category, emerges as a deviation from the norm," but if women's bodies are already considered the deviation from the norm, the idea of a "female grotesque" becomes a tautology (p. 11). Yet the bodies of the grave and water hags are clearly a deviation from some perceived norm of female aging—the "innocent grandmother" they could not possibly be confused for. They are the old hags discussed by Mikhail Bakhtin, whose "senile, decaying, and deformed flesh" (qtd. in Russo, 1994, p. 63) embodies the grotesque and is "loaded with all of the connotations of fear and loathing around the biological processes of … aging" (Russo, 1994, p. 63). Not just aging in general, but female aging specifically. Because these monsters exist at the intersection of the fear of aging female bodies (ageism and sexism) and physically anomalous bodies (ableism), they are designed to be objects of horror, loathing, disgust, and abjection.

That the developers were inspired by Baba Yaga is important because she is perhaps the most well-known and infamous folkloric crone. In Slavic folklore, she is portrayed as a terrifying, physically anomalous old woman with "ghastly features—drooping breasts, a hideous long nose, and sharp iron teeth" who kidnaps and eats young women and children and reproduces parthenogenetically (Zipes, 2013, p. 2). Although she is an archetypal witch, she is unique in her "striking ambiguity" (Johns, 2004, p. 3). While most fairy tale witches are unambiguous villains, Baba Yaga will either help or hinder, depending on the story or her mood.

This ambiguity is important because Baba Yaga was originally a Slavic pagan goddess, a frightening ruler of storms, winter, fertility, death, and the underworld who was the recipient of blood sacrifices (Johns, 2004, p. 16–17). She was the guardian of both life and death, but just as many ancient goddess figures became twisted and distorted over time, she was reduced to an evil old witch in order to disempower her and make room for patriarchal religion and male gods (Caputi, 2004). That the designers of the water hag see Baba Yaga as nothing but an example of "monstrous old women who feed on human flesh" reveals the way that games, like all popular culture, serve as a repository for patriarchal myth and meaning-making that actively works to disempower and marginalize women, especially if they are powerful and old.

The Ladies of the Wood: The Fates as Monstrous Crones

As heavily inspired by mythology and folklore as it is, it is perhaps not surprising that *The Witcher 3* also features three Crones—ancient, powerful, evil witches who, like *Macbeth*'s three witches, are clear adaptations of the three Fates. The Fates, or *Moirai*, are ancient Greek goddesses—Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos—who spin, weave, and cut the threads of fate for both gods and mortals and so are the incarnation of life, destiny, and death. Later patriarchal rewritings of the myth designed to support a patrilineal pantheon made the Fates the daughters of Zeus so that he could command them, but many philosophers and theologians disagreed with this choice, since originally they had only a mother—either the goddess of night, Nyx or the goddess of necessity, Ananke, whom Euripides called the most powerful of the deities (Caputi, 2004, p. 297). Like all powerful goddess figures, the Fates are terrible and frightening in their power but also important figures for worship and supplication.

In *The Witcher 3*, these figures are worshipped as the Ladies of the Wood in the land of Velen, and only referred to as "the Crones" by those who would disrespect them. Their names

are Weavess, Brewess, and Whispess—one who weaves magic tapestries, one who brews potions, and one who hears all. They are widely worshipped by peasants, whom the Crones "help survive through harsh times in return for unquestioning obedience," according to the bestiary. The bestiary continues with this description:

> They wield powerful magic, but one different from that of mages. They draw power from water and earth and are bound to the land in which they live. The Crones can hear everything that happens in their woods, predict the future, twist the threads of human lives and bring blessings as well as curses.

That their magic is drawn from the natural world reinforces their association with primal earth goddesses and hedge witches, and the bestiary also notes that the Crones are immortal and ancient, "older than humans … older even than elves and dwarves." An in-game book entitled "The Ladies of the Wood" explains that no gods or rulers care about the land of Velen, so the peasants have no choice but to turn to the Crones for help. In order to beg for their help, one must lead a child into the woods and send it off down the "Trail of Treats" where it will follow candy to find the "Good Ladies" and "never want for anything again, for the Ladies are kind and generous." This notion of leaving a child alone in the woods, following a trail, and witches using candy as a lure for children with the obvious intention of eating them clearly recalls the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel, positioning the Crones as typical, child-eating, predatory fairy tale witches. Other characters refer to them as cruel, vindictive, and nasty but acknowledge that they do care for the land and its residents in their own way and that "they always keep their word, but you must be careful what you ask for." In this sense, they are ambiguous figures like Baba Yaga, a heavy inspiration for the Crones, according to the game's Wiki.[41] The Wiki also states that the

[41] See https://witcher.fandom.com/wiki/Crones.

witches from *Macbeth* provided inspiration for their design, a fact supported by the in-game bestiary entry, which starts with a quote from a fictional play called “Macveth.”

Geralt first encounters these powerful women at an orphanage in a swamp where the aforementioned wayward children are kept until the Crones are ready to eat them. They speak to him from a tapestry woven of human hair, in which they are portrayed as beautiful young women (fig. 29). Hints to their monstrosity are present even here, however: one wears a necklace made of severed human ears, one holds a basket with a chicken inside in one hand and a knife in the other, and one wears a noose around her neck and appears to have two sets of legs covered in splashes of blood. Their voices also echo disturbingly, as though there is a layer of darkness just below each word. As soon as the conversation begins, they flirt aggressively with Geralt but dislike when he calls them crones, calling it an “ugly word” and accusing the “village bitches” of gossiping about them. They ask Geralt if he thinks they look like crones, inviting him to touch them “where it pleases [him] most,” exclaiming that “he’s got a sensitive touch,” and begging him to touch them more.

Figure 29. Screenshot of the Ladies of Wood in their tapestry woven of human hair from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015).

The Crones task Geralt with saving the land by destroying an evil spirit trapped in a tree, a dark power that "feeds on hatred and disdain" and is causing various problems and deaths in a nearby village. This spirit also speaks to Geralt, her voice emanating from a pulsating, thorny sac beneath the tree. She begs Geralt to instead set her free, insisting that the Crones are the evil ones, "Velen's curse" who "hear all through severed ears," "weave hair and twist lives," and "take their strength from a broth of human flesh." She explains that they killed her and trapped her soul unjustly, simply because they wanted to rule alone and she stood in their way. The spirit in the tree is actually the Crones' mother: according to a book found in the game, "The Mother, She-Who-Knows, the Lady of the Wood, came here from a faraway land and since she suffered terribly from loneliness, she made three daughters out of dirt and water." This goddess was the

sole ruler of the land of Velen, and her daughters served as her go-between with the people, who would request blessings in exchange for sacrifices of grain, animals, and humans made to her on a specific holy night. However, over time the Lady of the Wood "slipped deeper and deeper into madness," which spread over the land and caused the death of countless people. In an effort to save the land, her daughters "killed their mother and buried her in the bog," imprisoning her soul in a tree, "where it thrashes about in powerless rage." The backstory of the Crones therefore parallels the creation myth found in many cultures as well as myths in which ruling gods are overthrown by their children—as Zeus overthrew his father Cronos in Greek mythology—but this is a matriarchal creation and usurpation. Like many powerful goddess figures, however, both the Crones and their mother are framed as evil: if the player chooses to free the spirit, it saves the children the Crones were planning to eat in exchange, but it also destroys the nearby village, causing everyone to murder one another in a sudden rage. In this sense, there is no "correct" choice—no matter which ancient female power the player chooses to assist, mother or daughters, something bad happens and many people die.

