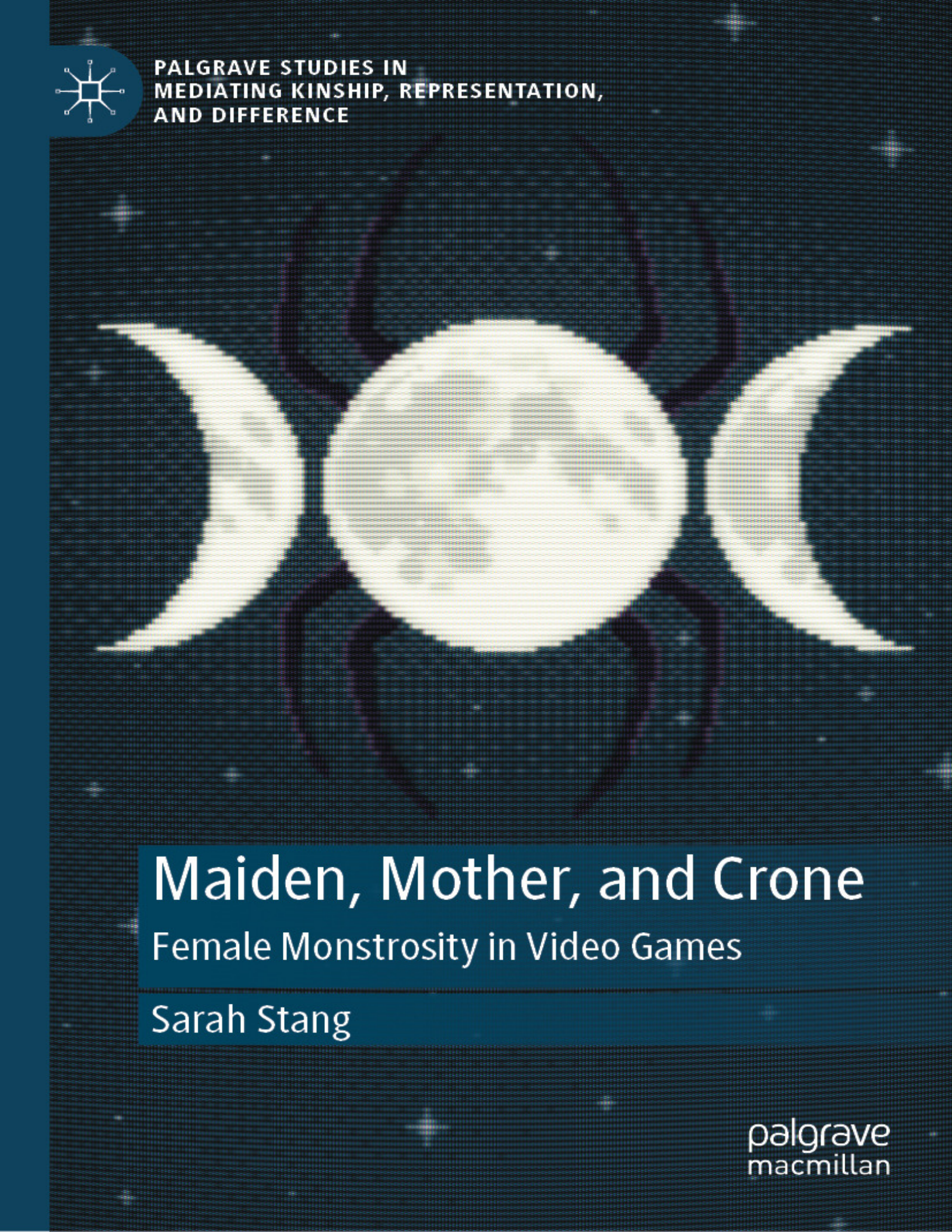

PALGRAVE STUDIES IN
MEDIATING KINSHIP, REPRESENTATION,
AND DIFFERENCE
Maiden, Mother, and Crone
Female Monstrosity in Video Games
Sarah Stang
palgrave
macmillan

Palgrave Studies in Mediating Kinship, Representation, and Difference

Series Editors
May Friedman
Toronto Metropolitan University, Toronto, ON, Canada

Silvia Schultermandl
University of Münster, Münster, Nordrhein-Westfalen, Germany

This book series brings together analyses of familial and kin relationships with emerging and new technologies which allow for the creation, maintenance and expansion of family. We use the term "family" as a working truth with a wide range of meanings in an attempt to address the feelings of family belonging across all aspects of social location: ability, age, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, gender identity, body size, social class and beyond. This book series aims to explore phenomena located at the intersection of technologies including those which allow for family creation, migration, communication, reunion and the family as a site of difference. The individual volumes in this series will offer insightful analyses of the representations of these phenomena in media, social media, literature, popular culture and corporeal settings.

This series is currently accepting proposals. To learn more, please follow this link: https://www.uni-muenster.de/Anglistik/Research/Amerikanistik/research/index.html

Sarah Stang

Maiden, Mother, and Crone
Female Monstrosity in Video Games

palgrave
macmillan

Sarah Stang
Digital Humanities, Brock University, St. Catharines, ON, Canada

ISSN 2752-7352 e-ISSN 2752-7360
Palgrave Studies in Mediating Kinship, Representation, and Difference
ISBN 978-3-032-25114-5 e-ISBN 978-3-032-25115-2
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-25115-2

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2026

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have

been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

This book is dedicated 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 villain instead of the protagonist—this is for you.

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank May Friedman, who served as the second reader for my doctoral dissertation and encouraged me to turn it into a book for her new series. There are few things more affirming and validating than hearing that one of your committee members loved your dissertation so much that she wants to publish it! It took much longer than I anticipated to get this done, but May's warmth, support, generosity, and patience throughout the process helped me accept that life happens and sometimes things get delayed, and that's okay. I would also like to thank the series' co-editor Silvia Schultermandl for her patience and enthusiasm for this project, as well as all the editors, copy editors, and (incredibly generous, knowledgeable, and thorough!) peer reviewers whose work has helped make this possible.

I would like to thank all my colleagues at Brock University, especially my excellent little cohort in the Department of Digital Humanities. They all offered so much generous advice on the topic of starting my academic position, working at Brock, applying for tenure, and book writing, but never made me feel pressured to get this book out.

Thanks also to Aaron Trammell and Lauren Cruikshank for being such wonderful and supportive friends, mentors, and collaborators. Their generous advice and guidance have been invaluable, and I hope to continue to work closely with them both for many years to come.

Speaking of life happening, during the course of putting this book together, I moved cities, landed my dream job, earned tenure, and had two children. Needless to say, getting a book out while also doing all that would not have been possible without the support of my best friend and partner, Jack Gaino. I am eternally grateful for all he has done and continues to do. He also very kindly helped me make the cover art for this book!

As with any project of this length, there are countless people to thank. So many people have helped, encouraged, challenged, or guided

me in some way during this long journey, and although I can't list them all here, I thank them from the bottom of my heart.

Competing Interests The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this manuscript.

Contents

1 Introduction: Monstrosity, Women, and Games

Why Monsters?

Why Games?

Gender and Games

Monsters and Games

Methods and Methodology

Why Female and Feminine Monsters?

The Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone

Chapter Summaries

References

Part I The Maiden

2 The Succubus: Sexualized Hybrid Monstrosity

The Original *Femme Fatale*

The "Chaotic Evil" Ludic Succubus

The Digital Succubus: Pets and Lovers

World of Warcraft

Dragon Age

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt

Ambiguous Hybridity: Fetishes and Horrors

God of War

The Succubus as Demon

The Madonna/Whore: "Rotten Underneath her Façade of Beauty"

References

3 The Spider Woman: Half *Femme Fatale*, Half *Vagina Dentata*

The Spider Woman as Literal Black Widow

Spider Mothers and the *Vagina Dentata*

Spider Women as Boss Monsters

Chaos Witch Quelaag

Lolth, the Demon Queen of Spiders

Playable Spider Women

Hybridity and the Nature-Culture Divide

References

Part II The Mother

4 Horrific Pregnancies and Monstrous Mothers: Reproduction in Japanese Games

The Mother of the Monstrous Brood

The Monster Within Her: Pregnancy as Mutation and Infection

Parasite Eve: The Mother of the Ultimate Being

Becoming and Birthing God(esse)s

"Your Love Can't Protect Her. Only I Can Do That": Over-Protective Monstrous Motherhood

Reproductive Horror and the Fear of Infection-as-Impregnation

References

5 BioWare's Reproductive Body Horror: Broodmothers and Banshees

"They Remade Her in Their Image. Then She Made More of Them. Broodmother..."

"The Creature Itself Is Nasty, but Nothing Really Compares to the Building of Dread Before You Ever Get to It"

The Mother Versus The Father

The Player as "Instrument of the Father"

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

Predatory and Monstrous Sexuality

Screaming Pregnant Cyborg Banshees

Misogyny and Technophobia

"The Depository of all That Is Transgressive and Dangerous"

References

Part III The Crone

6 Hideous Hags: The Fear of Female Ageing

"All that Is Evil and Cruel": The Ludic Hag in *D&D*

Monstrous Motherhood and Deceptive Seduction

Monstrosity, Old Age, and Disability

Dark Sororities

***D&D*'s Night Hag in Video Game Form[Chap:6][ID:Sec5]**

Planescape: Torment

Baldur's Gate 3

"Cunning, Depravity, and Repulsiveness": *Skyrim* 's Hagravens

Anti-Hagraven Propaganda

Queer Monstrous Desire

"Aged, Deformed Women": Hags in *The Witcher 3*

Ambiguous Old Women—Powerful, Liberated, and Evil

References

7 Fates, Crones, and Witches: Monstrous Ancient Goddesses

God of War's Gargantuan Goddesses

Clotho

Euryale

The Ladies of the Wood: The Fates as Monstrous Crones

Old Age and Predatory Sexuality

"I am but an Old Woman, Whom the World Has Largely Forgotten": Flemeth the Witch-Goddess

"Haunted by the Horror of Growing Old"

References

8 Conclusion: Monstrous Misogyny and the Journey Towards Reclamation

Ambiguity, Empowerment, and Disgust

The Challenge of Reclamation

Playable Monstrous Women

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

The Perils of Video Game Play

References

Index

List of Figures

Fig. 2.1 The succubus from the 1979 *Monster Manual* for *Dungeons & Dragons*

Fig. 2.2 The male and female versions of the succubus from the 5th edition *Monster Manual* (Perkins, 2014) for *Dungeons & Dragons*

Fig. 2.3 Screenshot of a succubus from *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004)

Fig. 2.4 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

Fig. 2.5 Screenshot of the bruxa playing card from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015)

Fig. 2.6 Screenshot of Cleopatra from *Dante's Inferno* (Visceral Games, 2010)

Fig. 3.1 *Arachne* by Gustave Doré in Dante's *Purgatorio* (*Source*: https://www.worldofdante.org/gallery_dore.html)

Fig. 3.2 Promotional art of the Arachne from *Castlevania* (1999) (*Source* https://castlevania.fandom.com/wiki/Arachne)

Fig. 3.3 Screenshot of Chaos Witch Quelaag from *Dark Souls* (From Software, 2011)

Fig. 3.4 Lolth from the cover of the 1986 *D&D* module *Queen of the Spiders* (TSR, Inc.), art done by Keith Parkinson. Note how Lolth is portrayed as a sexualized woman of colour. Taken from https://rpggeek.com/image/517896/queen-of-the-spiders

Fig. 4.1 Screenshot of a heavily pregnant Eve from *Parasite Eve.* Note the body horror elements of her form—multiple limbs, unnatural proportions, and a grotesquely swollen belly

Fig. 4.2 An image of the Yharnam Stone looted from Queen Yharnam after defeating her in *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware, 2015). Taken from https://www.bloodborne-wiki.com/2015/04/yharnam-stone.html

Fig. 4.3 A screenshot of Myra transformed into a giant psychoplasm monstrosity in *The Evil Within 2* (Tango Gameworks, 2017)

Fig. 5.1 A screenshot of the Broodmother from *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare, 2009). Note her large, multi-breasted body and tentacles

Fig. 5.2 A screenshot of the Mother from *Dragon Age: Origins—Awakening* (BioWare, 2010)

Fig. 5.3 A screenshot of a Banshee from *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012). Note her emaciated naked body, cybernetic implants, and distended belly

Fig. 6.1 A Night Hag (left) and green hag (right) from the *Monster Manual* (Perkins, 2014)

Fig. 6.2 The character model for Auntie Ethel Taken from the *Baldur's Gate3* Wiki https://bg3.wiki/w/images/3/37/Auntie_Ethel_Hag_Model.png

Fig. 6.3 A screenshot of a Hagraven from *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011)

Fig. 6.4 A grave hag from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015). Promotional image taken from https://witcher.fandom.com/wiki/Grave_hag

Fig. 6.5 Concept art for the water hag from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Art Book* (Batylda, 2015a, p. 172)

Fig. 7.1 Official artwork of Clotho's full body, taken from https://godofwar.fandom.com/wiki/Clotho

Fig. 7.2 A screenshot of Clotho once Kratos reaches the top level of her body in *God of War II* (Santa Monica Studio, 2007)

Fig. 7.3 Concept art of Euryale from *God of War II* (Santa Monica Studio, 2007) Taken from https://godofwar.fandom.com/wiki/Euryale

Fig. 7.4 A screenshot of the Ladies of Wood in their tapestry woven of human hair from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015)

Fig. 7.5 A screenshot of the Crones in their true, monstrous forms from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015)

Fig. 8.1 Official promotional concept art of Kerrigan as the Queen of the Blades in *StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010). Taken from https://starcraft.fandom.com/wiki/Sarah_Kerrigan

Fig. 8.2 A screenshot of the cinematic cutscene showing Kerrigan ascended as a Xel'naga in *StarCraft II: Legacy of the Void* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2015b)

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2026
S. Stang, *Maiden, Mother, and Crone*, Palgrave Studies in Mediating Kinship, Representation, and Difference
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-25115-2_1

1. Introduction: Monstrosity, Women, and Games

Sarah Stang[1] ✉
(1) Digital Humanities, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada

✉ **Sarah Stang**
Email: sstang@brocku.ca

Keywords Monsters – Gender – Popular culture – Media – Video games – Textual analysis – Close reading

> 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)

Why Monsters?

Monsters are fascinating figures, beings of all potential shapes and forms that spring from our cultural imaginations to manifest in our stories, haunt our dreams, and shape our societies. While monstrous beings certainly frighten us and represent an embodiment of our anxieties, they also give shape and form to all that which is mysterious, ambiguous, and transgressive. We are encouraged to fear monsters as children in our morality-laden fairy tales and then we learn to hate them and all those whom we label "monster," so the monstrous serves as a way to impart lessons, police behaviour, and demonize and ostracize others. Yet, as has become particularly apparent in contemporary popular culture, we also often feel irresistibly fascinated by and drawn to monsters, many of whom are continuously re-envisioned, remediated, and even sometimes redeemed. In this sense, monsters can often be contradictory and ambiguous figures, both symbolic and literal, endlessly morphing and mutating to play various roles and serve various purposes.

This malleability, ubiquity, and ambiguity have not only been key drivers behind the endurance and popularity of the monster, but these aspects also hint at why the monstrous has remained such an important and popular object of critical and scholarly analysis across countless fields. As Rosi Braidotti (2011) has pointed out, monsters "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, emphasis in original). This etymology is important to consider given that monstrosity has been a 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. 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. Teratology, as a "science," ostensibly seeks to objectively classify and explain anomalous births; however, given that

men (particularly 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, and queerness has also long been associated with monstrosity.

Controlling the discourse about certain bodies is a way to dominate and police those bodies, thereby dictating which bodies are acceptable and which are not. This has far-reaching consequences—as Donna Haraway (1991) has argued, "monsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations" (p. 177). Similarly, 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).

Teratologists like Cohen as well as feminist cultural scholars like Haraway and Braidotti have demonstrated how the figure of the monster symbolically polices the borders of what is permissible and

dictates which bodies are acceptable. As Cohen has noted, to step outside of social norms risks either "attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself" (Cohen, 1996, p. 12). 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, analysing and deconstructing the cultural objects involved in this mediated symbolic violence can therefore be considered important components of a feminist, social justice-oriented project. The "monstrous" as a broad category of alterity, marginality, deviance, and transgression formed and communicated in relation to certain "Othered" bodies and behaviours is the focus of this book. Specifically, my aim here is to unpack monstrosity in relation to the portrayal of women—in the form of feminine and female-coded monsters—in games.

Why Games?

Video games continue to dominate as the world's most popular and lucrative entertainment medium, with an estimated industry value of over $188 billion (Newzoo, 2023) and a global revenue of over $400 billion in 2023 (Clement, 2024b). The popularity of this medium cannot be overstated: 66% of Americans and 53% of Canadians play games regularly (ESA, 2022, p. 2; ESAC, 2022, p. 4). Although video games are sometimes dismissed as a medium for children, the average age of a gamer is 33–34 years old (ESA, 2022, p. 3; ESAC, 2020, p. 7). The monster is a central aspect of much video game play—particularly in the action-adventure, role-playing, shooter, simulation, and fighting genres, which make up the most popular and numerous video game

genres (Clement, 2024a)—and so countless people encounter and engage with ludic/digital monsters every day.

As has been played out in endless permutations and remixes, one of the primary roles and functions of the monster is to be an adversary to a presumed hero whom the audience can (or, more accurately, are expected to) cheer for or even imagine ourselves as or project ourselves onto. This is a traditional narrative framing for countless myths, legends, and fairy tales, retold in literature, poetry, paintings, sculptures, comic books, films, and television shows. While much scholarship has been devoted to critically analysing the monster and its socio-cultural functions in these media, the monstrous in games has received less attention. Yet, I argue that nowhere is this hero-versus-monster setup as apparent and ubiquitous as in games. Monsters have been central to gameplay since the inception of role-playing games, whether digital or nondigital (see Švelch, 2023 for more on the early history of monsters in games). In addition, most video games are interactive in that they invite the player directly into the story by having them control an avatar (referred to as a "player-character") and engage in gameplay. While identification with a protagonist and engagement with a story 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.

The history of games is rooted in speculative fiction—fantasy, science fiction, and horror—and in these genres, for the most part, the player is forced to confront and either defeat, hide, or flee from monsters. Often, the player adopts the role of heroic monster slayer/hunter or is simply placed in the unfortunate position of being pursued and attacked by nonhuman beings such as aliens, cyborgs, zombies, demons, ghosts, etc. While a cyborg might not be traditionally considered a "monster," if the game overtly labels the

creature/character as a "monster" then I will consider it as such for the purposes of this book. Many games require or encourage the player to murder or otherwise overcome monsters as an unavoidable aspect of gameplay—a requirement to win the game. This is important to consider because monstrosity has been used as a dehumanizing label to justify the violent execution of countless unwanted Others—in media and, unfortunately, in real life (See Kocurek, 2015; Mittman & Dendle, 2012). While this dehumanizing logic is common to all media forms, games take it one step further by making players enact violence against monstrous beings themselves—an action for which they are generally rewarded with points, loot, experience, and/or narrative progression—thereby solidifying an "us" versus "them" or "Self" versus "Other" dynamic.

It must be said that some games instead task the player with capturing or taming monsters, allow for playing alongside monstrous or otherwise nonhuman companions, or even make players adopt the role of (or transform into) a monster or monstrous "race" as part of gameplay. Yet, even in these games, there often remains a humanist logic, a reinforcing of the primacy and dominance of the human, which is generally coded as white, male, and normative. 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 in relation to real-world identities and bodies. As noted earlier, gender and race are the primary markers of monstrosity—there are countless myths and legends wherein there exists a monstrous race described with both racist and xenophobic language or a monstrous woman whose description and narrative role, as well as her inevitable punishment, reinforce misogynistic attitudes, norms, and ideologies. Race is not the primary focus of this book, though I draw on intersectional feminist theories which owe a heavy debt to Black feminist thought. While race is an important component of the unpacking of ludic-monstrosity-as-oppressive-discourse, it needs to be the topic of its own (much needed) book. Rather, my focus is on gender, specifically femaleness and femininity,

and its intersection with questions of queerness, disability, body size, and age.

Gender and Games[1]

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 over the past decade or so. This discourse has especially focused on the representation of women in games, as well as how game culture and the game industry maintain their "boys' club" status through the use of toxic, exclusionary, and misogynistic practices (for example, see Consalvo, 2012; Jenson & de Castell, 2013; Salter & Blodgett, 2012).

The vast majority of games feature playable protagonists who are straight-coded, white-coded, and cis-male-coded, and are designed and presented in a way that makes them intuitively read as heterosexual (assuming any romance elements are present in the game). This sends the message that only that kind of person can be a hero or only that kind of person's stories are interesting, compelling, or worth experiencing firsthand through gameplay. The repercussions of this run deep: As Harrisson et al. (2020) have noted,

> given the media's influence to shape a consumer's worldview, there is growing concern over the lack of diversity in the representation of videogame characters, which could have significant social impacts on players—for example, normalizing power imbalances and marginalizing certain groups. (p. 3)

Indeed, gender-based game research has thoroughly demonstrated that women have always been severely underrepresented in video games: several early large-scale content analyses found that women represented only 10%–14% of characters with a recognizable gender, and even when they are present in games, they are rarely playable characters (e.g. Ivory, 2006; Williams et al., 2009) and more often are

designed to appear sexy, with sexualized poses and revealing clothing (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Ivory, 2006; Scharrer, 2004). For example, 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. More recent studies have shown that while the overall proportion of female characters has increased over time (to 22% in 2017), that increase was primarily limited to secondary roles while most characters were still adult white men (Harrisson et al., 2020), and the sexualization has continued (Lynch et al., 2016). Similarly, a study of the latest games showcased at the Electronic Entertainment Expo—an important trade event for the video game industry commonly referred to as E3—revealed 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, though in 2020 it rose to 18%, suggesting that female representation in games may be improving (Sarkeesian & Petit, 2020). This is important to highlight not only because of how impactful in-game representation is on social relations and personal identities (e.g. Beck et al., 2012; Fox et al., 2015; Kaye & Pennington, 2016), but also because video game play in particular encourages identification and empathy through the virtual embodiment of playable characters (Klimmt et al., 2009, 2010).

However, even with this slight increase, the representation of women in games is still a far cry from reflecting global gender demographics or even the demographic of video game players, which is evenly split between men and women in Canada (Entertainment Software Association of Canada, 2022) and the United Kingdom (Ukie, 2020), while women account for 48% of players in the United States (Entertainment Software Association, 2022). In the United States, 62% of women and girls play video games (ESA, 2022, p. 2) and in Canada 68% of women aged 18–34 and 52% of women aged 35–54 play video

games (2020, pp. 14–15). This numeric parity between male and female players suggests that, as Shira Chess (2020) has declared, "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). That women do not feel a strong sense of ownership over video games is perhaps not surprising given that the medium has historically been dominated by men as both players and creators. Regarding the gender breakdown in the game industry, numbers are better than they used to be, but still far from nearing gender equality. Specifically, according to the International Game Developers Association (2021), 62% of game developers are male, 75% are white, and 68% are heterosexual. In the United Kingdom as of 2020, 70% of people working in the game industry are male, 90% are white, and 79% are heterosexual (Valentine, 2020). In Canada, women constitute only 23% of the game industry workforce (ESAC, 2021). Bailey et al. (2019) observed that women are underrepresented in leadership and engineering roles, and no game from the bestselling games of 2001–2017 had a female director. In addition, women employees within the industry have been reporting sexism, harassment, exclusionary practices, and even sexual assault for years (D'Anastasio, 2018; Sakellariou, 2020), and even when they manage to build successful careers, women and other marginalized employees struggle to push for change in an industry culture deeply entrenched in hegemonic masculinity, driven primarily by the profit motive, and resistant to change (Cote, 2020; Harvey & Fisher, 2014).

In addition, game journalists, critics, developers, players, and scholars have been critiquing the rampant racism, misogyny, and exclusionary "boys' club" attitude within video game culture for years. 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). Indeed, many women—especially queer women and women of colour—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. 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). As Amanda Cote (2020) and many others have observed, all this might be a reaction to the diversification of the player base, which is perceived by some male gamers as threatening to the medium: "while gaming has long possessed sexist structures, these have become more salient in the face of potential change" (p. 9).

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). Indeed, 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 that are not representations of themselves or their fantasies, and so the burden of creating more diverse representations must rest with marginalized groups. The same caution can be applied to the push for simply increasing the number of female characters in games, since the way people are represented is important to consider in addition to how often they appear. Even if female characters appear in a game, if they are designed to reflect problematic, sexist, or misogynistic stereotypes, or they are only ever a specific kind of woman—the vast majority of the (human) female characters who do appear in games are, like their male counterparts, heterosexual, cisgendered, able-bodied, neurotypical, slim, conventionally attractive, adult white women who are coded as European or North American—then their appearance alone does not support the project of diversity,

especially as it relates to broader efforts towards equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Monsters and Games

The number of women in games and how they have been portrayed as sexualized or victimized 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 mythology and film, and the relative ubiquity of monstrous creatures in games, especially both digital and analog role-playing games. This is perhaps because monstrosity is a more subtle or symbolic form of mediated misogyny. Sometimes mediated 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 the 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, 1993).

Although the monstrous creature may be enormous, painstakingly designed and animated, or even a major or final boss, she is often not 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 analysing 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 book 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: Wild Hunt* than any other kind of female character, yet because they are not human and appear only to be killed, they remain invisible.

As of this writing, there are only two other book-length works specifically focused on monsters/monstrosity in games, both of which have been published very recently: Jaroslav Švelch's *Player vs. Monster: The Making and Breaking of Video Game Monstrosity* (2023), which explores the history of monsters as enemy types in video games; and a collection I co-edited entitled *Monstrosity in Games and Play: A Multidisciplinary Examination of the Monstrous in Contemporary Cultures* (2025), which contains several chapters exploring monstrosity in relation to games, play, and gaming cultures from various perspectives. Otherwise, there are some books and that examine the horror genre of video games, and therefore touch on aspects of

monstrosity (i.e. Perron, 2009, 2018; Stobbart, 2019; Webley & Zackariasson, 2020). There are also some journal articles and individual book chapters on the topic, especially discussing the ever-popular figure of the zombie (i.e. Backe & Aarseth, 2013; Carr, 2009; Krzywinska, 2008; May, 2022). Some scholars have focused on the monster in terms of representation and identity as I do in this book, such as disability (Carr, 2014), race (Kocurek, 2015; Young, 2016), and motherhood (Batti, 2018; Harkin, 2020; Keogh & Jayemanne, 2018; Newman, 2019; Spittle, 2011; Vanderhoef & Payne, 2018). My own past work has largely focused on various kinds of female monstrosity in games (Stang & Trammell, 2020; Stang, 2018, 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2022b, 2023a). This is all important research, but it is spread across various book chapters and journal articles—so far there has been no book-length study specifically addressing monstrosity-as-representation in 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" role-playing games. I seek to demonstrate how these games remediate the same problematic tropes found in mythology and other media and also how ludic monsters provide a unique and arguably more harmful engagement with the monstrous given the way these games often position players as monster slayers. Because of this focus, the games I discuss here are ones that are generally categorized as science fiction or fantasy games, rather than traditional horror, barring some exceptions, such as my discussion of Japanese horror games in Chapter 4. While horror games of course often feature monsters, they usually appear in order to disrupt normalcy—the monster 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. These genres are also more likely to feature monsters inspired by mythology, fairy tales, and folklore, thereby connecting them to historical representations of marginalized-groups-as-monsters. In these games, as in the myths they draw on, monstrosity is used as a dehumanizing label that justifies the execution of countless beings—characters—for no real reason other than hatred for their existence. As I discuss in this book, 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). Female monstrosity in horror games—and horror media in general—has also received more scholarly attention than female monstrosity in SFF games. This is why I have chosen to focus more on SFF games than horror games (again, except in Chapter 4), despite the fact that I am focusing on monstrosity, which is a theme perhaps more commonly associated with horror. 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.

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 patriarchal cultures, particularly as represented and reinforced in mythologies, folklore, and

popular culture. This positioning is specifically in relation to female sexuality, reproduction, and ageing, 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. Games, with their long history of problematic female representation, are no exception—in fact, as I argue throughout this book, I believe that games are some of the worst offenders in terms of female monstrosity and symbolic/mediated violence against women.

Methods and Methodology[2]

The methods deployed in this book are textual and visual analysis, therefore I conduct close readings of media objects—particularly monstrous bodies—in order to analyse how they represent the world, especially real-world bodies and identities. This is an established, traditional method within the field of media studies, and several game scholars have discussed the fruitful ways it can be employed to analyse games (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011; Brooker, 2001; Carr, 2017; Consalvo & Dutton, 2006; Fernández-Vara, 2014; Konzack, 2002). Jim Bizzocchi and Theresa Jean Tanenbaum (2011) have described close reading as "a continuous process of creating contingent meaning from potential meaning" that 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). Although it is drawn from film studies, my methodological approach also takes 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 analyse the problematic representation of marginalized identities, such as Carr's (2009) analysis of disability in *Dead Space.*

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. Textual analysis also inevitably centralizes the researcher's (or the viewer's/player's) own interpretation of the mediated content, a long-established aspect of studying media. As early as 1952, Siegfried Kracauer 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 analysing the media object and that object itself is understood within its social context (for more on this, see Harvey, 2020; Malliet, 2007).

As I have discussed at length elsewhere, "social justice-oriented approaches to media analysis, such as those that employ feminist, queer, crip, or critical race theory, emphasize the centrality of identity and positionality in their interpretive analysis, and work to connect mediated messages to real world oppression" (Stang, 2022a, p. 2). Questions of identity and positionality in the context of close reading/textual analysis are important because reactionary and conservative members of the gaming community have long 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). But it has also been directed at feminist game scholars for their published research, the topics of their conferences, and even the content they teach, as has been discussed at length by Chess and Shaw (2015), A. D. Andrew (2016), Emma Vossen (2018), Tobias Van Veen (2014), and Katherine Cross (2016).

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. (pp. 56–7)

As foundational digital media theorist Janet Murray has argued, the urge to "protect" games from feminist analysis is pervasive, with some cultural gatekeepers working to keep games away from "the cultural and narrative dimensions of representation" (cited in Margini, 2017). Performing a close reading of a game through socially engaged lenses is therefore part of an ongoing feminist battle:

> The fight for the right to analyze video games closely, even in the face of the many perils of this work, is the fight to make our own meaning from games—to lay claim to the equal citizenship of those who are "different" in games cultures by understanding games on the terms and through the methods that we deem meaningful rather than those set and policed by the gamer status quo. (Ruberg, 2019, p. 61)

Despite the potential backlash, I use close reading 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.

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.

I argue throughout that these games leave very little room for potential oppositional readings, but to add nuance beyond my own interpretation of the game texts, I examined paratextual materials such as official artbooks and 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 include elements from developer publications, blogs, interviews, and forum

posts; player blogs, forum posts, and comments; and critical/journalistic writing. The developer interviews reveal 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 2 and the discussion of Lady Dimitrescu included in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5 and again briefly in Chapter 7, 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, examining which monsters are generally considered the most terrifying, horrific, or disgusting and what language is used to describe them and their bodies. Given all this, in the final chapter, I discuss the challenge of attempting to reclaim, redeem, or re-envision certain monsters.

As Harvey (2020) has demonstrated, "feminist media studies has a longstanding 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 (1993), 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, while Caputi's approach is in many ways similar to Creed's, she does not rely as heavily on psychoanalysis for her close readings and discussions, rather focusing on cultural analysis and mythology. Similarly, my approach blends cultural and historical contexts and traditions with elements of psychoanalysis, thereby adding nuance and depth to interpretive close reading. This approach 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.

Like my theoretical framework, the methods that I employ to perform this feminist media/cultural analysis are 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 analyse the monsters themselves, but to also consider how games can encourage new ways of thinking about the abject and monstrosity. I analyse the way that these monsters are remediations of tropes of female abjection and monstrosity found in popular culture and mythology, specifically regarding how their abjection is tied to their gender, sexuality, and other intersecting identity markers such as age, body size, physical anomaly/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.

Why Female and Feminine Monsters?

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, but 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. Feminist film scholars Linda Williams (1984) and Barbara Creed (1986, 1993) famously examined the affinity between the female victim and the monster in classic horror film, and the ways horror films portray female and feminized monstrosity, respectively. Creed's conceptualization of the "monstrous-feminine" remains a foundational concept for feminist media scholars interested in how women are made monstrous—or monsters are feminized—in media and popular culture more broadly. Several feminist film scholars have continued that important avenue of study, building on Creed's work to examine female monstrosity in contemporary and global horror films, as well as other media objects and aspects of popular culture. This includes books such as Jane Caputi's *Goddesses and Monsters: Women, Myth, Power, and Popular Culture* (2004), Cristina Santos's *Unbecoming Female Monsters:*

Witches, Vampires, and Virgins (2017), Erin Harrington's *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film: Gynaehorror* (2018), Sady Doyle's *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers: Monstrosity, Patriarchy, and the Fear of Female Power* (2019), Jess Zimmerman's *Women and Other Monsters: Building a New Mythology* (2021), and Patricia Saldarriaga and Emy Manini's *Monsters vs. Patriarchy: Toxic Imagination in Global Horror Cinema* (2025), along with countless journal articles, book chapters, and other think pieces. None of these books address video games, but they still provide an important basis for this project.

While not all the works mentioned above engage with the same frameworks and methods, they still owe a conceptual debt to Creed's foundational work. Creed 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. Creed's work provides a key foundation to my own, along with Kristeva's conceptualization of the abject. 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. 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 (Kristeva, 1982, 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 film theorist Noël

Carroll has called the paradox of horror (1990)—as well as the interplay between sexual arousal and fear or disgust.

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 ageing, 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.

Although the abject is embedded in psychoanalysis, a deeply problematic 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, 1993) applied the concept while remaining critical of both Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis by challenging the notion that women are feared because they are castrated and instead arguing that woman is terrifying because "man endows her with imaginary powers of castration" (1993, 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" (1993, 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 (see also Tyler, 2009).

Most importantly, Creed (1993) 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 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.

In this way, my project addresses some of the critiques of psychoanalytical analyses of gender in horror films brought up by Cynthia Freeland (1996), among others. My focus is on critically interrogating the gender ideologies presented in these games and embodied by their female characters/creatures. In other words, I seek to explore these games and their monstrous characters/creatures as cultural artefacts that represent, reinforce, and remediate the same

kinds of tropes and stereotypes feminist scholars have been critiquing for decades. Psychoanalysis is pertinent to my work because of the clear parallels that can be drawn between monstrous women in games (and especially the anxieties they embody) and their cinematic counterparts, which have been explored through psychoanalytical feminist frameworks. Although that feminist film scholarship can be considered dated and can reflect certain assumptions that were more accepted at the time, the same tropes and design decisions are apparent in contemporary games. Even Carroll (2004), who has been openly sceptical of psychoanalytic film theory, conceded that psychoanalysis "is certainly relevant, even apposite, to the analysis of many horror films, because many horror films presuppose, implicitly or explicitly, psychoanalytic concepts and imagery" (p. 257).[3] As I will discuss throughout this book, I see the same patterns and influences in the designs of female monsters in games—perhaps due to how game designers have been influenced by films, especially in the horror genre. The study of cinematic horror has been deeply shaped (some might say dominated) by psychoanalytic models of interpretation and they are useful for analysing games as well, though like most conceptual and theoretical frameworks, they cannot be applied uncritically.

I am certainly not the only game scholar to apply a psychoanalytical lens to video games, though game studies is still developing in terms of using this kind of approach and in many ways has a lot of theoretical and conceptual history to catch up on. Along with several works exploring identity and identification in games through a psychoanalytical lens, some examples of scholars looking specifically at monsters/monstrous creatures and monstrosity in games using psychoanalysis, many of which will be discussed more in depth later in this book, include Marc Santos and Sarah White's (2005) reading of monstrous creatures in the *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill* series as representations of the repressed and the Real; Carr's previously mentioned study on abjection and disability in *Dead Space* (2009); Steve Spittle's (2011) analysis of Alma from *F.E.A.R.* using both the uncanny and the abject; Bianca Batti's (2018) use of feminist

psychoanalysis to explore the monstrous mother in *Among the Sleep*; Brendan Keogh and Darshana Jayemanne's (2018) analysis of video games in the *Alien* franchise in relation to the archaic mother; John Vanderhoef and Matthew Thomas Payne's (2018) discussion of maternal abjection in the *BioShock* series; the examination of Portal's GLaDOS as an archaic monstrous mother by Stephanie Harkin (2020); and Geneveive Newman's (2019) look at the archaic/chthonic mother in *The Last of Us*.

Feminist film scholars were certainly not the only ones to explore the ways that patriarchal society renders women monstrous. Braidotti (1994) has noted that 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 often functions as a misogynistic construct, used to warn, control, and punish transgressive women and maintain patriarchal control over their bodies and behaviours. Similarly, Zimmerman (2021) notes that myths about female monsters "are the bedtime stories patriarchy tells itself" (p. 7). As 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 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. 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. 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. 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. 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.[4]

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 analyse 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 demonstrated 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 book, as my work here seeks to uncover and analyse the meanings and messages communicated through the visual discourse presented in the games under discussion.

Like the myths, legends, and products of popular culture that inspired and shaped them, video games are full of examples of female and feminine monsters. This includes adaptations and remediations of familiar female monsters found in mythology and folklore, like the siren, gorgon, banshee, succubus, harpy, hag, crone, or witch, as well as monsters with 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 presumed biological femaleness such as breasts, vulvas, and vaginas (see Fausto-Sterling, 2000); attire and hairstyles associated with femininity; a female actor providing the voice; and so on. 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.[5] 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 Chapters 2 and 3); 2) they are menstruating, pregnant, giving birth, or breastfeeding, usually in a non-normative or otherwise disturbing way (see Creed, 1993 and chapters 4 and 5 of this book); and/or 3) they have or are designed to look like monstrous vaginas (see Creed, 1993; 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 around (and attempted control of) female sexuality and reproduction, anxieties which have unfortunately

manifested in our stories across cultures and time periods and continue to influence popular culture around the world.

Of course, 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 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).

If there is no such thing as fundamental or "natural" biology, anatomy, or 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 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 Judith 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. When I use the word "female" as an adjective I am usually 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.

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. 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, 2021), 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.

The Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone

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 Chapters 6 and 7.

The female monsters I discuss in this book 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: 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 book 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 ageing and how this process manifests in and is reinforced by mainstream video games.

Chapter Summaries

Part 1: The Maiden

This book is divided into three parts, each with two chapters, which correspond to the three archetypes of Maiden, Mother, and Crone. The

first part begins with Chapter 2, which focuses on 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 and a monstrous version of the Maiden. This chapter analyses adaptations of and iterations on the succubus and the siren in *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax & Arneson, 1974), *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), the *Dragon Age* series (BioWare, 2009–2024), *The Witcher* series (CD Projekt Red, 2007–2015), the *God of War* series (Santa Monica Studio, 2005–2013), *Diablo III* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2012), and *Dante's Inferno* (Visceral Games, 2010). The succubusor siren-like monsters in these games 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. I explore the nature of hybridity and how perceived attractiveness and allure, as opposed to revulsion, is carefully constructed in the design of these monstrous women, and relate this to the sexualization of hybrid female monsters, or "monster girls," in online communities This chapter also considers questions of queerness in relation to the portrayal of sexuality as predatory and threatening to heterosexual males and discuss these all-female monstrous species as representations of liberating, queer, and anti-patriarchal kinships.

Chapter 3 builds upon this analysis of the succubus and her iterations but focuses on a specific type of hybrid, sexualized, predatory female monster: what I call the "spider woman." These are half-woman, half-spider creatures—another all-female species—who are a common enemy and boss monster type in both Western and Japanese games. As I discuss, they are drawn from Western and Japanese mythology and speak to the same fears as the succubus while also underscoring the

abject positioning of the spider as a feminized and widely hated creature and emphasizing their portrayal as *vaginae dentatae*. The games I analyse in this chapter are the *Castlevania* series (Konami, 1986–2014), *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* (Starbreeze Studios, 2013), *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011), *Diablo III* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2012), and *Dungeons & Dragons.* I end with a discussion of the monstrous woman as racialized goddess/queen and an overview of some examples of playable spider women, elaborating on this hybrid figure as an embodiment of the harmful and artificial division between nature and culture.

Part 2: The Mother

In Part 2 I move onto the Mother archetype, examining how pregnancy, birth, and maternity are framed in association with monstrosity, horror, transgression, infection, mutation, and madness. Chapter 4 focuses on monstrous pregnancy and birth in Japanese horror role-playing games, including *Parasite Eve* (Squaresoft, 1998), *Resident Evil—Code: Veronica* (Capcom, 2000), *Resident Evil Village* (Capcom, 2021), *Silent Hill 3* (Team Silent, 2003); *House of the Dead: Overkill* (Headstrong Games, 2009), *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware, 2015), and *The Evil Within 2* (Tango Gameworks, 2017). This analysis explores female monsters that, unlike the succubus or siren, are not designed to titillate the player; rather, they evoke reactions of horror, disgust, and revulsion. These portrayals also draw on anxieties regarding pregnancy-as-infection, monstrous babies and foetuses, unchecked maternal instincts and desires, and parthenogenetic reproduction while also often pitting fathers as playable heroes against mothers as monstrous enemies and "boss" fights.

Chapter 5 continues the topic of monstrous reproduction and motherhood, instead focusing on games made in a Western context: two acclaimed series by Canadian game studio BioWare. Specifically, this chapter analyses the monstrous, mutated Broodmother in the dark fantasy games *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare, 2009) and its expansion, *Dragon Age: Origins – Awakening* (BioWare, 2010), as well as the

horrific, undead, pregnant Banshees in the science fiction game *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012). These monsters are examined in the context of Canadian body horror filmmaker David Cronenberg's oeuvre, and the chapter unpacks how these games reinforce tropes and themes of pregnancy- and technology-as-infection/mutation, maternal madness, and, again, mothers versus fathers. Like the chapter before it, these games portray pregnant and maternal bodies as monstrous, mutated, out-of-control, mad, and horrific, thereby reinforcing harmful, misogynistic beliefs and attitudes and rejecting the potentials of maternity and matriarchal kinship.

Part 3: The Crone

In Part 3 I turn to the final figure of the triad—the Crone—to examine tropes of female monstrosity that explicitly target powerful old women. Chapter 6 explores the design of monsters that are positioned at the intersection of ageism, ableism, and sexism. This kind of monster is often referred to as a "hag" and embodies the fear, horror, and disgust directed at the ageing female body but also incorporates fears regarding ageing female sexuality and reproduction, thereby demonstrating that the categories of Maiden, Mother, and Crone are not fully distinct, but rather are fluid and overlapping. The objects of analysis in this chapter are the hags from *Dungeons & Dragons* and two of its digital adaptations/spin-offs: *Planescape: Torment* (Black Isle Studios, 1999) and *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios, 2023), the Hagravens from *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), and the grave hags and water hags from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. This chapter also weaves in questions of disability and queerness to highlight how these games disempower and disparage non-normative and transgressive forms of feminine kinship and desire.

In Chapter 7, I move from the hag to the witch and crone, unpacking how some games have presented powerful older women as ambiguous, capricious, and untrustworthy goddess-figures, evoking familiar archetypes like the infamous Baba Yaga from Slavic folklore (who is also a source of inspiration for the hag) or the three Fates from Greek

mythology. The objects of analysis in this chapter are the Fates and the gorgon Euryale from *God of War II* (Santa Monica Studio, 2007), the Crones from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, and Flemeth from the *Dragon Age* series. While these portrayals are largely negative, intended to evoke reactions of fear and disgust, as well as suspicion and desire for vengeance on the part of the player, they also present inherently ambiguous figures, matriarchal coven leaders and powerful goddesses who are both feared and worshipped. In this sense, while the games position these figures as either mysterious witch-goddesses or grotesque monstrosities, they offer potentials for feminist reclamation in ways that most other female monsters in games do not. Flemeth is especially a potentially positive and empowering figure, though I argue she is allowed to be so because she is not as physically monstrous, horrific, and anomalous as the other examples.

In the 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, I build upon the previous chapter's gesture towards feminist reclamation of the monstrous woman and spend some time exploring the potentials for playable monstrous women characters such as Sarah Kerrigan from the *StarCraft* series (Blizzard Entertainment, 1998–2015). I also discuss whether independent games might approach monstrosity in more nuanced ways with a look at *Undertale* (Toby Fox, 2015) as well as games that feature Baba Yaga, but with the caveat that the independent scene also produces works like *The Binding of Isaac* (McMillen & Himsl, 2011) which presents the fat, aged, reproductive, and maternal body as a decidedly abject and horrific enemy to fight. This book ends with a reflection on the potentials and challenges of a feminist reclamation, re-framing, and re-envisioning of the monstrous. While there is hope and some things are improving, 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 independent game developers—not all of whom are taking up the

mantle of reclaiming the unruly, transgressive, abject, monstrous woman—and marginalized players who must constantly negotiate and navigate their own identities and positionalities vis-à-vis games that present bodies like theirs as horrific enemies to fight and kill.

References

Andrew, A. D. (2016, July 11). Even doing academic research on video games puts me at risk. *The Establishment*. https://medium.com/the-establishment/even-ng-academic-research-on-videogames-puts-me-at-risk-1c48febb0c96

Arya, R. (2014). *Abjection and representation: An exploration of abjection in the visual arts, film, and literature*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Backe, H-J., & Aarseth, E. (2013). Ludic zombies: An examination of zombieism in games. *Proceedings of DiGRA 2013: DeFragging Game Studies*.

Bailey, E. N., Miyata, K., & Yoshida, T. (2021). Gender composition of teams and studios in video game development. *Games and Culture, 16*(1), 42–64.

Batti, B. (2018). Something's not right: Monstrous motherhood and traumatic survival in Among the Sleep. *The Popular Culture Studies Journal, 6*(2&3), 399–419.

Beasley, B., & Standley, C. T. (2002). Shirts vs. skins: Clothing as an indicator of gender role stereotyping in video games. *Mass Communication & Society, 5*, 279–293.

Beck, V. S., Boys, S., Rose, C., & Beck, E. W. (2012). Violence against women in video games: A prequel or sequel to rape myth acceptance? *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 27*, 3016–3031.

Bethesda Game Studios. (2011). *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim.* Bethesda Softworks. PlayStation 3.

BioWare. (2009). *Dragon age: Origins.* Electronic Arts. PlayStation 3.

BioWare. (2010). *Dragon age: Origins—Awakening.* Electronic Arts. PlayStation 3.

BioWare. (2011). *Dragon age II.* Electronic Arts. PlayStation 3.

BioWare. (2014). *Dragon age: Inquisition.* Electronic Arts. PlayStation 3.

BioWare. (2012). *Mass effect 3.* Electronic Arts. PlayStation 3.

Bizzocchi, J., & Tanenbaum, T. J. (2011). Well read: Applying close reading techniques to gameplay experiences. In D. Davidson (Ed.), *Well played 3.0: Video games, value and meaning* (pp. 289–316). ETC Press.

Black Isle Studios. (1999). *Planescape: Torment.* Interplay Entertainment. Microsoft Windows.

Blizzard Entertainment. (1998). *StarCraft: Brood war.* Blizzard Entertainment. Microsoft Windows.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2004). *World of warcraft.* Blizzard Entertainment. Microsoft Windows.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2010). *StarCraft II: Wings of liberty*. Blizzard Entertainment. Microsoft Windows.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2012). *Diablo III.* Blizzard Entertainment. Microsoft Windows.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2013). *StarCraft II: Heart of the swarm*. Blizzard Entertainment. Microsoft Windows.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2015a). *Heroes of the Storm*. Blizzard Entertainment. Microsoft Windows.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2015b). *StarCraft II: Legacy of the void*. Blizzard Entertainment. Microsoft Windows.

Braidotti, R. (1994). *Nomadic subjects: Embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory*. Columbia University Press.

Braidotti, R. (2011). *Nomadic subjects: Embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory* (2nd ed.). Columbia University Press.

Brooker, W. (2001). The many lives of the Jetman: A case study in video game analysis. *Intensities: The Journal of Cult Media, 2*. http://www.cult-media.com/issue2/Abrook.html

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.

Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "sex."* Routledge.

Capcom. (2000). *Resident evil—code: Veronica*. Dreamcast.

Capcom. (2021). *Resident evil village*. PlayStation 5.

Caputi, J. (2004). *Goddesses and monsters: Women, myth, power, and popular culture.* University of Wisconsin Press.

Carr, D. (2009). Textual analysis, digital games, zombies. Presented at *DiGRA 2009, Breaking new ground: Innovation in games, play, practice and theory* (London).

Carr, D. (2014). Ability, disability and *Dead Space*. *Game Studies*, *14*(2). http://gamestudies.org/1402/articles/carr

Carr, D. (2017). Methodology, representation, and games. *Games and Culture, 20*(10), 1–17.

Carroll, N. (1990). *The philosophy of horror, or, paradoxes of the heart*. Routledge.

Carroll, N. (2004). Afterword: Psychoanalysis and the horror film. In S. J. Schneider (Ed.), *Horror film and psychoanalysis: Freud's worst nightmare.* Cambridge University Press.

CD Projekt Red. (2007). *The witcher.* Atari. Microsoft Windows.

CD Projekt Red. (2011). *The witcher 2: Assassins of kings.* CD Projekt. Microsoft Windows.

CD Projekt Red. (2015). *The witcher 3: Wild hunt.* CD Projekt. Microsoft Windows.

Chess, S. (2020). *Play like a feminist*. MIT Press.

Chess, S., & Shaw, A. (2015). A conspiracy of fishes, or, how we learned to stop worrying about #gamergate and embrace hegemonic masculinity. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 59*(1), 208–220.

Clement, J. (2024a). *Most popular video game genres among internet users worldwide as of 3rd quarter 2023, by age group*. Statista. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1263585/top-video-game-genres-worldwide-by-age/

Clement, J. (2024b). *Video game market revenue worldwide from 2019 to 2029*. Statista. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1344668/revenue-video-game-world wide/

Cohen, J. J. (1996). *Monster theory: Reading culture*. University of Minnesota Press.

Consalvo, M. (2012). Confronting toxic gamer culture: A challenge for feminist game studies scholars. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, *1*. https://adanewmedia.org/2012/11/issue1-consalvo/

Consalvo, M., & Dutton, N. (2006). Game analysis: Developing a methodological toolkit for the qualitative study of games. *Game Studies, 6*(1). http://gamestudies.org/06010601/articles/consalvo_dutton

Cote, A. C. (2020). *Gaming sexism: Gender and identity in the era of casual video games*. New York University Press.

Creed, B. (1986). Horror and the monstrous-feminine: An imaginary abjection. *Screen, 27*(1), 44–70.

Creed, B. (1993). *The monstrous-feminine: Film, feminism, psychoanalysis*. Routledge.

Cross, K. (2016). Press F to revolt: On the gamification of online activism. In Y. B. Kafai, G. T. Richard, & B. M. Tynes (Eds.), *Diversifying Barbie and Mortal Kombat: Intersectional perspectives and inclusive designs in gaming* (pp. 23–34). Lulu Press Inc.

D'Anastasio, C. (2018). Inside the culture of sexism at Riot Games. *Kotaku*. https://kotaku.com/inside-the-culture-of-sexism-at-riot-games-1828165483

De Beauvoir, S. (1949/2011). *The second sex* (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). Vintage. (Original work published 1949).

De Lauretis, T. (1987). *Technologies of gender: Essays on theory, film, and fiction*. Indiana University Press.

Doane, M. A. (1991). *Femmes fatales: Feminism, film theory, psychoanalysis*. Routledge.

Downs, E., & Smith, S. L. (2010). Keeping abreast of hypersexuality: A video game character content analysis. *Sex Roles, 62*(11), 721–733.

Doyle, S. (2019). *Dead blondes and bad mothers: Monstrosity, patriarchy, and the fear of female power.* Melville House.

ESAC (Entertainment Software Association of Canada). (2020). *Essential facts about the Canadian video game industry.* https://theesa.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/RCGEF_en.pdf

ESAC (Entertainment Software Association of Canada). (2021). *The Canadian video game industry 2021.* https://theesa.ca/news/

ESAC (Entertainment Software Association of Canada). (2022). *Bringing Canadians together: Essential facts 2022.* https://theesa.ca/news/

ESA (Entertainment Software Association). (2022). *Essential facts about the video game industry.* www.theesa.com/resource/2022-essential-facts-about-the-video-game-industry/

Fausto-Sterling, A. (2000). *Sexing the body: Gender politics and the construction of sexuality*. Basic Books.

Fernández-Vara, C. (2014). *Introduction to game analysis*. Routledge.

Fox, J., Ralston, R. A., Cooper, C. K., & Jones, K. A. (2015). Sexualized avatars lead to women's self-objectification and acceptance of rape myths. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 39*(3), 349–362.

Fox, T. (2015). *Undertale.* Toby Fox. Microsoft Windows.

Freeland, C. A. (1996). Feminist frameworks for horror films. In D. Bordwell & N. Carroll (Eds.), *Post-theory: Reconstructing film studies* (pp. 195–218). University of Wisconsin Press.

FromSoftware. (2011). *Dark souls*. Bandai Namco Entertainment. PlayStation 3.

FromSoftware. (2015). *Bloodborne.* Sony Computer Entertainment. PlayStation 4.

Gygax, G., & Arneson, D. (1974). *Dungeons & dragons.* TSR, Inc. & Wizards of the Coast.

Hall, S. (1973). *Encoding and decoding in the television discourse*. Paper presented for the Council of Europe Colloquy on "Training in the Critical Reading of Televisual Language." University of Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/81670115.pdf

Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Sage in association with the Open University.

Haraway, D. (1991). *Simians, cyborgs and women: The reinvention of nature*. Routledge.

Harkin, S. (2020). "The only thing you've managed to break so far is my heart": An analysis of

Portal's monstrous mother GLaDOS. *Games and Culture, 15*(5), 529–543.

Harrington, E. (2018). *Women, monstrosity and horror film: Gynaehorror*. Routledge.

Harrisson, A., Jones, S., Marchessault, J., Pedraça, S., & Consalvo, M. (2020). The virtual census 2.0: A continued investigation on the representation of gender, race and age in videogames. *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*, *2020*. https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2020i0.11229

Harvey, A., & Fisher, S. (2014). "Everyone Can Make Games!": The post-feminist context of women in digital game production. *Feminist Media Studies, 15*(4), 576–592.

Harvey, A. (2020). *Feminist media studies*. Polity Press.

Headstrong Games. (2009). *House of the dead: Overkill.* Sega. Wii.

IGDA (International Game Developers Association). (2021). *Developer satisfaction survey: 2021 summary report*. https://igda-website.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.

Ivory, J. (2006). Still a man's game: Gender representation in online reviews of video games. *Mass Communication and Society, 9*, 103–114.

Jenson, J., & de Castell, S. (2013). Tipping points: Marginality, misogyny and video games. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing, 29*(2), 72–85.

Kaye, L. K., & Pennington, C. R. (2016). "Girls can't play": The effects of stereotype threat on females' game performance. *Computers in Human Behavior, 59*, 202–209.

Kendrick, S. (2015). *Misogyny and gaming: The maintenance of a male-gendered gamer culture*. Master's thesis, Toronto Metropolitan University. https://doi.org/10.32920/ryerson.14663763.v1

Keogh, B., & Jayemanne, D. (2018). "Game over, man. game over": Looking at the alien in film and videogames. *Arts, 7*(3), 43–56.

Klimmt, C., Hefner, D., & Vorderer, P. (2009). The video game experience as "true" identification: A theory of enjoyable alterations of players' self-perception. *Communication Theory, 19*(4), 351–373.

Klimmt, C., Hefner, D., Vorderer, P., Roth, C., & Blake, C. (2010). Identification with video game characters as automatic shift of self-perceptions. *Media Psychology, 13*(4), 323–338.

Kocurek, C. (2015). Who hearkens to the monster's scream? Death, violence and the veil of the monstrous in video games. *Visual Studies, 30*(1), 79–89.

Konami. (1986–2014). *Castlevania* series. Konami. Various Platforms.

Konzack, L. (2002). *Computer game criticism: A method for computer game analysis*. Proceedings of the Computer Games and Digital Culture conference, Tampere, Finland, 2002.

Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection*. (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). Columbia University Press.

Krzywinska, T. (2008). Zombies in gamespace: Form, context, and meaning in zombie-based video games. In S. McIntosh & M. Leverette (Eds.), *Zombie culture: Autopsies of the living dead* (pp. 153–168). Scarecrow Press.

Kuhn, A. (1994). *Women's pictures: Feminism, power & politics*. Verso.

Larian Studios (2023). *Baldur's gate 3.* Larian Studios. PlayStation 5.

Lynch, T., Tompkins, J. E., van Driel, I., & Fritz, N. (2016). Sexy, strong, and secondary: A content analysis of female characters in video games across 31 years. *Journal of Communication, 66*(4), 564–584.

Malliet, S. (2007). Adapting the principles of ludology to the method of video game contentanalysis. *Game Studies, 7*(1). http://gamestudies.org/0701/articles/malliet

Margini, M. (2017). "Hamlet on the Holodeck," twenty years later. *The New Yorker.* https://www.newyorker.com/books/second-read/hamlet-on-the-holodeck-twenty-years-later

May, L. (2022). *Digital zombies, undead stories: Narrative emergence and videogames*. Bloomsbury.

McMillen, E., & Himsl, F. (2011). *The binding of Isaac.* Microsoft Windows.

Mittman, A. S., & Dendle, P. J. (Eds.). (2012). *The Ashgate research companion to monsters and the monstrous*. Ashgate Publishing.

Myers, D. (2006). Signs, symbols, games, and play. *Games and Culture, 1*(1), 47.

Newman, G. (2019). Fungal zombies and tentacular thinking: The chthonic mother in the game The Last of Us. *Studies in the Fantastic, 7*(Summer/Fall), 39–50.

Newzoo. (2023). *Global games market report*. https://newzoo.com/resources/trend-reports/newzoo-global-games-market-report-2023-free-version

Perron, B. (Ed.). (2009). *Horror video games: Essays on the fusion of fear and play.* McFarland.

Perron, B. (2018). *The world of scary video games: A study in video ludic horror*. Bloomsbury.

Ruberg, B. (2019). *Video games have always been queer*. NYU Press.

Rubin, G. (1984). Thinking sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality. In C. S. Vance (Ed.), *Pleasure and danger: Exploring female sexuality.* Routledge.

Sakellariou, A. (2020). Every Ubisoft employee outed for abuse (so far) [UPDATED]. *ScreenRant*. https://screenrant.com/ubisoft-controversy-abuse-sexual-misconduct-allegations-who/

Saldarriaga, P., & Manini, E. (2025). *Monsters vs. patriarchy: Toxic imagination in global horror cinema.* Rutgers University Press.

Salter, A., & Blodgett, B. (2012). Hypermasculinity & dickwolves: The contentious role of women

in the new gaming public. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, 56*, 401–416.

Santa Monica Studio. (2005). *God of war*. Sony Computer Entertainment. PlayStation 2.

Santa Monica Studio. (2007). *God of war II*. Sony Computer Entertainment. PlayStation 2.

Santa Monica Studio. (2010). *God of war III*. Sony Computer Entertainment. PlayStation 3.

Santa Monica Studio. (2013). *God of war: Ascension*. Sony Computer Entertainment. PlayStation 2.

Santos, C. (2017). *Unbecoming female monsters: Witches, vampires, and virgins*. Lexington Books.

Santos, M. C., & White, S. E. (2005). Playing with ourselves: A psychoanalytic investigation of Resident Evil and Silent Hill. In N. Garrelts (Ed.), *Digital gameplay: Essays on the nexus of game and gamer* (pp. 69–79). McFarland.

Sarkeesian, A. (2015). We must be critical of the art we love. *Time.* https://time.com/4030632/anita-sarkeesian-sexist-media/

Sarkeesian, A. (2016). Sinister seductress [Video]. *Feminist Frequency.* https://feministfrequency.com/video/sinister-seductress/

Sarkeesian, A., & Petit, C. (2020). More video games featured women this year. Will it last? *Wired*. www.wired.com/story/women-video-games-representation-e3/.

Scharrer, E. (2004). Virtual violence: Gender and aggression in video game advertisements. *Mass Communication and Society, 7*, 393–412.

Shaw, A. (2014). *Gaming at the edge: Sexuality and gender at the margins of gamer culture.* University of Minnesota Press.

Spittle, S. (2011). "Did this game scare you? Because it sure as hell scared me!": F.E.A.R., the abject and the uncanny. *Games and Culture, 6*(4), 312–326.

Square. (1998). *Parasite eve.* Square Electronic Arts. PlayStation.

Stang, S. (2018). Shrieking, biting, and licking: The monstrous-feminine and abject female monsters in video games. *Press Start, 4*(2), 18–34.

Stang, S. (2019). The broodmother as monstrous-feminine: Abject maternity in video games. *Nordlit, 42: Manufacturing* Monsters, 233–256. https://doi.org/10.7557/13.5014.

Stang, S. (2021a). *Maiden, mother, and crone: Abject female monstrosity in roleplaying games* [Doctoral dissertation, York University]. YorkSpace Institutional Repository. http://hdl.handle.net/10315/38644

Stang, S. (2021b). Monstrosity and otherness in The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim. In M. Piero & M. Ouellette (Eds.), *Being dragonborn: Critical essays on The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (pp. 60–74). McFarland Press.

Stang, S. (2021c). The fiend folio's female fiends: Kelpies, vampires, and demon queens. *Analog Game Studies, 9*(1). https://analoggamestudies.org/2021/10/the-fiend-folios-female-fiends-kelpies-vampires-and-demon-queens/

Stang, S. (2022a). Too close, too intimate, and too vulnerable: Close reading methodology and the future of feminist game studies. *Critical Studies in Media Communication, 39*(3), 230–238.

Stang, S. (2022b). Tragic wraiths, seductive sirens, and man-eating vampires: Female monstrosity in The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt video game. In A. Luko & J. K. Wright (Eds.), *Monstrosity, identity, and music: Mediating uncanny creatures from Frankenstein to videogames* (pp. 213–232). Bloomsbury.

Stang, S. (2023a). Desirable and undesirable cyborg bodies in the Mass Effect video game trilogy. In J. Empey & R. Kilbourn (Eds.), *Feminist posthumanism in contemporary science fiction film and media: From annihilation to high life and beyond* (pp. 96–112). Bloomsbury.

Stang, S. (2023b). Diversity. In M. J. P. Wolf & B. Perron (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to video game studies* (2nd ed., pp. 466–475). Routledge.

Stang, S., & Trammell, A. (2020). The ludic bestiary: Misogynistic tropes of female monstrosity in Dungeons & Dragons. *Games & Culture, 15*(6), 730–747.

Stang, S., Meriläinen, M., Blom, J., & Hassan, L. (Eds.). (2025). *Monstrosity in games and play: A multidisciplinary examination of the monstrous in contemporary cultures*. Amsterdam University Press.

Starbreeze Studios. (2013). *Brothers: A tale of two sons.* 505 Games. PlayStation 3.

Stobbart, D. (2019). *Videogames and horror: From Amnesia to Zombies, Run!* University of Wales Press

Švelch, J. (2023). *Player vs. monster: The making and breaking of video game monstrosity*. MIT Press.

Tango Gameworks. (2017). *The evil within 2.* Bethesda Softworks. PlayStation 4.

Team Silent. (2003). *Silent hill 3.* Konami. PlayStation 2.

Tyler, I. (2009). Against abjection. *Feminist Theory, 10*(1), 77–98.

Valentine, R. (2020). The UK games industry is still overwhelmingly young, white, and male. *Gamesindustry.biz*. https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2020-02-03-the-uk-games-industry-is-still-overwhelming-young-white-and-male

Vanderhoef, J., & Payne, M. (2018). Big daddies and monstrous mommies: Bioshock's maternal abjection, absence, and annihilation. In J. Aldred & F. Parker (Eds.), *Beyond the sea: Navigating BioShock* (pp. 50–73). McGill-Queens University Press.

Van Veen, T. C. (2014). Safeguarding research: A scholarly roundtable on gamergate. *First Person Scholar*. http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/safeguarding-research/

Visceral Games. (2010). *Dante's inferno.* Electronic Arts. PlayStation 3.

Vossen, E. (2018). *On the cultural inaccessibility of gaming: Invading, creating, and reclaiming the cultural clubhouse*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Waterloo.

Webley, S. J., & Zackariasson, P. (2020). *The playful undead and video games: Critical analyses of zombies and gameplay*. Routledge.

Williams, D., Martins, N., Consalvo, M., & Ivory, J. (2009). The virtual census: Representations of gender, race and age in video games. *New Media and Society, 11*(5), 815–834.

Williams, L. (1984). When the woman looks. In M. A. Doane, P. Mellencamp, & L. Williams (Eds.), *Re-vision: Essays in feminist film criticism* (pp. 83–99). BFI.

Young, H. (2016). *Race and popular fantasy literature: Habits of whiteness*. Routledge.

Zimmerman, J. (2021). *Women and other monsters: Building a new mythology*. Beacon Press.

Footnotes

1 Some parts of this section are adapted from my chapter on "Diversity" in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies, Second Edition* (Stang, 2023b).

2 Parts of this section are adapted from my article "Too close, too intimate, and too vulnerable: Close reading methodology and the future of feminist game studies" in *Critical Studies in Media Communication* (Stang, 2022a).

3 Although psychoanalysis has been widely critiqued and debated (often rightly so), its influence in the study of film, literature, and television is extensive and it has produced unquestionable insights. 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. Trying to understand *why* these kinds of female monsters are so ubiquitous; *how* they shock, fascinate, and horrify; and why their designs make players *want* to violently murder them is a worthwhile task. I think we risk throwing the baby out with the bathwater by rejecting psychoanalytical approaches outright, but certainly we can use them carefully and in conjunction with other approaches and frameworks.

4 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 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.

5 There are certainly exceptions to this, especially in Japanese games. For example, Mara and Mishaguj from the *Shin Megami Tensei* series 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.

Part I
The Maiden

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2026
S. Stang, *Maiden, Mother, and Crone*, Palgrave Studies in Mediating Kinship, Representation, and Difference
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-25115-2_2

2. The Succubus: Sexualized Hybrid Monstrosity

Sarah Stang[1] ✉
(1) Digital Humanities, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada

✉ **Sarah Stang**
Email: sstang@brocku.ca

Keywords Succubus – Siren – Mythology – Hybridity – Sexualization – *Femme Fatale*

> 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 analyse 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. 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 the "sexy + gross = creepy" formula used by the designers of *Doom 3* (id Software, 2004) to create the Vagary, the only female creature/character in the game and a clear example of a misogynistic female monstrosity, which I will discuss more in the next chapter (for more on the formula, see Sarkeesian, 2016). This kind of monstrous woman is "sexy," but she is also "gross" and so in the end, she is "creepy" and must be destroyed.

Most importantly, these succubi 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. 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 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).[1] 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).[2] 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 Creed has observed, "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). However, she also cautions that "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). The succubus specifically reveals a great deal, as she is an embodiment

of desire but also the distrust and fear of female sexuality—especially the threat it poses to heterosexual men—and represents a symbolic form of the patriarchal attempts to control that sexuality by framing it as monstrous and evil. The succubus might be a specific kind of monster "type" but she is also an archetype, so other kinds of similarly beautiful and seductive female monsters can be 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.[3] 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.

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 1941 film *The Maltese Falcon*, but encompasses any kind of dangerous, deceptive, seductive, self-serving woman who tempts and uses the male protagonist for her own gain (Doane, 1991). She often initially presents herself as a victimized damsel only to reveal her true deceptive, cruel, and violent nature as she betrays (and even sometimes tries to murder) the protagonist after manipulating him with her sexual desirability (Doane, 1991). 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 *Monster Manual* is an encyclopedic collection of monsters for use in the highly influential, immensely popular, and long-running *Dungeons & Dragons* (hereafter *D&D*) fantasy tabletop role-playing game. Originally written by the game's creator Gary Gygax and first published in 1977, the *Monster Manual* provides illustrations, descriptions, and statistical information for a wide array of monstrous creatures intended for

players, especially the game's "Dungeon Master" who plans and facilitates/runs the play session, to use during game preparation and play. In other words, it is the game's bestiary—what my co-author Aaron Trammell and I have referred to as a "ludic bestiary" in previous work (Stang & Trammell, 2020). Ludic bestiaries serve a similar function to the medieval bestiary in that they seek to categorize and classify certain beings and bodies as nonhuman and/or monstrous others, contrasting them with normative (male, and usually white) humanity (Hassig, 2000). In other words, the design of the bestiary produces abject bodies, even incorporating morality in terms of labelling the monsters "evil." As Debra Hassig (2000) has described, the medieval bestiary was used as a mechanism for policing sexual behaviour, and the allegories within would compare women to animals and associate animals (and unchaste women) with an unkempt, lustful sexuality (p. 72). At the same time, even for a chaste woman, her gender means she is never truly free of the connotations of bestiality and sexuality described within the bestiary.

The *Monster Manual* is a bestiary, both in how it was envisioned and designed by Gygax and in how it has been viewed and utilized by players. Along with unique monster designs, the *Monster Manual* draws from and adapts monsters from global mythologies, folklore, speculative fiction, and popular culture and so could be considered the only contemporary form of the bestiary. Švelch (2023) notes that "the *D&D* publications were arguably the first in history to describe such a wide range of monsters in such detail, surpassing the bestiaries and demonologies of yore and becoming a pinnacle of contained monstrosity" (p. 43). As Trammell and I have written previously, the influence of the game and its bestiary is important to consider in relation to how abjection-as-oppression is circulated within popular culture, and a text like the *Monster Manual* reveals much about its creator's ideologies: "as myth … the bestiary nests within the shadowy edges of popular culture and emerges through strange and telling corridors, alleyways, and legends. It emerges as the beating heart of *D&D* to reveal true north on Gygax's moral compass" (Stang &

Trammell, 2020, p. 735).[4] For Gygax, every being encountered by players could be considered a monster until otherwise identified and so not all the creatures in the *Monster Manual* are evil; however, most of them are what he described as "a horrible or wicked creature of some sort" (Gygax, 1979a, p. 5). Importantly, Gygax discouraged players from playing as monsters and the game was explicitly designed for them to only play as either humans or the humanoid and traditionally heroic fantasy races.[5] As he wrote in the *Dungeon Masters Guide*, "the game is heavily weighted towards mankind" and "is unquestionably 'humanocentric'" (Gygax, 1979b, p. 21). Although he acknowledged that "men are the worst monsters," he affirmed that "in co-operation men bring ruin upon monsterdom" (Gygax, 1979b, p. 21).

The emphasis on *men* and *man*kind is telling because, as with traditional medieval bestiaries, women are dehumanized in the world of *D&D* by being symbolically represented in the *Monster Manual* in the form of hags, sirens, banshees, medusas, and so on. As such, they are designed in the *Monster Manual* to reproduce various misogynist tropes over the course of the game. The *Monster Manual* and other instructional resources like the *Player's Handbook* are intended to provide scaffolding for players to construct a game world, and so can be read to understand the ideologies underpinning and reinforced by the game. However, because this is a tabletop role-playing game, it is performative (played live with others, usually in a shared physical space), so everything is theoretically negotiable, meaning that the harmful misogyny (and racism) in the game's core texts can be played up or down on a group-by-group basis. That said, the game's basic design is like almost all role-playing games, analog or digital that followed *D&D*'s formula—players are encouraged to enact a power fantasy by fighting countless monsters, looting their corpses, levelling up, and then seeking new quests.

The succubus has been a monster in *D&D* since its beginning: the 1979 publication of the *Monster Manual* includes a hand-drawn picture of a naked woman with bat wings, horns, and fangs, striking a seductive pose (Fig. 2.1). 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" (Gygax, 1979a, p. 18). Her true character is presumably evil, given that her moral alignment is "chaotic evil,"[6] a detail that connects her to common misogynistic framings of women as both evil and chaotic that stem from antiquity.[7] 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 to dehumanize and therefore justify the oppression, exclusion, and persecution of others (see Bertman, 2009). 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 the 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 (Kristeva, 1982; Hassig, 2000; Stang & Trammell, 2020).

Succubus

Succubus



FREQUENCY: *Rare*
NO. APPEARING: *1*
ARMOR CLASS: *0*
MOVE: *12"/18"*
HIT DICE: *6*
% IN LAIR: *5%*
TREASURE TYPE: *I, Q*
NO. OF ATTACKS: *2*
DAMAGE/ATTACK: *1-3/1-3*
SPECIAL ATTACKS: *energy drain*
SPECIAL DEFENSES: *+1 or better weapon to hit*
MAGIC RESISTANCE: *70%*
INTELLIGENCE: *Exceptional*
ALIGNMENT: *Chaotic evil*
SIZE: *M (6' tall)*
PSIONIC ABILITY: *200*
Attack/Defense Modes: *D/G, I*

These female demons are usually not found in numbers, for they prefer to act alone. 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. Succubi cannot be harmed by any sort of normal weaponry. Succubus can *cause darkness* in a 5' radius. The kiss of the succubus drains the victim of one energy level, and all succubi are able to perform any one of the following feats at will: Become ethereal (as if using the oil of that name), *charm person*, *ESP*, *clairaudience*, *suggestion* (as the spell), *shape change* (to any humanoid form of approximately their own height and weight only), or *gate* in a type IV (70% chance), type VI (25%), or one of the lords or princes (5% chance) — there is only a 40% chance of such a gate opening, however.

Succubi rule lower demons through wit and threat.

Fig. 2.1 The succubus from the 1979 *Monster Manual* 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 (Fig. 2.2). 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*. 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. The message that they corrupt their victims—encouraging them to give in to their "darkest desires, indulge in taboos, and feed forbidden appetites"—also recalls homophobic and transphobic discourse that frames gayness or transness as a corruption or contagion and (queer) sexual desire as "dark, indulgent, and forbidden."

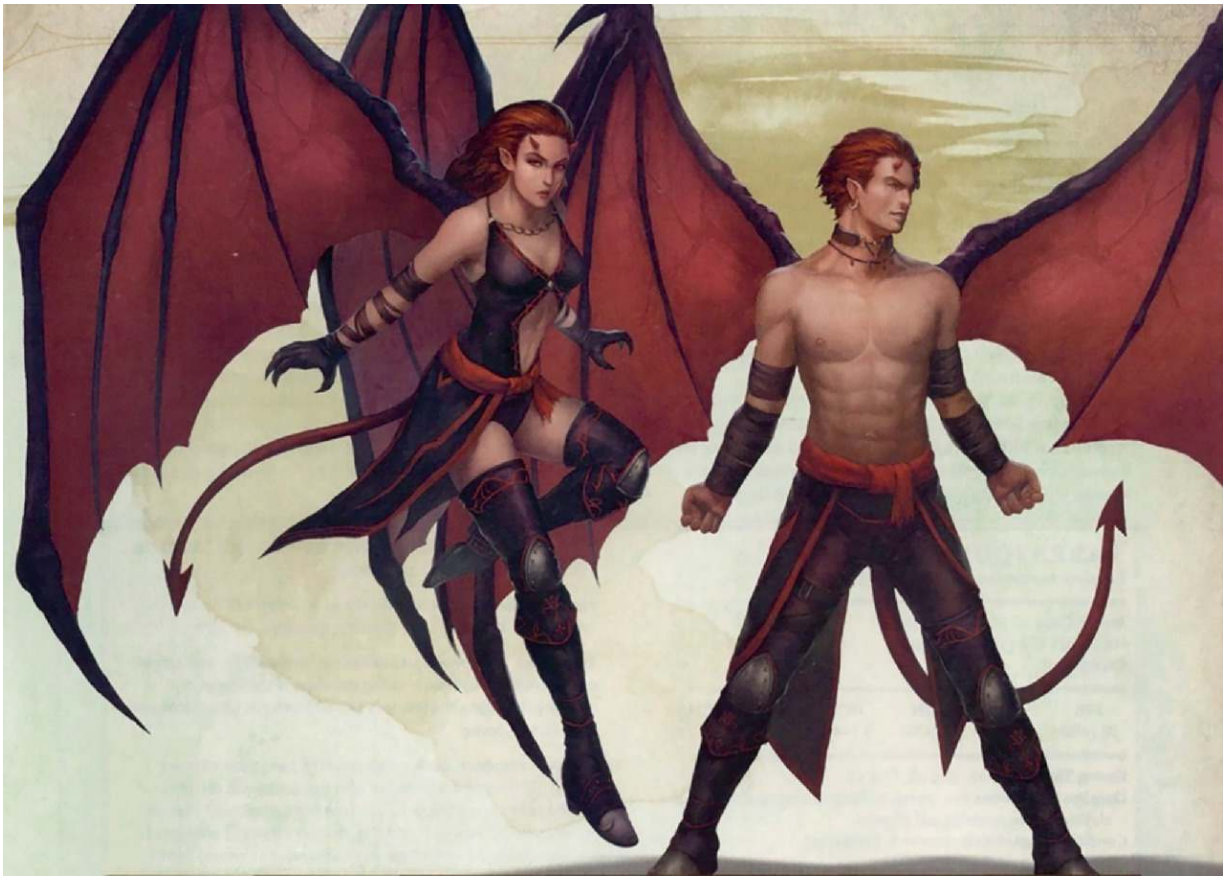


Fig. 2.2 The male and female versions of the succubus from the 5th edition *Monster Manual* (Perkins, 2014) for *Dungeons & Dragons*

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 Sullivan, 2000). 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). In a special issue of the journal *Transgender Studies Quarterly* focused on the keyword "monster," Anson Koch-Rein (2014) writes that the monster is often the metaphor of choice in transphobic discourse, "circulating as metaphoric violence against trans* people." The succubus re-envisioned as a gender-fluid or gender-bending monster that preys on both male and female victims, categorized as a "demon" and classified with physical statistics, abilities, and weaknesses in a bestiary alongside other kinds of humanoid and nonhumanoid

monstrosities designed to be confronted and murdered speaks to the sexual and gender-based violence directed at trans bodies in popular discourse, media, and medical science. While the monster is certainly an ambiguous figure—sometimes reclaimed by trans activists and used to explore the fraught experience of dysphoria, alienation, and trans embodiment, such as Susan Stryker's foundational piece "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage" (1994)—in this case, it is clearly designed to evoke fear and anxiety around sexuality and gender (also in association with kink and BDSM communities), thereby demonstrating how ludic monstrosity is connected to misogynistic, queerphobic, and transphobic discourse—even if that connection was unintentional. As I discuss further below, the connection between perceived sexual predation and transness is not unusual in the design of the hybrid or transformative monster.

The Digital Succubus: Pets and Lovers

World of Warcraft

Turning to digital games, succubi are unsurprisingly featured in several fantasy role-playing games, as many developers were either directly inspired by or drew on tropes established in *D&D*[8] or designed enemies based on well-known mythological monsters. In the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) *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. 2.3). 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."[9] 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.*



Fig. 2.3 Screenshot of a succubus from *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004)

On the fan-made *WoW* wiki,[10] 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 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 an 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.[11] Both a succubus and an orc are hybrid beings, with animal aspects that dehumanize them, yet one is a playable "race" while the other is a "monster" or "demon." Is it because the succubus is a female creature, or is it because she is a sexual creature? Perhaps both. As previously mentioned, a key purpose of the medieval bestiary was to police women's sexual behaviour. 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 (Hassig, 2000, p. 72). Female monsters, therefore, function to literally dehumanize women and present their sexuality as evil, and this is made apparent in the ludic succubus in *WoW*—though of course her sexual desires are also directed at the player, who is likely presumed male regardless of the gender of the chosen player-character, and so there is an element of desire along with the dehumanization and demonization. That desire is clearly intended to be a little humorous, given the succubus's exaggerated behaviour, but it also relies on the trope of the woman as a jealous lover; idealizes the dehumanizing image of the sexy-woman-as-pet; and evokes problematic master–slave relationships, which are inherently nonconsensual given the power differential, regardless of the succubus's forwardness.

Dragon Age

Demons are important figures in the lore of BioWare's dark fantasy *Dragon Age* series (2009–2024), as they are the primary motivation for keeping the series' magic users, called mages, imprisoned, carefully monitored and controlled, and on a tight leash.[12] Mages—people born with inherent magical ability—risk being possessed and controlled by demons and becoming "abominations." Demons inhabit an ethereal spirit/dream realm called the Fade with which mages are particularly connected. There are several types of demons who embody aspects similar to the Seven Deadly Sins: Rage, Envy, Sloth, Hunger, Fear, Terror,

Despair, Pride, and Desire. While demons ostensibly do not have genders and can shapeshift at will while within the Fade, Desire Demons appear in the first two games—*Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare, 2009) and *Dragon Age II* (BioWare, 2011)—as conventionally attractive naked or mostly naked women, except if they have already possessed a host. They are the only demon explicitly presented as female, whereas most other demons have more masculine-appearing or less humanoid bodies and are voiced by male actors. That the concept of "desire" should be represented by an attractive naked woman reinforces the idea that these games were written and designed with an assumed heterosexual male player in mind and given that the game's development was dominated by male writers, artists, and programmers, the portrayal of the Desire Demon is perhaps unsurprising.

Desire Demons resemble the succubi in *World of Warcraft* in that they have purple skin, large horns, claws, and tails, wear barely any clothing, and are also shown stroking their own bodies, including their naked breasts. Desire Demons also speak with a low, sultry voice familiar to popular culture portrayals of the *femme fatale*, though with the unsettling effect of having a deep, growling voice at the same time; and it is even possible to have sex with one, depending on player choices—something that will be repeated with the succubi in *The Witcher 3*, discussed shortly.

Desire Demons corrupt and control minds by offering and embodying their victim's deepest desires. Players can converse with a limited number of these demons throughout the series, and one Desire Demon explains, "I am desire. Whatever you creatures of the living world want, I seek to provide. Lust, power, greed… these are my province." After a successful intimidation of this specific Desire Demon, the player can choose for her to give them "pleasure"—effectively coercing her into sex with the threat of violence—and she agrees: "let me show you what it means to touch the face of desire, creature. It is something you shall not soon forget." She walks up to the player-character (who can be male or female) and begins kissing him/her, as

the camera pans down her body, showing the player-character's hand reaching around to her buttocks. It fades to black with the sound of kissing. This encounter reinforces the Desire Demon's positioning as a sexual object.

Although the player can choose to murder every Desire Demon they encounter, the demons do not see themselves as evil. One of the first Desire Demon players can converse with is giving a male Templar the illusion of a loving wife and family. She defends her actions, explaining that she "saw his loneliness and longing for a family that loved him" and "no one else would have known his heart." Although the player-character can accuse her of making the Templar into her slave, she explains that their relationship is more complicated than that: "I fulfil his dreams, I grant him all his desires. Is he my slave or am I his? We are partners. I give him what no one else can, and through him I experience what it is to be mortal." She asks the player-character to just leave them alone, and if the player agrees then she and the Templar disappear together, but if the player refuses then she bewitches the Templar into defending her. The player must then fight and kill both the Desire Demon and the Templar—there is no way to save him. While this could be interpreted as the game suggesting that it would have been better to let the demon go, players may still feel like they made the right choice as it removes one Desire Demon from the world. In video games the defeat of the succubus is a way to regain masculinist control and punish feminine transgression, regardless of the gender of the player-character or player. That desire should be represented by a beautiful naked woman who tricks and possesses others, shapeshifts, and drains her victims' life force reinforces the association between women—especially conventionally attractive and sexually active women—and lust, predatory sexuality, manipulation, and deception. While the player can choose to let some (but not all) of the Desire Demons encountered go, their portrayal reinforces negative stereotypes about women and their behaviour.

Yet, despite their feminine appearance, Desire Demons are genderless shapeshifters just like the succubi in *D&D*. While this is

mostly ignored in the first two games, in the third game, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014), players encounter a male-appearing Desire Demon named Imshael though he objects to being labelled a Desire Demon and prefers to identify as a "Choice Spirit." He explains this preference by noting that "everyone has desires. Not everyone makes the choice to act upon them" (World of Thedas Vol. 2, p. 279). When confronted, he attempts to bribe the player-character with virgins, riches, or power and the player can choose to accept the reward (though he never delivers on the promise of virgins) or fight and kill him. If the player chooses to fight him, Imshael transforms into several different kinds of demons (a Fear Demon, a Rage Demon, and a Pride Demon) throughout the battle. While it is interesting to note that a male-appearing Desire Demon is present in the series, it is also important to emphasize that he is in no way the "equivalent" of the female/feminine versions from previous games. Namely, he appears as a normative white man, at least until he transforms into various demons (never a Desire Demon though, only the male-coded ones)—he is not purple-skinned or naked, does not speak with a sultry voice, nor is he portrayed stroking himself or in any kind of romantic or lustful context. While he offers the player-character virgins, he does not offer himself up as a sexual partner. Indeed, his insistence on representing "choice" rather than "desire" reflects his non-sexualized male appearance ensuring that desire remains positioned as something sexual, sensual, seductive, and, of course, feminine.[13]

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt[14]

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, 2020, p. 14). 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. 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 monsters 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 images and descriptions of the monsters included in a 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. While most monsters in the series are either gender neutral/ambiguous or male-coded, there are a considerable number of female-coded and all-female monsters and monstrous beings.[15] Succubi in this series are conventionally attractive women with horns and goat's legs who wear revealing clothing or nothing at all and are generally covered in spiral markings or tattoos—thereby subtly racializing them by evoking tribal aesthetics—though their beauty is not enough to keep them from being called "hoofed hags" in *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* (CD Projekt Red, 2011). Specifically, a notorious womanizer (and fan favourite, to no one's surprise) 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 monsters: they are

referred to with misogynistic labels like "hag" (a nasty, fraught term we will return to in Part 3 of this book) but having sex with them is still considered an appealing prospect.