According to the spirit in the tree, the three sisters are "older than the oldest trees" and all life in Velen serves them. The bestiary notes that "the Crones seem for all intents and purposes to be immortal" but their youthful appearance is a deception as "magic elixirs keep them from aging and allow them to take the appearance of young women." The second time the player encounters the Crones, they appear in their "true" forms and this time, they look the part. All three are aged and monstrous in appearance, and much larger than human women. The Brewess is tall and fat, with stiff hairs covering her chest and shoulders and blotchy, pockmarked skin bulging out from her clothing and the ropes binding her. She wears an apron with a dead hare and chicken, a voodoo doll, and wooden spoons tucked into the ropes around her waist and her

head is covered with a hood and basket. The Weavess is a thin, hunched figure, with flies buzzing in and out of her single honeycomb eye socket. She has a second set of smaller legs dangling from the folds of her dress. The Whispess is also hunched and emaciated, her face covered by a hood and red net. She carries a bloody bag full of children's body parts and wears a necklace of human ears taken in tribute which she uses to hear everything that happens in her swamp. All three women seem to have skin disorders, are splattered with blood and grime, and have huge, clawed hands (figs. 30–31).

Figure 30. Concept art of the Crones from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015). Image taken from https://witcher.fandom.com/wiki/Crones

Figure 31. Screenshot of the Crones from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015).

Their grotesque appearances are not the result of a curse, this is their true form: as they claim, "we don't fall victim to curses—we cast them." The Crones are not human, rather they are what *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Art Book* (Batylda, 2015a) describes as "members of some degenerate breed of humanoid monsters" (p. 164). The bestiary describes them as evil and ugly and they seem to disguise themselves as beautiful young women only to deceive their worshippers and lure their young sacrifices to them. One night a year the Crones hold a Sabbath during which three attractive youths are chosen for a personal visit. The Crones supposedly bless the land in exchange, but the player sees the Crones in their beautiful young forms, naked and covered in blood, making a soup out of bloody human body parts—presumably the bodies of their sacrifices (fig. 32). This scene is revolting but also highly suggestive, with close-ups of

their nipples and one woman licking the bloody soup off another's fingertip. They also pour the bloody soup onto the roots of a tree, which then grows and caresses one of them on the cheek, thereby emphasizing their intimate relationship with nature and the swamp they call home. As soon as they notice the player-character's presence, they transform back into their true forms and a fight ensues with two out of the three Crones killed by the player. The final one is killed at the end of the game depending on player choices.[42]

Figure 32. Screenshot of the Crones in their youthful forms making human soup in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015).

Monstrous Desire: Old Age and Sexuality

In her book *Unbecoming Female Monsters*, Santos (2017) argues that although the fairy-tale witch is associated with old age and child-eating, witchcraft is also associated with "carnal

[42] The way the Crones fight is noteworthy because their movements and attack patterns are identical to other monsters in the game. Weavess has the same skeletal model and movement animation as a water hag, Brewess has that of a gargoyle, and Whispess is a foglet. This is interesting if only because it aligns them physically with monstrous creatures, thereby making it clear that they are designed to be monsters.

lust" (p. xix). And yet, in popular culture older women are almost never portrayed in terms of lust or sexual desire, and if they are portrayed that way, their desire is framed in negative ways: "older women's desire, eroticism and interest in pleasurable non-reproductive sex is presented as something transgressive and abject, especially when the sexual partner is a younger man" (Harrington, 2018, p. 244). The hags in *D&D* engage in transgressive sexual activity, but it seems to be specifically for an evil purpose—to wither or kill their victim—rather than for pleasure (besides the pleasure they derive from evil acts). However, in *Planescape: Torment* (Black Isle Studios, 1999), a digital roleplaying game based heavily on *D&D*, a night hag named Ravel expresses both sexual and romantic desire towards the player-character. Ravel is described as "plump, hook-nosed crone" with "jagged gray hair ... like a mass of twisted gray roots" whose "sickly blue-gray flesh hangs in looks folds from her face." She has a "grotesque smile, displaying a row of chipped yellowed fangs" that is so revolting that "as she gazes at you, a strange crawling sensation passes through you, like snakes burrowing beneath your skin." Ravel is desperately in love with the player-character, flirting with him, declaring that she has only ever cared for him, and referring to him as her "precious man." The player can respond in several different ways, ranging from disgust and rejection to complimenting her beauty, but the encounter is designed to feel uncomfortable, with lines like "she reaches out, as if to caress you, and you suddenly notice her fingers are talons, each fingernail filthy and wickedly sharp" reminding the player of her monstrous form.

The player is given the option to kiss Ravel, but only after calling her ugly. She explains that she need not be ugly because she can change her shape at will, at which point she transforms into one of the player-character's female companions (one of whom is a succubus and the other a

different kind of demon).[43] Regardless of how the player reacts to Ravel otherwise, they can only choose to kiss her if she changes her appearance to become young and conventionally attractive. When one of the player-character's companions is incredulous that Ravel could be in love with him, she asks with a smile, "is that so hard for you to believe…? Does Ravel … not *deserve* to carry such a feeling in her black-brambled heart…?" And when she is called a night hag, she responds with a "ghastly smile" and the following rant:

> Night hag…? I am but a *woman* who has sorely … missed her beloved creation. Some have named me crone, gray lady, Yaga sister, night hag—but MYSELF is my name, Ravel … But MANY things are said about we gray ladies. A race are we 'night hags,' but an *individual* am I. Some call us evil of Old, stalkers of mortal dreams, the kindly ones, ugly hideous things whose homes lie in the dark places of men's minds.