According to *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*'s (CD 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. 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*, the player can even choose to have Geralt sleep with a succubus who 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.

Sirens and Vampires: "A Monster in a Beautiful Woman's Body"

Ample breasts and a pretty face are not enough to save all monsters. For example, the siren is another sapient species of conventionally attractive women with animal body parts in *The Witcher* series, 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. 2.4). This line, buried in the game's bestiary, reveals much about the sirens, perhaps even giving them a justification for

their violent aggression towards men. This is perhaps unsurprising, after all, as Sady Doyle (2019) has pointed out, "fantasies about violent women usually conceal realities about violent men" (p. xxii).

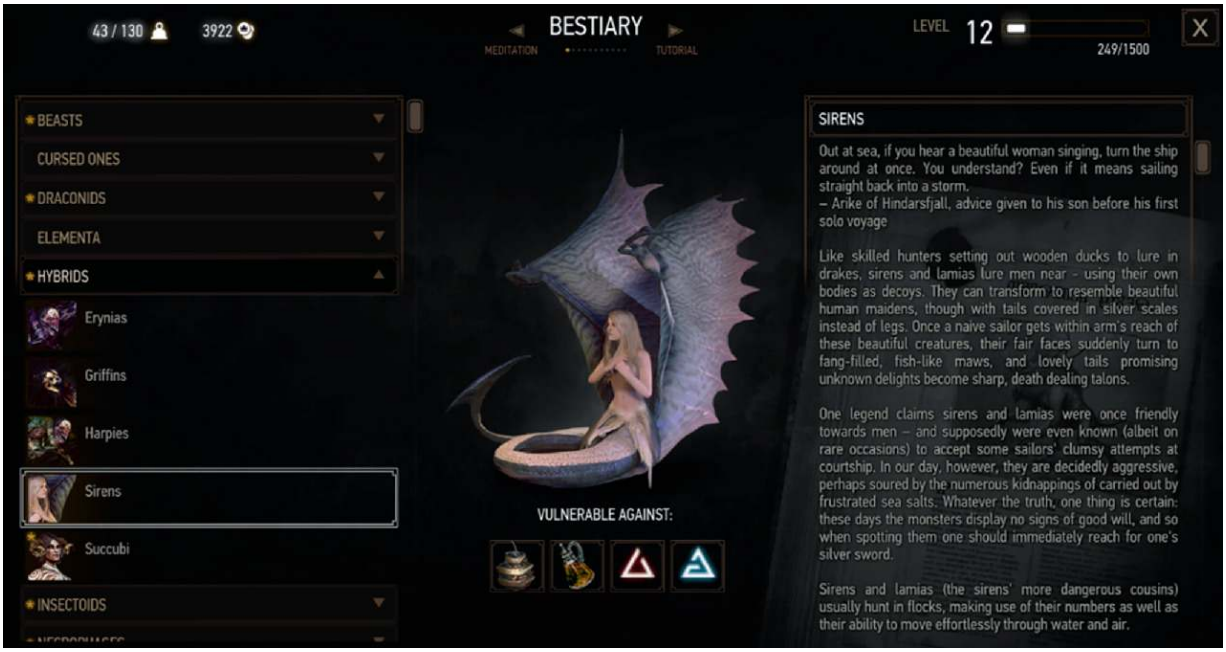


Fig. 2.4 Screenshot of the bestiary entry for sirens from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015). Note how they are categorized as "hybrid" monsters alongside succubi, but they are not treated with mercy or sympathy

Another subtle line buried in this bestiary entry, that they use "their own bodies as decoys," is also 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. As she notes:

> 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.

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. Like any mono-gendered species that seems to reproduce parthenogenetically, the sirens can be read as queer, and since they live together in protective, intimate communities ostracized from the rest of society, they lend themselves well to a feminist interpretation of emancipatory, non-normative, queer kinship (see Bradway & Freeman, 2022; Freeman, 2007). A monstrous-feminine kinship that violently rejects humanity (represented by violent, violating, heteronormative masculinity) in order to protect itself and centralize nonhuman (posthuman?) femininity and queer intimacy. This aligns with Tyler Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman's (2022) articulation of "kinship as an ideology, a material relation, an affective structure, and a narrative frame for conceiving, organizing, and living relationality in the contemporary moment" (p. 2).

Yet because these sirens are imagined and designed by men to be both sexualized and dehumanized, placed in a bestiary that classifies and categorizes them as "Hybrids" alongside creatures like griffins, and exist only to be slaughtered by a male protagonist, any feminist readings and imaginings of these creatures and their communities must be done outside of and in opposition to the game's text and paratexts. The game itself leaves no room for mercy or sympathy for the siren.

There is no in-game opportunity to take the siren's side or listen to her perspective. Instead, the game encourages the player to immediately reach for their sword once they have spotted a siren, recommending that the player damage their fin-like wings so they fall to the ground where they are vulnerable and defenceless. A player could choose to avoid swarms of sirens and decline all contracts and side quests that involve hunting or otherwise harming sirens, but at least one siren must be killed in order to complete the game. During the main quest "The Sunstone," Geralt enters an Ancient Crypt with the sorceress Philippa. A siren attacks them as they go deeper into the cave, screeching words in an unknown language, presumably her native tongue. Geralt asks Philippa what she said, and Philippa wryly responds with "you're not her type." Although Phillipa can understand the siren's language, she still assists Geralt in murdering her.

Threatened sirens, especially those who have been grounded, 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 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.

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. Throughout their literary and cinematic existence, vampires have been sexualized, gendered monsters, embodying cultural anxieties around class, homosexuality, and female empowerment. In cinematic adaptations of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the vampires often follow the gender hierarchy established within the novel. As film theorist Robin Wood (1983) has discussed, male vampires like Dracula are often portrayed as stylish, refined, seductive, and powerful, whereas female vampires, like Dracula's companions and the female vampire Lucy, are portrayed as weaker and more emotional. Dracula and the male vampires designed in homage to him prey on everyone, whereas female vampires, modelled after Lucy, have traditionally preyed on other women and children (Wood, 1983; Zimmerman, 1981). This hierarchy helps to negate the potential danger of the female vampire as a penetrative, phallic monster: as a lesbian or a child-eater, the female vampire is less of a threat to men who fear penetration by a more powerful woman. Female vampires do attack Geralt, but otherwise this gendered vampire hierarchy is upheld in *The Witcher* series: "higher vampires" are highly intelligent and powerful creatures—Geralt even befriends one of them—but the only female higher vampire Geralt

encounters, Orianna, is in *The Witcher 3*, featured in the downloadable content entitled *Blood and Wine* (CD Projekt RED, 2016). Orianna owns an orphanage full of children who she uses as her personal blood supply when her thirst overtakes her, though she also takes care of them. Orianna is presented as simultaneously more monstrous and weaker than her fellow vampires because she preys exclusively on children. Although Geralt does not kill her in the game, he swears he will one day come back for her, and in the acclaimed promotional trailer for *The Witcher 3*, entitled "A Night to Remember," Orianna is fought and killed by Geralt.[16]

Other than Orianna, female vampires in the series are almost exclusively encountered as bruxae, who are weaker and more animalistic versions of the typically male "Higher Vampires." Like the sirens, the bruxae do not speak, at least to Geralt, and so come across as less intelligent or less worthy of sympathy than Higher Vampires or creatures like succubi as well. *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. 2.5). Female vampires are both predatory and sexual, and, given their tendency to "drain" their victims, vampires can be interpreted as the same kind of manifestation of the monstrous-feminine as the succubus or the siren.



Fig. 2.5 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.[17] 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 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: Fetishes and Horrors

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 (Okayado, 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.[18] 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). This contradiction, embodied so clearly by the dominatrix figure, has long been a topic of discussion by feminist scholars interested in exploring how women can be simultaneously sexualization, fetishized, and empowered.[19] Suntzu argues that the succubus embodies the stereotype of the dominatrix but also what she calls the "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, in this specific case, "demon" or "monster."

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 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. On the other hand, while many 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") others break free from the "sexy woman with bat wings" trope in favour of a more horrific design.

God of War

In *God of War: Ascension* (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). 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).

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 both the sexualization of female characters and 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 their pleasure at the creation of an abject, grotesque, incongruous female body.[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. Games take this one step further by forcing players to confront, fight, and defeat the object of their horror and revulsion, rewarding them for doing so. Empusa is not the only succubus-style creature in the *God of War* series, as each installment features its own kinds of sirens as well—unsurprising given that it is inspired by Greek mythology and has the player-character killing countless mythological Greek gods and monsters. In the first game, the player-character must follow the sound of the Desert Sirens' song in order to kill all three of them to proceed in the game. They first appear as young women with low-cut tops, exposed breasts, and long ragged dresses, singing softly and mournfully to themselves with their long dark hair covering their faces. Once Kratos approaches, they attack him, revealing that their faces are entirely composed of a huge, fanged mouth—no eyes or nose. In *God of War II* Siren Widows appear as floating women, naked from the waist up, with long claws and blood splattered, ragged dresses. Like the Desert Sirens, they have nothing on their faces but huge fanged mouths. In *God of War III*, Siren Seductresses have red dresses that cover one breast and veils hiding part of their faces, though they also have huge, gaping, fanged mouths and possibly no other features. In *Ascension,* Siren Sibyls are half naked flying women, with long fingers and claws and ragged dresses but this time with eyes and a nose. Their mouths seem to have been sliced in each corner to make them larger, and they have countless sharp teeth.

Just like the sirens and bruxae in *The Witcher 3*, *God of War*'s sirens have the ability to shriek, which can stun and damage Kratos, and viciously attack him with both their fangs and claws. The sirens in the *God of War* series resemble those in *The Witcher 3* in that they are an all-female species of flying women with monstrous forms involving huge, fanged mouths. Yet unlike *The Witcher*'s versions, these creatures do not transform into monstrosities, and their monstrosity is entirely focused on their faces. In this sense, these sirens speak to the objectifying division between a woman's body and her face as designed for the male gaze—while the sirens' exposed breasts sexualize them, their faces render them horrific. Their hybridity takes the form of a conventionally attractive woman's body combined with a monstrous face with an animalistic, predatory, shark-like mouth. This aspect is of particular symbolic importance, as it evokes the infamous—and disturbingly ubiquitous—myth of the *vagina dentata*, or "toothed vagina," which will be discussed further in the following chapter.

The Succubus as Demon

The incongruous and disturbing combination of sexualized and repulsive or frightening elements exemplified in Empusa or the sirens 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. In some games, like *WoW* or *Dragon Age*, demons are effectively another kind of fantasy "race," but other games adopt a more religious framing in which a succubus 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)—two 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. 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. In the next chapter, I discuss another leader of *Diablo III*'s succubi, Cydaea, Maiden of Lust, as an example of a combination of the succubus archetype and the spider woman trope.

Continuing with the religious theme, 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 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. 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. ("Temptress," n.d.)

This wiki entry was likely written by a fan and reveals much about how players interpret the horror of the Temptresses as distinctly sexual and biologically essentialist.

The trope of a woman's unexpected and frighteningly monstrous "true" form being revealed through a surprising and unpleasant encounter can be read as both misogynistic and transphobic. This monster type can be read as a representation of the misogynistic trope of woman as *femme fatale* deceiver—she disguises herself as a "normal" (read: "innocent") woman to seduce her male victims and then kills/devours them. 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 a trans woman who "passes" fully but does not have the normative female genitalia her male lover was expecting—the "bait-and-switch" or "trap." 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. Additionally, the fact that the Temptress's body appears to be that of 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 through an exaggerated and horrific portrayal—what the writer of the above wiki quote unfortunately sees as "a manifestation of the corruption in both types of human genitalia."

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. This is a familiar fear: in her analysis of John Carpenter's *The Thing*, Creed (1993) 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" (pp. 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.

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, and she 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. While she is not as clearly hybrid as the other kinds of monsters discussed so far, her size renders her monstrous and her corpse-like appearance underscores her abjection. Boundary crossing and categorical breakdown are hallmarks of the abject and the abject monster signifies the boundary between the human and the nonhuman. In this sense, a corpse-like monster literalizes the breakdown of the distinction between human and nonhuman, subject and object: "The corpse…is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). Just as a zombie could be considered a hybrid creature—part living and part dead—Cleopatra presents an abject hybridity. But unlike most portrayals of zombies, she is also sexualized. 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. 2.6).



Fig. 2.6 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.

The Madonna/Whore: "Rotten Underneath her Façade of Beauty"

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.[21] 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 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—like Cleopatra).

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, blended with both animal and human parts (such as *God of War*'s sirens—beautiful women with monstrous shark-like mouths), but is also apparent in monsters that transform from human woman into monstrous creature

as with *The Witcher 3*'s bruxae and sirens. It is also apparent with hybrid monsters whose bodies are part human woman and part animal —usually a naked woman from the waist up, with exposed breasts, and animal from the waist down, such as the spider women I discuss in the next chapter.

In other words, the ambiguous dual nature of woman is literally embodied in the succubus and her various iterations, in that her body is part alluring woman and part deadly creature. 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. 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. 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.

While these creatures might embody feminine power and point to alternative modes of being in the form of queer, non-normative, and posthuman kinships, the way they are framed, represented, and distorted within a patriarchal worldview has rendered them monstrous, evil, and deserving of death. This symbolic, representational violence done to powerful, queer, transgressive women seems to never end:

> 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.

Like Caputi, Ayers (2013) has 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 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.

The ubiquitous imagery of the evil, seductive, hybrid, monstrous woman like the succubus or the siren serves to inform women that, as Emma Vossen has lamented in her dissertation, "this game is not for you, games are not for you" and that "men are good, women an evil to be overcome" (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 [are] 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)

This idea continues in the spider women I discuss in the following chapter. While succubi, sirens, and bruxae are hybrid in various ways, with animal aspects like wings, horns, goats legs, claws, and fangs mixed with female human bodies, the spider woman has a very specific form. Like a centaur, she is a human woman from the waist up—almost always naked—but unlike a centaur, her lower half is the full body of a spider, often with the spider's fanged mouth around the area where her

human genitals should be. In this way, the spider woman takes the idea of the succubus and pushes it further into a very specific and incredibly abject—yet familiar and ubiquitous—form of the hybrid, seductive monstrous-feminine.

References

Adams, M. B. (2018). Bye, bye, Birdo: Heroic androgyny and villainous gender-variance in video games. In T. Harper, M. B. Adams, & N. Taylor (Eds.), *Queerness in play.* Springer.

Ayers, M. (2013). *Masculine shame: From succubus to the eternal feminine*. Routledge.

Bertman, S. (2009). The antisemitic origin of Michelangelo's horned Moses. *Shofar, 27*, 95–106. [https://doi.org/10.1353/sho.0.0393]

BioWare. (2009). *Dragon age: Origins.* Electronic Arts. PlayStation 3.

BioWare. (2010). *Dragon age: Origins—Awakening.* Electronic Arts. PlayStation 3.

BioWare. (2011). *Dragon age II.* Electronic Arts. PlayStation 3.

BioWare. (2014). *Dragon age: Inquisition.* Electronic Arts. PlayStation 3.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2004). *World of warcraft.* Blizzard Entertainment. Microsoft Windows.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2012). *Diablo III.* Blizzard Entertainment. Microsoft Windows.

Bradway, T., & Freeman, E. (Eds.). (2022). *Queer kinship: Race, sex, belonging, form*. Duke University Press.

Braidotti, R. (1994). *Nomadic subjects: Embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory*. Columbia University Press.

Caputi, J. (2004). *Goddesses and monsters: Women, myth, power, and popular culture.* University of Wisconsin Press.

Carvalho, D. (2009). *Woman has two faces: Re-examining Eve and Lilith in Jewish feminist thought* (Master's thesis). University of Denver. https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/115/

CD Projekt Red. (2007). *The witcher.* Atari. Microsoft Windows.

CD Projekt Red. (2011). *The witcher 2: Assassins of kings.* CD Projekt. Microsoft Windows.

CD Projekt Red. (2015). *The witcher 3: Wild hunt.* CD Projekt. Microsoft Windows.

Chion, M. (1999). *The voice in cinema*. Columbia University Press.

Creed, B. (1986). Horror and the monstrous-feminine: An imaginary abjection. *Screen, 27*(1), 44–70.

[https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/27.1.44]

Creed, B. (1993). *The monstrous-feminine: Film, feminism, psychoanalysis*. Routledge.

Creed, B. (1996). Lesbian bodies: Tribades, tomboys and tarts. In E. Grosz & E. Probyn (Eds.), *Sexy bodies: The strange carnalities of feminism* (pp. 86–103). Routledge.

Davidson, J. P. (2012). *Early modern supernatural: The dark side of European culture, 1400–1700*. Praeger.
[https://doi.org/10.5040/9798400643026]

Doane, M. A. (1991). *Femmes fatales: Feminism, film theory, psychoanalysis*. Routledge.

Doane, M. A. (1999). Film and the masquerade: Theorising the female spectator. In S. Thornham (Ed.), *Feminist film theory: A reader* (pp. 131–145). Edinburgh University Press.

Faludi, S. (2006). *Backlash: The undeclared war against American women*. The 15th Anniversary Edition. Three Rivers Press.

Forbes, J. S. (2010). Disciplining women in contemporary discourses of sexuality. *Journal of Gender Studies, 5*(2), 177–189.
[https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.1996.9960641]

Freeman, E. (2007). Queer belongings: Kinship theory and queer theory. In G. E. Haggerty & M. McGarry (Eds.), *A companion to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer studies* (pp. 293–314). Blackwell.
[https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470690864.ch15]

Gygax, G. (1979a). *Monster manual*. TSR Games.

Gygax, G. (1979b). *Dungeon masters guide*. TSR Games.

Hassig, D. (2000). *The mark of the beast: The medieval bestiary in art, life, and literature*. Routledge.

Higgin, T. (2009). Blackless fantasy: The disappearance of race in massively multiplayer online role-playing games. *Games and Culture, 4*(1), 3–26.
[https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412008325477]

id Software. (2004). *Doom 3.* Activision. Microsoft Windows.

Kenkou Cross. (2010). *Monster girl encyclopedia vol. 1.* Seven Seas.

Koch-Rein, A. (2014). Monster. *Transgender Studies Quarterly, 1*(1–2), 134–135.
[https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2399821]

Krem *(Dragon Age)*. (n.d.). *Wikipedia.* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Krem_(Dragon_Age)

Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection*. (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). Columbia University Press.

Li-Vollmer, M., & LaPointe, M. E. (2003). Gender transgression and villainy in animated film. *The International Journal of Media and Culture, 1*(2), 89–109.

Okayado. (2012–ongoing). *Monster Musume: Everyday Life with Monster Girls* [Manga]. Tokuma Shoten.

Pellissier, H. (2012). The succubus mythology—Engineering a radical future sexy self. The Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies (IEET). https://archive.ieet.org/articles/pellissier20120619.html

Perkins, C. (2014). *Monster manual* (5th ed.). Wizards of the Coast.

Phillips, A. (2020). *Gamer trouble: Feminist confrontations in digital culture*. NYU Press.

Phillips, T. (2025, 30 January). BioWare veteran writer among those looking for work after post Dragon Age: The Veilguard downsizing. *Eurogamer*. https://www.eurogamer.net/bioware-veteran-writer-among-those-looking-for-work-afterpost-dragon-age-the-veilguard-downsizing

Putnam, A. (2015). Mean ladies: Transgendered villains in disney films. In J. Cheu (Ed.), *Diversity in Disney films: Critical essays on race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and disability* (pp. 147–162). McFarland.

San Filippo, M. (2013). *The B word: Bisexuality in contemporary film and television*. Indiana University Press.

Santa Monica Studio. (2007). *God of war II*. Sony Computer Entertainment. PlayStation 2.

Santa Monica Studio. (2010). *God of war III*. Sony Computer Entertainment. PlayStation 3.

Santa Monica Studio. (2013). *God of war: Ascension*. Sony Computer Entertainment. PlayStation 2.

Sarkeesian, A. (2016). Sinister seductress [Video]. *Feminist Frequency.* https://feministfrequency.com/video/sinister-seductress/

Schwartz, H. (2004). *Tree of souls: The mythology of Judaism*. Oxford University Press.

Stang, S. (2022). Tragic wraiths, seductive sirens, and man-eating vampires: Female monstrosity in The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt video game. In A. Luko & J. K. Wright (Eds.), *Monstrosity, identity, and music: Mediating uncanny creatures from Frankenstein to videogames* (pp. 213–232). Bloomsbury.

Stang, S., & Trammell, A. (2020). The ludic bestiary: Misogynistic tropes of female monstrosity in Dungeons & Dragons. *Games & Culture, 15*(6), 730–747. [https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019850059]

Stryker, S. (1994). My words to Victor Frankenstein above the village of Chamounix: Performing transgender rage. In S. Stryker & S. Whittle (Eds.), *The transgender studies reader* (pp. 244–256). Routledge.

Sullivan, K. E. (2000). Ed Gein and the figure of the transgendered serial killer. *Jump Cut, 43*,38–47.

https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC43folder/EdGein.html

Švelch, J. (2023). *Player vs. monster: The making and breaking of video game monstrosity*. MIT Press.

Temptress. (n.d.). *Dante's inferno wiki.* https://dantesinferno.fandom.com/wiki/Temptress

Toniolo, F. (2017). I "limiti" delle monster girls nella produzione contemporanea di manga eanime [The "limits" of monster girls in contemporary manga and anime production]. *Piano B. Arti E Culture Visive, 2*(2), 116–136.

Ussher, J. M. (2006). *Managing the monstrous feminine: Regulating the reproductive body*. Routledge.

Visceral Games. (2010). *Dante's inferno.* Electronic Arts. PlayStation 3.

Vossen, E. (2018). *On the cultural inaccessibility of gaming: Invading, creating, and reclaiming the cultural clubhouse* (Ph.D. Dissertation). University of Waterloo.

Wood, R. (1983). Burying the undead: The use and obsolescence of count Dracula. *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature, 16*(1/2), 175–187.

Young, H. (2016). *Race and popular fantasy literature: Habits of whiteness*. Routledge.

Zimmerman, B. (1981). Daughters of darkness: Lesbian vampires. *Jump Cut, 24–25*, 23–24. https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC24-25folder/LesbianVampires.html

---

Footnotes

1 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.

2 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.

3 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.

4 For a thorough look at how Gygax's positionality as a white male has influenced *D&D*, its legacy and culture, as well as hobby gaming in general, see Trammell's excellent 2023 book *The Privilege of Play*: *A History of Hobby Games, Race, and Geek Culture*.

5 As a note on terminology, up until 2022, *D&D* used the term "race" to denote different humanoid creatures players could encounter and potentially play as. Along with regular humans, players could choose to play as familiar fantasy beings like elves, dwarves, gnomes, halflings, as well as half-elves and half-orcs. Later versions of the game also allowed them to choose dragon-like humanoids called dragonborn and demonic humanoids called tieflings. Full-blooded orcs are not standard playable characters, as orcs are considered too evil, chaotic, brutal, and "savage" to be playable as heroes—one of the many racist elements of *D&D*, given how orcs are designed and described in ways that evoke both Indigenous and African tribal peoples and cultures (see Young, 2016). However, due to backlash, in 2022 Wizards of the Coast decided to move away from the term "race" for the 2024 core rulebooks and instead use the term "species" (see https://www.dndbeyond.com/posts/1393-moving-on-from-race-in-the-2024-core-rulebooks, accessed July 22, 2024). While they claim this is an attempt to be more inclusive, many of the humanoid "species" have long been highlighted as loosely veiled proxies for real-world racialized groups (see Higgin, 2009; Young, 2016), whereas humans within the game were primarily depicted as white (and, for a long time, male), thereby sending the problematic message that human = white and non-white = nonhuman. By using the term "species" instead of "race," it is clear that Wizards of the Coast wish to distance themselves from the racial connotations of these humanoid beings. However, by instead clearly delineating them as different species but not completely rewriting and redesigning their racially coded descriptions and depictions, they have actually doubled down on the messaging that non-white = nonhuman, albeit likely inadvertently. It also gives rise to a question that is key to this book: if these humanoid beings are now officially different species, why are players limited to choosing only those few options for their own characters, at least within a standard game? Why are dragonborn or tieflings worthy of identification while other intelligent,

humanoid beings, such as succubi, hags, or driders (half spider people I discuss later), considered simply evil monsters to be killed?

6 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.

7 That she is a bat-lady is interesting as well because it incorporates the cultural association of bats with evilness (which comes perhaps from their association with vampires, examples like the vampire bat, or perhaps simply because they are vectors for countless diseases, so the negative association helped/helps to keep people away from them). This is relevant and will be discussed later, as female animal-human hybrids often incorporate body parts from hated and feared (abject) creatures like snakes, spiders, and bats, whereas male animal-human hybrids are more likely to be beloved animals like horses as in the case of the centaur (an all-male species from Greek mythology).

8 For more on how *D&D* influenced the design of monsters in digital games, see Švelch (2023).

9 A full list of quotes can be found on the *WoW* Wiki entry for the Succubus, in the "Triva" section, at https://wowwiki.fandom.com/wiki/Summon_Succubus (accessed on August 25, 2023).

10 The following quotes are taken from https://wowwiki.fandom.com/wiki/Succubus (accessed on August 25, 2023).

11 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).

12 Literally, in the case of the Qunari mages (referred to as *Saarebas* meaning "dangerous thing"), who are outfitted with heavy armour, chains, leashes, as well as collars and visors. In some cases, they sew the mages' mouths shut or even cut out their tongues. They are treated like tools or weapons, ordered to use their magic whenever their keeper (essentially a non-mage master who holds the mage's leash and is a far stricter version of a Templar) desires. They are never allowed to be alone; their armour can immobilize them through a device held by their keeper and their collar

can prevent them from using their magic; and if they stray from their keeper, they are killed or must commit suicide.

13 10 years later, BioWare released another entry in the franchise, *Dragon Age: The Veilguard*, but there are no Desire Demons in that game. Perhaps they have decided to move away from this inherently problematic archetype. This might have been influenced by the increased diversity behind the game: the co-director Corinne Busche is a trans woman; one of the producers, Amber Vincent, is a woman; and the lead writer, Trick Weekes, is non-binary. Weekes is particularly interesting to note, as they also wrote several characters from *Inquisition*, including a trans man, Krem, who was the subject of much discussion when the game came out (see "Krem (*Dragon Age*)," n.d.). Weekes took over as lead writer for the franchise after David Gaider left the company in 2015. Unfortunately, they are no longer with BioWare, following the extensive downsizing of the company in 2025 by its owner and the series' publisher, Electronic Arts (Phillips, 2025).

14 Some parts of this section have been adapted from my previously published book chapter "Tragic Wraiths, Seductive Sirens, and Man-Eating Vampires: Female Monstrosity in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* Video Game" in the edited collection *Monstrosity, Identity and Music: Mediating Uncanny Creatures from Frankenstein to Videogames* (Stang, 2022b).

15 In this series, the idea of "collecting" women as "trophies" is not limited to monstrous women in the bestiary: in the first installment of *The Witcher* series (CD Projekt Red, 2007), 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.

16 Interestingly, Orianna is introduced in the trailer singing a lullaby, called the "Lullaby of Woe" (written by Marcin Przybyłowicz and Mikolai Stroinski) presumably for a monster child, perhaps a child higher vampire. The words suggest that the child should be frightened of the heartless yet brave witcher, who is on his way to chop, slice, and eat the child, leaving naught behind but "heartache and woe." This, along with some other brief segments in the game, suggest that witchers are a kind of boogeyman for monsters, and that even the most powerful kinds of monsters, like higher vampires, are afraid of witchers as professional monster slayers or, from their perspective, professional murderers. In the DLC side quest "Contract: Skellige's Most Wanted," Geralt is put on trial by a group of sapient monsters (a godling, a troll, a werewolf, and a doppler, or shapeshifter) for his crimes against monster kind. If he has shown mercy to specific sapient monsters throughout the game, such as a doppler, a godling, a werewolf, a troll, a sylvan, and a succubus, he is forgiven by all but the werewolf. Yet, regardless of how sapient, intelligent, and sympathetic they are, the bestiary entry for this side quest still refers to the monsters who put him on trial as "misguided beasts."

17 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, 1993, pp. 31–42).

18 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.*

19 In games, there is perhaps no figure who embodies this as clearly as Bayonetta, the eponymous *femme fatale* witch from the *Bayonetta* series. As Amanda Phillips (2020) has explored, like Lara Croft, fans and scholars struggle to decide if Bayonetta, who is extremely hypersexualized—along with skin-tight clothing, high heels, exaggerated proportions, and sexualized movements and stances, she literally becomes more naked as she attacks her enemies—but also queer, campy, and fights against patriarchal forces, is empowering or harmful for women. The key difference between her and a succubus is that Bayonetta is the playable protagonist rather than being framed as an inhuman monster to be slain (or penetrated in a different way) by the player.

20 This is despite the fact that the lead writer and one of the producers for the game were both women—a reminder that while these specific characters designs were created by men, women (likely) signed off on them and at least the lead writer (Marianne Krawczyk, who wrote or helped write almost all the games in the series) perhaps saw no problem with them or saw them as something that would increase sales of the game. This goes to show that the solution to these problems is not to simply throw more women into the mix, rather to challenge the archetypes themselves and highlight the misogyny inherent within them so that they are no longer as popular or accepted.

21 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.

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2026
S. Stang, *Maiden, Mother, and Crone*, Palgrave Studies in Mediating Kinship, Representation, and Difference
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-25115-2_3

3. The Spider Woman: Half *Femme Fatale*, Half *Vagina Dentata*

Sarah Stang[1] ✉
(1) Digital Humanities, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada

✉ **Sarah Stang**
Email: sstang@brocku.ca

Keywords Arachnid – Black Widow – Mythology – Hybridity – Sexualization – *Femme Fatale* – Lolth

> 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)

As discussed in the previous chapter, the hybridity of monsters renders them literal embodiments of ambiguity, categorical breakdown, liminality, and transgression. They resist categorization (except as "Hybrids" as in *The Witcher 3*'s bestiary) and combine incongruous human and nonhuman animal parts resulting in a literally dehumanizing portrayal. This hybridity, liminality, and ambiguity result

in simultaneous fascination/attraction and fear/revulsion—what Kristeva has discussed as the abject (1982), what Carroll has called the paradox of horror (1990), and, in its specifically gendered form, what Creed has identified as the monstrous-feminine (1993). Nowhere is the combination of fear and fascination, attraction and repulsion, monstrosity and femininity as apparent as in the body of the hybrid female monster. As a trope, or perhaps an archetype, she is a conventionally attractive young woman but with animal body parts. The succubi and sirens in *The Witcher* series, for example, have goat legs and fish tails, horns and wings. This chapter focuses on a very specific and remarkably ubiquitous form of hybrid female monster, one that highlights the disconnect between the "upper half" (the human, the pure, the attractive) and "lower half" (the animal, the impure, the shameful) of the human body. Specifically, this chapter focuses on what I call the "spider woman," a female monster who is half-woman, half-spider, though sometimes she first appears as a normative human woman who then transforms into this hybrid form. In a troubled and contradictory approach, these games portray female bodies as simultaneously sexualized and desirable and monstrous and horrific: the spider woman's top half is a conventionally attractive, often naked woman, and her bottom half is a giant, monstrous spider, with a gaping, fanged mouth placed where her vulva would normally be. As with the games discussed in the previous chapter, the spider women is presented as a monstrous enemy to be fought and slain—often centralized as a "boss battle." In this way, the games discussed here continue to 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.

While this kind of monstrous woman fits in with the hybrid animal-human succubus archetype discussed in the previous chapter, she is such a ubiquitous monster/enemy type in games that she needs an entire chapter devoted to her. In addition, the fact that she is half spider

is important to unpack as they are a particularly abject creature, commonly feared and hated around the world, with an estimated 6% of people suffering from full-blown arachnophobia (Frynta et al., 2021). Spiders are commonly featured as threatening monsters in media (especially giant ones, as in films like *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, 2005's *King Kong*, *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, and in countless video games).[1] While other kinds of hybrid mythological creatures like centaurs, satyrs, and sirens/mermaids certainly have nonhuman lower halves—horses, goat legs, and fish tails, respectively—these are not particularly abject or horrific animals. Later in the chapter I also discuss some examples of less hybrid spider-like women, designed with other kinds of spidery appendages or aesthetic attributes. However, as with the previous chapter, the connections between the spider woman, the succubus, the *femme fatale,* the goddess, and the abject monstrous-feminine will be explored throughout.

The Spider Woman as Literal Black Widow

The spider is a key element to this story, as there have been many mythological female figures who spin and weave, and so are associated with arachnids, as well as many mythological female monsters with nonhuman lower halves. The word arachnid itself comes from the Greek myth of Arachne, a woman who was so talented at weaving that she challenged the goddess Athena to a contest. Athena was defeated, and in her anger, she turned Arachne into a spider, and indeed the word for spider in Greek is *arachne*. Although the myth ends there, in popular media she often appears as a monstrous spider woman rather than just a spider. Arachne's most famous appearance is in Gustave Doré's illustration for the 1861 edition of Dante's *Purgatorio*, in which she is depicted as a naked human woman with eight spider legs—a hybrid form that set the stage for most visual depictions of spider women (Fig. 3.1).

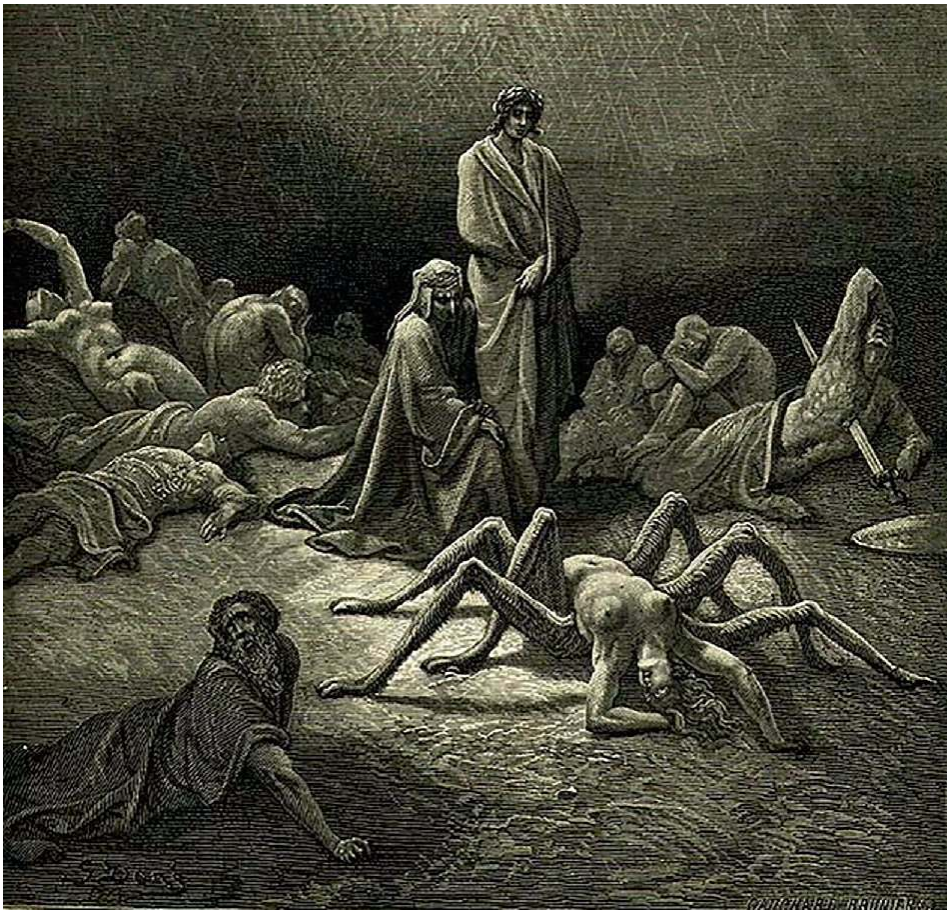


Fig. 3.1 *Arachne* by Gustave Doré in Dante's *Purgatorio* (*Source*: https://www.worldofdante.org/gallery_dore.html)

Greek mythology is a popular source of inspiration for the design of monsters, and the connection to the myth of Arachne is most evident in the *Castlevania* series, which features a species of spider women that are called "Arachne." In *Castlevania* for the N64 (Konami, 1999a, 1999b), the Arachne is introduced using the previously discussed "bait-and-switch" trope in which a woman initially appears to be attractive but is then revealed to be monstrous. As the *Castlevania* Wiki states:

> After discovering the lifeless body of a villager who drowned in poisonous water, the protagonist soon arrives to another river shore where they come across what appears to be a beautiful maiden taking a bath in the noxious waters. Looks can be deceiving, though, and as the lovely figure emerges from the

> water, her true nature is revealed: a horrifying monster that features the torso of a woman from the waist up and the repulsive body of a giant tarantula from the waist down. ("Arachne," n.d.)

Note the emphasis that "looks can be deceiving" and that the Arachne's "true nature is revealed" as "a horrifying monster." That the spider woman is presented using a surprising and unpleasant reveal of her "true" form—a woman with a highly unexpected and frighteningly monstrous lower half, see Fig. 3.2—speaks to the misogynistic fear of women as deceptive and untrustworthy, presenting or disguising themselves as the Madonna, or innocent damsel-in-distress, only to later be revealed as the Whore, or the deadly *femme fatale*.



Fig. 3.2 Promotional art of the Arachne from *Castlevania* (1999) (*Source* https://castlevania.fandom.com/wiki/Arachne)

The Arachne enemy type is designed in a similar way in subsequent installments, including *Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow* (Konami, 2003), though this kind of Arachne is not presented with a surprise reveal but is instead given only a brief and rather banal description: "This beast appears to be part woman, part spider." In *Castlevania: Order of Ecclesia* (Konami, 2008) the Arachne enemies have a similar design, but they are rendered even more abject because when the player kills them, their abdomens burst open, releasing a swarm of tiny spiderlings—a form of monstrous pregnancy I will revisit in Part 2 of this book. Their description reads: "A female spider. Her bodily fluids are highly toxic." The first part of this description completely erases the spider woman's humanity, simply referring to her as a female spider even though half of her is clearly human or humanoid (although her skin is purple in this version, making her appear less human). The second sentence of the description emphasizes the spider woman's positioning as both abject and sexually threatening—a poisonous *femme fatale* whose very body and the fluids therein are a threat.

The spider woman could be read as particularly unsubtle version of the *femme fatale*—she disguises herself as a "normal" woman to seduce her male victims and then devours them—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.[2] It is also the name of a perk in the game *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008), represented by a cartoonish image of an evil-looking woman with six arms standing over a male corpse. This perk allows female player-characters to do more damage to male enemies and unlocks special, sexual dialogue options while conversing with male characters.

Perhaps because of the black widow, there exists a familiar association between the female spider and deadly seduction or

predatory lust. This is exemplified in *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* (Starbreeze Studios, 2013), a game in which the player controls two brothers who have lost their mother and now have a sick and dying father they must save. At a certain point in their journey, they rescue a young woman who seems to have been captured and is going to be sacrificed by a tribe of monstrous gnomes. This woman, simply called The Lady, then seduces the older brother and leads him to her lair. There, she transforms into a half-woman, half-spider monster, imprisons both brothers in her web, and kills the older brother in her death throws after he tears off her legs one by one. This is a shockingly violent and misogynistic segment in a game that otherwise offers what critics have hailed as "a beautiful and sometimes darkly mature echo of the fairytales that taught us about the world as children" (Sliva, 2013) that meditates on themes such as family bonds, loss, and grief and was nominated for "Best Family Game" at the 2014 BAFTA Games Awards. Even in something inspired by fairy tales and marketed as a family game involves women presented as either dead, saintly mothers or as seductive, sexualized monsters.

Characters who initially appear or disguise themselves as beautiful women before revealing their true monstrous form (or having it forcefully revealed) are common popular culture manifestations of the monstrous-feminine. Along with the game examples discussed in the previous chapter, this is seen in film and television as well. For example, the predatory female alien-human hybrid disguised as a seductive woman in the 1995 film *Species* and the alien spider monster Greta in the "Beyond the Aquila Rift" episode of *Love, Death + Robots* from 2016. This trope reinforces the misogynistic message that women are deceitful, untrustworthy, and dangerous—and, if they threaten men, deserving of violent death. This predatory woman will deceive her victim, lure him in, imprison him in her web, take what she wants from him, and then eat him. Since they are spiders, they will penetrate him with their fangs and drain him dry, just like vampires or succubi. There will be nothing left of him but a dried-up husk.

This is a familiar and seemingly global misogynistic fear. For example, in Japanese mythology, the *Jorōgumo*, or "prostitute spider"/"whore spider," is a *yōkai* (spirit/monster) that can transform into a beautiful, seductive woman to lure men in before devouring them (Reider, 2013), and it should be noted that while the Arachne in *Castlevania* are named after the figure from Greek mythology, it is a Japanese series, created and published by Konami. The Jorogumo is also a monster type from *Pathfinder*, a tabletop role-playing game heavily inspired by *D&D.* Not only is this trope found across cultures, it is also found across media forms and genres. It is even found in children's media: the black widow character of Darlene in the "Roadside Attraction" episode of the 2015 children's show *Gravity Falls* first appears as a beautiful woman to seduce her male victims and then transforms into a spider woman before devouring them.[3]

Spider Mothers and the *Vagina Dentata*

The video game association between the spider woman and predatory lust is again exemplified in Cydaea, Maiden of Lust from *Diablo III* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2012).[4] She is a consort of the Lord of Sin and rules over the succubi discussed in the previous chapter, whom she refers to as her "daughters," again associating her with lust and seduction but also making her a maternal figure. 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." A non-player-character from the game describes her as simultaneously beautiful and hideous to look at, thereby also voicing the disturbing and abject ambiguity inherent in her design. Although she self-identifies as a mother to the succubi, she does not seem to care for them as she tells the player to "play" with them (i.e. fight them) so that she can recuperate. The nature of her relationship to the previously discussed Queen of the Succubi is left unexplained.

The positioning of female monsters as simultaneously sexualized and maternal speaks to the fluidity between the archetypes of the Maiden, Mother, and Crone, but that connection is particularly common with the spider woman. Along with Cydaea being the mother of succubi, the Vagary in *Doom 3* (id Software, 2004)—another spider woman and the only identifiably female creature in the game—is visibly pregnant. She is the result of the "sexy" + "gross" = "creepy" design principle used by the (male) developers, as discussed by Sarkeesian (2016). Her translucent abdomen carries a foetus, which the game's Wiki ("Vagary," n.d.) identifies as a "malformed Mancubus fetus," a Mancubus being a large elephant-humanoid hybrid monster. The Vagary also appears with swarms of "Trites," dog-sized spider demons, and the Wiki refers to the Vagary as their "mother" ("Vagary," n.d.). While the game itself does not make this connection, the assumption that she is their mother could be because of the ubiquity of the female spider monster who attacks with swarms of spiderling offspring in games.