Although this rambling dialogue with its capitalization and asterisks for emphasis is meant to indicate her madness and intensity (Hancock, 2015), it also reveals a great deal about her self-awareness. She is labelled as an ugly old crone, a monstrous and evil night hag, but she also feels that she is an individual, a woman deserving of love. It also connects her to the ambiguous and powerful figure of Baba Yaga and her statement that night hags are "ugly hideous things whose homes lie in the dark places of men's minds" could also be interpreted as a reference to the misogyny that led to her creation. Indeed, the design of the night hag, as Creed (1986) has stated of the monstrous-feminine in general, "reveals a great deal about male desires and fears" (p. 70).

[43] If you do kiss her in this form, Ravel gifts you a tattoo that increases your power. The "Tattoo of Ravel's Kiss" is a pair of red lips, with the following description: "This tattoo is blood red, and reminds you of the blood that Ravel drew when your lips touched hers. It may not have been the wisest decision, but it took tremendous bravery and strength to kiss her." The tattoo reduces wisdom and intelligence but increases strength and constitution, thereby "reflecting that the event that inspired it was brave but also foolhardy" (Hancock, 2015, p. 234). Interestingly, if you reject her even in this form, she changes back and scoffs, "a difficult man to please are you! Pah! And wonder do they why there are no males of our kind!" Not only does this confirm that Hags are an all-female species, it also suggests that they would like to have male lovers if they could but they always get rejected.

She exists in those “dark places of men’s minds” that continuously position powerful older women as horrific, ugly, and evil witches, hags, and crones to be fought and killed. And Ravel is indeed fought and killed—she refuses to let the player-character leave, screaming “you will stay here until the END DAYS in my brambled garden, never to leave, and you shall LOVE me, as you MEANT, as you PROMISED!” This dialogue positions her as a woman so broken hearted and betrayed that she has become mentally unstable—an example of the “crazy ex-girlfriend” trope. Once she is dead, the player loots her corpse and takes her fingernail and hair which can be used as weapons, desecrating her body and leaving her behind.

The other kinds of hags and crones discussed in this chapter express sexual or romantic desire towards the player-character as well, and this desire is met with amusement, disdain, or disgust. Players are not explicitly shown Hagravens as sexual beings, but in the quest “A Night to Remember,” a Hagraven’s sexual and romantic desires are explored and presented as a joke. After a drinking contest, the player-character wakes up the following morning with no memory of what had occurred the night before. They follow clues to retrace their steps and uncover their drunken shenanigans. The player-character discovers that at one point they apparently fell in love, got engaged, and purchased an expensive wedding ring that they gave to their fiancée, who is waiting for them in Witchmist Grove. Not wanting to pay what they owe for the ring, the player-character proceeds to Witchmist Grove to call off the wedding and ask their fiancée to return the ring. That fiancée, with whom the player-character was “so obviously in love” turns out to be Moira the Hagraven. She greets the player-character with joy, exclaiming “Darling! I've been waiting for you to return, to consummate our love!” The player cannot choose to reciprocate this love; they can only tell Moira that they want the ring back. Moira flies into a jealous rage, accusing the player-character of wanting to give the ring to a dark-feathered

Hagraven named Esmerelda. After declaring “I won’t let her have you!” she attacks the player-character, who must kill her and loot her corpse for the ring just as Ravel’s enraged reaction led to the player killing her and looting her corpse. Given that players can choose the gender of their avatar at the beginning of the game, this quest is potentially a queer tragedy: heavy drinking lowered the Dragonborn’s inhibitions, and she fell in love with a powerful, monstrous woman. Upon sobering, she realized that their love was forbidden in several ways, and she forced herself to suppress her queer desire and murder her monstrous lover in order to firmly re-establish herself as the heroic representative of normative society—the Dragonborn who kills powerful monsters and dragons, not the queer outsider who loves them.

Although this queer reading is compelling, it is more likely that players reacted to this side quest with amusement or disgust—how dare an ugly old woman fool herself into thinking the Dragonborn could ever really love her? The very idea is presented in the game as preposterous, ludicrous, and uncomfortable. Her desire is grotesque, and maybe even immoral. This is not just because she is a monstrous woman—after all, sirens and succubi are monstrous women and they are considered sexually desirable to men—but because she is old and unattractive. The cruel way her love, heartbreak, and jealousy are framed in this side quest echoes the disdain directed at older women (or fat women, unattractive women, disabled women, etc.) pursuing romance or sex, especially with attractive younger men, as though their sexual desire is a joke. This a common message in popular culture: Sobchack (2000) has highlighted the way that cinema mediates and reinforces a powerful cultural anxiety and disgust felt towards “an inappropriate and transgressive sexual desire that lingers through the very process of aging, physical degradation, and decay” (p. 337). In this sense, sexually active older women are viewed as a ludicrous and distasteful example of feminine excess. Even the label “Cougar”—used to

refer to an older woman with a younger male lover—is viewed negatively or with ambivalence, because it categorizes those women as sexual predators (Hinchliff & Gott, 2016, p. 23). It also reinforces double standards for male and female aging and sexuality, as there is no equivalent term for men because older men with younger female lovers is more normalized. In addition, if the Cougar is to be accepted, she must adhere to conventional beauty standards, be able-bodied, and appear younger than she is (Hinchliff & Gott, 2016, p. 23). If she does not meet these stringent criteria, the older woman as represented in popular culture is forced into the stereotype of aged asexuality and denied any possibility for sexual encounters (Hinchliff & Gott, 2016).

This ageist and sexist message is repeated several times in *The Witcher 3.* For example, alongside its description of the water hag, *The World of the Witcher* compendium (Batylda, 2015a) provides this delightful folktale:

> Water hags are naiads who fell in love with mortal men, and thus lost their eternal youth. It does not happen often, for water nymphs are fickle creatures that rarely have any concern for the young men they seduce. Still, sometimes a nymph will truly feel for a man and then, in accordance with the ancient, mystical laws of her people, she becomes subject to the flow of time. Because she is a magical being, she cannot die—but she does age, growing more and more decrepit until she finally becomes a water hag. Then, on moonlit nights, she comes to the lakeside and weeps for her lost youth. Though her body is wizened and ancient, she still likes to dance naked in the moonlight and make immoral proposals to any passing youth she meets. (Batylda, 2015a)

However, it also proceeds to dismiss this story as folly, stating that "whoever thought water hags had something in common with naiads must have had a truly poetical soul, and most certainly never saw one in daylight" (p. 115).

Regardless of how much the developers wanted players to know that there is *no way* someone could confuse a water hag for a naiad, the folktale is interesting to consider: this hag was originally a beautiful, divine being, but because she fell in love with a man she lost her eternal youth and beauty—she is punished for transgressive/forbidden love. Aging causes her body to grow decrepit until she "becomes" a water hag, as though there is a specific point in which she transitions from "decrepit old woman" to "water hag." Regardless of this transformation and her abject body, she still dances naked and propositions men, reveling in and celebrating her own body and sexuality. Yet this is framed as improper, "immoral" or even comical. For example, in the quest "A Bard's Beloved," Geralt comes across a troubadour in a cave who asks him for help, but warns him to be quiet, or else his "beloved" will hear. He describes her as "beautiful as the morn and sweet as linden honey" but sounds as though he is simply reciting a script. He begs Geralt not to wake her, but if the player goes deeper into the cave, he meets a water hag, who exclaims "Oh, a sweetheart! Fresh and scrumptious!" She makes him play a rhyming game, and the player can choose to play along and select the "You're as beautiful as…" dialogue option but then Geralt finished the sentence with "as rotten meat. And you're a monster. And I kill monsters." Battle begins instantly after this insult and the player must kill the water hag. Geralt's declaration removes the player's agency—even if the player might have wanted to play the rhyming game, or even find a peaceful resolution with this clearly sapient being, they are not allowed. Geralt's insistence that she must die because she is a monster also goes against several previous instances in which he states that he does not kill "sentient" monsters if they pose no harm to humans. Although she did refer to him as "scrumptious," there is no suggestion that she actually meant to eat him, and given that troubadour is still alive and could have left the cave at any time, the harm she poses to humans is

not clear. The troubadour's obvious distress does suggest that she is sexually predatory, but the compliments regarding her physical beauty are clearly intended to amuse the player once they see what she really looks like. The water hag's desires are framed as revolting and immoral, and Geralt referring to her as rotten meat—a response the player does not choose—echoes the cultural framing of the aged female body as decayed, past its prime, loathsome, and abject.

This framing is the most obvious in *The Witcher 3* in Geralt's interaction with the Crones once they reveal their true monstrous forms. Even though they no longer look like beautiful young women as they did in the tapestry, they continue to aggressively flirt with Geralt, propositioning him in a sexually predatory way clearly meant to amuse, disturb, and disgust the player. They tell Geralt that "he's even lovelier in real life…" to which he responds "hm, in real life you're… different… than you were in the tapestry." They reply "we're all dressed up just for you" suggesting that they see nothing wrong with their appearances. Quite the opposite—they ask him directly if he "desires" them and flirt in relation to their roles: The Brewess declares that she'd "suck every last drop out of you!" and the Weavess exclaims "ah, to be woven together with you!" The Whispess states forebodingly that she would be Geralt's "best – and last" suggesting that the experience would kill him. Even though he rejects their aggressive advances, making a few disgusted faces and shaking his head at them, they declare that "you shall dream of us and return for what you reject. They always come back." Once the conversation ends, the Weavess strokes her second pair of legs suggestively and the Brewess slaps her own buttocks while they all laugh and walk away.[44]

[44] Online commentary confirms that many players feel that the encounter with the Crones is one of the most disturbing moments in the game. The sexual tension in the scene is particularly upsetting to many players, but several online forums on GameFAQs, Steam, and The Witcher Wiki make it into a misogynistic joke by discussing how "hot" the Crones are and which one players would like to "bang." Several commenters joke about the Brewess' ample cleavage and buttocks, the Weavess' second set of legs, and the fact that two of them have covered faces as being particularly appealing aspects. Two forums even provided a poll where fans could vote for which Crone they would have sex with. While many comments simply express disgust at the question, several engage with ironically

This confidence reveals that they either do not care about their appearance and how their bodies are perceived or that they know exactly what they look like and believe it is desirable. However, their flirting is framed as vile and repulsive as well as threatening—it seems as though they would be just as likely to eat him as sleep with him, and based on what happened to the youths they made into soup during their Sabbath, both are a likely outcome. After seeing their true forms, Geralt discusses them with a character who worships them as goddesses, stating "[I] met your 'Ladies' – and I think 'Crones' is more fitting as a name for those monstrosities. Just the look of them – hideous monsters clad in human robes and skin." However, the character is shocked at Geralt's words, as he has only seen them as truly beautiful, meaning that they likely appear to their worshippers only in their youthful forms. The fact that appearance is what separates a "Lady" from a "Crone" reinforces the message that crone is a bad word, evoking imagery of a monstrous, repulsive, ugly, and evil woman.

The way these games present the sexual desire of night hags, Hagravens, water hags, and Crones as unquestionably disgusting and/or amusing is part of a widespread sexist double standard in Western culture, as Susan Sontag (1979) has discussed, since there are countless examples of sexually active older men who are framed as still desirable and whose sexual endeavours are not only acceptable, but applauded. Geralt himself is over 100 years old in the game, and although he appears middle-aged, he is sexually active and portrayed as desirable. He is allowed to have sexual pursuits and even a fiery romance. Hinchliff & Gott (2016) have noted that "there is no doubt that women are disproportionately disadvantaged in comparison with men

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serious responses, but with a clear undertone of sarcasm. See for example: https://witcher.fandom.com/f/p/4400000000000000461; https://www.reddit.com/r/witcher/comments/cijck2/would_you_still_bang_the_crones_sisters_lets_say/; https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/boards/702760-the-witcher-3-wild-hunt/71915864; https://steamcommunity.com/app/292030/discussions/0/594820473978204108/; https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/boards/702760-the-witcher-3-wild-hunt/71880254.

when it comes to ideas about what constitutes an attractive and 'sexy' body" (p. 25). They reference television shows such as *Ten Years Younger* or *The Swan* in which professional make-up artists, hairdressers, and cosmetic surgeons work to transform "the 'grotesque' aged female body into a culturally acceptable younger version. This leaves the viewer in no doubt that the 'older' female body is abject" (p. 25). These shows also send the message that a woman's appearance can and should be improved through expensive and time-consuming procedures, and that it is a woman's choice and responsibility to "take care" of her body to reduce the signs of aging. However, this neoliberal beautyist, ageist, and sexist message also implies that women can "disguise" or hide their real age. Like Blanche from *A Streetcar Named Desire* seeking to hide her real age from her romantic interest by keeping the lights dimmed and staying hidden in the shadows, a woman's efforts to hide her aging body and conceal her "flaws" is framed as necessary but also deceptive and manipulative—a kind of "false advertising" for the product of her body. This message is communicated in *The Witcher 3* with the Crones' alternative appearance as young and beautiful Ladies. Geralt is far more receptive to their flirtations the first time he speaks to them, and they show only their attractive appearance to their worshippers to ensure they continue to send their youths to "meet" with them once a year. When they are young and beautiful, they are completely naked, but in their true forms they wear clothing, as though the developers did not want to force the players to see such grotesque bodies naked as well, thereby reinforcing the sexualization of the youthful female body and the horror of the aging and non-normative female body. Just as the siren or bruxa disguises herself as a beautiful woman only to transform into a monstrosity—her "true" monstrous self—the Crones' initial appearance is presented in *The Witcher 3* as a kind of trick or deception.