For example, in *Castlevania: Legacy of Darkness* (Konami, 1999a, 1999b), the boss Queen Algenie is another spider woman who adheres to this spider-mother-with-spiderlings trope. For the first part of the battle against her, she is attached to a large egg sac on the wall from which she attacks the player-character. Algenie spits poison and gives birth to swarms of small spider creatures, which attack the player-character. She also periodically opens up her spider mouth—which resembles a massive, fanged opening and is positioned exactly where her vulva would be—from which she spits out webbing to try and draw the player-character in and drain his health. In this sense, whether in relation to her fanged spider's mouth or the spiderlings she births, Algenie's monstrosity and danger stem primarily from within her vagina.

According to Creed (1993), "woman…terrifies because man endows her with imaginary powers of castration" (p. 87). The locus of these powers is the vagina—an organ which has been theorized as ambiguous or contradictory for heterosexual men who both desire and fear it. Although it might be pleasurable to penetrate the vagina, it also

means that the penis must be "devoured" by the woman's body, disappearing inside of her. The vagina is often symbolically associated with the mouth precisely because of that act of devouring the penis. The vagina and the mouth are commonly conflated spaces of sexual penetration, and the ubiquitous dark, damp, cave-like environments in horror media expose anxieties around both orifices (Creed, 1986, pp. 56–57). As Creed observes, "fear of the castrating female genitals pervades the myths and legends of many cultures" and "the threatening aspect of the female genital is symbolized by the *vagina dentata* or toothed vagina" (p. 105). A familiar myth found across cultures, the toothed vagina castrates any man who tries to penetrate it, if that penetration is unwanted and uninvited. Erich Neumann (1955) and Joseph Campbell (1969) have discussed the *vagina dentata* as the destructive side of the feminine archetype of the Great Mother and "a common motif which occurs across cultural mythologies and is found in artwork and folklore" (Campbell, 1969, p. 73). In many of these myths, the *vagina dentata* belongs to a beautiful woman who lures men to her only to kill and/or castrate them (a *femme fatale*) or is used to protect the woman from would-be rapists (a defence mechanism). The *vagina dentata* is therefore a particularly important manifestation of the monstrous-feminine, and Creed has demonstrated its centrality in horror film in both literal and metaphorical terms.

While some stories describe a woman with actual teeth in her vagina, others are more abstract; for example, in ancient Greek mythology, Scylla was a female monster with the upper half of a beautiful woman while her lower half was comprised of three snapping, biting hounds. As Creed (1993) has observed of these kinds of monsters:

> The myth of the woman as castrator clearly points to male fears and phantasies about the female genitals as a trap, a black hole which threatens to swallow them up and cut them into pieces. The vagina dentata is the mouth of hell – a terrifying symbol of woman as the "devil's gateway" … The vagina dentata also

> points to the duplicitous nature of woman, who promises paradise in order to ensnare her victims. The notion of the devouring female genitals continues to exist in the modern world; it is apparent in popular derogatory terms for women such as "man-eater" and "castrating bitch." (p. 106)

Erin Harrington (2018) similarly notes that the *vagina dentata* "plays on anxieties surrounding unbounded female sexual power and desire [and] the interiority of the female genitals" (p. 53). While it can be understood as an empowering defence mechanism protecting women against rape, it is also "a cautionary tale to men about the hypothetical dangers of sex with unknown women, and expresses rapacious, unbounded desire in a manner that is coded as threatening and transgressive" (Harrington, 2018, p. 53). Feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz (1994) has pushed beyond the sexual anxieties of this trope to instead interpret the *vagina dentata* as a metaphor for the fear of the boundless abject, the fear of being consumed and subsumed by the feminine body, the female other. In Other words, this is the symbolic representation of the fear of women's bodies and how they might punish male transgression, female sexuality and sexual independence, and also the mysterious (and divine) power of the feminine. Jane Caputi (2004) has unpacked the framing of the female goddess-monster within mythology and its connections to popular culture. Her work has explored 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. 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. Either way, the death of these feminine monsters at the hands of the male protagonists symbolically represents the victory of the normative, patriarchal

symbolic order, thereby alleviating the anxieties these female monsters embody.

Not only is this imagery of woman-as-castrator ubiquitous in mythology and film, but it is also a common trope in games. In her dissertation, Vossen (2018) pointed out several examples of monsters that resemble female reproductive organs and the *vagina dentata*, 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" (p. 91). Due to the ubiquity of monstrous representations of female genitalia, she has argued 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. While the sirens and bruxae discussed in the previous chapter have huge, fanged mouths which can be interpreted as *vaginae dentatae* (see Creed, 1986, p. 63), the spider women have fanged spider's mouths where their genitals should be, thereby *almost* literally portraying the trope.

The *vagina dentata* is not the only motif/trope applicable to the spider woman. Like the psychological concept of the abject, the aesthetic concept of the grotesque is particularly associated with the body's lower half—the genitals and anus. 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). Many examples of

grotesque bodies are monsters, such as the mythical Minotaur, a mix of man and bull, or Chimaera, a hybrid being composed of lion, goat, and snake body parts. Like the abject, 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. 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). A ripe concept for feminist interpretation, in other words. As Mary Russo has explored in *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (1994), the term "grotesque" comes from the word "grotto," thereby evoking 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). Russo has demonstrated how the grotesque body is a feminine or feminized body, anchored in the spectacle, subject to the male gaze, and controlled by gendered power dynamics.

The way the "lower stratum of the body" is presented as abject and grotesque is clearest in hybrid human-nonhuman creatures with monstrous lower halves, like the spider women discussed here. In other words, these monstrous women are grotesque half spiders, a widely hated and feared creature, and they also have *vaginae dentatae*, spit poison, parthenogenetically reproduce by birthing countless spiderlings, and are sexually predatory—there is very little to reclaim or redeem here, these are the ugliest form of misogyny made manifest. No wonder they are designed to be killed by the player.

Spider Women as Boss Monsters

Chaos Witch Quelaag

Hybrid spider women are often centralized as main antagonists or bosses for the player to fight, meaning that confronting and defeating them is necessary to proceed in the game. In this way, the game forces the player to enact violence against these characters who, unlike the generic Arachne enemies, have names and designated lairs. Queen Algenie, as discussed earlier, is one such example. Another, arguably more prominent example because it is both more contemporary but also the game spends more time lingering on her body is Chaos Witch Quelaag from *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011), who is introduced in her cavernous web and egg-filled lair—a space that can be read as womb like, especially since the (male) player-character enters it through a dark, vaginal tunnel. This is notable because dark, dank rooms and corridors are particularly common visual motifs in horror and, by associating vaginal or womb-like spaces with the horrific, they reinforce the misogynistic fear of and distrust towards female reproductive organs (Creed, 1993, p. 18). The presence of eggs also underscores the connections between these frightening spaces and reproduction, as well as sending the message that whatever monstrosity lives in this lair is *female.* In addition, Quelaag's title of "Chaos Witch" connects her to common misogynistic framings of women as evil and chaotic—ancient Greek mathematician and philosopher Pythagoras famously identified the "evil principle" as that which "created chaos, darkness, and woman" (Johnson, 2005, p. 63).

Quelaag does not speak to the player-character, and her entry into the cavern occurs through a series of shots that show only parts of her monstrous form—a mouth covered in spike-like teeth; a writhing tongue; a fiery abdomen; a woman's hand with long, sharp nails stroking the spider's eyes—before panning slowly up her naked torso, joined to the spider's body at her lower abdomen (Fig. 3.3), nipples covered only by her long hair.



Fig. 3.3 Screenshot of Chaos Witch Quelaag from *Dark Souls* (From Software, 2011)

This slow reveal not only establishes a shocking juxtaposition between monstrous fiery spider and naked woman, it also reverses the bait-and-switch reveal of the Arachne discussed earlier, as her top half is revealed after her bottom half. This scene communicates to the player that this creature is not just the expected giant spider, nor is it a woman riding a spider monster—it is a woman conjoined with a spider monster—while simultaneously sexualizing her body in a titillating, gradual reveal. The reveal does not show her full face, however, but stops just after showing her lips, smirking as she twirls her finger in her hair, as though she is flirting with the player-character. The way her body is presented to the player, through this series of separate shots plus a panning shot that highlights only her most desirable aspects—slim hips, firm stomach, naked breasts, and smiling lips—while hiding her eyes (a part of the body that might humanize her) recalls classical cinematic framing of female actors, which tended to reduce them to attractive body parts rather than showing their whole bodies in the frame. This kind of framing has been criticized by feminist film theorists as a technique that establishes the female body as a fetishized

object of sexual desire for the male characters and male audience members. As Laura Mulvey (1975) articulated in her foundational *Screen* article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," the woman's body becomes a "perfect product … stylised and fragmented by close-ups" (p. 15).

Quelaag is a popular boss among the game's fans, and in the official artbook *Dark Souls: Design Works*, the *Souls* series creator Hidetaka Miyazaki has noted that her popularity is likely because of "her chest" while also admitting that at one point in the design process she had dialogue, but they felt that the character "lost something" so they removed it, making her "one of the few completely silent characters" (FromSoftware, 2014, Chaos Witch Quelaag). This joke was picked up by fans: if online functionality is turned on, players can leave messages to other players and a common one leading up to Quelaag's lair is "Amazing Chest Ahead." The double entendre comes from the fact that the game is full of treasure chests the player can loot, but the joke is that the "chest" being referred to in this case is Quelaag's breasts. That Quelaag is designed by men, not given a voice, revealed with a slow panning of her naked body, has become a meme in relation to her breasts, and exists simply to be fought and defeated by the player highlights the ways that her design and narrative role can be read as misogynistic even without considering the symbolic meanings behind that fact that her lower half is a monstrous spider with a gaping, fanged mouth. The male protagonist invades her uterine lair, entering uninvited through a vaginal canal-like tunnel, then murders her—she exists only to be sexualized and violated.

Lolth, the Demon Queen of Spiders

The ludic spider woman is often presented as a demon, a queen or former queen, or even a goddess. While woman, goddess, spider, queen, demon, and monster may seem like too many categories to occupy, the overlap of femaleness, animal hybridity, monstrosity, and divinity is common in mythology and popular culture. Indeed, this figure has appeared in RPGs from the very beginning: the most iconic female

monster in *D&D* is a hybrid spider woman and a goddess figure. Lolth, the Demon Queen of Spiders was designed by *D&D* creator Gary Gygax as the first fictional "demon lord" included in the game. She was first introduced in the modules *Descent into the Depths of the Earth* (Gygax, 1978a) and more fully described in *Vault of the Drow* (Gygax, 1978b). Then she was the main antagonist of *Queen of the Demonweb Pits* (Sutherland & Gygax, 1980), which was voted the single greatest adventure of all time by *Dungeon* magazine in 2004. The best part of that adventure, according to the magazine, is Lolth herself: as fantasy and science fiction author Jean Rabe stated, "the Queen is one of the best *D&D* villainesses ever. Beautiful, crafty, and insidious" (Mona & Jacobs, 2004, p. 81). In addition, in the final issue of *Dragon* magazine, Lolth was declared one of the greatest villains in *D&D* history (Bulmahn et al., 2007, pp. 54–69).

Lolth is a chaotic evil goddess and the chief deity of the drow elves, or dark elves, a race/species[5] of evil, dark-skinned, white-haired humanoids who live underground. The racist overtones are clear here, and it is no coincidence that this dark-skinned race/species is not only described as evil, but is also ruled by a goddess. Not just any goddess, but a chaotic evil, ruthless, manipulative, deceptive, and seductive one who often takes the form of "an exquisitely beautiful female dark elf" (*Fiend Folio,* p. 24). Lolth is indeed commonly described as both beautiful and lethal, though her physical appearance is not consistent because she can change forms at will. On the cover of *Queen of the Demonweb Pits* Lolth appears as a black-bodied spider with the head of a beautiful woman but on the cover of the *Queen of the Spiders* reprint of the same module, she is depicted as a completely humanoid, sexualized drow elf woman with stiletto boots and exposed thighs (see Fig. 3.4). In this portrayal she is not only sexualized, but she is also exoticized as a woman of colour. On the cover of Paul Kidd's 2001 *Queen of the Demonweb Pits* novelization, Lolth is somewhere in between these two forms: the upper body of a beautiful bikini-clad woman with the thorax and legs of a large black spider—a clear example of the hybrid spider woman.

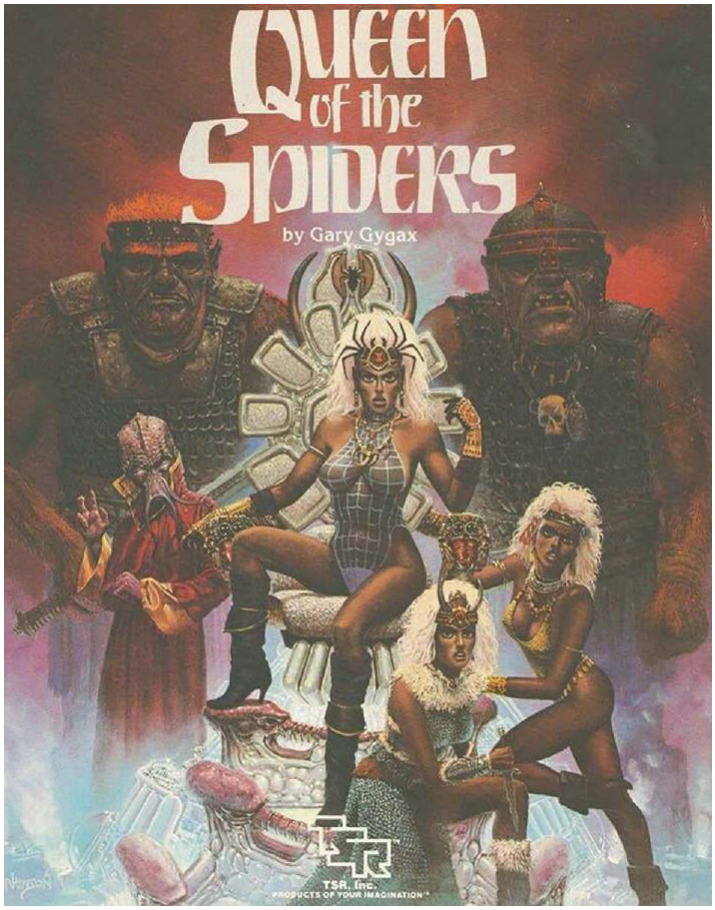


Fig. 3.4 Lolth from the cover of the 1986 *D&D* module *Queen of the Spiders* (TSR, Inc.), art done by Keith Parkinson. Note how Lolth is portrayed as a sexualized woman of colour.
Taken from https://rpggeek.com/image/517896/queen-of-the-spiders

According to the *Monster Manual IV* (Wilkes et al., 2006), Lolth's "every thought is touched by malice, and the depth of her viciousness can surprise even her most faithful priestesses" (p. 52). Again and again, players are reminded that Lolth is powerful and beautiful, but also chaotic, selfish, and evil. Lolth is described as "both cruel and capricious; she demands many sacrifices and demonstrations of loyalty. She also foments internal discord to keep her chosen people tough and ruthless" (Wilkes et al., 2006, p. 58) and "a goddess of cold cruelty … reveling in betrayal and bloodshed" ("Lolth," n.d.). In this sense, as an evil, Black goddess, Lolth exists at the intersection of racism and sexism, representing an example of what Jane Caputi and Lauri Sagle (2004) discuss as the *femme noir*, the *femme fatale* of colour, who

serves to remind viewers that "behind the apparently beautiful face of the woman of colour—the virgin/lover/mother—lurks the lethal, cannibalistic, non-human monster" (p. 100).

Importantly, drow society is matriarchal, where Lolth's all-female priestesses rule and "males are subservient to females" (Wilkes et al., 2006, p. 127). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this is framed as a bad thing, with the drow performing human sacrifices to please her and living in a constant state of competition and conflict because Lolth loves chaos and violence. The Handmaidens of the Spider Queen, her elite all-female warriors, would even destroy entire drow cities if they strayed too far from Lolth's ways. The prayer that her followers say to her reinforces this matriarchal twist on the violent empowerment she represents:

> Great Goddess, Mother of the Dark, grant me the blood of my enemies for drink and their living hearts for meat. Grant me the screams of their young for song, grant me the helplessness of their males for my satisfaction, grant me the wealth of their houses for my bed. By this unworthy sacrifice I honor you, Queen of Spiders, and beseech of you the strength to destroy my foes. ("Lolth," n.d.)

This prayer makes it clear that in Gygax's mind, matriarchy means theft, sexual violence, and horrific death for men. In this way, Lolth can be read as a sort of boogeyman for anti-feminists who fear the possibility of a matriarchal society in which women treat men the way they have treated women for much of human history. Unfortunately, even as one might wish to see Lolth as an inspiring figure, an unapologetic goddess who took power for herself (as will be discussed below), her empowerment is premised upon the patriarchal assumption that powerful women must be evil and cruel, and that they will threaten men and all that they stand for—the goddess recast "as devil, monster, and whore" (Caputi, 2004, p. 13).

A Mother, A Queen, and A Bitch

The drow worship Lolth as their "Dark Mother," and she is frequently referred to as "the evil matron of the drow" but she is also called "Mother of Lusts," and so she is both maternal and sexualized, like many of the spider women discussed here. This again highlights the slippage between the Maiden and the Mother, as there are several examples of monstrous women who are simultaneously sexualized and maternal. In some cases, those characters are either referred to or self-identify as mothers, like Cydaea, or they reproduce/produce spawn during the game, usually as part of their combat abilities, like Queen Algenie. Lolth is not just a figurative mother-goddess, rather she is also a literal mother, having birthed three children with her ex-husband, Corellon, the chief elf deity and creator of the elves. She betrayed Corellon, driven by a desire for power, and even tried to manipulate her daughter Eilistraee into accidentally murdering her own father. When that failed, Lolth (whose original name was Araushnee) attempted to poison him. Her plans were thwarted and Corellon transformed her into a spider demon and banished her. Lolth fought to become the goddess of the drow and retain her power as a deity, and she was at odds with two of her children, especially Eilistraee, who also sought to become the goddess of the drow, in order to save them and turn them back toward the light. She is often called the "Dark Maiden," and given her physical resemblance to her mother, she can be read as an "improved" version of Lolth—younger and, most importantly, loyal to her father. She seeks to save and redeem the drow, bringing them back to the light, while Lolth seeks to keep them in chaos and stagnation underground. In this sense, Lolth is clearly a "bad mother"—a power hungry older woman who betrayed her family and cares only for her own ambitions—in opposition to her "good daughter." This mother and daughter dynamic represents the Madonna-Whore dichotomy discussed previously: patriarchy dictates that if women want power they must seek it through men, their husbands or fathers, and remain subservient to them. Eilistraee did this and so remains the Madonna, or more accurately, the Maiden.[6] Lolth, on the other hand, is the treacherous Whore.

Lolth was also opposed by her son Vhaeraun although he originally supported her rebellion against his father Corellon. Vhaeraun became Lolth's rival, seeking to become the new drow deity and (ironically) promote gender equality among the drow. He was eventually subdued by Lolth, instead serving her and being worshipped only by male drow who wished to better their lot in life but were too afraid to rebel against Lolth directly. Lolth tolerates this sub-religion, and Vhaeraun now "embod[ies] the ideal of drow male according to the Lolthite matriarchy: 'swift, silent, obedient'" ("Lolth," n.d.). The messaging here is quite clear: this "bad son" (as opposed to the "good daughter" Eilistraee) obeyed his mother instead of his father, and now suffers under her despotic and misandrist rule. Contemporary "manosphere" internet parlance might label Vhaeraun a "simp"—a derogatory term for a man who is submissive, respectful, and obedient to a woman.

Finally, Lolth is also a mother of monsters, as she created a race/species of beings who are extensions of her will. These beings, called the Yochlol or Handmaidens of Lolth, are "her spies, taskmasters, and agents of villainy" (Wilkes et al., 2006, p. 54). They can take the form of female drow or monstrous spiders, but their true, demonic form is "a pillar of yellow slime with a single malevolent eye" (Wilkes et al., 2006, p. 54). While the children she created with Corellon became gods, the children Lolth creates alone are demonic and monstrous beings, lacking the inherent beauty of her other children. This is a common trope with the monstrous-feminine, which will be discussed further in the following chapter—when a woman attempts parthenogenetic reproduction, she can give birth "only to deformed manifestations of herself" (Creed, 1993, p. 47).

The fan-compiled *D&D Wiki* notes that Lolth is known as "the Queen of Spiders, Mistress of Lies, and the Lady of the Shadows" and her favoured form is "that of a colossal, six-armed, female drider [half-human, half-spider], nearly 75 feet in height, though she frequently takes the form of a spider or a female drow" ("Lolth, Goddess of Spiders," n.d.). Although Lolth can assume many forms, her 75-foot, six-armed spider woman form really emphasizes her status as a powerful

goddess. However, her detailed backstory reveals that the reason she became a spider monster and the evil, cruel goddess of the drow is so she can torture them because they were the creations of her hated ex-husband. Her motivation is therefore vengeance against a man, and she is cruel even to her own people, which undermines her positioning as a potentially empowering goddess figure.[7]

Even the title "queen" is not necessarily without underlying racism and misogyny. Caputi and Sagle (2004) note in their discussion of the way poor Black women are treated in the United States, "*queen* signifies, variously, greed, fecundity, insatiability, matriarchy, and elemental and inherited power; it always conveys a mockery of even the possibility of Black female influence, power and sovereignty, while masking a rank white-supremacist fear of that possibility" (p. 104, emphasis in original). Indeed, while Lolth is certainly a powerful goddess, she embodies that misogynistic and white supremacist fear of Black female influence, power, and sovereignty and so is unequivocally presented as a capricious *femme fatale*/*femme noir*, or Black Widow, a monstrous and evil woman whose threat manifests literally in her spider-like body, with deadly venom that drips from her fangs.

One of Lolth's titles is also "Spider Bitch," which speaks volumes about how Lolth is positioned within this ludic world. Like "queen," Caputi and Sagle (2004) note that "the word bitch functions as a racialized term of contempt for women, rooted in the quintessentially pornographic image of the woman of color as sub-human animal (and, concomitantly, the belief that animals are 'beneath' humans)" (pp. 104–105). Yet, Barbara Walker (1983) has demonstrated that bitch/Bitch used to be an honorific, and was in fact "one of the most sacred titles of the Goddess, Artemis-Diana" (p. 109). Assuming the form of an animal and being associated with animals, like the spider, is not uncommon among gods and goddesses, though it does point to the association of the feminine with the natural (and so uncivilized, chaotic, primal) world. Calling Lolth the Spider Bitch also evokes the "potent Bitch Goddess" discussed by Caputi (2004) and quoted in the previous chapter. She "becomes the high-heeled and tightly bound dominatrix,

safely contained in a pornographic dungeon"—thereby resembling her dominatrix appearance on the cover of *Queen of the Spiders* (see Fig. 3.4) though in this case she is safely contained in the pages of a game module to be rifled, ogled, played with, and destroyed by men.

It is important to identify the racism along with the misogyny inherent in Lolth's design, presentation, and use in *D&D* and its related media (such as the *Baldur's Gate* series). *D&D* has been identified by many scholars and critics as a game that reinforces not only sexism but also colonial, racist, and white supremacist logics and ideologies (for example, see Dashiell, 2023; Higgin, 2009; Trammell, 2016, 2018; Young, 2016). Gygax revealed his racist and misogynistic approach to game design by clearly associating Black female power with evilness, cruelness, and capriciousness, and neither TSR, Inc. nor Wizards of the Coast have done anything to correct this portrayal, regardless of their rather uninspiring and limited attempts to portray the drow in a less racist way (Gault, 2020).[8] Lolth is still a villain in *D&D*, presented as a powerful fiend for high level players to confront and slaughter. Certainly, *D&D* allows for flexible play styles and approaches, meaning players can interpret (and use) her as they see fit, but the game's core texts—rulebook, handbooks, bestiaries, guides, etc.—reinforce her positioning as an irredeemably evil sexualized and villainized monster.

Despite trying to read empowerment in some manifestations of the Queen/Bitch woman of colour figure in popular culture, whom they see as "sexually sovereign, creative, powerful" and "the half- remembered mythic figure who provides a background source for the power of the femme noir" (p. 105), Caputi and Sagle (2004) note how problematic it is that Black women in particular are presented so often as enemies in popular culture. They cite Bram Dijkstra's (1996) description of this figure as the "ultimate temptress, the bestially beautiful, primitive African queen … the ultimate praying mantis, the woman with the African womb" (p. 147) from his book *Evil Sisters: The Threat of Female Sexuality and the Cult of Manhood*. This "sexually political racism" (Caputi & Sagle, 2004, p. 105) manifests often in speculative fiction, wherein the (racialized and sexualized) monster—whether a vampire,

an alien, or, in our case, a demon queen/evil goddess—can be killed in a reenactment of racist and sexist violence. In this sense, although both monstrosity and the abject itself are ambiguous and therefore potentially transgressive, the ludic (or cinematic, or literary, or mythological, etc.) female monster does not exist because she chooses to—she is designed, coded, and rendered (usually by male developers) to be confronted and slain (by an assumed male player, since this was *D&D* in the late 1970s and early 1980s). Although Lolth was created a long time ago, what she represents is perennial and certainly present in digital games as well. As Kishonna Gray and David Leonard (2018) have observed:

> In the dehumanizing representations commonplace within digital spaces, video games encode the injustices that pervade society as a whole. … Games provide a training ground for the consumption of narratives and stereotypes as well as opportunities to become instruments of hegemony; they offer spaces of white male play and pleasures, and create a virtual and lived reality where white maleness is empowered to police and criminalize the Other. (p. 6)

Lolth and monstrous women like her are, therefore, misogynistic and sometimes racist constructs that are designed to reinforce hegemonic ideology and uphold the primacy of dominant bodies, behaviours, and gender dynamics.

Playable Spider Women

Spider women or women with some spider-like attributes have been featured as playable characters in a few games, though they are generally only one option among a whole cast of characters the player can choose from, rather than centralized as the singular, main protagonist. Elise the Spider Queen from *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009) is one such example. Unfortunately, even though she is playable and so theoretically invites identification, she embodies the

same problematic and sexist stereotypes and tropes seen with all the other nonplayable kinds of hybrid, monstrous, spider and/or succubus-like women.

Elise is described as a manipulative, seductive, powerful woman, but her husband grew angry and jealous at her power and poisoned her with a disfiguring potion. Obsessed with regaining her lost beauty, she sought out an undead spider god named Vilemaw, whose bite "transformed her into something utterly inhuman, yet still beautiful—an arachnoid creature, drawing unsuspecting prey into her web" ("Elise," n.d.). Elise made a deal with the spider god, and to maintain her eternal youth, she sacrifices victims to him and then drinks his venom. "Vicious and elegant, Elise's charismatic grace lures the innocent and greedy alike into her web of deceit," ("Elise Background," n.d.) states the game's official description, and "there are few who can resist her seductions" ("Spider Queen," n.d.). Embodying a design for female characters which is all too familiar in video games, Elise is a conventionally attractive woman with a slim waist and large breasts, wearing a tight black, highly sexualizing, and revealing outfit, showing off her cleavage and stomach. She possesses two forms: one of a beautiful woman, albeit with spider-like appendages that come out of her back and allow her to climb on walls, and the other of a giant black spider who can control hordes of "spiderlings." The game's wiki indicates that her spiderlings are her offspring, produced through parthenogenesis ("Elise," n.d.), though elsewhere it states "it is unclear if they are the actual biological children of Elise. Despite this, Elise calls them as her children (as well as her pets)" ("Spiderling," n.d.). Either way, Elise is yet another example of a spider woman who is both sexualized and coded as maternal, like Queen Algenie, Cydaea, the Vagary, and Lolth. Like a spider, she can also produce venom and make webs from her body, and she also possesses a hive mind bond with her spiderlings, allowing her to control them at will.

Elise has alternative skins that players can acquire, which change her appearance and description. This includes the "Death Blossom" skin, described as follows:

> An enchanting beauty she is, lithe in form, and colored like the flowering valleys frozen mid-bloom by winter's chill. Yet the creature Elise dines upon the flesh of maidens, allured by her delicate pulchritude, who dance softly into the jaws of a monster. ("Spider Queen," n.d.)

This description paints a picture of Elise as a sort of Venus flytrap for unsuspecting young maidens, thereby positioning her as another familiar archetype: the lesbian vamp who preys on young virginal women. In this sense, Elise is a threat to both men and women—a predatory and seductive maternally coded bisexual *femme fatale*. This is another familiar character trope, found in countless works from the first vampire novel *Carmilla* to David Lynch's dreamlike *Mulholland Drive* (for more on this, see Creed, 1993; Doane, 1991; San Filippo, 2013).

There are a couple other playable spider-like women worth mentioning here, such as Kerrigan from *StarCraft,* who will be discussed at the end of this book, and Widowmaker from *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016). While Kerrigan is certainly hybrid, she is more of an insect-like human-alien hybrid, whereas Widowmaker has several clear spider-like aesthetic attributes, including a helmet with several red spots that look like spider eyes and a large tattoo of a spider on her back. Her name is a reference to the black widow spider, as she made herself a widow when she killed her own husband. Like the spider women discussed here, she is a clear *femme fatale*, and the French name for her character is, in fact, Fatale. She was a ballet dancer married to an Overwatch agent, and in order to get to him, his enemies in a terrorist organization called Talon kidnapped her, forced her to undergo intensive neural reconditioning and programming, turning her into a sleeper agent. She murdered her husband and felt more alive than she ever had when she did it, so she returned to Talon asking them to turn her into an assassin. A geneticist altered her physiology, slowing her heart, which turned her skin cold and bluish-purple, and numbing

her ability to feel emotions. She therefore literally embodies the archetype of the cold-blooded killer and the Black Widow.

Widowmaker also identifies with the spider, reflecting on her own resemblance to the animal: "When I was a girl, I had a fear of spiders. I was told they felt no emotion, that their hearts never beat. But I know the truth. At the moment of the kill, they are never more alive" ("Widowmaker," n.d.). However, she is not "monstrous" in the way that the other spider women discussed here are—she is not hybrid, and the only thing that makes her potentially nonhuman is her slowed heartbeat, inhuman skin colour, and deadened emotions. In this sense, while she is a spider woman, as well as a clear *femme fatale*, she is not a "monster" (or a queen, goddess, or mother) in the same way Elise is. She is certainly "ambiguously human," both in terms of her physiology and her violent and bloodthirsty behaviour. Unsurprisingly, she is also a sexualized character, wearing a skintight outfit with a plunging neckline —familiar clothing for the sexualized *femme fatale* archetype. She becomes arguably more monstrous with her "Medusa" skin, an outfit players can unlock/pay for and select that transforms Widowmaker into a green-skinned, snake-haired, black-and-yellow-eyed gorgon. While this is simply an optional costume for the character, it does more clearly signal her monstrosity, aligning her with one of the most famous —and perhaps the most maligned—monstrous *femme fatale* characters in Western history. Medusa, or gorgons more generally, are also common monstrous women found in games, many of whom are hybrid, often with snake tails in place of legs. Given the similar (and similarly unfair) cultural positioning of the snake as a treacherous, deceptive, sneaky, venomous, and widely feared and hated animal, there are many parallels that can be read between the spider woman and the snake woman. Medusa, as an infamous monstrous/bad woman, a maligned victim-survivor, an archetypal example of the monstrous-feminine, and a symbol of feminine/feminist rage, will be discussed at length in the concluding chapter of this book.

Hybridity and the Nature-Culture Divide

As discussed throughout this book, there are several different kinds of hybrid female monsters that appear commonly in video games, many of which are drawn from Greek mythology like the harpy (half-woman, half-bird), the siren (originally also half-woman, half-bird, but often portrayed as half-woman, half-fish in popular culture), and the gorgon or Medusa (commonly portrayed as a woman with serpents for hair whose gaze can turn people to stone). While these are all popular monsters—that is, they are commonly included in both analog games, such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, and digital games, such as the *Final Fantasy* series, the *God of War* series, and *The Witcher* series—as this chapter has shown, one of the most ubiquitous hybrid female monsters in games takes the form of a half-woman, half-spider. This monster usually has the torso of a human woman attached to the body of a spider, like the Arachne, Queen Algenie, the Vagary, Cydaea, or Quelaag, though sometimes she is more of a humanoid arachnid or has spider-like appendages protruding from somewhere on her body, like Elise. Sometimes they alternate between both forms, like Lolth.

These are not just spiders, they are *female* spiders, and that is key.[9] As Vossen (2018) has explored, J. R. R. Tolkien's work is widely recognized as a key source of inspiration for fantasy role-playing games, both analog like *Dungeons & Dragons*, and digital. One of the most famous female spiders in fantasy media is Tolkien's giant, predatory, ancient, and evil Shelob. Many scholars have argued that she is a symbolic representation of misogynistic ideas about women and their bodies, as she embodies predatory and lustful sexuality as well as having a grotesque and abject—but undeniably *female*—form. Shelob hungers for men and is killed through violent penetration by a man's blade, but she is not only a sexual monster, she is also a maternal one, again demonstrating the slippage between Maiden and Mother. She has produced countless offspring, and has been identified as symbolizing "an ancient maternal power that swallows up masculine identity and autonomy" (Milbank, 2013, p. 35) and representing an "embodiment of

monstrous maternity" (Jaques, 2013, p. 88). In addition, Tolkien's descriptions underscore both Shelob's body and her lair as grotesque and abject, swollen, stinking, dark, and requiring violent penetration by bold men (see Partridge, 1984; Vossen, 2018). Although Shelob is not hybrid, we can see parallels between her and spider women like Queen Algenie and others discussed here. Like women, female spiders occupy a particularly unpleasant place in the masculine psyche, it seems, and so it is perhaps not surprising that spider women are both regular enemies and also featured as notable and centralized boss monsters in games, highlighting their threat as dangerous, powerful, and deadly beings requiring violent (often penetrative) death at the hands of "bold" men.

As shown in the previous chapter as well, an extremely effective way of (literally) dehumanizing someone is to make them half animal, and it also categorizes them as a grotesque and abject subject: one who is "heterogenous, animal, metamorphosed, altered" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 207). Hybridity is also a way to signal the ambiguous and abject duality associated with the feminine in patriarchal society and thought. These kinds of hybrid monsters are familiar across the world's mythologies—many myths, legends, and folkloric tales feature characters, goddesses, and monsters that are part woman and part animal, or they transform into an animal (see Caputi, 2004; Neumann, 1955). This hybridity or transformation and their inherent ambiguity and categorical breakdown are central to the disturbance and appeal of both the abject and grotesque, but they also highlight the association of the feminine with the natural (/bestial/primal/uncivilized) world. As Donna Haraway (1992) has observed, feminist scholars have been "excruciatingly conscious of nature's discursive constitution as 'other' in the histories of colonialism, racism, sexism, and class domination of many kinds" (p. 296). Feminist scholars have also long noted that nature is symbolically gendered female; that female bodies are categorized as more animalistic, primal, visceral, especially in terms of reproduction; and that within Western patriarchal society the natural world is positioned below the "civilized" one—and civilization is

masculine (MacCormack, 2012). 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 and nature beneath culture (MacCormack, 2012, p. 257).[10]

The same can be said for non-whiteness, especially Blackness. Most of the examples discussed here have the human upper bodies or illusory forms of white women, but the question of hybridity in terms of race cannot be ignored, especially given Lolth's clear positioning as a Black queen/goddess/*femme noir*. 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). In this sense, Lolth exists at the intersection of racism and sexism, though it is perhaps surprising that more of the spider women discussed here are not women of colour as well. However, the whiteness of these spider women is likely because they are designed by (mostly) heterosexual white and Japanese male game developers to adhere to the "sexy + gross = creepy" formula or the

"bait-and-switch" trope and so are meant to appeal to the presumed heterosexual white and Japanese male player. So, they could be the result of homogeneity among Western and Japanese game developers as well as white/light-skinned beauty standards and the white/Japanese supremacy that underpins them.

While this chapter focused on one specific kind of monstrous Maiden—a version of the succubus archetype so ubiquitous it needed its own chapter—it further highlights this insidious way that misogyny manifests in games. Women have been "forever associated with unholy, disorderly, subhuman and unsightly phenomena" (Braidotti, 2011, p. 80). Since they are combinations of woman and animal, and are often evil queens, goddesses, and mothers, the spider women discussed here certainly qualify as "unholy, disorderly, subhuman and unsightly." Like all unsightly bodies, the spider woman is fascinating even as it is abhorrent, and since her upper half is usually that of a conventionally attractive woman, she is simultaneously both desirable and repulsive. While this hybridity has been associated with magic and divinity, especially apparent in the spider women queens and goddesses with magical abilities, it is also connected to monstrosity, the abject, and the grotesque. The slippage between god and demon/monster has been well-documented and goddesses are particularly noteworthy for feminist scholarship because many of them have been systematically transformed into monsters as mythology gets interwoven into folktales, literature, and other media (Caputi, 2004). As powerful women—especially queens and goddesses—signify a threat to patriarchal society, they must be made monstrous and therefore dehumanized and categorized as evil (Caputi, 2004, p. 315–341). However, the spider is not a hated or feared creature in all cultures, and the spider goddess does not always have to be evil. For example, Grandmother Spider is an important figure in the mythology and oral traditions of many Indigenous cultures in North America. In Hopi mythology, she is the creator of humans and in Navajo and Ojibwe mythology, she is a protector and helper. Decolonizing games and diversifying game developers is one way in which the spider woman might be redeemed

and reclaimed, recast as a goddess, and more often centralized as a playable and empowering version of the monstrous-feminine. Unfortunately, game designers have yet to tap into these kinds of alternative, more potentially empowering sources of inspiration.

As I have hinted at throughout this chapter, particularly in the discussion of Queen Algenie and Lolth, and as I discuss in more detail in the following chapter, monstrous hybridity and the fear, mistrust, and revulsion it evokes is deeply intertwined with female reproduction and feminized reproductive bodies. Many monstrous Maidens are also monstrous Mothers, so examples often overlap, but the following two chapters will focus explicitly on exploring how games portray reproductive and maternal bodies, presenting them and their offspring as abject monstrosities—usually sans the sexualization aspect because they are no longer desirable—deserving only of violent death.

References

Arachne. (n.d.). *Castlevania Wiki.* https://castlevania.fandom.com/wiki/Arachne

Bakhtin, M. M. (1968). *Rabelais and his world*. (H. Iswolsky, Trans.). MIT Press.

Bethesda Game Studios. (2007). *Fallout 3.* Bethesda Softworks. PlayStation 3.

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2012). *Diablo III.* Blizzard Entertainment. Microsoft Windows.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2015). *Heroes of the Storm*. Blizzard Entertainment. Microsoft Windows.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2016). *Overwatch.* Blizzard Entertainment. Microsoft Windows.

Braidotti, R. (2011). *Nomadic subjects: Embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory*. Second edition. Columbia University Press.

Bulmahn, J., Jacobs, J., McArtor, M. Mona, E., Schneider, E. W., Stewart, A., & Walker, J. (2007, September). 1d20 villains: D&D's most wanted; preferably dead. *Dragon, 32*(359), 54–69.

Campbell, J. (1969). *The masks of god: Primitive mythology.* Penguin.

Caputi, J. (2004). *Goddesses and monsters: Women, myth, power, and popular culture.* University of Wisconsin Press.

Caputi, J., & Sagle, L. (2004). Femme noire: Dangerous women of color in popular film and television. *Race, Gender & Class, 11*(2), 90–111.

Carroll, N. (1990). *The philosophy of horror, or, paradoxes of the heart*. Routledge.

CD Projekt Red. (2015). *The witcher 3: Wild hunt.* CD Projekt. Microsoft Windows.

Creed, B. (1986). Horror and the monstrous-feminine: An imaginary abjection. *Screen, 27*(1), 44–70.
[https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/27.1.44]

Creed, B. (1993). *The monstrous-feminine: Film, feminism, psychoanalysis*. Routledge.

D'Anastasio, C. (2021). D&D must grapple with the racism in fantasy. *Wired*. https://www.wired.com/story/dandd-must-grapple-with-the-racism-in-fantasy/

Dashiell, S. (2023). Discussions of fantasy characters and demonstrations of a defensive hybridity in gamer masculinity. *The Journal of Men's Studies, 31*(1), 25–43.
[https://doi.org/10.1177/10608265221084017]

Dijkstra, B. (1996). *Evil sisters: The threat of female sexuality and the cult of manhood*. Knopf.

Doane, M. A. (1991). *Femmes fatales: Feminism, film theory, psychoanalysis*. Routledge.

Elise. (n.d.). *League of legends wiki*. https://leagueoflegends.fandom.com/wiki/Elise

Elise Background. (n.d.). *League of legends wiki.* https://leagueoflegends.fandom.com/sk/wiki/Elise/Background

FromSoftware. (2011). *Dark souls*. Bandai Namco Entertainment. PlayStation 3.

FromSoftware. (2014). *Dark Souls: Design Works*. UDON Entertainment Corporation.

Frynta, D., Janovcová, M., Štolhoferová, I., Peléšková, S., Vobrubová, B, Frýdlová, P, Skalíková, H., Šípek, P., & Landová, E. (2021). Emotions triggered by live arthropods shed light on spider phobia. *Scientific Reports*, *11*(22268).

Gault, M. (2020). Dungeons & dragons' racial reckoning is long overdue. *Wired*. https://www.wired.com/story/dungeons-dragons-diversity/

Greenwood, E. (1991). *The drow of the underdark*. TSR, Inc.

Gray, K., & Leonard, D. (2018). *Woke gaming: Digital challenges to oppression and social injustice.* University of Washington Press.

Grosz, E. (1994). *Volatile bodies: Towards a corporeal feminism*. Indiana University Press.

Gygax, G. (1978a). *Descent into the depths of the Earth*. TSR.

Gygax, G. (1978b). Vault of the drow. TSR.

Gygax, G. (1979a). *Monster manual*. TSR Games.

Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Sage in association with the Open University.

Haraway, D. (1992). Promises of monsters: A regenerative politics for inappropriate/d others. In L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, & P. A. Treichler (Eds.), *Cultural studies* (pp. 295–337). Routledge.

Harrington, E. (2018). *Women, monstrosity and horror film: Gynaehorror*. Routledge.

Higgin, T. (2009). Blackless fantasy: The disappearance of race in massively multiplayer online role-playing games. *Games and Culture, 4*(1), 3–26. [https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412008325477]

id Software. (2004). *Doom 3.* Activision. Microsoft Windows.

Jaques, Z. (2013). There and back again: The gendered journey of Tolkien's hobbits. In P. Hunt (Ed.), *J. R. R. Tolkien*. Macmillan.

Johnson, A. (2005). *The gender knot: Unraveling our patriarchal legacy*. Temple University Press.