Conclusion: "Haunted by the horror of growing old"

Although this chapter has only examined a handful of games, the negativity towards the inevitable and natural developments of the female body is ubiquitous. This means that, as de Beauvoir (1949) has observed, "woman is haunted by the horror of growing old" (p. 547). As this chapter has shown, Chivers' (2011) argument that "the big screen offers a cultural repository of regressive and outmoded beliefs about aging femininity" (p. vxiii) can be applied just as readily to video game content. Like cinema, older women are not often represented in games at all. As Harrington (2018) has observed, "loss of youthful normative femininity (and its implied sense of fecundity, sexual availability and reproductively) results in an expulsion from cultural space" (p. 243). Unless the game allows for customized character creation in which the player can make their character appear old, playable protagonists skew young. However, many mainstream games do feature playable protagonists that are middle-aged men, yet players do not get to embody the role of a middle-aged woman, let alone an elderly woman. When they are present in games, older women, like mothers, are forced into one of two representation roles: kindly maternal figure or wicked abject monster.[45] As this chapter has demonstrated, the

[45] One interesting exception to this is Flemeth from the *Dragon Age* series. Flemeth first appears to be an old woman who lives deep in a swamp, known as The Witch of the Wilds and the Mother of Vengeance. In her youth she fell for a man who was not her husband. When her husband found out about their affair, he had her lover killed and locked her away in a tower. She summoned a demon, becoming an "abomination" (a mage possessed by a demon) and killing her husband and all his men. She fled into the wilds where for a hundred years she would "steal" men—though it is not clear if she would seduce them or rape them—to "sire" what the game describes as her "monstrous daughters: Horrific things that could kill a man with fear." As the game notes, the population lives in fear of Flemeth, believing that she "lives on in the marsh, and she and her daughters steal those men who come too near." Legend says that Flemeth aids supplicants who come seeking her help, but rarely in expected ways, and most petitioners come to regret their wishes. She's known as a vengeful and sometimes capricious being, just as likely to kill a supplicant as help them—as an ambiguous witch of the woods, she is likely yet another character inspired by Baba Yaga. While this backstory aligns with the monstrous-feminine, the way she is presented throughout the series makes her a more nuanced, fleshed out, and ambiguous character.

In the first installment of the series, Flemeth rescues the player-character, nursing them to health in her hut in the swamp. Her daughter Morrigan, another witch, believes that her mother maintains her immortality by taking over the bodies of her daughters, one after another—making her an example of a monstrous mother. Thinking she is to be the next host, Morrigan begs the player-character to help her murder her mother. If the player chooses to fight Flemeth, she transforms into a dragon. She cannot truly be killed, however, and she returns in the second game, first appearing in her dragon form to rescue the player-character. When she transforms into a human again, she has

categories of Maiden, Mother, and Crone overlap, and so the hag/crone is made monstrous in relation to her aged and non-normative appearance but also because of her sexual desire and monstrous maternity. In this sense, sexualized monsters, maternal monsters, and aged monsters are not separate—they each represent the fear, hatred, distrust, and revulsion towards the female body.

And yet, it important to remember that aging female bodies are not inherently horrific, rather they are positioned as such within a misogynistic and ageist society. Indeed, as Ussher (2006) has demonstrated, even though women are continuously bombarded with cultural representations of aging as a kind of horrific disease or decay and the epitome of abjection, "a significant proportion of women resist this particular fiction of femininity, as it is at odds with their lived experience" which is, in fact, quite positive (p. 128). The Hagravens and Crones, as powerful sorceresses and leaders, are revered, admired, and even worshipped. They do not feel revulsion or horror towards their own aged, non-normative, monstrous bodies, rather they, like the hags in *D&D*, embrace that which is perceived within dominant culture as "disturbing and unpleasant" (*Monster Manual*, 2014, p. 176). They are also extremely confident in their own sexual desirability, and although it is presented as disgusting, disturbing, and even pathetic or

changed her appearance, looking more glamourous and perhaps more like a villainess sorceress than she did as the witch of the wilds. Flemeth appears throughout *Dragon Age II* (BioWare, 2011) and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014), always as an ambiguous, intimidating character who clearly knows more than she lets on. Along with shapeshifting, she can hide part of her soul in objects, appear in several places at once, and foresee the future. It is also revealed that her body houses the soul of a goddess who seeks vengeance against those who wronged her.

Although one of the male characters in *Origins* calls Flemeth "an old hag who talks too much," she is a dominant, powerful, dangerous, and mysterious being whom the game does not present in an entirely negative light. Like the Crones, Flemeth is actually a goddess figure, though unlike the Crones, she is not framed as completely evil, nor is she portrayed as physically abject. Although she is still someone the player can fight, and it seems like BioWare is setting her up to be the major villain in the next installment, she might provide an example of a more nuanced older woman character who is not forced into the kindly, grandmotherly role but is allowed to be a powerful, mysterious, important, and confident witch while not being framed as completely evil or presented as a grotesque joke. Flemeth is still an example of the monstrous-feminine, a witch and a "bad mother," but she may offer more space for identification and reclamation, especially as she is a popular subject for cosplay, fan art, and fan fiction.

amusing in the games, there is something empowering and transgressive in their blunt refusal to adhere to "age-appropriate" behaviour. In this sense, while these games are conservative and ideologically complicit in the marginalization, objectification, and extremely negative framing of aging female bodies, they also provide a complex cultural space in which the abject perils and pleasures of aging can be found and explored. This is especially clear in Ravel's insistence on her own individuality and feelings, Silvia's desperate desire to become a Hagraven and thereby empower herself, the water hag's joyful naked dancing and cheeky sexual propositions, and the way the Crones are beloved and worshipped by their followers, even though they ask a high price for their blessings. Just as the succubus/maiden speaks to female sexual power and the mother/broodmother demonstrates female reproductive power, the crone/hag represents an ancient and magical female power. While these games have clear misogynistic and patriarchal biases and agendas in that they position these powerful women as abject monstrosities that must be killed, they are drawing on transgressive and ambiguous mythical and legendary figures like Baba Yaga or the Fates who offer potential for oppositional reading and reclamation. These games do not offer space to make that process easy, however, meaning that reclamation is a difficult and fraught process. The concluding chapter of this project will address the difficulty of feminist reclamation, discuss possibilities for reimagining monstrosity, reiterate why female monstrosity and gender representation matters, and suggest paths to developing alternative visions of monstrosity.