Konami. (1999). *Castlevania.* Konami Computer Entertainment Kobe. Nintendo 64.

Konami. (1999). *Castlevania: Legacy of Darkness*. Konami Computer Entertainment Kobe. Nintendo 64.

Konami. (2003). *Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow*. Konami. Game Boy Advance.

Konami. (2008). *Castlevania: Order of Ecclesia*. Konami. Nintendo DS.

Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection*. (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). Columbia University Press.

Lolth. (n.d.). *Forgotten realms wiki.* https://forgottenrealms.fandom.com/wiki/Lolth

Lolth, Goddess of Spiders. (n.d.). *Dungeons & dragons wiki.* https://www.dandwiki.com/wiki/Lolth,_Goddess_of_Spiders_(5e_Creature)

MacCormack, P. (2012). The queer ethics of monstrosity. In J. S. Picart & J. E. Browning (Eds.), *Speaking of monsters: A teratological anthology* (pp. 255–265). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137101495_23]

Milbank, A. (2013). "My precious": Tolkien's fetishized ring. In G. Bassham & E. Bronson (Eds.), *The lord of the rings and philosophy: One book to rule them all.* Open Court.

Mona, E., & Jacobs, J. (2004, November). The 30 greatest d&d adventures of all time. *Dungeon, 18*(116), 68–81.

Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen, 16*(3), 6–18. [https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6]

Mulvey, L. (1991). A phantasmagoria of the female body: The work of Cindy Sherman. *New Left*

Review, 188.

Musker, J., & Clements, R. (Directors). (1989). *The little mermaid.* Walt Disney Feature Animation.

Nethis. (n.d.). *Heroes of the storm wiki*. https://heroesofthestormarchive.fandom.com/wiki/Neithis

Neumann, E. (1955). *The great mother: An analysis of the archetype*. Princeton University Press.

Partridge, B. (1984). No sex please—We're hobbits: The construction of female sexuality in the lord of the rings. In R. Giddings (Ed.), *J.R.R. Tolkien, this far land*. Vision Press.

Reider, N. T. (2013). *Tsuchigumo sōshi*: The emergence of a shape-shifting killer female spider. *Asian Ethnology, 72*(1), 55–83.

Riot Games. (2009). *League of legends.* Riot Games. Microsoft Windows.

Russo, M. (1994). *The female grotesque: Risk, excess and modernity*. Routledge.

San Filippo, M. (2013). *The B word: Bisexuality in contemporary film and television*. Indiana University Press.

Sarkeesian, A. (2016). Sinister seductress [Video]. *Feminist Frequency.* https://feministfrequency.com/video/sinister-seductress/

Sliva, M. (2013). *Brothers: A tale of two sons review*. IGN. https://www.ign.com/articles/2013/08/06/brothers-a-taleof-twosons-review

Spiderling. (n.d.). *League of legends wiki*. https://leagueoflegends.fandom.com/wiki/Spiderling

Spider Queen. (n.d.). *League of legends wiki*. https://leagueoflegends.fandom.com/wiki/Elise/LoL#Spider_Queen

Starbreeze Studios. (2013). *Brothers: A tale of two sons.* 505 Games. PlayStation 3.

Strickland, D. H. (2013). Monstrosity and race in the late middle ages. In A. S. Mittman & P. J. Dendle (Eds.), *The Ashgate research companion to monsters and the monstrous* (pp. 365–386). Ashgate Publishing.

Sutherland, D., & Gygax, G. (1980). *Queen of the demon web pits.* TSR.

Trammell, A. (2016). How dungeons & dragons appropriated the orient. *Analog Game Studies, 3*(1). https://analoggamestudies.org/2016/01/how-dungeons-dragons-appropriated-theorient/

Trammell, A. (2018). Representation and discrimination in role-playing games. In S. Deterding & J. Zagal (Eds.), *Role-playing game studies: Transmedia foundations.* Routledge.

Vagary. (n.d.). *Doom wiki.* https://doom.fandom.com/wiki/Vagary

Vossen, E. (2018). *On the cultural inaccessibility of gaming: Invading, creating, and reclaiming the cultural clubhouse* (Ph.D. Dissertation). University of Waterloo.

Walker, B. (1983). *The woman's encyclopedia of myths and secrets*. Harper & Row.

Widowmaker. (n.d.). Overwatch wiki. https://overwatch.fandom.com/wiki/Widowmaker/

Wilkes, J. C., Thomasson, C., Jurkat, M. A., & Sims, C. (2006). *Monster manual iv.* Wizards of the Coast.

Young, H. (2016). *Race and popular fantasy literature: Habits of whiteness*. Routledge.

Footnotes

1 I refer to this archetype of female monstrosity as the "spider woman" to indicate her hybridity and differentiate her from "Spider-Woman," the female version of the comic book hero Spider-Man and from a female spider, since the giant talking female spider—like J. R. R. Tolkien's Shelob—is also a common monster type in role-playing games.

2 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: "Financial gain is a motivation in which the offender benefits monetarily from killing. Examples of these types of crimes are "black widow" killings, robbery homicides, or multiple killings involving insurance or welfare fraud." See https://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/serial-murder. The phrase is often used in high profile cases of women convicted for committing murder for financial gain.

3 In the vein of children's media, even Ursula from Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (Musker & Clements, 1989) can be read as spider-like, in that her eight-tentacled, black lower body aligns her with abject hybridity. Although she is ostensibly an octopus woman rather than a spider woman, it is clear that her form is intended to evoke disgust and unease in a way that Ariel's fish tail does not. Tentacles relate closely to abject and hybrid female monstrosity, and often it is unclear if these characters' appendages are spider-like or tentacular. Either way, they evoke ideas of penetration. Ursula will be discussed further in this book, but it is worth noting here that although she is less sexually predatory than the hybrid monstrous women discussed in this book, she does transform herself into a normative, conventionally attractive human woman in order to seduce Ariel's beloved Prince Eric.

4 Interestingly, Cydaea is voiced by Claudia Black, who also voices Morrigan from BioWare's *Dragon Age: Origins* (a game that will be discussed in a later chapter), another sexualized *femme fatale*-like figure who can shapeshift into a giant spider.

5 I use "race/species" here as I want to acknowledge the original terminology although as I mentioned in a previous footnote, *D&D* now uses the term "species" instead of "race."

6 Albeit the "Dark" Maiden with the black skin of the drow/dark elves, and so still a racialized figure, especially compared to her father, portrayed as a blonde-haired, light-skinned elf. It is no coincidence that goodness in the world of *D&D* is generally associated with light-skinned (especially blonde-haired, blue-eyed) characters, inspired as it is by other racist or racially problematic fantasy and horror media like *The Lord of the Rings* series, *Conan the Barbarian*, and the works of H. P. Lovecraft (see D'Anastasio, 2021; Young, 2016). She is also portrayed as naked in her iconography, though her long silver hair covers her, keeping her modest.

7 Oddly, Lolth punishes her people, especially those who fail her tests, by turning them into driders, which is strange in that their punishment is making them look more like her. This may be a manifestation of her own self-loathing (an especially compelling reading given that many drider feel immense shame for having failed their queen/goddess, are outcast from drow society, and have a death wish), or it could simply be that it was not well thought out by the game's writers. Interestingly, the drider are sexless so that they cannot reproduce and become an established race/species, rather they only exist as a result of transformation. For more on the drider, see Greenwood (1991).

8 Lolth likely inspired several similar kinds of ludic spider queens and goddesses. One example is Neithis, the Spider Queen from *Heroes of the Storm* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2015). Neithis is described as a goddess and "a mysterious and powerful matriarch" ("Nethis," n.d.). She is not a playable character in the game, but she is the announcer for her specific battleground, an ancient Egyptian-themed map called "Tomb of the Spider Queen" and will grant aid to players who give her gems of power. She is described in the game's data as "a primal and ancient spider goddess who rules over an underground tomb. She is incredibly direct and deadly and does not play games. Those who intrude in her lair will either serve her or die" and she is given the following attitude traits: "Beastial [*sic*], Impossible to Please, Direct, Deadly" ("Nethis," n.d.). The game's art for her shows that she is indeed a spider woman: a spider centaur whose upper half is that of a scantily clad woman of colour with brown skin, dreadlocks, and a large headpiece. She has four arms and her hands have long, pointed claws. That she is a woman of colour and described as "beastial [*sic*]," "primal," "impossible to please," "deadly," and a "matriarch" aligns her closely with Lolth and the harmful portrayal of powerful, capricious, seductive, evil, and monstrous Black women/*femmes noirs* described by Caputi and Sagle (2004).

9 Along with Arachne, Charlotte from *Charlotte's Web* is a well-known example of a female spider. Rather than being monstrous or presented as terrifying and abject, both Arachne and Charlotte are more tragic figures. While Arachne suffers due to her own hubris and is victimized by a more powerful woman who feels threatened by her, Charlotte embodies a self-sacrificial maternal figure.

10 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 or male, female monstrosity is still often designed and interpreted as horrifying and abject (p. 146).

Part II
The Mother

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2026
S. Stang, *Maiden, Mother, and Crone*, Palgrave Studies in Mediating Kinship, Representation, and Difference
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-25115-2_4

4. Horrific Pregnancies and Monstrous Mothers: Reproduction in Japanese Games

Sarah Stang[1] ✉
(1) Digital Humanities, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada

✉ **Sarah Stang**
Email: sstang@brocku.ca

Keywords Pregnancy – Pregnant – Mother – Maternal – Fertile – Offspring – Spawn

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 and the one that follows both focus on the ways female reproduction[1] and reproductive organs and bodies, as well as maternal identities and behaviours, are constructed and presented as monstrous, horrific, and out-of-control in games. Through an analysis of some particularly egregious examples of pregnant monsters and reproductive and/or maternal monstrous characters, I demonstrate how women are made monstrous, repulsive, and evil in games in relation to their reproductive processes and often reduced to a pregnant body—specifically, a transgressive, non-normative, unruly, and transformative pregnant body—which serves as a vessel for its similarly dangerous (and often female) offspring. The examples in this chapter are all from Japanese games, whereas those in the following chapter are from North American games, specifically those made by Canadian game company BioWare.

Japan is one of the world's leading producers of video games, with countless studios as well as juggernauts like Nintendo, Sega, and Sony that have deeply impacted and continue to shape the medium (Harris, 2014; Prisco, 2017). Japan also boasts the world's third largest gaming consumer market, ranked only after the United States and China (Newzoo, 2022). Although Kristeva's conceptualization of the abject, Creed's notion of the monstrous-feminine, as well as parallel concepts like Bakhtin's grotesque, all have their roots in Western aesthetics, mythologies, cultural trends, psychoanalysis, and scholarship, many of these concepts, trends, and tropes speak more about human tendencies rather than specific cultures, times, peoples, and places, and so can be applied to Japanese games as well.

As Raechel Dumas (2018) notes in her book exploring the monstrous-feminine in contemporary Japanese horror media, "the monstrous-feminine is a largely ubiquitous trope, materializing across

global borders in myriad localized contexts, often at the nexus of anxiety-ridden discourses centered on shifting paradigms of subjectivity, cultural identity, and nationhood" (p. 2). She elaborates on the Japanese context:

> While Creed's analysis is limited in scope to Western horror films, her observations provide a fruitful point of departure for thinking also about the monstrous-feminine in Japan. Monstrous configurations of femininity have long occupied a place in the Japanese cultural imaginary, routinely emerging as sites for modeling deviant (and reinforcing normative) moral behaviors and social norms. (Dumas, 2018, p. 3)

Indeed, like Western horror, Japanese horror is rife with female and feminized monsters, from the sexualized Jorōgumo, or "prostitute spider"/"whore spider," discussed previously to the recurring trope of the creepy, pale young girl with long dark hair inspired by the onryō, a feminine vengeful ghost. As this chapter discusses, female reproduction and reproductive organs and bodies are also a fraught, anxiety-ridden subject for Japanese horror. The next chapter focuses on Western iterations of pregnant, birthing, and/or maternal female and feminized ludic monstrosity, and it will become apparent that these creatures speak to the same misogynistic anxieties, fears, and hatred towards pregnant and maternal bodies and behaviours across the two cultures.[2]

As several feminist scholars have long noted, the portrayal of female reproduction as monstrous, unruly, dangerous, and threatening is intertwined with anxieties around the unchecked power of the transformative, malleable, and "morphologically dubious" (Braidotti, 2011, p. 226) reproductive female body, and the threat of female fecundity (see Arnold, 2013; Braidotti, 2011; Caputi, 2006; Creed, 1993; Harrington, 2018; Kristeva, 1982; Santos, 2017; Ussher, 2006; Wood & Schillace, 2014, among others). These scholars have thoroughly explored monstrous pregnancy and maternity in mythology and horror film, highlighting how harmful representations circulate

and are remediated, thereby impacting "real-world" socio-cultural attitudes. Conversely, scholarship on this topic in video games is sparce, but as I hope to demonstrate throughout this book, video games can be particularly harmful because players must actively murder these pregnant and maternal 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 often victimized and made monstrous against their wills, as will be discussed in this chapter. 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.

As I have explored elsewhere (Stang, 2017), 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; Stang, 2017; Voorhees, 2016)—mothers are rarely portrayed at all and almost never positioned as active agents, heroic figures, or playable characters. Indeed, mothers in games are generally absent, deceased before the story begins, killed off during the game, or portrayed as villains or monsters (Harkin, 2020; Stang, 2019; Stang & Trammell, 2020; Vanderhoef & Payne, 2018). This tendency is 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 and childbirth 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 games they are often presented in superficial, unrealistic, and exaggerated ways (Cruikshank, 2015; Mendelytė, 2023; Stang, 2019; Thomas & Lupton, 2015). As Lauren Cruikshank (2015) has discussed, the few video games that incorporate pregnancy and childbirth "largely replicate the misrepresentations, distortions, deletions, and

exaggerations around birth that occur in other media portrayals" (p. 32). Indeed, these portrayals largely perpetuate both potentially harmful misinformation as well as oppressive gender-based stereotypes, assumptions, and norms.

Despite the fact that half of all players identify as women (ESAC, 2022),[3] there remains a widespread cultural assumption that mothers do not play video games, or if they do, they mostly only play "casual" mobile phone games (Chess, 2017; Harvey, 2015; Vanderhoef, 2013). This assumption is reflected in the fact that mothers are not a widely recognized or studied segment of the player demographic and developers and publishers almost never explicitly target mothers in their marketing campaigns, which continue to focus on boys and young men as the primary audience (Summers & Miller, 2014; Vossen, 2018). Yet, a study of "gamer moms" conducted by one of the largest game development and publishing corporations in the world, Activision Blizzard (which is now owned by Microsoft, the world's largest software corporation), found that one in five gamers are women with children—a considerable segment that they acknowledge has remained largely unstudied (Activision Blizzard Media, 2023). Although this report, entitled *Mom's Got Game*, is only one marketing-focused report done by one company, it does highlight that at least some segments of the mainstream game industry are beginning to recognize that "the stereotype that women, and especially moms, don't enjoy playing video games couldn't be further from the truth" (Activision Blizzard Media, 2023, p. 11).[4]

Cultural understandings of pregnancy, birth, and motherhood continue to play a major role in shaping how femininity and femaleness are constructed, understood, and internalized by members of society, across gender identities, reproductive choices, and parental statuses. Mediated representations provide individuals with the content and context for forming identities, identifying the groups with whom they belong, and, consequently, understanding how they should relate to others. Portrayals of pregnancy, birth, and motherhood in popular media influence not only the self-perception of those who are pregnant

or identify as mothers but also how others understand and relate to those experiences and identities. As a hugely popular and influential medium for a considerable percentage of the population, video games are therefore a key means by which messages about pregnancy, birth, and motherhood are communicated. Unfortunately.

The Mother of the Monstrous Brood

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 (1993) 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)

Parthenogenetic reproduction might seem to empower the mother, giving her uncontested control over her offspring, but 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 such as the succubus, siren, or spider women discussed in the previous chapters are presumably born monstrous, part of a monstrous race or species. But 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—a pregnant body becomes a spectacle, stared at and touched without consent as a visible manifestation 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 well-being) to protect the all-important foetus. 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 self-infection-as-impregnation—are clearly paralleled in the games discussed in this chapter: Square's, 1998 cult classic *Parasite Eve*; an early and more recent installment in the long-running *Resident Evil* series, *Resident Evil – Code: Veronica* (Capcom, 2000) and *Resident Evil Village* (Capcom, 2021); the third installment in the horror classic *Silent Hill* series, *Silent Hill 3* (Team Silent, 2003); Headstrong Games' campy 2009 rail shooter *House of the Dead: Overkill*; FromSoftware's disturbing but beloved *Bloodborne* (2015); and, finally, the "dadified" survival horror game *The Evil Within 2* (Tango Gameworks, 2017). These examples were chosen to illustrate the ways Japanese horror games present pregnancy and birth as horrific and monstrous. Although this is by no means an exhaustive list, they serve to showcase the ludic monstrous-feminine outside of a Western context, though it

should be noted that video games are a global medium, so these games were, and still are, widely consumed by audiences around the world.

The Monster Within Her: Pregnancy as Mutation and Infection

Parasite Eve: The Mother of the Ultimate Being

The titular Eve from *Parasite Eve* was originally a famous opera singer named Melissa Pearce. At the beginning of the game, she seems to develop heinous powers and cause audiences gathered to see her perform to spontaneously combust or melt/decompose into piles of orange slime. The game's player-protagonist, NYPD officer Aya Brea, discovers that Eve's powers are the result of mutating, out of control, parasitic mitochondria within her body. These mitochondria, who call themselves "Eve" because they come only from female cells and seek to start a new race of beings, cause Melissa/Eve to mutate into a huge, floating female creature with unnaturally long arms that end in sharp claws and a pointed, phallic lower half.

Eve knows her own body will not last much longer with the rapidly growing mitochondria within her, so she steals sperm from a hospital and uses it to impregnate herself, seeking to give birth to an "Ultimate Being" that can contain the mitochondria and start a new, advanced species. Importantly, the stolen sperm has been genetically altered to have no male chromosome/mitochondria, so that the Ultimate Being will be purely female and not come under threat by male mitochondria, which sabotage the female evolution. While the "science" behind this is nonsensical, the key is that this mutating monster, this Ultimate Being, is a foetus with entirely female DNA, growing at an accelerated rate within Eve.

Eve gathers the orange slime from her melted victims and uses it to form a protective barrier around her "nest" so she can give birth in peace. Aya realizes her body is also infected with those parasitic

mitochondria, meaning that she may also become a monster like Eve, but the benefit of this is that she is immune to Eve's powers. She dissolves the orange slime barrier and defeats Eve, causing her body to also melt into orange goo. The baby is still born, however, emerging from the bloody, orange slime. It starts out in its Baby form, a baby-like creature with an enlarged head with visible brain matter under the skin, a tail, and wings, before evolving into even more monstrous forms as Aya fights it: the Child, Adolescent, and Adult forms. Aya defeats the creature by shooting it with bullets containing her own, more powerful mitochondria, and rigging a massive explosion to take it out completely.

The game is full of body horror imagery, with Eve's victims melting into grotesque piles of bloody orange slime with bloody slime running from their eyes and other orifices, as well as mutated "Neo-Mitochondrial Creatures," such as a rat that undergoes a bloody mutation into a giant monstrosity, a giant bipedal alligator monster, a dog whose face splits into three heads and whose body enlarges to the size of an elephant, and, interestingly, a horrific woman-brain-spider hybrid monster called "Spiderwoman." But the most horrific body is that of the heavily pregnant Eve (Fig. 4.1).

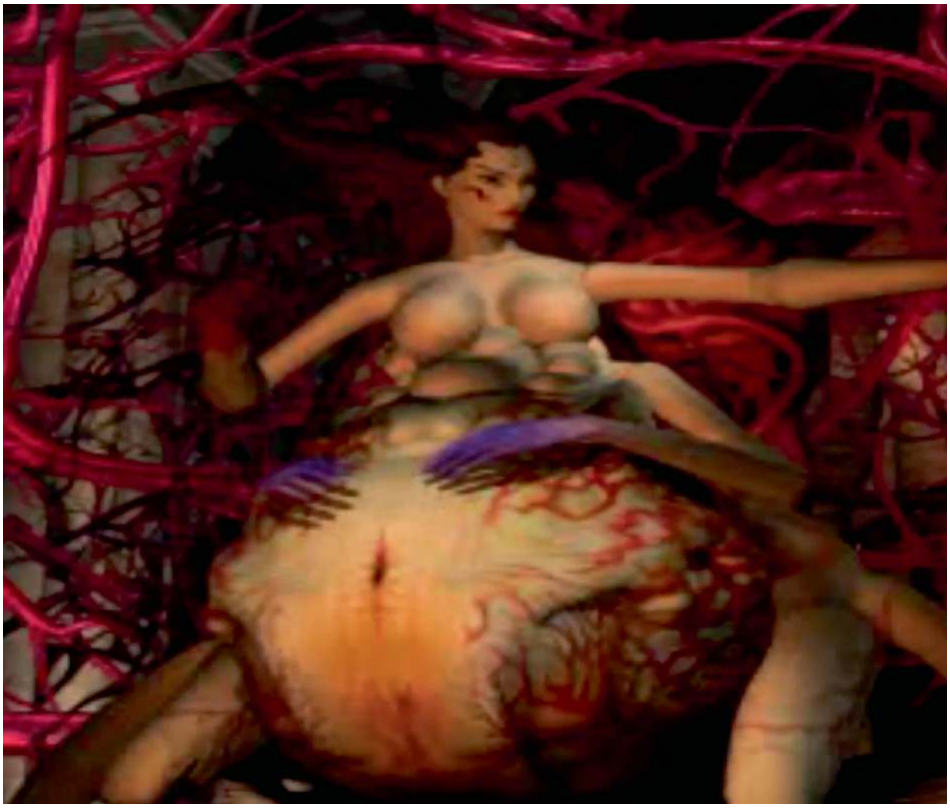


Fig. 4.1 Screenshot of a heavily pregnant Eve from *Parasite Eve.* Note the body horror elements of her form—multiple limbs, unnatural proportions, and a grotesquely swollen belly

Her giant body has grown multiple limbs and breasts—a trope we will see again with other pregnant monsters—and her swollen belly is unnaturally large, covered in veins and seemingly ready to burst. She sits like a fertility goddess on a throne in her nest/lair, covered and entangled in what look like blood vessels, evoking placental imagery. With one set of her hands resting gently and protectively on her belly and a calm, beatific smile, she is like a posthuman Madonna, ready to birth forth a divine being that will spell the end of humanity as it is and usher in a new age dominated by a more advanced, evolved, mitochondrial form of life. Eve declares that "nucleic domination has finally come to an end once and for all," but that is, of course, framed as a bad thing within the game's anthropocentric (nucleic-centric?) narrative.

Eve's body represents horrific, mutant, parasitic pregnancy and an (entirely female) unchecked threat to the entire human species.

Pregnancy as a mutation or a parasitical infection is a common trope in horror media, perhaps inspired by some reproductive processes found in the insect world in which eggs are laid inside living victims and hatch within their bodies, allowing the larvae to eat them from the inside. The *Alien* franchise's Xenomorphs are an iconic example of this—a "Facehugger" hatches from an egg, latching onto the victim's face and implanting, or impregnating, them orally with a Xenomorph embryo. The embryo grows inside them until it becomes a "Chestburster" which, as its name suggests, violently births itself by bursting from the victim's chest. Yet, like the mitochondrial Ultimate Being growing inside Eve, this is more than just a parasitical infection and is almost akin to rapid, cancerous evolution within a host. The Chestburster uses the host's genetic material to construct its own body, thereby taking on some of their physical attributes. The extraterrestrial threat to humanity, then, resembles the very victim it seeks to destroy. Similarly, mitochondria are within our bodies—the "powerhouse of the cell"—and *Parasite Eve* speculates on what might happen if the threat to the human species were to come from within rather than without.

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). Yet, for Eve, her foetus is not oppositional, even as her mutations result in her own death. Rather, she is willingly and purposely birthing forth what she sees as the future—a nonhuman, female future—which is, of course, the doom of humanity. While Eve is not set up in opposition to a male protagonist (*Parasite Eve* is an example of a game featuring a female playable protagonist which, as discussed in the introductory chapter, is a relatively rare occurrence), as a blonde, blue-eyed police officer, Aya can be read as a representative of idealized, normative, militaristic, white patriarchal womanhood. While she also has mutating mitochondria, Aya uses her powers and her gun to defend normative, patriarchal society and to violently destroy the feminized threat Eve and her offspring represent. Eve is the "bad woman" and "bad mother" who chooses to grow and birth the harbinger of humanity's end, and although Aya is not a

mother, she does represent the "good woman" and the protector of humanity. Aya does become a mother, or mother-figure in the game's sequel, *Parasite Eve II* (1999), in which a shadow organization clones her and, interestingly, names the clone-child Eve, since she also has the advanced mitochondria within her. Aya adopts Eve, protecting her and raising her as her own daughter/little sister.

The parallels between *Parasite Eve* and the *Alien* franchise continue, then, as many feminist scholars have read Sigourney Weaver's character Ellen Ripley, the protagonist of the original *Alien* series and famed hero of humanity, as the "good," civilized, white (WASP), clean mother (who, like Aya, is also not a mother at first but becomes one in the film's sequel *Aliens* by adopting a young girl) in contrast with the Xenomorph queen as the "bad," uncontrollable, primal/bestial, dark, archaic, phallic mother (see Berg, 1989; Bundtzen, 1987; Caputi & Sagle, 2004; Creed, 1993; Harrington, 2018; among others). Ripley and Aya have both been celebrated as non-sexualized "strong female protagonists," yet works that pit one kind of femininity against another are always going to be fraught. Lynda K. Bundtzen's (1987) observation about *Aliens* could just as readily be applied to Eve (read as the Xenomorph Queen) and Aya (read as Ripley): "What is so disturbing about this film from a feminist perspective, then, is its extreme opposition of two kinds of maternal nurture: the instinctual and biological in the Alien, and the conscious, chosen, cultural motherhood of Ripley" (p. 15).

While reading the Xenomorph Queen as a symbolic representation of unchecked female fecundity and a gross caricature of female reproductive processes has been a popular undertaking for feminist film scholars, the same kind of attention has not been directed at video games like *Parasite Eve*, even though it can be argued that Eve is a clearer example of this, given that she was originally a normative human woman. Although I am writing this almost 40 years later, Bundtzen's (1987) words still resonate with this example as well as all the examples I discuss in this book:

> I want to ask why the female body must be represented with such primal terror, such intense repugnance, and why it needs to be so resoundingly defeated, sucked into the vacuum of space as if thrown back into whatever imaginative void could have germinated such horror. (p. 16)

Eve is not ejected into the vacuum of space, rather she melts into a pile of bloody orange goo—a far more abject, disturbing, and visceral (and viscous) end which is arguably worse than the more sterile and removed fate of the Xenomorph Queen. On the other hand, Eve smiles as she dissolves, perhaps knowing that her body would not have lasted much longer anyway with its out-of-control mutations, and her baby will still be birthed from her, so maybe she is content with her fate.

In her close reading of the original source material for the game, a 1995 novel by Hideaki Sena also titled *Parasite Eve*, Dumas (2018) notes how "the titular antagonist of *Eve* represents at once an intriguing and deeply troubling fusion of Darwinian horror and enduring anxieties regarding the place of the maternal in Japanese socio-political life" (p. 59). Dumas observes that "the female body in the Japanese pop cultural imagination is routinely constructed as a site that is volatile, uncontainable, penetrable and penetrating, incorporating, excessively desirous, and unrelentingly generative" (p. 7). She shows how this manifests in *Parasite Eve,* as "the female body becomes an ever more robust source of terror that is articulated as unchecked erotic desire and unremitting reproductive momentum" (p. 66).

This could be said of the game, yet in many ways the game is tamer than the book, even with all the gore and body horror. In the game, Melissa becomes Eve very quickly, without lingering on how Melissa felt about this transformation. She impregnates herself with genetically altered sperm taken from a clinical setting and willingly dies to give birth to the Ultimate Being. In the book, Eve takes over her host's body in a much more gradual and drawn-out way, subsuming her consciousness and so effectively killing her. Eve rapes the male protagonist to collect his sperm, uses it to fertilize the egg, and then

forcefully implants it in the uterus of a young girl who has been infected with the mutant mitochondria. The birth nearly splits the young girl open, thereby highlighting how Eve is not a self-sacrificing mother but a being who uses and abuses the bodies of women and young girls. In the book, the final struggle is between the mitochondrial female DNA and the male DNA from the sperm used to create it. The newly born female monstrous mitochondrial organism seeks to annihilate genes inherited through the male line but is in fact vulnerable to them. The male protagonist assimilates his body into the newly born organism and his male DNA wins, thereby saving the human species—mankind—from the feminized threat. A man and his maleness save the day, whereas in the game it is a young woman with similarly mutated mitochondria who is the hero.

As Dumas (2018) argues, in the book, "the unruly maternal body, compelled by unbridled libidinal drives and procreative impulses, is subordinated to a masculine economy of power" (p. 70). In this sense, as problematic as the game is, it can actually be read in more positive light by contrast—Eve kills countless people, but she sacrifices her own body (or that of Melissa) to bring forth the Ultimate Being rather than forcing a young girl to undergo a horrific and traumatic birth that ruins her body. And she is brought down by a woman and her similarly empowered mitochondria rather than a man/male DNA (of course, Aya is a police officer, so can be interpreted as a representative of that "masculine economy of power"). Although the game allows players the catharsis of destroying a monstrous mother and her horrific offspring, it can be read as less misogynistic—rather than having the female monster threaten other women and girls and be defeated by a man/the very building blocks of maleness, the female monster is brought down by a powerful but non-reproductive "good" woman. Like *Alien*, this is still *not great.* But, after reading the book, at least it is clear it could have been worse.

Becoming and Birthing God(esse)s

Resident Evil

While playable female protagonists are relatively rare in video games, centralizing normative white women who use guns to defeat pregnant female monsters seems to be a recurring aspect in Japanese horror games from the late 1990s and early 2000s. The Resident Evil franchise is particularly noteworthy in this trend with Claire Redfield, who first appeared as one of two playable character options alongside male protagonist Leon S. Kennedy in *Resident Evil 2*. The second game she appears in, *Resident Evil – Code: Veronica* (Capcom, 2000), is noteworthy regarding its portrayal of the monstrous-feminine, and it has already had some attention in this regard from game scholars (Alton, 2020; Santos & White, 2005). As Marc C. Santos and Sarah E. White (2005) observe, the final boss of that game, Alexia Ashford, perfectly embodies Kristeva's abject maternal and Creed's monstrous-feminine. Their description of her mutations is worth quoting at length:

> We watch the beautiful yet deranged Alexia Ashford undergo 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)

Although Claire is not the one to defeat Alexia—players must play as her brother Chris Redfield for the second half of the game—the parallels with the monstrous maternity of Eve and that of Alexia are clear. In this sense, Claire is like Aya—the "good" woman placed in contrast with the "bad," out-of-control, fecund monstrous-feminine.

Like Eve, Alexia is more than willing to undergo her transformations in order to create/become the first of an evolved, advanced species. She infected herself with a virus that would transform her and grant her immense power and placed herself in suspended animation to allow it to gestate within her. It is worth noting that Alexia releases parasitic insects—her offspring, perhaps—to attack the player-character; attacks with phallic tentacles erupting from her body; and transforms into an insect-like flying creature with a phallic "stinger" emerging from her lower half, much like Eve. As Chris Alton (2020) observes, all this lends weight to the interpretation of Alexia as an example of Creed's dual concepts of the monstrous womb and the phallic mother. In other words, Alexia is yet another "bad" mother who empowers and impregnates herself and reproduces parthenogenetically.

Code: Veronica is by no means the only game in the *Resident Evil* series to focus on reproductive and maternal horror. The primary antagonist of the more recent mainline installment, *Resident Evil Village* (Capcom, 2021), is Mother Miranda, a cult leader infected with a powerful black "Mold" with the power to absorb and assimilate both genetic material and consciousnesses, and whose fungal root looks like a giant foetus. Miranda and her cult worship this Mold as "the Black God" and her infection has granted her superhuman abilities, such as invulnerability, immortality, and shapeshifting (including the ability to shapeshift into an "Old Hag" à la the Evil Queen from Disney's *Snow White*). Stricken by the loss of her daughter Eva, whose body and consciousness was absorbed/assimilated by the Black God/Mold, she seeks to sacrifice Rose, the daughter of the playable protagonist Ethan, and use her body as a vessel to house the Black God and Eva's consciousness along with it. In this sense, like Eve, Miranda seeks to give life and form to an ultimate/divine being. Of course, she is defeated at the end of the game—Ethan sacrifices himself to defeat her and save his daughter—and she cries out her daughter's name before dying. Miranda is not as physically monstrous as other examples here—she does not mutate into a grotesque, exaggerated, hybrid form—but she is an example of maternal horror in that a) she is infected by something

evil and alien (that, of course, looks like a human foetus)[5] that grants her supernatural abilities and b) her desperation for her daughter (her "maternal instincts") drives her to extreme, dangerous behaviour. She seeks to infect others with that same evil and is fixated on the rebirth of her daughter, which would also mean the birth of an ultimate/advanced/divine being. She is defeated by a father (and the player) protecting his daughter because heroic fathers will always defeat monstrous mothers—a pattern I return to later in this chapter.

In addition, Lady Alcina Dimitrescu, another woman infected with the Mold, also becomes a monstrous mother to monstrous daughters, though her monstrosity has a more physical manifestation. Miranda infested Dimitrescu with a Mold-exposed, nematode-like parasite called a Cadou, effectively turning her into an immortal vampire with sharp, extendable claws and gigantic proportions—leading to her fetishization among some fans, particularly because of her huge, almost 10-foot stature and large breasts as well as her aristocratic *femme fatale* vibe (Winkie, 2021). Dimitrescu conducted another experiment with Miranda wherein the corpses of three women were implanted with the same Mold parasites. Over the course of a week, the parasites released blowfly like organisms that consumed the corpses from within and assimilated their DNA, as the Black God/Mold does. The parasites coalesced into three women-like creatures resembling the corpses they fed on and, like Dimitrescu, they must feed on human flesh and blood, and they also have the ability to transform into swarms of flies. Dimitrescu named and adopted the three women as her own daughters, and they live together in her castle as a family where they rule over, terrorize, and feed upon the human residents of the village and servants in their castle. The daughters compete with each other for their mother's attention and approval, which, together with the fact that there is no father, signals the psychoanalytic "bad mother" who enacts total control over her children and creates those "deformed manifestations of herself" (p. 47) through parthenogenetic reproduction, as Creed (1993) discussed in her analysis of *The Brood.*

Again, Dimitrescu is not as physically monstrous as Eve or Alexia, but she is clearly inhuman and signals her monstrosity through her extreme, exaggerated physicality. Her size and vampiric bloodlust/cannibalism aligns her with both the grotesque and the abject—Creed discusses female vampires in relation to abjection and blood at length in *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993, pp. 58–71)—yet, like the succubus/female vampire/*femme fatale* monsters who prey on men discussed earlier in this book, she is still an object of fascination and fetishization. Women do not have to be overly monstrous to be rendered abject, as they are always already abject monsters within the misogynistic ideology of patriarchal society. In an interview with IGN (Krabbe, 2021), the game's (male) director Morimasa Sato discusses the design of Dimitrescu:

> We tried a lot of different things in order to make the Countess scary and feel like a boss character. There were ideas to make her more creature-like as well, but in the end we felt that a towering woman was the most simple yet powerful thing we could do.

Indeed, a woman does not have to be "creature-like" to be considered a monster, she just has to be tall, dominant, older, and a single mother. Sato describes Dimitrescu's castle and family, and Miranda's cult, as "a hierarchy of women" and notes that "Ethan has a family he is trying to protect, so we wanted to have a family for Lady Dimitrescu as well, to provide a contrast" (Krabbe, 2021). Ethan is allowed to fight and kill for his family and be hailed as a hero and the subject of player identification, but women who do the same like Dimitrescu and Miranda are villains and monsters presented as enemies for the player to destroy. Again, fathers will always defeat mothers in video games. IGN writer Esra Krabbe (2021) writes:

> This horror experience in which a relatively weak male character is terrorised by imposing women seems to draw inspiration from a type of sadomasochistic fantasy that is rarely

> seen in videogames. Within the Resident Evil series, Lady Dimitrescu and her three daughters are a threat of a kind that we have never seen before.

This claim is untrue—giant monstrous women have been featured in video games for a long time—but, more importantly, his claim that this game is a sadomasochistic fantasy assumes the player would be a man and identify with Ethan's masculinity. Female players, especially those who may identify more with a woman like Dimitrescu, such as older women and/or mothers, are not assumed to be part of the player base. This game was not made for them, but for the "weak" men who fetishize and fantasize about Dimitrescu, but still murder her and her daughters in a heroic paternal power fantasy, *not* a sadomasochistic fantasy.

While there is no literal horrific pregnancy in these two examples, Mother Miranda is infected with the Mold of her Black God and wishes to use that same infection to have her daughter reborn within the body of another, which speaks to monstrous infection-as-reproduction. The corpses being implanted with the parasites that then devour them from within could be interpreted as a form of monstrous infestation-as-impregnation, in the same way the Facehuggers implant an embryo within their victims in the *Alien* franchise, which then bursts from their bodies. Just as the Xenomorph embryo absorbs the genetic information from its host, thereby taking on aspects of its appearance once "born," the Mold parasites take on the form of their victim's bodies, meaning they are both born and made from those dead women. Regardless of their monstrous, undead, insect-like, parasitical nature, Dimitrescu clearly loves and cares for them. However, Ethan kills all three daughters in his quest to recover his own daughter and Dimitrescu hunts him down to enact vengeance. Of course, she is defeated by the player in a climactic battle. Heroic fathers will always defeat monstrous mothers, especially if their little girls are in danger. This mother-vs-father theme will be returned to later in this chapter.

Silent Hill 3

Silent Hill is another iconic Japanese horror franchise that features countless examples of the monstrous-feminine and the abject maternal. The first game in the series features paternal protagonist Harry Mason pitted against a bad/villainous (and single) mother who seeks to forcefully impregnate her daughter—whom she has psychologically and physically abused and tortured her whole life—with a divine "seed" to birth a female deity she and her cult worship. As Dumas (2018) discusses in depth, the physical locations in the game "are connotative of the monstrous dimensions of the female reproductive body" (p. 136) and evoke Creed's (1993) description of the "monstrous womb." Many of the monsters evoke common tropes of the monstrous-feminine, such as the *vagina dentata* and the castrating or phallic mother. The game is full of "dark maternal forces whose power to penetrate and annihilate the body threatens the male protagonist" (Dumas, 2018, p. 137). These themes continue in the third installment of the series, though this time you play as the adopted daughter of the previous games' paternal protagonist.

Silent Hill 3 (Team Silent, 2003), like *Parasite Eve*, centralizes a "good" woman/would-be mother who refuses to reproduce as the playable protagonist, a teenager named Heather Mason, and culminates with a final boss battle against a "bad," abject, reproductive mother, Claudia. Like Eve, Claudia seeks to bring about the birth of a god, a monstrous female creature adored and worshipped by a cult who believes she will supposedly bring about a paradise on Earth. However, Heather is the one intended, or perhaps destined, to birth the god and is already implanted with the divine "seed," which has been within her since birth. Claudia murders Heather's father, the series' previous playable protagonist Harry Mason, and so Heather's driving ambition is two-fold: to deal with the malevolent entity developing inside of her and to seek vengeance for the murder of her beloved father. To deal with the first issue, Heather swallows a substance given to her by her father that allows her to vomit up the divine embryo growing within her—an abject response to an abject experience—and tries to crush the

writhing foetus under her boot. Claudia, in desperation, pushes Heather aside and swallows the expelled embryo to attempt to birth the god herself. The process causes Claudia's body to begin to transform and she flees into a hole—a dark, ruptured slit, like a torn vaginal opening after a particularly violent birth—into a chamber with reddish-pink, fleshy walls. Although players do not see it, the god must have burst out of Claudia, as there is nothing but her bloody dress left behind.

While Claudia does not undergo physical transformation as a result of her pregnancy like Eve, she does give birth to a monstrous offspring, which is then the focus of the player's violence. The player as Heather must then fight God, the final boss of the game, whose large, twitchy body is only half-formed, with exposed bone, missing flesh, and unfinished limbs. She has a mostly human face and long dark hair, but her skin is covered in fine black lines, like a cracked porcelain mask. Once the player defeats her, Heather viciously kicks her head a few times to make sure she is truly dead before turning to leave. Heather's viciousness is in part because the creature killed Claudia in the process of being born, denying Heather the satisfaction of enacting direct vengeance against the woman who murdered her father.

Eve and Claudia wilfully and purposely impregnate themselves in order to bring forth an ultimate or divine being. They sacrifice themselves for their child, accepting their death in order to bring forth new life. In this sense, they embody idealized, self-sacrificial motherhood, yet they are still monstrous mothers because their offspring are monstrous—ultimate/divine female beings created without male input, and so a threat to patriarchy and all it stands for. Sarah Arnold (2013) discusses horror films with similar narrative set-ups in which women become pregnant with monstrous offspring, noting that "the ideology of essential motherhood becomes horrific when the pregnancy and resulting offspring are represented as monstrous … these horrors present mothers who carry out their self-sacrificing and nurturing duties for monstrous babies" (p. 167). By contrast, Alexia's pregnancy-like mutations result from her infecting herself and letting the virus gestate within her, a choice she makes in

order to transform into a powerful, insect queen-like monstrosity. Her transformations are not to bring forth a divine/ultimate being, but to become one—she is a reproductive monster, but not a maternal one. Mother Miranda and Lady Dimitrescu, on the other hand, are not pregnant monsters but are "bad mothers" in that they engage with horrific reproduction in relation to creating or recreating their daughters. Miranda tries to use the powers of the Mold to have her daughter reborn in the body of another and Dimitrescu uses the same Mold parasite that infested her and gave her powers to create her own daughters.

Although the way they engage with maternal and reproductive horror differs, these characters all embody the fear of female reproduction as a form of empowerment. While reproducing is the only way many women are allowed to be empowered/have power within patriarchal society, this is an unacceptable form of empowerment—reproduction that is not "natural" and does not involve male input and therefore poses an unseemly threat. And so their attempts are disrupted—aborted—by the player. Eve dies before seeing her baby, though she seems to accept that fate and perhaps it is a mercy she did not live to see her child murdered by Aya. Alexia does not seem to care for the parasites/insects she spawns, suggesting she does not see them as children but rather simply as weapons—something familiar to the reproductive spider women like Queen Algenie discussed in the previous chapter and a trend that will be revisited again in the following chapter. Miranda is killed before she can have her daughter reborn, clearly mourning her loss until the very end, and Dimitrescu's daughters are killed off by the player one by one, until she—devastated, enraged, and heartbroken—also meets her end. Claudia also dies before seeing her beloved god, though again she seems to have accepted her fate when she swallowed the divine foetus, knowing the host body would not survive the birth. Eve and Claudia can be seen as self-sacrificing mothers, giving up their own bodies to bring forth new life—theoretically a good thing within a traditionalist, patriarchal worldview—but since the life they seek to birth is inhuman, divine/superior to

humanity, and, importantly, *female*, this is not celebrated but rather treated as horrific and inexcusable. The monstrous goddess and her monstrous mother must both be destroyed—by normative young women who choose *not* to become reproductive monsters or vessels for divine beings themselves—in order to restore normative, patriarchal order.