Chapter 7

Conclusion: Monstrous Misogyny

> *To be a femme fatale you don't have to be slinky and sensuous and disastrously beautiful, you just have to have the will to disturb.*
>
> —Alice Munro (1991)

> *I want to lay claim to the dark power of my monstrous identity without using it as a weapon against others or being wounded by it myself.*
>
> —Susan Stryker (1994, p. 246)

Over the course of this dissertation, I have outlined the ways that mainstream games remediate existing tropes of female monstrosity, thereby reinforcing the message that women and their bodies are dangerous, deceptive, and disgusting. Using textual and cultural analysis and applying theoretical and conceptual frameworks drawn from feminist film studies and feminist cultural studies, I have shown how, like most popular culture, games are part of a long tradition of constructing the female body as monstrous—the sexual Other to be hated, feared, and destroyed. While women are all always already abject, this demonization is most commonly directed at sexually liberated, queer, disabled, mad, fat, and old bodies—those that are considered non-normative within a worldview that strictly and stringently polices women's bodies and behaviours. While games are different from mythology, films, and other media, the same tropes of female monstrosity are remediated in games, especially in their design of monstrous bodies that incorporate the *femme fatale* archetype, evoke the abject, and foster an association between monstrosity and female sexuality, reproduction, and aging. Weaving together feminist cultural and media studies concepts and theories—particularly the abject, the monstrous-feminine, the *femme fatale*, and the grotesque—and applying them to an intersectional analysis of gender representation in games has proven a fruitful undertaking.

This work has been intended to shed a critical light on an aspect of female representation in games that has been long overlooked. While games might be getting a little better in terms of representation, such as having more female characters as playable protagonists, monstrosity is an area where much interrogation and improvement is still needed. Monstrosity has long been used as a label to justify the oppression, ostracization, and murder of the unknown or unwanted Other. While this is found less often in film since the interventionist heyday of feminist film criticism (though it is certainly still there), games have yet to experience that eye-opening realization or auto-critique. As this dissertation has demonstrated, monstrosity is intertwined with gender representation, and given the lack of critical discourse around monstrous women in games, developers are apparently able to "get away with" embedding misogyny in their games without causing an uproar. The lack of critical commentary on female monstrosity speaks to the potentially insidious and invisible nature of symbolic representation in media. For example, in his discussion of the ways science fiction films incorporate people of colour as aliens and robots, Adilifu Nama (2008) has pointed out that symbolic representation of the Other through nonhuman creatures and characters means that "the established hegemonic order gets to have its cake and eat it too, by allegorically expressing racially biased representations of blacks and other people of color yet avoiding criticism for promoting a particular racial politics" (p. 146). Similarly, by portraying women as monsters, the developers of these games have been able to avoid accusations of sexism regarding these specific characters and creatures. This dissertation serves as that accusation.

Many of the games I have discussed here are extremely popular, critically acclaimed, and commercially successful works, with *The Witcher 3* even hailed as a "masterpiece" (Dingman,

2015) and winning several "Game of the Year" awards.[46] This speaks to their cultural impact and positioning within gaming fandom as being "the best of the best." In this sense, they are exemplary manifestations of what the mainstream video game industry has to offer and what many players, journalists, and critics desire in their games. The fact that they feature so many monstrous women designed in such overtly misogynistic ways points to some of the fundamental problems in the game industry and in game culture, as discussed in the introductory chapter. The fact that heterosexual white men make up the majority, and sometimes the entirety, of the development teams combined with the fact that these games were all designed for and marketed towards a player base composed of that same demographic means that even though women do play these games, they are not being considered nor having their voices heard. Intervening and engendering change will therefore require more feminists and those who would not identify as "gamers" to play games, make games, and claim ownership over the medium, as Chess (2020) has argued. We need to "spend more time playing as a tool of radical disruption" (Chess, 2020, p. 4) and work to make games better, in every way.

This is not to say there should not be any female monsters in games, but the fact that they fit so clearly into archetypal categories related to the fear of female sexuality, fecundity, and aging that have been around since antiquity highlights a particularly derivative design process. More importantly, these kinds of monsters are actively harmful to women: by perpetuating these archetypes and stereotypes and forcing players to murder these monstrous women, these games are sending a clear and unquestionably violent message. While this might not result in violent behaviour towards women in "real life," it does reinforce the omnipresent misogyny that has

[46] It held the record for most Game of the Year awards ever received, with 260 wins, until it was overtaken in 2021. It was even hailed as the top game of the generation by Gamesradar. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Witcher_3:_Wild_Hunt#Awards for details.

profoundly shaped and continues to shape our cultures. These games do little to counter harmful narratives or provide a new spin on old stories and, perhaps the worst part, they offer players the opportunity to enact gender-based violence against these transgressive, sexualized, fat, pregnant, old women and get praised and rewarded for it.

Ambiguity, Empowerment, and Disgust

Because the design behind these ludic monsters is based in hegemonic ideologies, it is necessary to ask if it is perhaps possible to reclaim them as a way to push back against those ideologies. After all, within the ambiguity of the abject and the grotesque lies theoretical potential for empowerment. Although that ambiguity makes the abject or the grotesque creature more horrifying because it resists categorization, it also leaves space for reading that abject or grotesque creature as liberating in its resistance. Indeed, for feminist scholars like Patricia Yaeger (1992), Mary Russo (1995), and Deborah Covino (2004), the abject woman is subversive and liberating: she "immers[es] herself in the significances of the flesh, becoming willfully monstrous as she defies the symbolic order" (Covino, 2004, p. 29). She makes "a spectacle of herself" and her strange body (Russo, 1995, p. 53), forcing the male gaze to turn away in disgust or embarrassment. She challenges normative gender dynamics simply by existing in her unruly, unapologetically monstrous body. This description could be applied to several monsters discussed here: the siren who lives in an all-female community, preying on menfolk; the Mother when she creates monstrous offspring that are loyal only to her, thereby using her abject reproductive abilities to empower herself; the three Crones as they delight in their own bodies and power, ruling the land as goddesses.

However, a woman making a spectacle of herself in real life has "more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries: the possessors of large, aging, and dimpled thighs

displayed at the public beach, of overly rouged cheeks, of a voice shrill in laughter, or of a sliding bra strap" (Russo, 1995, p. 53). In this sense, she is not purposely empowering herself, rather she is simply existing, and society labels her as a spectacle for it: "anyone, any *woman*, could make a spectacle out of herself if she was not careful" (Russo, 1995, p. 53; emphasis in original). The taboos around the female body are so strict that it becomes grotesque and unruly if it also happens to be a pregnant body, an aging body, an anomalous body, an "ugly" body, a fat body, a non-normative body, etc. and dares to enter the public sphere. While these games are not "real life," they do reinforce those taboos by presenting the female monster—that siren, broodmother, or crone—as evil, deceptive, horrific, disgusting, and an enemy to be slain. In other words, these monsters are not really ambiguous, at least they are not presented in ambiguous ways—they are portrayed in an entirely negative light.