House of the Dead: Overkill

One interesting, albeit disturbing and horrific, example of a reversal of this trope of self-infection-as-impregnation is in Headstrong Games', 2009 co-op rail shooter game *House of the Dead: Overkill.* Players enact the dual roles of a special agent and a detective—both American men—who are tasked with bringing down the creators of a mysterious substance, a compound called Formula X that causes those who are injected with it to mutate into horrific and violent monstrosities. Gameplay involves simply shooting at endless hordes of mindless mutants interspersed with more challenging boss fights against gigantic monstrosities. The mastermind behind Formula X is a creepy scientist and prison warden named Clement Darling, who created it to try and save his dying elderly mother. Clement plans to put his mother's brain into the body of a young woman named Varla and inject her with Formula X to ensure the transplant works.

Players are introduced to Clement's mother as she is carried in on a litter wearing what appears to be a wedding dress and veil. She is elderly and infirm, but still highly unpleasant. She calls her son a "feckless pissant" and she sees nothing wrong with taking over the body of a younger woman and posing as her. She does object to the choice of host, stating of Varla before the procedure "she's got small tits! Don't use one with small tits, Clement. I forbid it" before roughly smacking Varla on the breast. Clement and his mother start to kiss passionately as the player-characters react with shock and disgust and threaten that they are "going to fucking puke."

After the brain transplant, the mother, posing as the real Varla, flirts with the player-characters, one of whom is in love with Varla and so

particularly susceptible to her flirtation. She claims, “I’ve never felt so turned on in my life!” and offers sex to both men. Clement appears and scolds her for her behaviour, and she tells him to go to his room, enacting a strange parody of a typical mother-child interaction. Infuriated, Clement demands she show him some gratitude and to “act her age.” She slaps him, exclaiming “don’t you ever talk to your mother like that” and the movement reveals the exposed brain beneath her hair. Clement says “sorry, mommy” and they proceed to make out. Clement whispers “I love you, mom” but she starts violently convulsing and vomiting green fluid as her tongue begins to elongate and writhe out of her mouth.

One of the player-characters yells “say night night to Mommy, asshole” and guns the woman down, causing her to fall into a massive vat of the formula. She mutates into a gigantic monster simply called “Mother” and the player(s) must fight and defeat her. Her massive body is naked, emaciated, and the back of her head, neck, and shoulders is covered in swollen growths. She has elongated arms and enlarged hands with sharp claws, a gaping fanged mouth, and a long, phallic tongue. Despite this, Clement declares “Mommy… You’re beautiful!” upon seeing her. During the battle Mother roars and stomps around, causing her drooping breasts to sway and bounce, and swipes, grabs, stomps on, and throws large objects at the players. Her most grotesque action, however, is when she unfurls a sort of sharp insect-like tail (similar to the pointy appendage that both Eve and Alexia have in their mutated forms) crouches down with her hands on her thighs, and pushes as foul green liquid gushes out of her. The player-characters react with disgust, one yelling “oh man, that’s fucking wrong!” as mutant creatures fall out of Mother’s vagina and begin to attack them, exploding with a damaging wave of acid on impact. When it happens again, one of the characters quips “here comes another bundle of joy.” Once she is defeated, she falls to the ground and Clement cries in despair “I can’t go on in a world without my mommy!” before declaring his intention to undo the wrongs he has done by “return[ing] to the womb.” The game’s sarcastic narrator calls this “a final noble act” and

Clement begins to crawl and then limp between his mother's towering legs, stating that he can now "die happy." The camera switches to show the stunned reactions of the player-characters as they hear the sound of wet, fleshy noises and begin to gag while looking on in horror. One of the player-characters makes a joke about Clement being "a real motherfucker."

This game is noteworthy in that rather than a woman infecting herself to become pregnant or mutate into a superior/ultimate/divine being, this woman is infected by her son in order to save her and, as a result, becomes a pregnant/birth-giving monstrosity.[6] In some ways, she becomes like a goddess, at least in the eyes of her devoted son, yet like the others discussed so far, she is still vulnerable to guns. The Mother has little agency in the story, but it is clear her relationship with her son is abusive, incestuous, and obsessive, so even before she becomes monstrous, she was already a "bad" mother and clearly raised a "bad" son. This, the game suggests in a kind of Freudian nightmare, is what happens when mothers and sons are too close, the son never separates himself from the mother, and there is a lack of a father figure. The player-characters call Clement insane, but he insists he is "just a very loving son" and one can only imagine what kind of childhood he had. That he crawls up her giant vagina to die and thereby "atone" for his sins means that he has come full circle—returned to the place of his birth, returned to a place he likely associates with safety, innocence, and peace.

Maternal bodies are indeed liminal bodies, providing the doorway or gateway into life and worldly existence. Though the maternal body is the threshold of life, it is also deeply associated with all-consuming and all-devouring death in psychoanalysis, mythology, and, of course, horror media (Braidotti, 2011; Creed, 1993; Kristeva, 1982). Within a psychoanalytic framework, 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 myths and horror films (Creed, 1986, 1993). 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 (something Clement from *House of the Dead: Overkill* clearly did not do). A child that fails to separate themselves from their mother (or whose mother refuses to let them go) will never develop into their own person and will instead remain part of her. When the mother is rejected by her child, as she should be according to this theory, she becomes abject—meaning that all mothers are "supposed" to become abject beings. It is clear this game is riffing off of these popular conceptions of psychoanalysis, especially the "Oedipus complex" in which the male child desires his mother and sees his father as his rival for this mother's affections. In this sense, the game's ending in which mother and son become one and then die together seems as appropriate as it is disturbing and disgusting. Returning to the *Alien* franchise, Mother in *House of the Dead: Overkill* resembles Creed's reading of the Xenomorph Queen as the archaic mother—"the voracious maw, the mysterious black hole which … threatens to give birth to equally horrific offspring as well as threatening to incorporate everything in its path" (1986, p. 63). Indeed, Clement's mother's body both produces monstrous offspring and devours her (willing) son.

While psychoanalytic theorists—Kristeva included—took this seriously and seemed to truly believe that mothers *must* become abject for proper selfhood to develop (see Creed, 1993; Tyler, 2009), it is clear that this is simply another way to justify society's terrible treatment of mothers. Like Creed, Carroll, Tyler, and others, I am deeply sceptical of psychoanalysis, and yet as many scholars of horror media have argued, countless filmmakers seem to have been deeply influenced by this worldview—perhaps unsurprising, given the cultural impact of psychoanalysis in the twentieth century. Indeed, evil, monstrous mothers are ubiquitous in popular culture, especially in horror films. *House of the Dead: Overkill* pokes fun at this overused trope throughout the game, but especially in the final, closing banter between the two player-characters, in which one refers to their experience as "a

damning fucking indictment of contemporary feminism." As explanation, he states: "I just think two dick-wielding cop clichés taking down a hundred foot birthing mother is a statement fairly limited in its interpretations." The same kind of joke could be made about pretty much every monster discussed in this book—the descriptions and images practically speak for themselves in the ways they scream their misogyny. And yet, these kinds of games continue to get made—without the self-awareness demonstrated by the campy tone and commentary in *House of the Dead: Overkill*—suggesting that not everyone "gets" the joke or is trying to make one. Rather, these monsters are featured because developers really do feel they are the most effective for their games (and, based on critical acclaim and commercial success, many players agree)—the scariest, most repulsive, and most horrifying things they could come up with are women's bodies made monstrous. As Santos and White (2005) argue, although the playable protagonists all use guns to fight, in these games players are tasked with doing more than just shooting "bad guys," rather 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 (p. 77). So, continue to interpret we shall.

Bloodborne

FromSoft's 2015 Gothic/Lovecraftian cult classic *Bloodborne* is perhaps the most apt game to discuss on the subject of the conception and birthing of evil gods and monstrous, horrific impregnation-as-infection/mutation. The game is set in the Gothic city of Yharnam, home of the Healing Church which administers miraculous, healing blood to all who come seeking treatment for their illnesses. In reality, this church is a cult that worships the "Great Ones"—ancient, monstrous, eldritch beings whose divine blood heals all illnesses but also is the sources of a plague that causes hideous transformations into monstrous creatures. The player is a Hunter tasked with hunting down and killing the ferocious beasts that roam the city's streets—even after

discovering they used to be people. The Great Ones long to reproduce but, for an unexplained reason, are generally unable to do so, producing only stillbirths or unfinished beings. Yet they continue to try by periodically impregnating human women.

The game is deeply preoccupied with impregnation, reproduction, (still)birth, infanticide, and blood, with the player receiving gifts of blood from various women, exploring locations like "the Nightmare of Mensis," using items called "Red Jelly" that look like bloody foetuses for conducting rituals, and collecting and consuming divine umbilical cords covered in eyes collected from the Great Ones' failed attempts to reproduce with humans. The description for these umbilical cords reads: "every Great One loses its child, and then yearns for a surrogate." If players consume three of these umbilical cords, they can unlock a secret ending called "Childhood's Beginning" in which they are transformed into/reborn as a newborn Great One, a purple squid-like creature, though it is left ambiguous as to whether this would be considered a "good" ending or a "bad" one. As players progress, the moon climaxes in an enormous red "Blood Moon," evoking a connection between the lunar cycle and a menstrual cycle. The game prophesizes that "when the red moon hangs low, the line between man and beast is blurred. And when the Great Ones descend, a womb will be blessed with child." Indeed, when the Blood Moon appears, various women the player had previously encountered (many of whom gifted the player with vials of their blood) suddenly start to feel ill and strange—they have been impregnated by Great Ones trying to produce viable offspring. This is a nightmarish twist on the well-known myth of a "virgin birth" in which a woman is "chosen" by a male god—such as the one from Christian mythology or more ancient versions of the same kind of patriarchal figurehead like Zeus from ancient Greek mythology—and impregnated without any apparent sexual contact (or consent).[7]

These impregnated women are clearly in agony, though some seem to relish being "chosen" by the gods. The pregnancies progress at an alarming rate and one of these unfortunate women, Arianna, is later found after following a trail of her blood. She is slumped over in a chair

with a crying, writhing, bloody slug-like creature—a “Celestial Child,” or a failed attempt to birth a Great One—on the ground in front of her. Players can kill this newborn monster, which instantly kills Arianna as well, which grants them one of the umbilical cords previously mentioned. Players can also kill another pregnant woman—one who delights in having been chosen—and obtain another umbilical cord. Yet another one is acquired after being told to “seek the nightmare newborn” and killing a Great One called “Mergo’s Wet Nurse”—a large, black-winged, multi-limbed, faceless monster who guards a pram.

Mergo is the name of an infant Great One, seemingly the only known successful Great One birth, though it is unclear how “successful” it was, as Mergo is never seen and the game implies the baby was stillborn or died shortly after birth. Mergo’s mother is Yharnam, the queen of an ancient civilization of large, pale humanoids called the Pthumerians, and the city’s namesake. She is seen several times in the game, a ghostly figure wearing a white wedding dress but with bloodstains covering her abdomen and running down the front of her dress. Weeping with her hands bound in front of her, she gazes up at the moon with a look of longing while the player hears the sound of her baby crying—perhaps it was stolen from her by the monstrous Wet Nurse, though the game leaves it unclear. It is also unclear if the blood covering her dress is from the baby bursting or being forcefully taken from within her, a disastrous c-section, or simply a symbol of a miscarriage or stillbirth. Right before fighting Mergo’s Wet Nurse, players encounter a pram and hear the sound of an infant crying, and although they collect another umbilical cord as a reward for defeating the Wet Nurse, the pram is empty. Yet, players hear the baby crying while fighting the Wet Nurse, and only when it is defeated does the crying stop and the words “Nightmare Slain” appear on screen, so perhaps killing the Wet Nurse also resulted in the death of the baby.

Mergo’s mother, Queen Yharnam, can be optionally encountered and fought. At the beginning of the battle, she is visibly pregnant and her hands are bound. She attacks the player with her blood, spraying it out of her body and other areas of the room, and after taking some

damage she breaks free from her manacles and creates a blood sword. As the player attacks her, she gets covered in ever increasing amounts of blood as they strike her belly, and the baby within her audibly cries. Mergo's cries are so powerful that they can even stun the player temporarily—like an infant siren, bruxa, or banshee. Once defeated, Queen Yharnam drops an item called a "Yharnam Stone," which resembles a calcified, bloody placenta and foetus (Fig. 4.2). The description reads: "A sacred heirloom left by Yharnam, Pthumerian Queen. The Queen lies dead, but her horrific consciousness is only asleep, and it stirs in unsettling motions." The game's wiki notes under the "Trivia" section that "one could reasonably assume that this is a so-called Lithopedion, a calcified, unborn, dead fetus" ("Yharnam Stone," n.d.), yet the description implies this is actually Queen Yharnam's immortal consciousness and is in fact still very much alive. Whether it is herself or her baby, players gain the item as a trophy, proof that they murdered this monstrous, pregnant queen.



Fig. 4.2 An image of the Yharnam Stone looted from Queen Yharnam after defeating her in *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware, 2015).

Taken from https://www.bloodborne-wiki.com/2015/04/yharnam-stone.html

As a final example of *Bloodborne*'s preoccupation with violence towards pregnant/maternal bodies and the monstrous offspring they produce, in the game's downloadable content (DLC) entitled "The Old Hunters," players find the enormous corpse of a deceased Great One named Kos, whose body appears to be a chimeric amalgamation of a fish, a mollusk, and a human woman. The game does not reveal how she died, but it does inform players that hunters and scholars sent by the Healing Church desecrated and dissected her body to study it and learn more about the Great Ones. Even though she is dead, she is still able to give birth to a large, skeletal humanoid called the "Orphan of Kos" who wields his own placenta as a weapon. At first, the Orphan stands next to its mother's corpse, sobbing and staring up at the moon. Once approached, it attacks the player-character "in a fit of anger and confusion" ("Kos," n.d.). While fighting him, he constantly screams and cries out to his mother for help—although her body is dead, apparently a Great One's mind/consciousness is immortal and exists in another plane—and she aids him in attacking the player-character by sending out waves of damaging lightning from her corpse.

Bloodborne has received countless accolades, has won several "Game of the Year" awards, and has been ranked highly on many "greatest video game of all time" lists. Apparently, most players and critics do not mind the game's gruesome gameplay, grotesque imagery, and horrific treatment of pregnant bodies and their monstrous offspring. However, some players have discussed their discomfort with the game's content online. For example, in a Kotaku article entitled "All the video games you can't play when you're pregnant," Keza MacDonald (2019) discusses her own discomfort in playing *Bloodborne*—what she calls "a HORRIBLE game to play when pregnant." Indeed, despite their clear preoccupation/obsession with portraying pregnancy and childbirth, it seems clear that the developers behind the game—who are all men, at least in the key roles of Director, Producers, Lead Game Designer, and Lead Programmer—were not particularly concerned with how off-putting or even triggering the game's gruesome content might be for pregnant players. As this chapter demonstrates, the

perspectives, feelings, and experiences of pregnant and maternal players are seemingly almost never considered when making game design choices.

"Your Love Can't Protect Her. Only I Can Do That": Over-Protective Monstrous Motherhood

As previously touched upon, much horror media features unhealthy and obsessive relationships between mothers and their children, as well as storylines in which the child symbolically or literally rejects the mother and seeks, returns to, or is rescued by their father, such as in *The Brood*. Interestingly, the child is often a daughter, like Nola's daughter in *The Brood* or, for a video game example, Eleanor Lamb's rejection of her villainous, abusive mother Sofia in *BioShock 2* (2K Marin, 2010) and desire to be rescued by and rejoin her father-figure/the player-character, a being called a "Big Daddy."[8] This formula of rejecting monstrous mothers in favour of fathers disrupts what might be empowering, feminist, and feminine kinship between mothers and their daughters. 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, and the daughter might be too young to realize that she will soon be an abject being just like her mother.

The final example in this chapter, *The Evil Within 2*, helmed by the creator of *Resident Evil*, captures this formula of the mother and father battling for possession of a victimized daughter. Of course, the heroic father, not the monstrous mother, is the subject of player embodiment and identification. It also showcases a mother who becomes monstrous not in order to empower herself or bring forth a divine/ultimate being, but in a desperate attempt to protect her daughter at all costs. Certainly, mothers are expected to continuously sacrifice their own well-being for that of their children, prioritize their children's needs, and occasionally even become vicious "mother bears" when required. But the limits placed upon women's behaviour within patriarchal society are stringent, so any lashing out must be kept carefully controlled or else

she will be labelled “overbearing,” “overprotective,” “domineering” or, far worse, “out-of-control,” or “crazy.” As Harrington (2018) has discussed regarding the portrayal of destructive, violent, protective, or visceral motherhood, maternity is “conflated with primal instinct in a way that implies that a mother’s natural (animal) bond with her children is so strong that she will stop at nothing to protect or retrieve her children. Here, allegedly monstrous motherhood draws its horror from the extreme lengths that mothers will (allegedly) go to protect their offspring” (p. 197). Just as all women risk slipping from Madonna to Whore, a mother always risks overstepping the boundaries of acceptable maternal behaviour, and if she does overstep, she is made monstrous and punished (usually with death). This is especially the case when the mother is pitted against the father specifically or patriarchy in general (which are often symbolically aligned) in order to protect her child.

In *The Evil Within 2*, the playable protagonist is an ex-police officer named Sebastian Castellanos. Stricken by the loss of his daughter Lily in a house fire, he turned to alcohol. His wife and fellow ex-cop, Myra, also grieving the loss of her daughter and convinced she was not actually dead but rather abducted, left him (the Wikipedia entry states she “abandoned him” (“The Evil Within 2,” n.d.), thereby already placing blame and villainy upon her). Sebastian finds out that Myra was right (he of course never believed her) and Lily is actually alive and is being used as part of an experiment by a nefarious organization called Mobius in which her consciousness is used to power a simulation. To try and save her, Sebastian plugs himself into the simulation, which is a surreal and horrific representation of Lily’s subconsciousness. He discovers that Myra has also plugged herself into the simulation to save Lily, and has actually been working to infiltrate and take down Mobius. But instead of working together, they are pitted against each other in a battle for their daughter. As the Wikipedia entry states, Myra’s “desire to protect Lily has made her insane and obsessed,” wanting to protect Lily herself and keep her “safe” inside the simulation (“The Evil Within 2,” n.d.). While the Wikipedia is not official material, it is likely written

and edited by people who have played the game, meaning it can provide a hint about how fans feel about these characters. The game's Wiki, on the other hand—which is a similar, but more niche and detailed, encyclopedic resource—blames Myra's behaviour on "her maternal instincts" kicking in ("Myra Castellanos," n.d.).

Sebastian confronts Myra, attempting to assure her that he is only there to protect Lily. She insists only she can protect Lily and that Sebastian must leave. Using rage-powered telekinesis, Myra blasts Sebastian away in a massive storm and hides Lily away in a recreation of their family home. Myra sees the house inside the simulation as their "new home" where Lily will be safe and happy: "free from fear. Free from pain." Sebastian tries to remind her that the simulation is not real and that Lily would not be living a real life if kept trapped there and begs Myra to let him take Lily home and come with them, so they can be a family again. Myra reacts badly to this, clutching her head and whimpering while her body glitches and switches forms between "normal" and her ghostly, psychoplasm-covered appearance. She screams "No! I won't let anyone take her from me!" before drawing a psychoplasm blade and walking threateningly towards Sebastian, who draws his gun while begging her to stop. The scene cuts towards a child's drawing of Sebastian, Myra, and Lily, emphasizing that Sebastian's desire to be a family again is also what Lily clearly wants. A shot rings out and the scene fades to white before revealing that Myra stopped her blade inches from Sebastian's eye.

Myra's appearance in the simulation is slightly inhuman, showing that she has been shaped by the simulation and her daughter's subconsciousness, thereby confirming her "loss of control." She is pale and barefoot, with a hood and odd, gooey white netting covering her eyes. Her "clothing" is actually formed by "psychoplasm," a white substance that Myra can control. The camera zooms in on her face, and the white netting covering her eyes begins to crack, revealing several glowing, throbbing, reddish-orange eyes, like a demonic spider, as Myra's head begins to twitch (a common theme for women, it seems).

She screams with rage, releasing another psychic blast, and when it ceases, the camera lingers on Sebastian's face as he looks up in horror.

Perhaps unsurprisingly (given the context of this book but also the clear build-up to a boss fight), Myra has transformed into a gigantic monster (Fig. 4.3). Seemingly stuck up to the waist in the ground, her greyish-white body is emaciated and covered in veins and bulging cysts of psychoplasm. Her hair is long and matted, covering a zombie-like face with a gaping mouth and bulging eyes. An orange glow shines from within her cage-like torso, indicating to players where her "weak spot" is (a common design in video game boss battles so players know where to aim). Of course, that means Sebastian must begin shooting monster Myra in the stomach while trying to dodge her attacks. Once it is shot at enough times, the cage-like barrier of psychoplasm protecting it breaks and Sebastian can shoot the throbbing, glowing orange organ within her. When it is finally destroyed, her lower abdomen begins to throb and Myra screams in pain. Her belly bursts in a shower of blood as Myra's screams rise to a crescendo before she slumps backwards. Her torso is an empty, bloody mass, exposing her backbone, and her burst belly has released countless dog-sized spiderlings that attack the player. Sebastian stomps viciously on each one while Myra gasps and wheezes in the background.



Fig. 4.3 A screenshot of Myra transformed into a giant psychoplasm monstrosity in *The Evil Within 2* (Tango Gameworks, 2017)

Once the spiders are dealt with, Myra's body mutates further, with her arm lengthening into a deadly tentacle ending with her fingers as spider-like appendages surrounding a fanged mouth in the centre of her palm. Myra also summons tentacles from the ground that appear to be horrific amalgamations of various body parts. Right before her defeat, Myra gasps "Have… to keep… her safe…" and then Sebastian's final gunshot makes her face explode. She screams and then slumps, seemingly dead, but she suddenly raises her head, which twitches in a horrific manner, and she launches one last tentacle attack on Sebastian before collapsing in a heap. Like Eve, Myra's monstrous body begins to melt, oozing into a pile of slimy, greyish white psychoplasm. Distraught, Sebastian walks into the milky psychoplasm lake, and finds Myra's human hand sticking out of the milky surface (with her wedding ring prominently on display in a symbolic reminder of their bond). He rushes to pull her out of the liquid and drags her back onto shore, apologizing to her. She opens her eyes, saying "No. I… couldn't control myself… You did the right thing. Thank you. I'm… so glad you're alive.

You have to… Take Lily. Get her out of here." Sebastian insists he will get them all out alive, but Myra insists he must leave her behind and focus on saving Lily: "Lily needs you now."

Sebastian reunites with Lily—his "sweet little girl"—cradling her to his chest. A weakened Myra joins them and admits her plan to stay behind and sacrifice herself to destroy Mobius. As she strokes his cheek, she insists that "Lily will always be in danger… Unless I destroy them." Sebastian tries to argue with her but Myra shushes him, tearfully asking him to "promise to take care of the little one" and to "never let her forget how much her mother loved her." Myra kisses Sebastian, and he tells her he loves her. She responds with "I love you, too. Both of you. That's why I'm doing this." Sebastian runs through the crumbling simulation cradling Lily in his arms until he reaches an escape. The game then shows Myra bathed in a serene golden light with her hand outstretched towards her family. Her final words are "Lily. Sebastian. I love you both. Now you'll be safe" as the simulation falls apart around her. Sebastian wakes up from the simulation and rescues the real Lily and the ending cutscene shows a happy Lily driving off into the sunset with her father, playing with a crocheted doll that looks like Myra, apparently completely without grief over the loss of her mother.

The Evil Within 2 is full of female and feminized monstrous creatures, many of which are portrayed in a grotesquely or violently sexualized way, thereby rendering the game even more disturbing because the simulation is hosted within the subconsciousness of a little girl. Sebastian fights the Lament, which looks like an amalgamation of multiple female bodies fused into one, with several bony, elongated limbs and a large gaping black mouth. Like several of the monsters discussed earlier in this book, the Lament can deafen Sebastian with its shrieks and if it grabs him, it vomits acid in his face until he dies. Anima is a ghostly wraith-like woman with long dark hair and tattered clothes whom Sebastian encounters throughout the simulation. Laura, who is in the first installment of the series and appears again in the second, is yet another emaciated, undead female monster with long dark hair covering her face. Instead of multiple heads she has multiple limbs,

each ending in huge hands with massive claws, some of which jut out from her back. She emerges from piles of corpses and moves like a spider using these multiple limbs, and so she is a particularly horrific version of a spider woman.

Continuing with the body horror theme, the Guardian is a huge female creature made up of the mutilated remains of a serial killer's victims. With multiple heads all with long dark hair and a giant buzzsaw attached to one arm, this hulking creature giggles and laughs maniacally when encountered. The serial killer—a photographer named Stefano Valentini who preys on women, using their corpses to create horrific grotesqueries he calls his "art"—infiltrated the simulation and seeks to prey on Lily. With powers granted to him inside the simulation, Stefano creates and uses the Guardians as his servants, meant to guard him from Sebastian, meaning the women he murdered and whose bodies he defiled and transformed into these bloody, twisted monstrosities are forced to serve him even in death. Sebastian also encounters Stefano's greatest creation, his "prized pet and ultimate masterpiece" ("Obscura," n.d.), a woman-camera hybrid called Obscura. This creature is particularly horrific: again, an amalgamation of several women's body parts, Obscura walks on three legs stitched together to form a sort of tripod. Wearing pink ballet shoes, Obscura moves with an unnerving spider-like grace, but with a particularly creepy gyration of her hips as she walks on her tiptoes. Her back is arched with her naked breasts thrust up towards the air, in what one critic calls "a perverse imitation of sexual ecstasy" (Williams, 2019). This sexual aspect is a cogent observation, as Obscura also moans, seemingly with pleasure, as she moves and even her screams when Sebastian shoots her seem almost like wails of pleasure. In place of her head, there is an old-fashioned, elongated camera with a single lens that serves as her eye. Her flash temporarily blinds and stuns Sebastian so she can pin him to the ground and stab him with multiple bladed appendages that emerge from her body.[9]

Given all these monstrous women populating the simulation, it is perhaps unsurprising that Myra should mutate into a giant, pregnant

milk monster. Her form is a result of her own psychological state and instability, and she has apparently let her "maternal instincts" get the better of her. Like Nola in *The Brood* or Sofia Lamb in *BioShock*, Myra's sin here is really in trying to keep her daughter to herself, away from her father. In this sense, *The Evil Within 2* has players play through a symbolic battle between the mother and the father, effectively for possession of the daughter's soul. The father wants to set her free and bring her back to the real world (i.e. let/make her grow up) whereas the mother seeks to keep her in the "safety" of the fantasy realm where she will be a little girl forever. Given the game's fetishistic preoccupation with violence against women—especially in the way women are violated, abused, mutilated, and forced to serve violent masculine forces—maybe we cannot blame Myra for not wanting Lily to become a woman and face such a world. While the simulation is full of monstrous women who all seem to have been victims whose experiences "drove them mad" and turned them into literal monsters (mirroring the way our society blames victims and turns them into monsters), it is important to note that they all prey on Sebastian—the male intruder into the space. Men are the primary antagonists of this series, namely the head agent (called "The Administrator") in charge of Mobius who abducted and sought to use Lily, as well as another agent and evil cult leader named Theodore who betrayed Myra and tried to use Lily's powers for himself. Together with Stefano, it is clear that the game is showing men as the primary threat to not only Lily's well-being but the entire world through this twisted simulation. Yet these men are not portrayed as physically, literally monstrous. Rather, it is the women suffering at the hands of men who become the monsters. Myra can be included in that group, given how much she suffered after losing her child and her husband refusing to believe her "delusion" that Lily was actually alive, as well as the betrayal by her trusted comrade Theodore.

So, Myra's distrust of both Sebastian and the outside world is not necessarily unfounded. But of course, she is in the wrong here—she is being a "bad mother." As Arnold (2013) has discussed, in psychoanalytic theory, the bad mother "threatens to keep the child from

entering the Symbolic" (p. 75) and rejects her own abjection by trying to keep her child with her forever. The bad mother is controlling, oppressive, and domineering, but also possessive and overprotective, thereby intentionally or unintentionally keeping her child from developing their own sense of identity and selfhood. Myra has let herself become that bad mother in her desperation, and so her loving husband/the player must violently destroy her monstrous body, "knocking her back to her senses" as the Wikipedia states ("The Evil Within 2," n.d.). Then, she thanks him for doing so, reiterating over and over how much she loves him. To make amends for her sins, she sacrifices herself to save her husband and daughter, letting Sebastian bring Lily into the symbolic order and the (in this case literal) realm of the father. Of course, Sebastian can enact ultraviolence in order to desperately save his daughter—that is what a "good" dad would do (and does, in countless stories about protective fathers and father-figures). Players can enact a paternal power fantasy in which, rather than saving a victimized, damsel-in-distress love interest, they save a victimized, damsel-in-distress daughter. Fathers can fight against other fathers, and even against bad mothers, but mothers, it seems, are not allowed to do the same. Myra redeems herself through an ultimate act of self-sacrifice, and given the stringent (actually, impossible) expectations placed on women to not just become mothers, but to be *perfect* or *ideal* mothers, it seems that sometimes the only truly good mother is a dead one.

Reproductive Horror and the Fear of Infection-as-Impregnation

The games discussed in this chapter all focus on themes and portrayals of unnatural pregnancy as a violent, visceral, and often viscous form of physical transformation resulting from mutation, impregnation, or infection by a god, a virus, a parasite, a fungus, a chemical compound, self-aware mitochondria, or one's own psychosis. Sometimes this pregnancy is self-inflicted in order to become and/or birth a

divine/ultimate/advanced being, other times it is to save, protect, or resurrect a beloved family member—a mother or a daughter. Regardless of the cause or reason, these pregnant bodies and their offspring are presented as unnatural, monstrous, and horrific enemies needing to be violently destroyed by either a male hero or a female heroine representing normative patriarchy and wielding phallic weapons like guns and swords. Destruction of the pregnant body and its gruesome, inhuman/nonhuman offspring is a means to an end, as players must do so to proceed to their goal and either continue or finish (win) the game. In many of these examples, the pregnant body and/or its offspring are major boss fights and even the final battle, the culmination of the player's efforts and the resolution of the game's story. My use of the term "pregnant body" is purposeful here, as it dehumanizes the person—in these cases, always coded as women—experiencing the pregnancy and reduces them to their biological function. Several of the examples are maternal rather than pregnant, such as Mother Miranda and Lady Dimitrescu, as well as Myra up until the point where she transforms into a giant monster with spiderlings inside of her writhing belly. But they are all "bad" mothers: Miranda is unwilling to let her daughter go and preys upon the daughter of another, Dimitrescu creates parasitical vampire daughters who are as monstrous and inhuman as she is, and Myra tries to keep her daughter to herself and threatens the sanctity of the nuclear family unit. Out of all the examples discussed in this chapter, only Myra is redeemed—once the player-as-father violently ruptures her belly, murders her monstrous parthenogenetic spiderling offspring, and knocks some sense in to her, she is allowed to become a "good" mother again by assuring her husband of her love and devotion, granting him her blessing to take her child away, and performing the ultimate act of self-sacrifice.

Self-sacrifice is the only path for a "good" mother within patriarchal society, and clearly the only road towards redemption for a mother who dances with the monstrous by letting herself or her maternal instincts become "out of control." Although it is important to point out that these

games were all made primarily by men, even women players may enjoy them and not question these horrific representations. As Arnold (2013) notes, "this patriarchal construct of idealised motherhood is a source of comfort not only for men but also for women, who invest in the masochistic fantasy of self-sacrifice" (p. 15). Patriarchal society, whether in the West or Japan, presents mothers with examples of good/idealized motherhood (either in popular culture or religion), which are impossible to emulate. As Harrington (2018) discusses,

> horror films that invoke the monstrous-maternal express ambiguity and anxiety over two dominant constructs of motherhood. The first, "essential" motherhood, is the notion that motherhood is a biological and emotional necessity that sits at the heart of the female experience. The second, "ideal" motherhood, is the imperative for women to mother in culturally, socially and historically specific and ideologically complicit ways. These categories are dangerous and reductive constructs, and ones that demand a rigour and a perfection that can never be attained. […] The monstrous-maternal suggests that there is something fundamental to motherhood itself that sparks and breeds monstrosity, and that this is something that women cannot escape; mothers are always-already monstrous, no matter how hard they try to mother "well." (p. 17)

Indeed, bodies that are pregnant and identities that are coded as maternal are always already monstrous and abject, just as the female body is. The films discussed by scholars such as Creed, Arnold, and Harrington often conflate pregnancy and maternity and position both at the precipice of monstrosity, and the same can be said of the games discussed here. This section of the book is called "The Mother" yet this chapter and the one that follows focus largely on pregnancy, and that is no coincidence. The way women's bodies and behaviours are policed often starts with menarche though in many ways it reaches its zenith with pregnancy—pregnant women are assumed to be "mothers-to-be"

and those who wish to abort the foetus or give up the baby are derided as failures or even sinners. In some cases, pregnancy-as-horror can be separated from maternal horror, as is the case with Alexia whose body undergoes pregnancy-like transformations but who does not identify as a mother or mother-to-be and feels no maternal instincts towards her offspring, but the two are often intertwined. This is also the case in horror film, as discussed by Arnold (2013), wherein "the representations of the pregnant woman operate in a similar mode to representations of motherhood" (p. 157), thereby causing "difficulty in differentiating between discourses of pregnancy and discourses of motherhood" (p. 157).

In other words, whether the character is a mother or just pregnant, she suffers all the same. Both pregnancy and maternity are represented as a form of suffering—either the good mother suffers through her self-sacrifice, or the bad mother suffers by being killed off at the end of the story. As Arnold (2013) states, "suffering and self-sacrifice are the conditions by which the mother is representable" (p. 17). Though Arnold is discussing films, the same can be said of games—there are plenty of dads-as-heroes but a distinct lack of mothers, or pregnant people, as playable protagonists. Yet, there seems to be a plethora of pregnant and maternal villains, enemies, and monsters for the player to fight and destroy, along with their monstrous offspring abominations. In the chapter that follows, I discuss more examples of this trope but with a focus on North American games—specifically, two acclaimed dark fantasy and science fiction series with clear body horror elements produced by the Canadian game company BioWare.

References

2K Marin. (2010). *BioShock 2.* 2K Games. PlayStation 3.

Activision Blizzard Media. (2023). *Mom's got game.* https://www.activisionblizzardmedia.com/insights/blogs/2023/10/moms-got-game

Alexander, L. (2014). *Taking on the challenges of being a mom in game development*. Game Developer. https://www.gamedeveloper.com/business/taking-on-the-challenges-of-beinga-mom-in-game-development

Arnold, S. (2013). *Maternal horror film: Melodrama and motherhood*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Alton, C. (2020). Zombies, phallic monsters, and rocket launchers: An examination of gender representations and simulations in the resident evil series (Ph.D. Dissertation). York University. https://ys.library.yorku.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/dc73bfa0-dcdd-4afcb362-2ee2d354316e/content

Arnold, S. (2013). *Maternal horror film: Melodrama and motherhood*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Berg, C. R. (1989). Immigrant, aliens, and extraterrestrials: Science fiction's alien "other" as(among other things) new Hispanic imagery. *CineAction, 18*, 3–17.

Braidotti, R. (2011). *Nomadic subjects: Embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory* (2nd ed.). Columbia University Press.

Brice, M. (2013). The dadification of video games is real. *Alternate Ending*. http://www.mattiebrice.com/the-dadification-of-video-games-is-real/

Bundtzen, L. K. (1987). Monstrous mothers: Medusa, grendel, and now alien. *Film Quarterly, 40*(3), 11–17.
[https://doi.org/10.2307/1212458]

Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "sex."* Routledge.

Campbell, C. (2016). Where are all the video game moms? *Polygon*. http://www.polygon.com/features/2016/7/7/12025874/where-are-the-video-game-moms

Capcom. (2000). *Resident evil—Code: Veronica*. Capcom. Dreamcast.

Capcom. (2021). *Resident evil village*. Capcom. PlayStation 5.

Caputi, J. (2004). *Goddesses and monsters: Women, myth, power, and popular culture.* University of Wisconsin Press.

Caputi, J., & Sagle, L. (2004). Femme noire: Dangerous women of color in popular film and television. *Race, Gender & Class, 11*(2), 90–111.

Chang, E. (2017). A game chooses, a player obeys: BioShock, posthumanism, and the limits of queerness. In J. Malowski & T. M. Russworm (Eds.), *Gaming representation: Race, gender, and sexuality in video games* (pp. 227–244). Indiana University Press.
[https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2005rgq.18]

Chess, S. (2020). *Play like a feminist*. MIT Press.
[https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12484.001.0001]

Creed, B. (1986). Horror and the monstrous-feminine: An imaginary abjection. *Screen, 27*(1), 44–70.
[https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/27.1.44]

Creed, B. (1993). *The monstrous-feminine: Film, feminism, psychoanalysis*. Routledge.

Cronenberg, D. (Director). (1979). *The brood* [Film]. Les Productions Mutuelles Ltée; Elgin International Productions.

Cruikshank, L. (2015). What to expect when your avatar is expecting: Representations of pregnancy and birth in video games. In N. Burton (Ed.), *Natal signs: Cultural representations of pregnancy, birth and parenting* (pp. 19–40). Demeter Press. [https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1rrd8tc.5]

De Lauretis, T. (1987). *Technologies of gender: Essays on theory, film, and fiction*. Indiana University Press.

Dumas, R. (2018). *The monstrous-feminine in contemporary Japanese popular culture*. Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-92465-6]

ESAC (Entertainment Software Association of Canada). (2020). *Essential facts about the Canadian video game industry.* https://theesa.ca/wpcontent/uploads/2020/11/RCGEF_en.pdf

ESAC (Entertainment Software Association of Canada). (2022). *Bringing Canadians together: Essential facts 2022.* https://theesa.ca/news/

Fausto-Sterling, A. (2000). *Sexing the body: gender politics and the construction of sexuality*.Basic Books.

Freud, S. (1949). *An outline of psychoanalysis*. Norton.

FromSoftware. (2015). *Bloodborne.* Sony Computer Entertainment. PlayStation 4.

Gray, K. (2017, May 9). Why is motherhood so poorly portrayed in video games? *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/09/video-games-motherhood

Harkin, S. (2020). "The only thing you've managed to break so far is my heart": An analysis of Portal's monstrous mother GLaDOS. *Games and Culture, 15*(5), 529–543. [https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412018819663]

Harrington, E. (2018). *Women, monstrosity and horror film: Gynaehorror*. Routledge.

Harris, B. J. (2014). *Console wars: Sega, nintendo, and the battle that defined a generation*. HarperCollins.

Harvey, A. (2015). *Gender, age, and digital games in the domestic context*. Routledge. [https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315757377]

Headstrong Games. (2009). *House of the dead: Overkill.* Sega. Wii.

Henley, S. (2020). "Being pregnant changes everything": The game industry awkwardly grapples with maternity. *The Washington Post.* https://www.washingtonpost.com/videogames/2020/04/27/being-pregnant-changes-everything-game-industry-awkwardlygrapples-with-maternity/

Joho, J. (2014, November 2). The dadification of video games, round two*. Kill Screen*. https://killscreen.com/articles/dadification-videogames-round-two/

Klecker, C., & Grabher, G. M. (Eds.). (2021). *The disfigured face in American literature, film, and television*. Routledge.

Kos. (n.d.). *Bloodborne wiki.* https://bloodborne.fandom.com/wiki/Kos

Krabbe, E. (2021). Resident evil village: The evolution of lady Dimitrescu and her daughters IGN First. *IGN*. https://www.ign.com/articles/resident-evil-village-the-evolution-of-ladydimitrescu-and-her-daughters-ign-first

Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection*. (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). Columbia University Press.

MacDonald, K. (2019). All the video games you can't play when you're pregnant. *Kotaku.* https://kotaku.com/all-the-video-games-you-cant-play-when-youre-pregnant-1834924217

Mendelytė, A. (2024). Thought experiments in video games: Exploring the (un)ethics of motherhood in Frictional Games' Amnesia: Rebirth. *Games and Culture, 19*(1), 38–54. [https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120231153715]

Myra Castellanos. (n.d.). *The evil within wiki.* https://theevilwithin.fandom.com/wiki/Myra_Castellanos

Newzoo. (2022). Top countries and markets by video game revenues. https://newzoo.com/resources/rankings/top-10-countries-by-game-revenues

Obscura. (n.d.). *The evil within wiki.* https://theevilwithin.fandom.com/wiki/Obscura

Prisco, J. (2017). How Japan changed video games forever. *CNN.* https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/12/asia/future-japan-videogame-landmarks/index.html

Rubin, G. (1984). Thinking sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality. In C. S. Vance (Ed.), *Pleasure and danger: Exploring female sexuality.* Routledge.

Santos, C. (2017). *Unbecoming female monsters: Witches, vampires, and virgins*. Lexington Books.

Santos, M. C., & White, S. E. (2005). Playing with ourselves: A psychoanalytic investigation of Resident Evil and Silent Hill. In N. Garrelts (Ed.), *Digital gameplay: Essays on the nexus of game and gamer* (pp. 69–79). McFarland.

Smith, C. (2014, November 10). Gaming's mom problem: Why do we refuse to feature mothers in games? *Polygon*. http://www.polygon.com/2014/11/10/7173757/mothers-in-videogames

Square. (1998). *Parasite eve.* Square Electronic Arts. PlayStation.

Square. (1999). *Parasite eve II.* Square. PlayStation.

Stang, S. (2017). Big daddies and broken men: Father-daughter relationships in video games.*Loading…*, *10*(16), 162–174.

Stang, S. (2019). The broodmother as monstrous-feminine: Abject maternity in video games.

Nordlit, 42: Manufacturing Monsters, 233–256. https://doi.org/10.7557/13.5014.

Stang, S., & Trammell, A. (2020). The ludic bestiary: Misogynistic tropes of female monstrosity in Dungeons & Dragons. *Games & Culture, 15*(6), 730–747. [https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019850059]

Stefano Valentini. (n.d.). *The evil within wiki.* https://theevilwithin.fandom.com/wiki/Stefano_Valentini

Steiner, K. A. (2014). *A different kind of crunchy mom* [blog post]. https://www.emberdione.com/a-different-kind-of-crunchy-mom/

Summers, A., & Miller, M. K. (2014). From damsels in distress to sexy superheroes: How the portrayal of sexism in video game magazines has changed in the last 20 years. *Feminist Media Studies, 14*(6), 1028–1040. [https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2014.882371]

Tango Gameworks. (2017). *The evil within 2.* Bethesda Softworks. PlayStation 4.