Efforts at reclamation require tireless vigilance: players must continuously work to reject or push back against negative framings, to conduct oppositional readings and form alternative interpretations. That process is exhausting when the player is constantly bombarded by the hegemonic messages both overtly and symbolically encoded in the game. It is especially exhausting and hurtful when that player sees themselves reflected in the monster they are forced to kill and understands that those negative, oppressive messages are also directed at their own unruly body. As bell hooks (1992) has shown in her work on the oppositional gaze, looking "too deep" into the content you are consuming can hurt when it includes a negative portrayal of someone who looks like you (p. 121). Her reflection on the film *Imitation of Life* resonates with my own feelings towards the monstrous woman hated, persecuted, and erased in the games I play:

> I will always remember that image. I remembered how we cried for her, for our unrealized desiring selves. She was tragic because there was no place in the cinema for her, no loving pictures. She too was absent image. It was better then, that we were absent, for when we were there it was humiliating, strange, sad. We cried all night for you, for the cinema that had no place for you. And like you, we stopped thinking it would one day be different. (p. 122)

Perhaps the most hurtful aspect of this process is disgust. While fear can be empowering—if you are a feared creature you have power over those you terrify—being the object of disgust is decidedly disempowering (see Ahmed, 2004). Objects of disgust are positioned as lower, inferior, undesirable, tainted, contaminated, impure, and/or unclean. Certain bodies, especially those belonging to marginalized groups, have been described this way since antiquity as a way to justify their oppression or exclusion and to reaffirm the superiority of the "normative" body. Although disgust is ambivalent and that which is disgusting can be appealing or fascinating, the games I discussed in this dissertation work to reinforce the feeling of necessity or satisfaction that comes from repelling and destroying the disgusting object, rather than embracing or accepting it. Some players may revel in the Crones' sexuality and unruly bodies (although as I discussed in the previous chapter, that reveling might actually be a perverse or sarcastic pleasure rather than identification or empowerment), but the game informs them in no uncertain terms (through Geralt's reactions) that those bodies and behaviours are disgusting and that the Crones must be destroyed. This is perhaps because feelings of disgust can often lead to reactions of rage: "bodies that are disgusted are also bodies that feel a certain rage … To be disgusted is after all *to be affected by what one has rejected*" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 86; emphasis in original). The abject threatens, evokes a feeling of disgust and fear, which may result in an

enraged and violent expulsion of the abject object/subject—what Kristeva (1982) calls a "violent, dark revolt" (p. 1). Games allow for a cathartic enactment of that violent expulsion by encouraging (and often forcing) players to murder that offensive and threatening object of disgust.

The Challenge of Reclamation

The horror of the monstrous-feminine evokes both the cultural fear of feminine power (especially seductive or procreative powers) but also the cultural disgust directed at female bodies, even those processes which are generally considered natural, like menstruation, pregnancy, or aging. It is important to emphasize that those reactions of fear and disgust are by no means "natural" or "normal"—they are constructions/products of longstanding socio-cultural conditioning intended to oppress women and uphold patriarchal power structures. Stories like those told in myth and media are powerful tools in evoking and reaffirming these negative affective responses, which is part of why reclamation is such a long and difficult road.

A quintessential example of this difficulty in terms of the monstrous-feminine is the ancient Greek gorgon Medusa. As recounted by Ovid in *Metamorphoses*, Medusa was once a beautiful human woman who was raped in Athena's temple by the god Poseidon. Angered by this desecration of her temple, Athena took her wrath out on Medusa, transforming her into a monster as punishment for her own rape. Medusa has since been claimed as a symbol of feminist rage—an embodiment of the misogyny that has shaped Western society for millennia as well as the injustice women face within patriarchal society, blamed and punished for their own victimization at the hands of men (Valentis & Devane, 1994). Medusa was even featured on the cover of *Women: A Journal of Liberation* in 1978, a choice which was intended to "be a map to guide us through our terrors, through the depths of our anger into the sources of our power as

women" (Wilk, 2000, p. 217–218). While some women find Medusa an empowering figure because she is so angry and powerful, she exists as an embodiment of gender-based oppression. Elizabeth Johnston (2016) considers Medusa the "original nasty woman"—a figure that haunts Western patriarchy, "materializing whenever male authority feels threatened by female agency" (para. 5). As she notes, "in Western culture, strong women have historically been imagined as threats requiring male conquest and control, and Medusa herself has long been the go-to figure for those seeking to demonize female authority" (Johnston 2016, para. 1). This is the problem with reclaiming the monstrous: although she is appealing because of her power, her original purpose was to simply be another monster for the male hero Perseus to murder. He cuts off her head, thereby removing the source of her power (her venomous serpentine hair and eyes that turn men to stone) and uses it as a weapon against his own enemies. Medusa's story is entirely tragic: she is raped, punished by being turned into a monster, forced to live alone in a cave, murdered, and then literally objectified.

While I do not mean to discount the work of feminist reclamation, I feel it is important to underscore that these games do not make it intuitive or easy to reclaim the monstrous women they depict. As a female player, when I encounter the siren, the succubus, the broodmother, the banshee, the hag, or the crone, I see myself depicted there. I see my own sexuality, reproductive processes, and future demonized, hated, feared, and presented for destruction. As a feminist player I recoil at this framing and portrayal while also delighting in the idea of an all-female race of monstrous women who feed on men, a mother who creates life parthenogenetically, and old women who embrace their own sexual desires and rule over covens and countries. However, even if I delight in their existence, if I want to keep playing the game I must destroy them. I am

forced to be complicit in the violence directed at these transgressive women, or else I must simply turn off the game and choose not to play.

Your (Empowered, Feminist, Monstrous) Princess is in Another Castle

As I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation, many of these games draw inspiration from myths, legends, and fairy tales. This is unsurprising given how much the fantasy genre in general is inspired by or even derived from mythology and given that myths and fairy tales are full of monstrous creatures. Unfortunately, most traditional Western myths, legends, and fairy tales exist in service to normative, hegemonic ideology. They function as guides towards "proper" behaviour and warnings against transgression. As Caputi (2004) has thoroughly demonstrated, gender relations in mythology reinforce patriarchy and normalize misogyny. In other words, if game developers continue to uncritically draw inspiration from traditional mythology, positive change will not happen. They could turn instead to feminist rewritings of myths and fairy tales; non-Western myths and legends, especially those from Indigenous cultures; and more contemporary feminist fantasy and science fiction work. These sources might all provide alternative inspiration for game developers designing worlds, characters, and creatures—not only would they help developers to come up with more inventive designs and stories, they would also provide players with much needed alternative visions of monstrosity and otherness. If it is too difficult to reclaim the existing monstrous-feminine then the only path forward is to envision of new kinds of monsters, tell new kinds of stories, and dream up new kinds of worlds.