Team Silent. (2003). *Silent hill 3.* Konami. PlayStation 2.

The Evil Within 2. (n.d.). *Wikipedia.* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Evil_Within_2

Thomas, G. M., & Lupton, D. (2016). Threats and thrills: Pregnancy apps, risk and consumption. *Health, Risk & Society, 17*(7–8), 495–509. [https://doi.org/10.1080/13698575.2015.1127333]

Tyler, I. (2009). Against abjection. *Feminist Theory, 10*(1), 77–98. [https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700108100393]

Ussher, J. M. (2006). *Managing the monstrous feminine: Regulating the reproductive body*. Routledge.

Vainio, C. (2014, April 22). Life as a game dev mom. *Medium*. https://medium.com/raising-ahuman/life-as-a-game-dev-mom-a8a69d954074

Vanderhoef, J. (2013). Casual threats: The feminization of casual video games. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, 2.

Vanderhoef, J., & Payne, M. (2018). Big daddies and monstrous mommies: Bioshock's maternal abjection, absence, and annihilation. In J. Aldred & F. Parker (Eds.), *Beyond the sea: Navigating BioShock* (pp. 50–73). McGill-Queens University Press. [https://doi.org/10.1515/9780773555556-005]

Voorhees, G. (2016). Daddy issues: Constructions of fatherhood in The Last of Us and BioShock Infinite. *ADA: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology, 9*. http://adanewmedia.org/2016/05/issue9-voorhees/

Vossen, E. (2018). *On the cultural inaccessibility of gaming: Invading, creating, and reclaiming the cultural clubhouse* (Ph.D. Dissertation). University of Waterloo.

Williams, K. (2019). “Appreciate the art”: Complicity and collaboration in bioshock (2007) and the evil within 2 (2017). *The Vault of Culture*. https://www.vaultofculture.com/vault/feature/williams/bioshockevilwithin2

Winkie, L. (2021). Why so many people are horny for this 10-foot-tall vampire lady. *Slate.* https://slate.com/culture/2021/05/resident-evil-village-tall-vampire-lady-dimitrescugiant-woman-fetish.html

Wood, A., & Schillace, B. (2014). *Unnatural reproductions and monstrosity: The birth of the monster in literature, film, and media*. Cambria Press.

Yharnam Stone. (n.d.). *Bloodborne wiki.* https://bloodborne.wiki.fextralife.com/Yharnam+Stone

---

Footnotes

1 As discussed at length in the introductory chapter, discussing monstrous women in terms of their “female” bodies is a fraught undertaking, especially when focusing on non-normative, monstrous, and otherwise Othered bodies, because there is no “normal” or “natural” body (see Butler, 1993; de Lauretis, 1987; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; and Rubin, 1984). However, the monsters discussed here are pregnant/give birth and referred to as women, using the adjective “female,” and/or using she/her pronouns. In this sense, the way the developers—again, almost entirely cis-male/man-identified—designed these monstrous characters and creatures is in relation to assumptions about and popular culture portrayals of women who reproduce. Although biological reproduction requires biologically female organs, it must be emphasized that “woman” is understood here as a gender identity, whereas the word “female” is used to describe bodies that are biologically female. The horrific misogyny on display in the games discussed throughout this book encompasses hatred, fear, and revulsion toward biologically female bodies (including their normative reproductive processes) *and* feminine gender identities, which are two separate, although often related and intertwined things. This chapter is highlighting a focus on the former, but the latter is always present as well.

2 It should be noted that, as a Western scholar, my discussion of the games that follow are from a Western (specifically, a Canadian) perspective, and so I am not intending to provide much commentary on Japanese cultural norms, beliefs, and attitudes or speculation on how Japanese audiences may interpret these games. Rather, I seek to demonstrate that these tropes manifest in similar ways in Japanese games. This is important to consider given that a huge percentage of games played around the world come from Japan and Japanese games are incredibly influential on the medium as well as game cultures around the world. Sarah Arnold (2013) similarly spends some time comparing the maternal in Japanese and American horror films in her work, finding that “ambivalence surrounding the role and function of the mother seems to transcend culture/nationality,” though of course “the particular means by which this ambivalence is figured is relatively specific” (pp. 118–119). However, unlike the films she discusses, the games I look at in this chapter are all set in the West or Western-inspired/influenced locations (e.g. *Code: Veronica* is partially set in the Southern Ocean and Antarctica but the facilities the player explores were built by European/British nobles and are influenced by European gothic architecture and art;

Bloodborne's Yharnam is a fictional Gothic European-style city) and feature American (or presumably European in the case of *Bloodborne*) player-characters.

3 Not just young women, either: the Electronic Software Association of Canada has also shown that 68% of women aged 18–34 and 52% of women aged 35–54 play video games (2020, pp. 14–15), meaning that many people playing these games are likely mothers themselves.

4 This is the only dedicated study I could find on mothers who play games, and we know even less about mothers who make games. There have been a few blog posts written by mothers who are/have been game developers outlining their experiences, which have been mostly overwhelming and isolating (Steiner, 2014; Vainio, 2014), and one journalistic article featuring interviews with game developer mothers who see the industry as an unwelcoming space because they are taken less seriously and are seen as less committed to their work (Alexander, 2014). Finally, there is one article in *The Washington Post* on the topic, which notes that it is challenging, and sometimes impossible, to be a mother in a male-dominated industry "with a well-earned reputation for long hours" and lack of facilities and support structures for pregnancy, breastfeeding, and childcare (Henley, 2020). Given the barriers that women already face in the industry, many developers who become mothers end up leaving their jobs, which may help to explain the lacking and highly problematic portrayals of pregnancy, birth, and motherhood that plague the medium.

5 This is not the only instance of a monstrous foetus in the game. There is also a horrific creature called "Baby" that resembles a giant, grotesque foetus with an enormous head and huge, gaping mouth that stretches large enough to consume the player-character whole in a graphic and horrifying instant death scene. The Baby slides around the floors of a house, using its underdeveloped limbs to push it along as it chases the player, leaving bloody streaks in its wake while the player hears the wet squelching of its slimy body. Its voice is that of a human baby, saying words like "mama," "dada," and "yummy," and it makes happy, laughing noises while chasing the player-character and crying when it loses track of him, reinforcing the juxtaposition between the "cute" baby voice and the horrific form from which it emanates. The player is powerless in this segment, only able to run away and hide from the Baby. Clearly many elements of horror in this game are intertwined with themes of reproduction, birth, and foetuses.

6 Interestingly, even though she was in Varla's body at the time, when she transforms into a monster, the Mother resembles common popular portrayals of a hag or monstrous old woman—a trope that will be explored at length later in this book. While her drooping breasts, emaciated appearance, and taught, thin-looking skin covered with age spots signifies her old age, her birth-giving during battle positions her as fertile in a way she could not have been if she were still an old woman. In this way she is monstrous not only because of her exaggerated proportions, large claws, and sharp teeth, but also because she is a naked old woman and because she is a mother/birth-giver of monsters (Clement included), meaning her body is doubly abject—positioned at the

fraught intersection of sexism and ageism. The graphic and unapologetic incest on display between mother and son is rendered even more disturbing given her old age, as love between an old woman and a younger man is also a social taboo (whereas the reverse is more socially acceptable, especially for wealthy old men) and portraying old women as sexually active, desiring, and desirable is even more forbidden within a patriarchal worldview that values women only when they are young as sexual objects that appeal to male desires and when they are older (though not too much older!) as reproductive vessels for new life.

7 Zeus usually does have intercourse with his victims, but in one myth he impregnates Danaë with nothing but a shower of "golden rain" and she gives birth to the famed hero Perseus. There are several other examples of supposed virgins giving birth to divine and heroic figures throughout world mythologies—see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miraculous_births for a list.

8 This game is an example of monstrous fatherhood, though the monstrous father in question is a hero rather than a villain and is the subject of player empathy and identification as the playable protagonist (which already speaks volumes regarding patriarchal society's preference for fathers over mothers). To elaborate, the player becomes the Big Daddy Subject Delta: a hulking, monstrous, genetically altered human being who has been physically and mentally conditioned to protect a young woman named Eleanor Lamb at all costs. Eleanor's cold and cruel mother, Sofia Lamb, is the game's villain. Not only does she plan to sacrifice her daughter for her collectivist utopia in which all would become one, she also attempts to destroy the sanctity of the father-daughter bond by murdering Delta and keeping her daughter to herself. *BioShock 2* asks the player to make ethical choices regarding whether to spare or murder various monstrous, antagonistic, and treacherous characters throughout the game, and the choices made will calibrate Eleanor's own moral compass. If the player chooses mercy, the tone of the ending is hopeful: Eleanor saves her villainous mother from drowning and refers to her father as her conscience. If the player instead chooses ruthlessness and violence, Eleanor leaves her mother to drown and prepares to conquer the world, citing her father's survival instincts as her inspiration. In both cases, Delta dies physically but his essence is absorbed by Eleanor as she tells him that "you'll always be with me now father, your memories, your drives, and when I need you, you'll be there on my shoulder, whispering." Regardless of her own capabilities, Eleanor's personality and moral beliefs are completely dictated by the player's actions. Not only does she view her father as her saviour, but she also models herself entirely upon his behaviour. Delta's choices can make Eleanor become ruthless and cruel in a matter of days. In a conversation between Sofia and Delta, Eleanor's mother observes sadly that "the girl lying on that bed is no longer my child, nor my life's work. She is a monster, shaped by you alone. Just as she has always wanted." Eleanor is presented as an empty vessel, waiting to be (literally) filled with her father's essence. In this sense, although Delta is the physical/literal monster, Sofia is clearly the true monster—the monstrous mother.

9 Stefano is missing an eye (within the simulation his missing eye has been replaced by a camera lens, though he keeps it mostly covered by his hair), is strongly queer-coded, and is described as "insane," "deranged," and a "high functioning psychopath" ("Stefano Valentini," n.d.). In this way, he embodies the problematic archetype of the villain with a visible facial

anomaly/scar/"disfigurement" (see Klecker & Grabher, 2021) and the queer-coded mad artist, or "the homo-homicidal aesthete" (Chang, 2017, p. 236) and resembles the similarly mad, queer, and beauty-obsessed serial killer artist Sander Cohen from *BioShock* (see Chang, 2017 for a thorough unpacking of this character as a highly problematic portrayal of queerness). The first encounter with a Guardian begins with Sebastian entering a dark chamber with countless bloody women's corpses hanging from the ceiling, each wrapped in a white sheet—one of the many horrific "installations" or "exhibits" using women's severed body parts that Stefano has set up. Approaching a mirror, Sebastian sees the reflection of a grinning woman with long dark hair and a red dress with a plunging neckline. He looks behind him, but there is no one there. When he turns back, the hulking multi-headed Guardian is standing before him, smashing through from behind the mirror with her buzzsaw hand. In this way, the Guardian almost embodies the "bait-and-switch" trope discussed earlier in this book, though it is odd and disturbing that this victimized monster should seem to enjoy her monstrosity and her enslavement to Stefano so much—just as it is odd that Obscura serves her creator. Perhaps their own suffering has driven them mad (the Guardian does cackle "maniacally"), Stefano retains control over them, or they are simply projections of Stefano's own psyche.

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2026
S. Stang, *Maiden, Mother, and Crone*, Palgrave Studies in Mediating Kinship, Representation, and Difference
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-25115-2_5

5. BioWare's Reproductive Body Horror: Broodmothers and Banshees

Sarah Stang[1] ✉
(1) Digital Humanities, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada

✉ **Sarah Stang**
Email: sstang@brocku.ca

Keyword Pregnancy – Pregnant – Reproduction – Reproductive – Mother – Maternal – Fertile – Offspring – Spawn

> Menstruation and childbirth are seen as the two events in woman's life which have placed her on the side of the abject. It is woman's fertilizable body which aligns her with nature and threatens the integrity of the patriarchal symbolic order.
>
> Woman's birth-giving function has provided the horror film with an important source of many of its most horrific images—its intra-uterine iconography, the parthenogenetic mother, evocations of the uncanny and images of alien births.
>
> —Barbara Creed (1993, p. 49)

Like the previous chapter, my focus here is on the portrayal of horrific pregnancy and monstrous maternity in mainstream digital role-playing games. While the previous chapter analysed Japanese games, this one looks at North American games, specifically two series

produced by Canadian game company BioWare. Although BioWare is by no means the only Western game studio to feature maternal and pregnant monsters in their games, their two most critically acclaimed and successful franchises, the dark fantasy *Dragon Age* series and science fiction space opera *Mass Effect* trilogy, are particularly preoccupied with body horror, physical mutation, and transforming both the reproductive and infertile female body into something monstrous for the player to fight and kill.

This chapter returns once again to the work of Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg. As Ronald Allan Lopez Cruz (2012) has noted, Cronenberg's films are held up as prime examples of quintessential body horror, as they often present grotesquely mutated or mutating bodies, focusing on the horror of hybridity, transformation, and monstrous reproduction. These themes are clearly reflected in BioWare's games, and while their shared nationality might be coincidental, it seems that BioWare was inspired by Cronenberg's work. The monsters discussed in this chapter—the reproductive Darkspawn Broodmother and the pregnant, cyborg "techno-zombie" Banshees—represent the same kinds of anxieties and themes Cronenberg explores in his oeuvre. These anxieties relate to fears about bodily precarity and the categorical breakdown between self and other, human and animal, nature and culture, living and dead, thereby also engaging with the concept of the abject. That these examples are female and feminized reproductive monsters speaks to the connection to the abject maternal body and the monstrous-feminine, as well as the misogynistic and patriarchal fear of unchecked feminine power and female fecundity. In this sense, the monsters discussed here fit into a long tradition of constructing and representing female reproduction and reproductive bodies, especially transgressive, non-normative, and parthenogenetic reproduction and reproductive bodies, as horrific and monstrous in popular culture.

“They Remade Her in Their Image. Then She Made More of Them. Broodmother…”[1]

In *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009; hereafter *Origins*) and its expansion *Dragon Age: Origins—Awakening* (2010; hereafter *Awakening*), the player enacts the role of a heroic “Grey Warden” whose race and gender are customizable. At a certain point in *Origins*, the player encounters 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. 5.1). The player must fight this monster—who attacks by screaming, spewing vomit and saliva (abject substances), sending her Darkspawn children to attack, and grabbing with her tentacles—in the fleshy, pulsating, pink walls of her lair. The atmosphere surrounding the player as they uncover the truth about Darkspawn procreation is like a horror film: dark, dank underground caverns, creepy music, the manic whisperings of prisoners driven mad by their captors. The Darkspawn are the primary enemies the player must fight throughout the game, though little is revealed about them until this moment. The Darkspawn resemble twisted, monstrous versions of the gameworld’s normal humanoid “races”: humans, elves, dwarves, and Qunari, and in this scene, the player learns why. The Darkspawn breed by capturing women of these various races and force-feeding them poisonous Darkspawn blood, body parts, as well as flesh from people of their own race. 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 (1993) described in her discussion of *The Brood*.



Fig. 5.1 A screenshot of the Broodmother from *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare, 2009). Note her large, multi-breasted body and tentacles

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—the abject subject is "heterogenous, animal, metamorphosed, altered" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 207). Tentacles can also be interpreted as phallic, positioning her as a kind of phallic mother (Creed, 1993). 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, 1993, 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, 1993, pp. 2–3). Finally, she has been transformed through torture, cannibalism, and consuming "tainted" blood: bodily transformation and cannibalism are both abject

—again, signalling 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 (1993) 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 entire world and, more intimately, the player-character who seeks to save it.[2]

The connection between blood, transformation, fecundity, monstrosity, and the female body is worth exploring further. In her analysis of maternal/reproductive bodies as the monstrous-feminine, 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,

signalling her connection to the primal, bestial world of the dark feminine and the archaic maternal). In other words, the process that turns her into a mother also makes her inhuman and monstrous (or vice versa).

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

> 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.

"The Creature Itself Is Nasty, but Nothing Really Compares to the Building of Dread Before You Ever Get to It"

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[3]:

> Broodmothers are the creepiest and most disturbing creatures in the series.
>
> The creature itself is nasty, but nothing really compares to the building of dread before you ever get to it.
>
> I've done that fight several times. Still freaks me out.
>
> I hated the whole Deep Roads section (in a good way), and the Broodmother was just puke icing on the shit cake.
>
> 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.
>
> 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.
>
> 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!
>
> The broodmothers were so fucking frightening and disgusting to me but they were perfect for such a dark and gritty game.

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[4]:

> 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.

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.

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.

Maybe they're not exactly scary, but they're creepy, horrifying and the worst part is knowing how they were made.

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[5]:

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.

Broodmothers are one of the most disgusting but at the same time most sad creatures you'll ever meet in DA.

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.

100% this is the stuff of nightmares.

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.
>
> 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.
>
> Never before has the design and lore of a boss been so soul-shatteringly horrifying.
>
> Yeah, after I learned about broodmothers, I reeeeally [*sic*] 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.
>
> 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.

The final two comments are particularly interesting. The first notes that after the encounter, they did not want to bring their female party members into the Deep Roads and the second states that the gendered nature of this segment made them experience the horror more profoundly because they had a female avatar. 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 one other

commenter 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 expansion, *Awakening*—which features 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 Versus The Father

Like *House of the Dead: Overkill* discussed in the previous chapter, the main antagonist and final boss of *Awakening* is simply called the Mother, though in this case the game is taking itself quite seriously rather than presenting a disturbing, Freudian situation in an ironic or campy way. 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; Lindsey, 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. 5.2). 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.

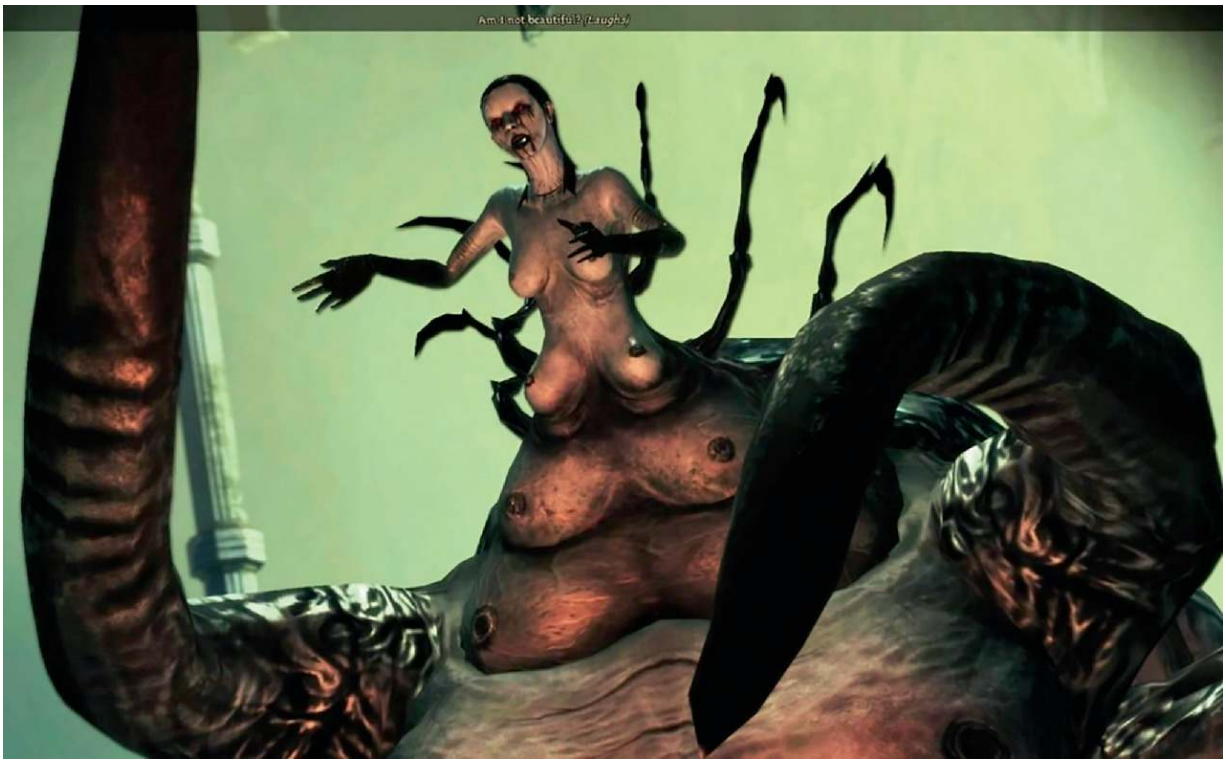


Fig. 5.2 A screenshot of the Mother from *Dragon Age: Origins—Awakening* (BioWare, 2010)

Although some players named the Mother as one of the "creepiest" monsters in the *Dragon Age* series in the above threads (one commenter, for example, notes that "she made my skin crawl"),[6] she is not mentioned nearly as often as the Broodmother. One commenter 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 another monster, you know? By DA:A, even, I was more bemused than horrified by The Mother.[7]

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 (one commenter calls her "Jabba the Hut with boobs" and another says that "the jiggle physics haunt me to this day"[8]), 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 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.

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.

The Player as "Instrument of the Father"

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 sapience 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. Her awakening also caused her to no longer hear the call of the Archdemon that normally controls the Darkspawn, and she blames the Architect for the loss of the Archdemon's "sweet song." The other sapient/awakened Darkspawn are torn between loyalty to the Architect, the reformer who wants them all to become sapient and self-sufficient, and the Mother, the traditionalist who wants them to return to mindlessly serving the Archdemon. 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. As one character says in the game, the Mother's Children "are abominations, even among darkspawn."

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. If the grub consumes the flesh of a tainted creature, like another Darkspawn, it transforms into a "childer hatchling," with legs and claws. According to the *Dragon Age*

Wiki, after consuming another tainted creature, the hatchling evolves in a fully grown "childer":

> This final form of the Children is by far stronger and deadlier than all previous forms. Their claws have grown long and sharp, and they sprout additional insect-legs. Their body is encased by a protective carapace, making them much harder to kill than a childer grub or hatchling. They are also frighteningly fast; adult childers are capable of speed unmatched by every other type of darkspawn. ("Children," n.d.)

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.

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 and she is framed as delusional and described as "mad" by other characters.

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, then, is 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. Tortured and mutated, forced to devour her own kin, and then made to "awaken" from the Archdemon's song, losing her blissful ignorance and mindless purpose.

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 was to make her aware of her own abjection. She then opens up her mouth and jaw like an alien and screams—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.[9]

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 are always teetering on the brink of evil and want to create children that are loyal manifestations of themselves (p. 91). The maternal body is therefore 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 optional and 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 patriarchal symbolic order. 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 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. In previous chapters I already mentioned The Vagary from *Doom 3*, who has a visible foetus in her translucent abdomen, and Cleopatra from *Dante's Inferno,* who births flying monsters from her nipples while players fight her, but there is also Alma from *F.E.A.R.*, a pregnant ghost and central antagonist whose contractions cause nightmarish chaos to manifest around her (for more on Alma, see Spittle, 2011) and monsters called Pregnants from the *Dead Space* series with distended stomachs full of tiny monsters that will burst out if the Pregnant is shot in the torso. Horrific, mutated, monstrous pregnant women are clearly a common trope in both Japanese and Western video games, and they are often presented to the player as a major antagonist or even the final boss to be slain before winning the game. That all of the games listed here feature a male player-character

simply adds to their inherent misogynistic assumptions and messaging, though BioWare (as well as several of the games discussed in the previous chapter) has demonstrated that allowing for female player-characters does not mean the game will be any less hostile towards female bodies and subject positions if they are non-normative, transgressive, and parthenogenetically reproductive.

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

BioWare's *Mass Effect* video game trilogy[10] has been lauded as "one of the most important pieces of science fiction narrative of our generation" because of its "ability to reflect on our society as a whole" (Munkittrick, 2012). However, the way the trilogy positions and frames nonhuman feminized bodies is deeply problematic. While *Mass Effect* ostensibly promotes acceptance of nonhuman others—particularly aliens and synthetic beings—it positions the female cyborg body as a site of horror and revulsion, and, in Cronenbergian style, presents pregnancy in relation to death, hybridity, infection, and mutation.[11]

Set in a not-too-distant future in which humanity has joined a kind of galactic federation of alien races, the *Mass Effect* trilogy's protagonist/player-character is the heroic Commander Shepard, a human man or woman in charge of a space ship crewed by human and nonhuman characters.[12] Although the series is full of nonhuman beings, the main alien species presented in the series as central characters, companions, and love interests are all humanoid in design; although they may have distinct features that clearly indicate their alienness, they are all bipedal, with two arms, one head, one mouth, and so on. Some alien species, like the Asari, are almost completely humanoid, and, as I discuss in more detail later, they are an all-female species made up of conventionally attractive, blue-skinned women and are presented as sexually and romantically desirable throughout the series. Although there are a few alien species who are significantly less

humanoid, they are minor characters, only rarely encountered, and are not present as companions, party members, or love interests.

Aside from alien-human relations, the series focuses on exploring the tension and conflict between organic beings and the synthetic life they create. The games explore this tension using both well-known and more unique science fiction tropes: enslaved, hive-mind robots called the Geth gain sentience and rise up against their creators, taking over the planet and forcing their former masters into a diaspora; the artificial intelligence that runs Shepard's ship gains possession of a sexualized gynoid body, falls in love with a human man, and goes through various existential crises; humans with cybernetic implants that grant them telekinetic powers are used as soldiers but are viewed with distrust by the rest of society; one of Shepard's crewmates is a genetically engineered, artificially conceived, and technologically enhanced "perfect" woman; Shepard dies but is resurrected and reconstructed through forbidden alien technology, making them question how human they actually are; and the main antagonists of the series, the Reapers, are a species of giant, highly advanced, artificially intelligent, techno-organic beings whose purpose is to destroy (or "reap") all advanced organic life in the galaxy.

The trilogy's ending has the player decide whether all synthetic life should be destroyed, if it should be reined in and controlled directly by Shepard, or if a posthuman "synthesis" of all organic and synthetic life —effectively rendering everything a cyborg, including plants and animals—is the best way to save the galaxy. The synthesis choice is presented as the most "just" one, as it means cooperation instead of genocide or oppression, and would theoretically make everyone equal in their hybridity. On the other hand, throughout the series, humans and humanoid beings are centralized, and the story is told from a contemporary human perspective; technological augmentation is framed as an "infection" or "contagion" that threatens bodily autonomy; and cyborg existence is variously framed as undesirable and dehumanizing, associated with ruthlessness and cruelty, or presented as a grotesque and horrific living death. While the ending allows for the

creation of a seemingly egalitarian, posthuman utopia, *ME*'s vision of synthetic-organic fusion is contradictory and technophobic. In this sense, the series highlights and reinforces the ambivalent positioning of the nonhuman and/or cyborg—or any kind of liminal, hybrid body—in popular culture, underscoring the desirability of humanoid bodies, purely human bodies, or bodies that can pass as human.

Predatory and Monstrous Sexuality

As previously mentioned, the Asari are an all-female humanoid alien species that feature heavily in the *ME* series. They are often encountered as either enemy mercenary soldiers or sexualized exotic dancers. While they look almost entirely like slim, conventionally attractive human women, their alienness is signalled 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 such as the Na'vi from the *Avatar* franchise, green such as the Orion slave girl from the *Star Trek* franchise or Gamora from the *Guardians of the Galaxy* franchise, or red like Ahsoka from the *Star Wars* franchise—distinguishes them from the human characters (who are overwhelmingly white in Western science fiction media with *Mass Effect* 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."[13]

The Ardat-Yakshi are the series' 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 in *Mass Effect 2* (BioWare, 2010) 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—no mother-daughter kinship, love, or loyalty allowed here), 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 BioWare features many queer characters in their games—a vital contribution to queer representation in video games—unfortunately sometimes those characters lack much-needed nuance and reinforce harmful stereotypes.[14] Specifically, 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), Chris Holmlund (1994), Katherine Farrimond (2012), and Liz Millward et al. (2017) have unpacked over the past three decades. 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 Cyborg 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, in the third installment in the trilogy the Ardat-Yakshi become victims of a form of techno-infection that turns them all into "Banshees." As previously mentioned, the main antagonists of the *Mass Effect* 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, which I refer to as "techno-zombies." To create the Banshees, the Reapers exclusively target the Ardat-Yakshi and not other Asari, perhaps because of their

superior biotic abilities, 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 *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012) and must be killed. In this sense, Morinth is doomed even if the player chooses to spare and join forces with her—there is no redemption for the murderous lesbian *femme fatale.*

Technology, especially as wielded by a technologically advanced or superior alien/cyborg/robot species or an out-of-control mad scientist, has often been portrayed in science fiction as intertwined with hybridity, mutation, infection, reproduction, and body horror. Indeed, science fiction and body horror are two intertwined genres, as seen in works ranging from Mary Shelley's foundational book *Frankenstein* to Cronenberg's *The Fly* to more recent films like 2018's *Annihilation*. The blending of body horror and science fiction found in *Mass Effect* (as well as the *Dragon Age* series, which blends dark fantasy with horror elements) is also a Cronenbergian approach: as Caelum Vatnsdal (2004) asserts, *The Fly* (Cronenberg, 1986) "contains all the science and hardware of typical gearhead sci-fi, but also a hideous, rampaging bug monster … and so on balance seems more of a horror movie" (p. 18). Cronenberg and BioWare are both therefore enacting the role of mad scientist who fuses seemingly disparate parts together to create an entirely unsettling whole—a monstrous generic hybrid. However, *Mass Effect*'s genre-blending is slightly different. Although Seth Brundle's transformation in *The Fly* is indeed due to irresponsible use of technology—he drunkenly used himself as a test subject to see if the teleportation machine he invented would work—the horror this mishap resulted in was the fusion of two living, organic beings. BioWare, on the other hand, centralizes the fusing of synthetic technology and organic tissue. In this sense, the resulting cyborg

zombie-mutants blend science fiction with the horrific to present players with monsters that embody a kind of techno-abjection.

This reinforces technophobic attitudes, underscoring a fear or distrust towards technology (especially if wielded by nonhumans against humans) and cyborgs. In *Mass Effect*, that technophobia (or perhaps more accurately, "cyborg-phobia") reaches its zenith with the design of the Reapers' techno-zombies, as they are mutated, abject monstrosities that exist to be fought and killed by the player. Humans who are infected by the Reapers mutate into "Husks," which look like zombies covered with visible blue cybernetic parts. In addition to human-derived Husks, the other main alien species in the series also have their own unique and similarly horrific forms of techno-zombification. These monsters evoke anxieties around mutation and the loss of bodily autonomy through possession/infection by a technological Other and reinforce a distrust of hybridity and the collapsing of boundaries it entails. *Mass Effect*'s science fiction-horror genre hybridity is exemplified in the design and presentation of these monstrous cyborgs: it is signalled in the visual design of the monsters themselves (their corpse-like appearance and their mutated and unnatural bodies), the atmospheric design of the scenes in which they are encountered (including unsettling music, dark spaces, and jump scares), and the ways in which they move and behave (they sprint or shuffle slowly, swarm or suddenly teleport, scream or roar with uncanny voices, and viciously attack the player-character).

The physical appearance of the Banshee (Fig. 5.3) is particularly noteworthy for several reasons. First, they are the only clearly gendered mutant—the techno-zombies made from the other alien races appear to become genderless (or subtly coded as male) when transformed, whereas the Banshee has breasts as well as a visible vulva. 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, suggesting that the

game's (all male) designers sought to turn the pregnant female body into a horrific spectacle for the (presumed male) player. 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, emaciated, corpse-like cyborg women attacking the player would be more unsettling 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.



Fig. 5.3 A screenshot of a Banshee from *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012). Note her emaciated naked body, cybernetic implants, and distended belly

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 to this book, the archetypal categories of Maiden, Mother, and Crone are not separate, rather they are fluid and overlapping. In an earlier chapter, I 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 *Mass Effect*'s Ardat-Yakshi and the monstrous, skeletal, corpse-like but also seemingly pregnant Banshees they become in the third installment.

Along with being the monstrous, naked, mutant, techno-zombie versions of predatory and queer-coded *femmes fatales,* the Banshees are a reference to Irish mythology: the banshee is a female spirit whose scream signals death. Accordingly, the Banshees scream at the player and release a damaging biotic blast while doing so. In addition to their terrifying scream, Banshees can teleport around the battlefield. They are one of the most challenging enemies in the series as they can kill the player-character in one hit—a lot of attention went into designing the Banshees to be horrifying and memorable monsters for players to face. While the other techno-zombies encountered are horrific and grotesque, the Banshees are not only more difficult, they are *scarier.* It is no coincidence that they are also identifiably female, have visible genitals, are mutated versions of queer-coded predatory *femmes fatales,* and appear to be pregnant. In this sense, BioWare's cyborg zombie-mutant monsters are not only remediating body horror tropes of hybridity, mutation, and infection, but also of monstrous/unnatural pregnancy—all themes found in both *The Fly* and *The Brood,* lending weight to my reading of BioWare's games alongside Cronenberg's grotesque Canadian horror films.

Body horror tropes are problematic in many ways: the fear of anomalous bodies and genetic defects reveals ableist biases, the fear of infection has been related to the AIDS crisis and homophobia, the fear of hybridity relates to racialized bodies and anti-miscegenation and can therefore be read as racist. These issues are all symbolically coded, however, and require a deeper reading to uncover. On the other hand, designing monsters as screaming, naked, pregnant women with visible genitals is a far more overt and obvious example of misogyny. As pregnant, naked, and screaming alien cyborg monsters created by murdering and technologically infecting and resurrecting genetically "defective" and sexually predatory infertile *femmes fatales*, the Banshees exemplify the ways women are made monstrous in terms of

both their sexuality and their reproductive functions. Perhaps this is why the Banshees are particularly horrifying: they evoke the abject in the same ways the other techno-zombies do because they are mutated, infected, hybrid, screaming, mindless monstrosities, but they go beyond that level of horror by also being naked, pregnant women. Monsters like the Banshees might make for exciting enemies to fight, but rendering them monstrous in association with aspects of both cyborg hybridity and biological femaleness is deeply problematic, sends harmful messages to the players who are made to confront and fight these horrific monsters, and reinforces the message that this game was not made with pregnant players, or women in general, in mind.

Misogyny and Technophobia

The *Mass Effect* series, like much science fiction, communicates technophobic messages to its audiences. In its blending of body horror with science fiction, the series creates an aesthetic of techno-abjection, which allows BioWare to approach the posthuman or transhuman through the pathways of fear, anxiety, and technophobia. As Daniel Dinello (2005) has observed, the science fiction subgenre of virus horror, another blended genre which presents mutilated/mutated and corrupted bodies, is a metaphor for technophobia. He notes that:

> As revealed in science fiction, the virus of technology is the satanic machine, humanity's terminator, and the source of death in a techno-apocalypse. Like a viral infection, technology develops into an autonomous, invasive force … Voracious in its urge to possess and engulf, technology is a parasite that frequently undermines human integrity—invisibly infiltrating, manipulating, seizing control, and mutating its human host to support its own survival and evolution. (Dinello, 2005, p. 247)

Although Dinello's book came out before *Mass Effect*, he could have been accurately describing the series. Framing technology as a virus means that humans (or other sapient humanoid aliens) become "mere carriers of the techno-disease" and organic life therefore serves "as a

breeding medium that combines and recombines technological structures to produce new mutations that may ultimately result in the extinction of humanity" (Dinello, 2005, p. 247). By combining this techno-plague anxiety with the physical abjection of the infected techno-zombies, BioWare created monstrosities that the player would *want* to kill. The zombie is, after all, "the ideal enemy: 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" (Krzywinska, 2008, p. 153). The spectacularly horrific appearance of BioWare's techno-zombies is particularly important to consider when reading the monster as a symbolic representation of Otherness.

The series categorizes cyborg bodies and pregnant bodies as both similarly monstrous, infected, and mutated. Even though the Banshee is a creature that has technically no "human" in it—it is a mutated cyborg Asari—its body is presented as abject and horrifying in human (and misogynistic) aesthetic terms. Although Donna Haraway (1991, 1992) has argued that the cyborg, or monstrosity and hybridity more generally, are ambiguous and transgressive and so potentially empowering for women, the ludic female monster, alien, or cyborg is designed, coded, and rendered (usually by male developers) to be either objectified and romanced or confronted and slain (usually by male characters). She is not, therefore, inherently transgressive; rather, she is a misogynistic, anthropocentric construct that is designed to reinforce hegemonic ideology and uphold the primacy of normative (and above all, human) bodies, behaviours, and gender dynamics. This is an unfortunately common way in which the female cyborg functions in popular culture: as Mary Ann Doane (1990) has demonstrated, the representation of "techno-femininity" in science fiction cinema is used to reinforce rather than destabilize gendered stereotypes. Similarly, Anne Balsamo (1996) has argued that, regardless of their potentials, technological development and augmentation are still heavily influenced by patriarchal gender norms and boundaries. The *Mass Effect* series fails to push back against this problem, instead reinforcing it in its design of the monstrous Banshees.

“The Depository of all That Is Transgressive and Dangerous”

In what is perhaps Cronenberg’s most well-known film, *The Fly*, the main character, Seth Brundle, accidentally mixes his own genetic information with that of a house fly, an accident which precipitates his gradual transformation into a grotesque insect-human hybrid monster. Other Cronenberg films like *Rabid*, *Scanners*, and *Dead Ringers* also demonstrate his preoccupation with infectious, gynecological, sexual, and reproductive horror as well as the figure of the male “mad scientist” who is obsessed with achieving the power of reproduction. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Cronenberg film that has garnered the most feminist film theorist attention is *The Brood*, in which a woman (who, importantly, is mentally ill and whom the film heavily implies was abused by her own mother) becomes infected by her own rage and, with the influence of a male psychotherapist who encourages her mutations, develops a grotesque external womb that houses her parthenogenetically created zombie monster babies. As Linda Badley (1995) argues, “in deliberately repellent images, [Cronenberg’s] films depict male science’s fear and envy of women’s power of reproduction and the struggle between them for control” (p. 125). Maggie Humm (1997) makes a similar observation, arguing that in Cronenberg’s films, “masculinity is positioned in tension both with its own horrific construction of the feminine and also with its psychic desire for the maternal feminine, particularly for the reproductive body” (p. 60).

As Vatnsdal (2015) has observed in his study of Canadian cinematic monsters, “the loss of control represented by these creatures is horrific, it is undesirable, [and] it comes when least expected” (p. 29). Whether the creators of the *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect* series were influenced by Cronenberg’s approach to body horror and genre-blending or not, his very effective evocation of horror, repulsion, and abjection in relation to fears around reproduction, infection, and mutation are clearly paralleled in both series. Both series therefore fall into a long

tradition in Canadian horror of creating monsters that "serve as expressions of fear that our calm civility and rational control are tentative propositions at best" (Vatnsdal, 2015, p. 29). However, the screaming, naked, pregnant and maternal female monsters who are created from either tortured or mutated captive women who are labelled "mad" and may also be rape victims or twisted, undead, cyborg versions of queer-coded, predatory, seductive *femmes fatales* are *not* necessary additions to this tradition. As with all body horror, there is a line that should not be crossed. That is not to say that there should be no female monsters, or gendered monsters in general, but presenting biological femaleness and female reproduction as inherently horrific crosses that line. In other words, this is not about being tasteful—body horror is not a "tasteful" genre—but it is about choosing to not remediate harmful tropes.

Mary Russo (1994) has highlighted the misogyny in the concept of the grotesque by pointing to 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 misogynistic association is exemplified in the naked, screaming, pregnant, undead, cyborg Banshee as well as the horrific, mad, mutated Broodmother. While there is always potential for subversive and oppositional interpretations and reclamations, especially of ambiguous figures like the hybrid cyborg or monster, that potential is undermined by the manner in which these games frame these characters and creatures. Presenting female bodies as horrific and repulsive in relation to reproductive processes is just as harmful as overtly sexualizing them —in either case, those bodies are presented as spectacles and objects of male desire or revulsion, existing to be either romanced or murdered (or, in the case of the succubus, perhaps both). These design choices also send a clear message that these games were not made by women developers nor intended for women players, especially pregnant ones, regardless of the actual player demographic and the ability to play as a female hero.

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 argued 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]. (p. 6)

But, importantly, she also noted that:

> 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 monsters in relation to reproduction through horrific, voracious, murderous sexual activity or by transforming them into monstrous pregnant-appearing zombies. In this way, these games continue the theme or trope of pregnancy-as-mutation/infection discussed in the previous chapter and familiar to body horror media such as Cronenberg's *The Brood*. To

progress in games such as *Origins*, *Awakening*, and *Mass Effect 3*, the player is forced to murder these pregnant and/or maternal figures. These examples of the abject maternal and/or reproductive 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, which, like monstrosity itself, are inherently ambiguous concepts. However, the transgressive potential of those concepts is undermined since these monsters are explicitly designed to "gross out" or "freak out" the players, encouraging them to *want* to kill these monstrous women. In this sense, Josh Dohmen's (2016) warning that while the abject has the potential to "contest and even revise one's identifications," there is also the danger 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 section, which has focused on the monstrous Mother, especially in terms of monstrous pregnancy and reproduction, demonstrates that the centrality of horrific 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. (pp. 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 Patricia 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. In the following section, I move into a discussion of the Crone, the final aspect of the ludic manifestation of the abject monstrous-feminine. While the focus will be more on the "senile hag" part rather than the "pregnant" part, as I shall demonstrate, there is much slippage between the mother (or the reproductive monster) and figure of the hag/crone.

References

Ahmed, S. (2004). *The cultural politics of emotion*. Edinburgh University Press.

Ashfae. (2012). David Gaider interview. *Livejournal*. https://swooping-isbad.livejournal.com/1286233.html

Badley, L. (1995). *Film, horror, and the body fantastic*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Balsamo, A. M. (1996). *Technologies of the gendered body: Reading cyborg women.* Duke University Press.

BioWare. (2009). *Dragon age: Origins.* Electronic Arts. PlayStation 3.

BioWare. (2010). *Dragon age: Origins—Awakening.* Electronic Arts. PlayStation 3.

BioWare. (2011). *Dragon age II.* Electronic Arts. PlayStation 3.

BioWare. (2014). *Dragon age: Inquisition.* Electronic Arts. PlayStation 3.

BioWare. (2012). *Mass effect 3.* Electronic Arts. PlayStation 3.

Chang, E. (2017). A game chooses, a player obeys: *BioShock*, posthumanism, and the limits of queerness. In J. Malowski & T. M. Russworm (Eds.), *Gaming representation: Race, gender, and sexuality in video games* (pp. 227–244). Indiana University Press. [https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2005rgq.18]

Children. (n.d.). *Dragon age wiki.* https://dragonage.fandom.com/wiki/Children

Creed, B. (1993). *The monstrous-feminine: Film, feminism, psychoanalysis*. Routledge.