Of course, just drawing inspiration from other sources does not necessarily change the inherent cultural biases among developers and runs the risk of cultural appropriation if, for example, Indigenous developers are not involved in the process of adapting their own

mythologies. In that sense, the question of who is in the writing room, so to speak, must continue to be asked. Change must continue to be demanded, including changes in hiring and labour practices, company cultures, and production norms. Content should change to not only reflect the diversification of player demographics but to appeal to new players, especially those who have been excluded from marketing considerations and have felt alienated from the medium. These are not new demands by any means—as discussed in the introductory chapter, feminist critics have been decrying the lack of diversity in the industry and demanding more inclusivity and positive representation for decades. And yet games with these kinds of problematic representations continue to be produced, purchased, and celebrated. Because of this deeply entrenched resistance to change, perhaps the mainstream industry is not the place to look for alternative visions of otherness.

The independent game industry, while sharing some of the same issues as the mainstream industry, is a far more diverse and progressive scene. As argued by countless marginalized or minoritized game developers like celebrated game creator Anna Anthropy, independent game developers are the ones working tirelessly to promote positive change and more nuanced and diverse representations in games. Pushing for more accessible tools for game making and for more non-gamers to try game design, Anthropy has argued that "video games need more voices and more people creating them" because "video games are ... very homogenous, and they are very alienating, and very hard to look at without ... vomiting?" (Ellison, 2013). Although she may have been joking about the vomiting, as I have shown in this dissertation, the bodies of monstrous women are put on display as grotesque and abject spectacles intended to evoke strong reactions of horror and disgust, meaning that her assessment is not that outlandish.

Independent games are already taking new approaches to monstrosity that push back against the framing of monster-as-unwanted-Other. For example, *Undertale* (2015), an independent game created by Toby Fox, is a rare example of a game that humanizes the monster, highlights the association between monstrosity and marginality, and questions the violent and masculinist logic of "hero-slays-monster." Players adopt the role of a gender-ambiguous human child who awakens in the underground world of monsters. The game at first appears like a traditional roleplaying game, but it quickly becomes clear that although the player-character is the only human around, monsters are the residents of this world, not just enemies to be fought and killed. The player can choose to defeat every monster they encounter in what is called a "genocide" playthrough. Although this is a normative way to play a game, it becomes clear that this is a morally "bad" choice, presenting a story full of sorrow, hatred, and fear. The player can instead choose a completely nonviolent approach to gameplay, where they show mercy to every monstrous creature or character encountered. This is a counterintuitive and challenging way to play, but this "pacifist" route reveals a joyful, positive, and friendship/acceptance-oriented story. *Undertale* has received extensive critical acclaim, being praised as an innovative, progressive, and unconventional approach to the roleplaying game genre and winning countless accolades. Most importantly, it is perhaps the only game that subverts genre expectations in order to actively encourage the player to empathize with, care about, and show mercy to monsters. It critiques the us-versus-them attitude and the violence inherent in most video games and challenges the player to enact mercy, nonviolence, and care through gameplay.

Undertale is a unique kind of game, yet it serves as an important intervention into the convention of monster slaying. As has been the case for decades, the independent game scene seems to be the space where risky, unconventional storytelling is happening while the

mainstream industry remains conservative and traditional. Unfortunately, mainstream games carry far more weight than independent games do, with much higher sales and far more aggressive marketing campaigns. This means that mainstream games have a far greater cultural impact and continue to be the driving force behind the medium as a whole. As this dissertation has demonstrated, the mainstream game industry seems to have no interest in subverting genre expectations or facilitating a reclamation of the monstrous. In seeking new visions of monstrosity and nonhumanness in general, the independent game industry is likely the only space to offer much hope.

The Perils of Video Game Play

The quotes at the start of this concluding chapter suggest that there is a desire and a possibility to reclaim and find power in the identity of non-normative, villainous, monstrous woman. A "dark power" found within the "will to disturb." Yet the stories told in mainstream culture, whether through mythology, fairy tales, film, or video games, are embedded in hegemonic ideology and so function as a vehicle for misogyny and oppression. They encourage the intertwining feelings of horror and disgust when confronted with unruly and monstrous bodies. They send the clear message that certain bodies and behaviours are abject and so should be rejected, violently expelled, or murdered. Although I would like to see myself reflected in video game characters, what I see most often are women who are "unacceptably" deviant, transgressive, and monstrous and so presented as horrific threats that cannot be permitted to live. Monstrous women who are allowed to survive are those within the precarious confines of a stringent definition of what is "acceptably" monstrous, like the succubus who is willing to exist for the pleasure of men. When I look at the queer siren, the screaming banshee, or the repulsive crone, I see feminist rage. I see anger, heartbreak, and injustice in the gaping maw of the *vagina*

dentata, the scream of the "mad" mother, the disturbing cackle of the wicked witch. Although I can try to convince myself that these are empowering figures, that they can let me feel power in my own body, I know them for what they really are: misogynistic figments of the patriarchal cultural imagination, like Medusa, who exist to warn me to *never* make a spectacle of myself, lest the hero's blade should sever my head from my body.

The game industry is still desperately in need of a feminist intervention, and that intervention cannot be limited to the human women, the sexualized protagonists, or damsels-in-distress. That intervention must also include a consideration of the ways that games approach representation through symbolic or veiled designs. The monstrous has always been a site of cultural anxiety, struggle, and oppression and in games that struggle is *actively performed* in a cathartic re-enactment of heroic myths that establish the primacy of the dominant "us" and encourage hatred, disgust, fear, horror, and violence towards the marginalized "them." It is no wonder that game culture is plagued with such deeply entrenched misogyny, racism, and homophobia. Throwing more marginalized developers into the industry and hoping for the best is not going to change anything until the culture is changed. Although I do not have the perfect solution, this dissertation has hopefully served to show that the problems run deeper than commonly thought. Representation is a multifaceted thing, and it should not be the burden of the marginalized player to try and save themselves anguish by conducting an oppositional reading or feminist interpretation of characters that are intended to be hated, feared, and murdered. I should not have to kill the women I see myself in; destroy the unruly bodies that resemble my own; or erase the future witch, goddess, or queen I hope to become. Space must be made for celebrating the willful, disturbing, unruly dark power of the grotesque and abject monstrous.

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