Cronenberg, D. (Director). (1986). *The fly* [Film]. Brooksfilms; Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation.

Cruz, R. A. L. (2012). Mutations and metamorphoses: Body horror is biological horror. *Journal of Popular Film and Television, 40*(4), 160–168. [https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.2012.654521]

Dinello, D. (2005). *Technophobia!: Science fiction visions of posthuman technology.* University of Texas Press.

Doane, M. A. (1990). Technophilia: Technology, representation and the feminine. In M. Jacobus, E. F. Keller, & S. Shuttleworth (Eds.), *Body/politics: Women and the discourses of science* (pp. 163–176). Routledge.

Doane, M. A. (1991). *Femmes fatales: Feminism, film theory, psychoanalysis*. Routledge.

Dohmen, J. (2016). Disability as abject: Kristeva, disability, and resistance. *Hypatia, 31*(4), 762–778. [https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12266]

Dym, B. (2019). The burden of queer love. *Press Start, 5*(1), 19–35.

Farrimond, K. (2012). "Stay still so we can see who you are": Anxiety and bisexual activity in the contemporary femme fatale film. *Journal of Bisexuality, 12*(1), 138–154. [https://doi.org/10.1080/15299716.2012.645725]

Goto, L. (2015). Vilifying mental illness: Horror games & the insanity trope. *FemHype.* https://femhype.com/2015/03/16/vilifying-mental-illness-horror-games-the-insanitytrope/

Haraway, D. (1991). *Simians, cyborgs and women: The reinvention of nature*. Routledge.

Haraway, D. (1992). Promises of monsters: A regenerative politics for inappropriate/d others. In L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, & P. A. Treichler (Eds.), *Cultural studies* (pp. 295–337). Routledge.

Harrington, E. (2018). *Women, monstrosity and horror film: Gynaehorror*. Routledge.

Hart, L. (1994). *Fatal woman: Lesbian sexuality and the mark of aggression.* Princeton University Press.

Holmlund, C. (1994). Cruisin' for a brusin": Hollywood's deadly (lesbian) dolls. *Cinema Journal, 34*(1), 31–51. [https://doi.org/10.2307/1225654]

Humm, M. (1997). *Feminism and film.* Edinburgh University Press.

Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection*. (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). Columbia University Press.

Krzywinska, T. (2008). Zombies in gamespace: Form, context, and meaning in zombie-based video games. In S. McIntosh & M. Leverette (Eds.), *Zombie culture: Autopsies of the living dead* (pp. 153–168). Scarecrow Press. [https://doi.org/10.5040/9798881840402.ch-0010]

Lindsey, P. (2014). Gaming's favorite villain is mental illness, and this needs to stop. *Polygon.* https://www.polygon.com/2014/7/21/5923095/mental-health-gaming-silent-hill

Millward, L., Dodd, J. G., & Fubara-Manuel, I. (Eds.). (2017). *Killing off the lesbians: A symbolic annihilation on film and television*. McFarland.

Munkittrick, K. (2012). Why Mass Effect is the most important science fiction universe of our generation. *Gizmodo.* https://gizmodo.com/why-mass-effect-is-the-most-importantscience-fiction-u-5886178

Owen, L. (2015). Monstrous freedom: Charting fat ambivalence. *Fat Studies, 4*(1), 1–13. [https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2014.896186]

Rich, A. (1976). *Of woman born: Motherhood as experience and institution*. Norton.

Russo, M. (1994). *The female grotesque: Risk, excess and modernity*. Routledge.

Sarkeesian, A. (2016). Sinister seductress [Video]. *Feminist frequency.* https://feministfrequency.com/video/sinister-seductress/

Scholz, S. (2009). Public confessions of a sinner: A healthy take on obesity? *Medical Humanities, 35*(2), 66–67.

Shaw, A. (2014). *Gaming at the edge: Sexuality and gender at the margins of gamer culture.* University of Minnesota Press.

Spittle, S. (2011). "Did this game scare you? Because it sure as hell scared me!": F.E.A.R., the abject and the uncanny. *Games and Culture, 6*(4), 312–326.

Stang, S. (2019). The broodmother as monstrous-feminine: Abject maternity in video games. *Nordlit, 42: Manufacturing* Monsters (pp. 233–256). https://doi.org/10.7557/13.5014

Stang, S. (2023). Desirable and undesirable cyborg bodies in the *Mass Effect* video game trilogy. In J. Empey & R. Kilbourn (Eds.), *Feminist posthumanism in contemporary science fiction film and media: From annihilation to high life and beyond* (pp. 96–112). Bloomsbury.

Ussher, J. M. (2006). *Managing the monstrous feminine: Regulating the reproductive body*. Routledge.

Vatnsdal, C. (2004). *They came from within: A history of Canadian horror cinema*. Arbeiter Ring Publishers.

Vatnsdal, C. (2015). Monsters up north: A taxonomy of terror. In G. Freitag & A. Loiselle (Eds.), *The Canadian horror film: Terror of the soul* (pp. 21–29). University of Toronto Press.

Yaeger, P. (1992). The "language of blood": Toward a maternal sublime. *Genre, 25*(1), 5–24.

Footnotes

1 Parts of this chapter have been previously published in my article "The Broodmother as Monstrous-Feminine—Abject Maternity in Video Games" in the journal *Nordlit* (Stang, 2019) and my chapter entitled "Desirable and Undesirable Cyborg Bodies in the Mass Effect Video Game Trilogy" in the edited collection *Feminist Posthumanism in Contemporary Science Fiction Film and Media From Annihilation to High Life and Beyond* (Stang, 2023).

2 Although players can choose a more or less marginalized/minoritized avatar, as in much fantasy media, this character bypasses their own oppression by being recruited into a powerful organization and gaining power and influence over others. Many role-playing games have players start out as a "nobody" who must prove their worth as a leader or other kind of special "chosen one" by conquering each zone on a map, killing all the monsters (i.e. indigenous and often monstrous creatures), and earning the favour of those who reside there in order to conscript them to a cause. Venturing forth into wild and hostile lands and taming them, usually through violence, provides an uncritical re-enactment of colonial conquest and fosters in players a feeling of

imagined control and dominance. In this sense, even though the player-character may start out at the bottom rung of society (for example, by choosing a particularly hated/feared race/class such as a city elf or a mage), they quickly serve as the representative and saviour of the *Dragon Age* series' fantastical yet patriarchal, militaristic, hierarchical, and oppressively religious society of Thedas, regardless of the gender, race, or background the player chooses for their avatar.

3 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.

4 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.

5 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.

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

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

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

9 Her 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 an earlier 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.

10 I refer to the *Mass Effect* trilogy here (BioWare, 2007–2012) because I am only examining the first three games in the series. While there is a fourth game, *Mass Effect: Andromeda* from 2017, it is not part of the main trilogy and tells a different story told in a different galaxy.

11 As I explore elsewhere (Stang, 2023), in a troubled and often contradictory approach, the *ME* trilogy dictates which bodies are desirable or undesirable from a heterosexual male perspective: female and feminized bodies are portrayed as sexualized and alluring only if they are purely organic, purely synthetic, or able to "pass" as organic by hiding their synthetic parts. Otherwise, they are monstrous. In this way, the series' portrayal of cyborg bodies draws on established science fiction and horror tropes to demarcate strict boundaries around the "acceptable" ways bodies can be technologically enhanced and to mitigate the potential threat that technologically augmented/empowered women pose within patriarchal society by forcing them into only one of two representational categories— sex object or monster—thereby objectifying, othering, and dehumanizing them within the narrative.

12 In the *ME* trilogy players can choose the sex (a binary choice between male and female) and basic appearance of their player-character (facial features, skin colour, and hair style and colour), but they must still be a human with a normative appearance and so players cannot align themselves with the nonhuman as they can in the *Dragon Age* series.

13 The name "Demon of the Night Winds" evokes Lilith, who, as mentioned in an earlier 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.

14 Adrienne Shaw (2014) 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 unfortunately remediations of the same harmful tropes and stereotypes that were critiqued in film studies decades ago.

Part III
The Crone

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2026
S. Stang, *Maiden, Mother, and Crone*, Palgrave Studies in Mediating Kinship, Representation, and Difference
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-25115-2_6

6. Hideous Hags: The Fear of Female Ageing

Sarah Stang[1] ✉
(1) Digital Humanities, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada

✉ **Sarah Stang**
Email: sstang@brocku.ca

Keyword Old age – Ageism – Ableism – Hagraven – Witch

> 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, pp. 337–8)
>
> 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.
>
> —Elissa Melamed (1983, p. 54)

As I have demonstrated in the previous 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, vampire, or spider woman. 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 ageing body of a woman is considered particularly terrifying, abject, and grotesque. The misogyny and ageism underpinning the fear, horror, and disgust directed towards the ageing female body coalesces

in the form of the crone, hag, or witch—familiar archetypes of female monstrosity. These terms are not necessarily interchangeable, but they all point to feminine power that has traditionally been framed as evil and dangerous. While "witch" has been reclaimed in some circles and is sometimes portrayed in more positive or neutral ways in popular culture (especially if the witch in question is young and conventionally attractive),[1] both "crone" and "hag" imply old age and possibly ugliness or unpleasantness, meaning these figures are often misogyny manifest, as Elissa Melamed discusses in the second opening quote of this chapter. 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 ageing. As Vivian Sobchack's (2000) semi-autobiographical work on the dread of ageing in horror film has demonstrated, the visibly ageing female body is presented in ways intended to alienate, denigrate, and humiliate older women, framing their very existence as something that disgusts and terrifies. In this chapter, I analyse the figure of the hag 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 the crone, as I discuss in the following chapter) 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*[2]

According to the *Dungeons & Dragons 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" (Perkins, 2014, p. 176; Fig. 6.1). 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" (Perkins, 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" (pp. 176–177).



Fig. 6.1 A Night Hag (left) and green hag (right) from the *Monster Manual* (Perkins, 2014)

Hags are immortal, so their aged appearance has nothing to do with actual ageing; 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* (Reitherman, 1963)—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 1983 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. 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.

Monstrous Motherhood and Deceptive Seduction

Historically, the majority of the tens of thousands of women accused of and executed for witchcraft during the witch hunts of the fifteenth–eighteenth 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 portrayed 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* sucks the magic out of her daughter-figure's hair to maintain her own youth.[3]

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 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. (Perkins, 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, or they become monstrous (or both). 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. Hags then take these daughters back and raise/train them, often forming a coven with their daughters. In this way, although it is outside the purview of normative heterosexual reproduction (but still requires reproduction), hags do form non-normative familial bonds that can be read as transgressive, anti-patriarchal, and queer. That this queer reproduction poses a threat to the sanctity of heterosexual/heteronormative reproduction and families underscores the way that these old women are made monstrous because they undermine and endanger normative society. Hags therefore fall into a long tradition of symbolically (or overtly) framing monsters as queer outsiders who threaten the stability of cisheteropatriarchal society and the normative, nuclear family unit (see Wood, 1986).

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 deceptive and 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* (Gygax, 1977), a specific type of hag called a "night hag" can infiltrate the nightmares of impure or evil men and consume them by "riding the victim until dawn" until their bodies wither into larvae (p. 73). In the 5th edition *Monster Manual* (Perkins, 2014), night hags 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 tricky and untrustworthy, able to turn invisible and magically alter their appearances and voices in order to attract, manipulate, and deceive mortals.

Like many of the female monsters discussed in this book, hags are presented as deceptive and treacherous, using illusions to lure their victims before springing their "trap." Indeed, official descriptions of the hags tend to relish the fact that they are deadly *femmes fatales* who disguise themselves before revealing their true forms. These seductive "bait-and-switch" monsters, like the bruxa or spider woman, are monstrous in both appearance and behaviour, but where the bruxa is monstrous because she transforms into a deadly vampire and the spider woman is monstrous because of her inhuman lower half, hags are monstrous because their true forms are *old* and *ugly*.

To demonstrate this preoccupation with hags in terms of lust and sexual predation, what follows is a deep dive into an article entitled "Ecology of the Green Hag" from issue 331 of *Dragon* magazine, the official *D&D* magazine with source material for the game—a key paratextual object that was extremely popular among dedicated players. In this article, green hags represent "love you will die for":

> Green hags act with a malevolence and deceitfulness in excess of even their most savage brethren. Far more glib and persuasive then [*sic*] any of their sister hags, green hags excel at manipulation and temptation. … Green hags frequently disguise themselves as beautiful women and tempt men to secluded locales with libidinous promises and appealing disguises. Although green hags do not seek out male victims exclusively, they find that men quite easily, almost willingly, fall to their temptations. Once alone, they take sadistic pleasure in revealing their true forms to their would-be lovers before savagely slaughtering them. However, even worse is when a green hag's victims are more than mere would-be lovers. Insanity often follows those that survive such a traumatizing rendezvous. (Schneider, 2005, p. 59)

The author of this article, F. Wesley Schneider, is a senior game designer with Wizards of the Coast and has developed several *D&D* sourcebooks.

He seems to delight in describing the hags as perpetrators of seduction and murder, yet the final sentence implies that the "rendezvous" is traumatizing not because it is particularly violent or unpleasant, but because the hag reveals her true form after.

This article also gives an origin story for the green hag, recounting the legend of a beautiful woman named Green Mary, who lived in and protected the forest and its creatures, worshipping the spirits of nature. She fell in love with a human hunter, ignoring the forest's cries for revenge against the cruel man and sleeping with him. The forest punished her for this transgression:

> The next morning, the hunter awoke to find his lover horrifically transformed. The forest had reclaimed its servant's willful body, changing her milky skin into gnarled bark, her raven hair into vines, and her soft hands into twisted claws. Realizing the extent of her sin, Green Mary obeyed her spirit masters' orders with a fearful and repentant fervor. When it was done, not even a drop of the hunter's blood remained to stain the verdant ground.
>
> Yet nature knows no mercy, and, despite Green Mary's atonement, her form did not return to its one-time alluring shape. Disgusted by her actions and new form, she fled the beautiful groves and glens through which she once danced and took up residence among the rotting vines and festering pools of her forest's most putrid swamp. Thus rose the first green hag, a creature of nature enslaved to passion but fated to destroy all after which she lusts. (Schneider, 2005, p. 57)

This tale of a beautiful woman who transgresses and is transformed into a hag, yet is still driven by lust and passion, must be a compelling origin story for these creatures, as a similar one is told as the origin of the water hag in *The Witcher 3*, discussed later in this chapter. The horror here is not that this woman was punished for her sexual activity (the gods always seem to punish sexually active women for sleeping with the wrong man, or in the case of Medusa, for being raped in the

wrong place—I will discuss this more in depth later in this book), but that she was punished by being transformed from the pinnacle of conventional and youthful beauty into its complete antithesis. She is full of self-loathing, but still "enslaved to passion," yet no man would want her in this form. The hag therefore exemplifies Vivian Sobchack's (2000) discussion of old age and female monstrosity in horror cinema: "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). That she is forever cursed by the very spirits she served due to one mistake and "fated to destroy all after which she lusts" paints this story as a tragedy, and yet the hag is not presented as a tragic figure; rather, she is framed as a deceptive, sexually predatory monster.

Monstrosity, Old Age, and Disability

The *Monster Manual* (Perkins, 2014) goes into only minor detail regarding the green hag's specific appearance and behaviour in addition to the general description of all hags, as quoted at the opening of this section, simply calling them "wretched and hateful" beings who "love to manipulate other creatures into doing their bidding, masking their intentions behind layers of deception" (p. 177). The "Ecology of the Green Hag" article, however, goes into extreme detail:

> Green hags possess fearsome powers, horrible diseased features, and cruel natural weaponry, but despite all of this, perhaps their most disturbing trait is how closely they resemble normal humans. Ranging the same heights and weights as human females, only their withered, swampy appearances mark green hags as anything more then [*sic*] particularly misshapen crones, and even these tell-tale deformities might be hidden behind myriad magical disguises. Monstrous yet strangely familiar, green hags prove the least physically terrifying of all

> hags, marking them as the best examples of all hags' aberrant crossbred ancestry.
>
> Although their proportions mimic those of withered human women, their bent backs and hunched postures make some appear far shorter. Their weight also runs to far greater extremes, with some green hags appearing as emaciated, skeletal things while others can barely support their own obese bulk. Regardless of appearance, one must never assume that a green hag is frail or sickly, as all of their race possess physical powers outstripping nearly any humanoid of similar size.
>
> Aside from seemingly unnatural strength, a green hag's twisted form affords it a host of extraordinary and deadly powers. A green hag's physical similarity to human women is only superficial, as any who nears swiftly sees. Their mold-colored hair forms a wild viny tangle that rings their exaggerated, wart-covered features like a swampy mane. Their bent bodies possess a similar algae-green coloring as their hair but appear scarred and thick like bark, often marked with cancerous, knobby protrusions. This calloused hide makes green hags particularly resistant to physical attacks and often aids them in hiding amid the decaying overgrown areas in which they lair.
>
> This warped, hard physiology becomes most deadly as it extends to green hags' hands, which twist into yellow-nailed, filth-encrusted talons as deadly as any wild beast's. (Schneider, 2005, p. 57)

The language used here is worth highlighting for its excessive ableist and ageist imagery. Terms like "diseased features," "withered," "misshapen crones," "deformities," "bent backs," "hunched postures," "twisted forms," "exaggerated, wart-covered features," "scarred," "cancerous, knobby protrusions," and so on. *D&D* falls into a long tradition of linking old age with physical and mental disability and presenting ageing bodies as physically anomalous or "deformed"

(Chivers, 2011). The very word "deformed" (as well as similar words like "twisted" or "misshapen") 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. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2002) has explained that "Western thought has long conflated 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, reminding people of their own primal, bestial, and visceral nature, bodily fluids, and processes, physical disability is abject in that it reminds people of their own bodily precarity and fragility, and the temporary nature of their body as whole and perfect. 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)

Along with her age, the hag's disabled appearance adds to the horror and revulsion players are supposed to feel towards her, especially because she is actually incredibly strong, agile, and dangerous. Her physical abilities do not match her appearance as an old and disabled woman, and this may trick the player into letting down their guard only to be shocked at the hag's brute strength. In addition, Schneider's descriptions of the hag's extreme weight—either emaciated or with "obese bulk"—render the hag a particularly grotesque figure, defined

by her lack of adherence to a presumed "normative" body weight. Like the Broodmother and Banshees discussed previously, very fat and very thin bodies are positioned as abject and horrifying, indicating monstrosity in terms of physical appearance. Many monsters are designed this way, with extreme body weights used as a shorthand for monstrosity, villainy, disease, and/or madness. The message this sends to women is, of course, that if their bodies are outside of the stringent requirements of normative beauty standards, then they too may be considered monstrous. This is especially the case if those women are old, as their bodies are already being scrutinized through the lens of male sexual desire and subject to feelings, attitudes, and words full of disgust. The disgust Schneider, and any game designer or player like him, feels towards the hags' old and anomalous bodies is palpable.

Finally, I would like to highlight the mention of hags' "aberrant crossbred ancestry," as this strikes me as a particularly racially charged description. As Schneider (2005) notes, "being a race exclusively consisting of females, hags must look outside of their own species to propagate … Using kidnapping and magical disguises, hags seek out nearly any humanoid male (seemingly preferring humans and half-elves)" (p. 60). Certainly, the way hags reproduce is horrific, but the horror should theoretically be in how they devour infants and replace children with their own changelings, rather than in the "aberrant crossbred ancestry" this results in. *D&D* has a particular preoccupation with mixed race (or, more accurately, inter-species) identities, with much ink spilled over how mixed blood characters should look, act, and what their inherent statistics, ability scores, and moral alignments should be. Many critics have pointed out that basing statistics such as strength, dexterity, constitution, intelligence, wisdom, and charisma on the character's racial background reeks of biological essentialism.[4] As part of ongoing efforts to address backlash they have faced for the racist language and imagery long embedded in the game, in late 2022 Wizards of the Coast replaced the word "race"—what they call a "problematic term"—for the word "species" in materials produced from then on.[5] Yet, the description for monstrous beings like hags has not

changed.[6] While it is a sign of progress—albeit slow, reactionary, and begrudging progress—that Wizards of the Coast is paying attention to discourses around the way orcs and drow (as discussed in my analysis of Lolth) have been portrayed, little attention is or has been paid to the way these same issues manifest in the monsters players encounter, fight, and murder.

Dark Sororities

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" (Perkins, 2014, p. 176) is framed within the *Monster Manual* as posing a deadly threat to the player-character because *of course* the idea of a family, sisterhood, society, network, 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, female kinship-oriented 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 (Perkins, 2014, p. 176). Yet, they choose to create more hags, and those new hags are exact replicas of their mothers. Why would they do this if they do not seek to form familial bonds or hag communities?

In "Ecology of the Night Hag," another article written for *Dragon* magazine, Schneider (2004) elaborates on the night hags' complete lack of kinship:

> Night hags pay little respect to the concept of racial privilege and contend with others of their race in the same manner they deal with all other creatures, with strong night hags subjugating their weaker sisters. Night hags sometimes deal with the hags of the

> Material Plane but never as equals and always as masters. These extraplanar hags maintain a deeply rooted sense of superiority when it comes to normal hags and cruelly dominate either an individual or whole covens. Selfish and supercilious in the extreme, night hags rarely form covens with their own kind and most assuredly never with lesser hags of the Material Plane. When a coven of night hags does form, it most often consists of a dominant night hag and two weaker night hags or even three night hags forced by a more powerful night hag to do her bidding. These weaker night hags might be hags the leader subjugated or, more often, the dominant hag's own daughters. (p. 68)

This framing of powerful women as competitive and selfish is a way to undercut their collective power and disavow the potentials and possibilities for non-normative, or even transgressive, matriarchal, all-female families and bonds of feminine kinship. This 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 larvae 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. As Schneider describes in his article for *Dragon* magazine, hags represent the nightmares of normative, masculinist, patriarchal society:

> Foul beyond reasoning and old beyond reckoning, half-crazed shadows cackle madly in the mist-shrouded night. Lurking in the rank, wild places even the bravest fear to tread, nightmare crones haunt the legends of every culture and hint at the corruption that festers deep within each mortal soul. Cunning predators, vengeful adversaries, and warped reflections of the civilized races, these are the monstrosities known as hags. (Schneider, 2005, p. 56)

By naming these powerful, ancient, sexually active, cunning, all-female, single mothers "hags" *D&D* and its source material produce a stigma around female old age, sexuality, reproduction, 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 drive him mad or outright kill him. In this sense, hags are a quintessential embodiment of misogyny, in that they portray female reproduction, ageing, sexuality, and bonding as monstrous, horrifying, and dangerous, along with underscoring the disgust players are meant to feel towards old, disabled, and overly fat or thin women. Of course, given its influence and impact on the genre of the digital role-playing game, *D&D* is not the only game in which powerful, inhuman old women are portrayed as evil, deadly, and monstrous "hags."

D&D's Night Hag in Video Game Form

Hags are a popular enemy type in *D&D*, perhaps because they are so powerful and therefore prove a challenge for high-level players, plus they are highly charismatic and so would be fun for Dungeon Masters to role-play (Dungeon Masters are expected to perform as the non-player characters and enemies the other players encounter during each play session). As such, they appear in several video game *D&D* adaptations and spin-offs, two of which I will explore here: *Planescape: Torment* (Black Isle Studios, 1999) and *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios, 2023).

Planescape: Torment

In her book *Unbecoming Female Monsters*, Cristina Santos (2017) has argued that 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" (p. xv). Like all women in a patriarchal society, female monsters are placed into certain archetypal categories based on their age and behaviour: the beautiful virgin becomes the siren; the sexually promiscuous woman becomes the seductive succubus or vampire; the dominant, single, or stepmother becomes the reproductive monster or the fairy-tale witch; the post-menopausal woman becomes the hag, witch, or crone (Santos, 2017, p. xvii). Santos's exploration of the witch is particularly interesting, as she has demonstrated that although the fairy-tale witch is associated with old age and child-eating, witchcraft is also associated with "carnal lust" (2017, 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*, 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 loose 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).[7] 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). 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.

Baldur's Gate 3

The *Baldur's Gate* series is an extremely popular and acclaimed digital *D&D* adaptation, with the latest installment as of this writing, *Baldur's Gate 3*, receiving universal critical acclaim, winning several Game of the Year awards, and being hailed as one of the greatest video games of all time.[8] Unsurprisingly, hags feature in this game as well. For example, the player can find a couple of books in the game that include details about hags. One, an authorless book called *The Evil Eye*, indicates that hags grow in power by collecting magical artefacts and making bargains with mortals and also categorizes them, as they might be classified within a bestiary:

> While the number of trinkets and bargains a hag personally acquires means that her powers will be unique compared to that of her sisters, hags as a whole can still be divided into three sub-categories.
>
> Night Hags: Named as such for their ability to haunt a mortal's dreams, slowly devouring vital essence until the victim's soul can be trapped into the hag's soul bag. They are known for being petty, selfish braggarts.

Sea Hags: Known for devouring their victims whole, sea hags can terrorise and kill with a single look. They reek of fish and are incapable of making a proper cup of tea.

Green Hags: They are beautiful. They are powerful. Speak not a word against them.

The description of green hags is odd—positive but in a way that suggests something foreboding. Indeed, a book found later in the game, entitled *A Brush with Evil: On Hags* and written by Elizabeth M. Soot, reveals far more about green hags, suggesting that *The Evil Eye* was perhaps written by the same author who was under a green hag's enthrallment when she wrote it. As the book states:

It has been too long, dear reader, since we last sat together. I wish it was because I'd been travelling far and wide, working to bring you more tips and tricks on how to triumph over evil. Alas, that was not the case.

For I fell prey to a Green Hag.

Worry not, I am alive and well. But I have spent the last two years in her service. One day, I will share what happened in that darkened cell. But not this day.

Instead I come to you with a warning. We have discussed hags before, be they of the Night, Green, or Sea variety, and how they are not to be trifled with. But even with all my research, I never truly understood what it meant to encounter one.

Evil beings, hags rely on magic, deceit, illusion and even blackmail to lure their victims in. I knew this. I repeated it many times to you, dear reader. But I did not realise their charm, their allure. I did not know I would come to love her. That I would yearn to please her. She strung me along, tempting me with my wildest dreams. I thought myself clever, that I would be able to outmanoeuvre her. I once bested a glabrezu - surely I could handle a Green Hag? And she let me believe it. Until she sprung her trap.

> Hags delight in suffering, priding themselves on creating new and inventive ways to torment those in their "care." And while I have escaped, I spend every waking moment in fear that either her or one of her "sisters" will come for me. For a hag coven does not let even the smallest of slights go unpunished.
>
> And so I rescind my previous guides to dealing with a hag, my suggestions for clever language and deceit. Instead, I offer these words should you ever encounter a hag: run. And pray she does not follow.

Given that the author's name is Elizabeth, players would likely assume that a woman wrote this book. In this sense, even for players unfamiliar with *D&D*, these texts position hags as queer monsters—all-female, as "hag" is a gendered term and only the pronouns "she" and "her" are used, and preying on women as well as men. Players familiar with *D&D* would be unsurprised by this, as hags have always been presented as seductive, deceptive, and treacherous sexual predators. *Baldur's Gate 3*, with its wild success, brought many new players into the franchise, meaning that even those new to the world of *D&D* will not miss the message that hags are horrific monstrosities, so the sexism/ageism/ableism in their design will unfortunately continue for both the tabletop and digital iterations of the game.

In *Baldur's Gate 3*, players encounter a hag named Auntie Ethel, who initially appears as a kindly old woman who promises to help the player-character with an affliction and later reveals herself to be a hag in disguise. "Auntie" is a title adopted by hags, and according to the *D&D* sourcebook *Volo's Guide to Monsters*, "the oldest, wisest, and most powerful hags are called 'grandmothers' by other hags" (Mearls, 2016, p. 52). Auntie is a title earned "from being very old, a member of a powerful coven, directly serving a grandmother, or having many offspring (whether adopted or birthed)" (Mearls, 2016, p. 52). Continuing the earlier discussion of the racialization of hags ("crossbred," as Schneider called them), it is perhaps no coincidence that both Grandmother and Auntie are titles of respect given to older,

wise, and trusted women (Elders) in many Indigenous cultures, with Auntie especially indicating a special bond of guidance, mentorship, and care between an older and younger woman who may or may not be blood relatives. This terminology, which may have been appropriated on purpose given *D&D*'s fraught history with cultural appropriation and using Indigenous signifiers in the design of its characters and monsters (for examples of this, see Sturtevant, 2021), positions hags alongside racialized, marginalized, and minoritized real-world women. Since hags are an all-female species, this choice also frames female and feminine kinship as unnatural, horrific, deadly, monstrous, and threatening. This also highlights the contradictions inherent in the descriptions of the hags, since they are simultaneously selfish and competitive while also clearly valuing and honouring bonds with other hags. *Volo's Guide to Monsters*, for example, includes a guide for how Dungeon Masters can role-play as hags, which exemplifies this contradiction: an evil option for a hag's personal ideal is "I will become an auntie or grandmother, even if I have to kill my own mother to do it" (Mearls, 2016, p. 55) but at the same time it states that "every hag recognizes that she and her sisters are kindred souls, like the members of a dark sorority or sisterhood" (p. 57). Beyond inconsistent writing, this suggests that hags embody ambiguity—like many witch/hag figures from myth, legend, and folklore, a hag may help, or she may hinder. Auntie Ethel is no exception to this, as she does offer the player-character help, but the price is steep and results in an effect that is somewhat detrimental to the player-character's abilities and only benefits the hag.

Auntie Ethel has a pregnant young woman named Mayrina as her captive. Mayrina has promised her child to Auntie Ethel as part of a deal, whom the hag plans to turn into her own hag daughter. Auntie Ethel is abusive to her, forcing her to "eat for two" even when Mayrina is full, telling her she would be an awful mother anyway, calling her a "pregnant half-wit," and locking her in a cage. Players can choose to agree to Auntie Ethel's terms in exchange for her help or fight and kill her. If players agree to her deal, she reveals her true form (Fig. 6.2), declaring that "not many get to see a hag in all her glory. Consider

yourself blessed." If players choose to fight her, they are shown a bestiary entry for Auntie Ethel, outlining her statistics (a very strong and very charismatic being which will certainly pose a challenge to players seeking to fight her)—a reminder that in the end Auntie Ethel is nothing more than a monster to slay. Fighting her is indeed challenging, and like many evil women characters/monsters in games such as those discussed so far in this book, she uses deceptive, underhanded tactics like rendering herself invisible, creating illusory copies of herself, and teleporting. But even if players kill her, she is effectively immortal, and returns later in the game when players encounter an "anti-hag support group" whose members have suffered at the hands of Auntie Ethel and seek help to deal with her.



Fig. 6.2 The character model for Auntie Ethel
Taken from the *Baldur's Gate 3* Wiki https://bg3.wiki/w/images/3/37/Auntie_Ethel_Hag_Model.png

During the course of this quest, players find out that Auntie Ethel ate a missing little girl named Vanra in order to transform the girl into

her new hag daughter. Auntie Ethel had disguised herself this time as a hardened sea captain, but once she transforms into her hag form, she proudly reveals her bulging, pregnant belly to the player informing them that "little Vanra was so very tasty" and that she now sits in her belly, "growing fat with power" and being slowly transformed into a hag. Auntie Ethel will "vomit her up, and have [her]self a fresh young hag to train." She does not want to exert herself by fighting the player, asking them to walk away. If they refuse, she informs the player that if they do harm her, the girl inside her would die, whereas the hag would simply return again, stronger than ever. Players can still choose to attack Auntie Ethel, and, depending on their previous choices, they can use a potion that causes her to vomit up the child, who runs to her mother, unharmed. Enraged at the loss of her prospective young hag, she attacks the player, who fights her one final time. The real sea captain whose form Auntie Ethel had taken is rescued, and she describes her enthrallment to the hag: "I've raided warships. Fought every beastie the sea can throw at you, and I've never flinched—not once. But Ethel—Umberlee's tits, she snapped her fingers and had me. I would have died for her—*wanted* to." This reinforces the story told by Soot in her book, again positioning hags in terms of seduction and deception, making it clear that they hypnotize their victims into loving and worshipping them. All the victims of Auntie Ethel's enthrallment that the player sees are women, which, along with being part of an all-female species, again positions her as a particularly queer threat, though of course all the *D&D* source material and paratextual material make it clear that hags prey on men as well.

If the player casts "speak with the dead," a spell allowing them to communicate with corpses, Auntie Ethel's corpse promises she will return and expresses her anger at having been robbed of her "very own hag daughter." As she laments: "from my guts she would've come—my blood, my bile. It would have been glorious." Again, this suggests that Auntie Ethel would have adored her daughter, thereby pushing back against the framing of hags as competitive and disdainful towards one another. If the player asks her why she is so cruel, she responds "please.

It's you lot who come to me. All you do is want—to be prettier, to be richer, to be loved. People are their own worst enemies, petal. I just let them see it." Or, alternatively, she responds in a more broken way: "Not me… that's cruel. It's… people. They want… and want… and want. I merely… give." Again, this sends the message that Auntie Ethel is more ambiguous and capricious than evil—people come to her for her help and she uses her powerful magic to grant them what they desire. Like an evil genie or a fickle fairy tale witch like Baba Yaga—who I will discuss more later in this chapter—the wish she grants may not be exactly what the supplicant had in mind, or the price may be too steep to pay. Whether this makes her evil is up for debate, but as far as the game is concerned, all hags are literally evil—defined by their moral alignment—and so even if players can choose not to fight her, Auntie Ethel is portrayed in relation to deception, treachery, cruelty, child-eating, and monstrous reproduction, and poses a particular threat to young (human) women and little girls. Most players trying to play as a morally "good" character will end up killing Auntie Ethel.

"Cunning, Depravity, and Repulsiveness": *Skyrim*'s Hagravens[9]

Like the "Dark Sorority" of *D&D*'s hags, in the fantasy role-playing game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011)—which is deeply inspired by *D&D* and mimics many of its elements and mechanics—many witch covens are also led by monstrous hags: hybrid creatures called Hagravens[10]—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 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. 6.3). The game warns players that "few creatures match the cunning, depravity, and repulsiveness of the Hagravens," thereby signalling 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.



Fig. 6.3 A 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,[11] 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—a form of empowering feminine kinship she was denied under patriarchy.

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 or kin relationships, sisterhood, female bonding, 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—just like *D&D*'s hags. 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. 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 (which means they must dislike themselves), 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-centred, 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 wilfully misrepresented, it is likely because groups of women who come together to form bonds of queer-coded feminine kinship, teach and mentor each other, learn magic, and become powerful beings would be an incredible threat to the patriarchal society of Skyrim (the land in which the game is set). Just as witches and witch covens have historically 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 they have no rights—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).[12] 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 many 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 intersection of sexism, ageism, and ableism, like *D&D*'s hags, as discussed earlier. Along with the sexism at play here, 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—the heroic representative of normative, patriarchal society—is the one doing it, this morbid desecration is unquestioned, acceptable, and encouraged.

Queer Monstrous Desire

Continuing from the earlier discussion of the way older women's sexual desires are portrayed as repulsive, horrific, or comical, Santos (2017) has also argued that the witch—which can be considered as analogous to the hag—as an old and liberated woman who does not adhere to patriarchal norms embodies a sexual freedom. Namely, because she is post-menopausal and so infertile, she can seek sexual intercourse for pleasure without the risk of pregnancy (Santos, 2017, p. 91). Woman, therefore, becomes dangerous and monstrous "when the patriarchal desire to harness her sexuality and reproductive powers is denied" (Santos, 2017, p. 91). The same can be said for queer women, and really any women who are not reproductive. How monstrous, then, would a queer old woman be?

While players are not explicitly shown Hagravens as sexual beings, in the quest "A Night to Remember," a Hagraven's sexual and romantic desires are explored and presented as a joke meant to amuse and disgust the player. 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 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.

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, older 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 ageing, physical degradation, and decay" (p. 337). In this sense, sexually active older women are viewed as a ludicrous and distasteful example of feminine excess. As Sharron Hinchliff and Merryn Gott (2016) discuss, 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 (p. 23). It also reinforces double standards for male and female ageing and sexuality, as there is no equivalent term for men because older men with younger women as their 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).

"Aged, Deformed Women": Hags in *The Witcher 3*

In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, the player—again, playing as a professional monster hunter, or witcher, named Geralt—encounters several kinds of grotesque hag monsters, including grave hags and water hags. 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. 6.4). These women are called grave hags because they devour human corpses and the in-game 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.

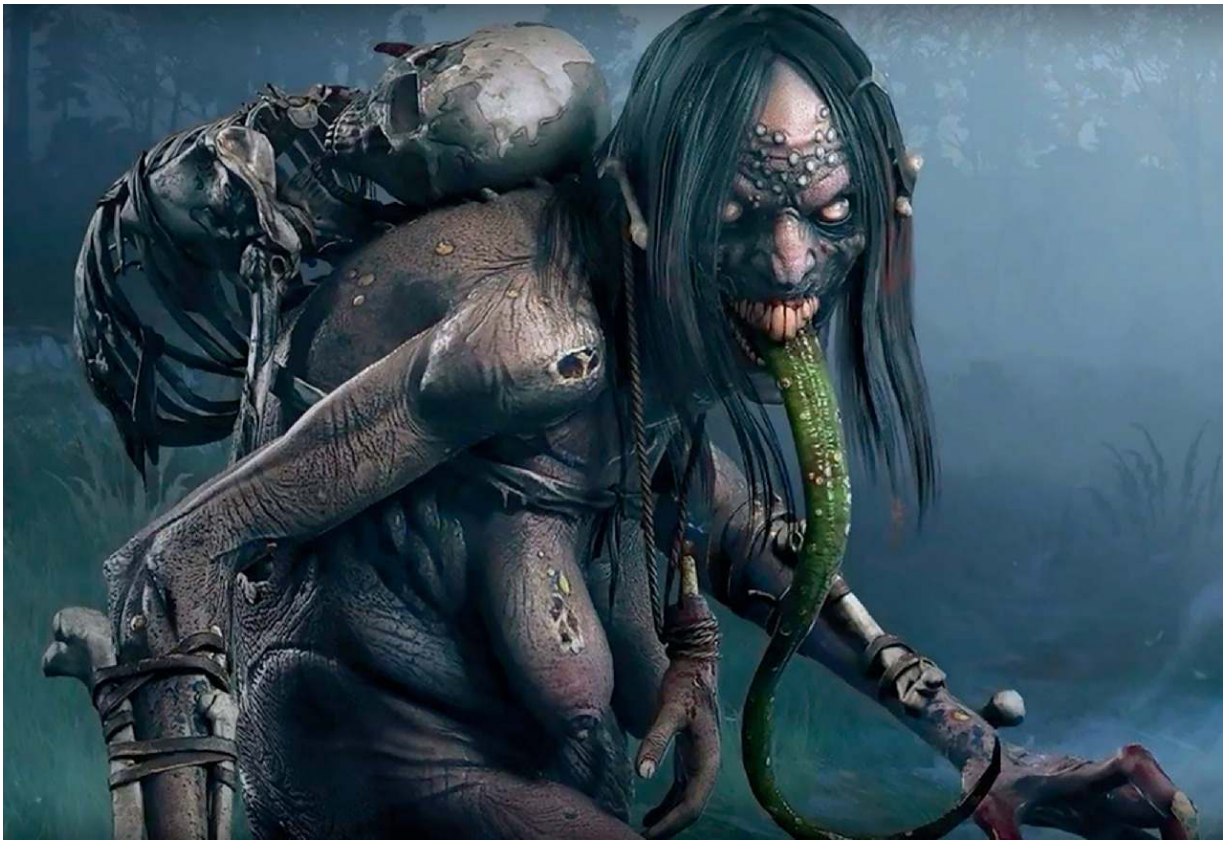


Fig. 6.4 A grave hag from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015). Promotional image taken from https://witcher.fandom.com/wiki/Grave_hag

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).

Hags are often associated with death and disease, perhaps because they represent old age and so are a reminder of infirmity and mortality —"the human face of death" (Melamed, 1983, p. 54). Along with the grave hag, other examples include the Witch of Hemwick from *Bloodborne*, an old, hunched woman whose body is covered in eyeballs she has gathered from the living for "suspicious rituals" ("Witch of Hemwick," n.d.). She awaits the player as a boss fight in "the city of gravekeeper witches carved by the sunlight, Hemwick" and is the overseer of "unwanted corpses" ("Witch of Hemwick," n.d.). There are also the Revenants from the newer *God of War* games (Santa Monica Studio, 2018–2022), which are reanimated corpses who resemble hunched, emaciated old women wearing rags and animal bones, with antlers growing from their heads. According to the game's lore, the Revenants are witches who traded their souls for magic powers, losing their humanity in the process. Like the grave hag, they can poison the player, though this time they use their breath rather than their tongues. One Revenant can be resurrected by the player, promising to reunite the player-character Kratos with his dead wife/mother of his son (who is his companion throughout the games), but once she is resurrected, she attacks the player, screaming that she will reunite them "in death!" Another is The Raven Keeper, a Revenant who uses the souls of sacrificed children to create mystical ravens that serve the Norse god Odin. She refers to these ravens as her children, but keeps their souls prisoner, terrifying and traumatizing them, again reinforcing the association with the fairy tale witch who preys on children.

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 perhaps 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 the Maiden chapters and even the hags from *D&D*. While the siren and bruxa are experts at disguising themselves as beautiful young women to lure their victims, and *D&D*'s hags seem to also be adept at disguising themselves, *The Witcher 3*'s 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 ageing 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, as with the Hagravens discussed earlier. 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. 6.5), and together these descriptions are all clearly intended to evoke a reaction of disgust and loathing in the player.



Fig. 6.5 Concept art for the water hag from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Art Book* (Batylda, 2015a, p. 172)

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, and 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 ageing—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 ageing in general, but female ageing specifically. Because these monsters exist at the intersection of the fear of ageing female bodies (ageism and sexism) and physically anomalous bodies (ableism), they are designed to be objects of horror, loathing, disgust, and abjection.

The ageist and sexist messaging is repeated several times in *The Witcher 3.* For example, alongside its description of the water hag quoted earlier, *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" (Batylda, 2015a, 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. Ageing 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." As discussed earlier with Green Mary and the origin of the hag, there is some sadistic desire here to present hags as beautiful young women who were punished for their sexual transgressions—their love and/or lust for human men. Hagravens are women who choose to become monsters, and so all the hags in these games are either willingly monstrous or deserve their monstrous forms, thereby potentially alleviating any guilt the player might feel for murdering them. After all, it was their own fault they became monsters, and the games make it painfully clear that these inhuman old women are *evil.*

Despite this transformation and her abject body, the water hag still dances naked and propositions men, reveling in and celebrating her own body and sexuality, just as Hagravens will occasionally flirt with the player and Auntie Ethel considers the player "blessed" to see her "in all her glory." But this pride and sexual activity 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 finishes 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 (meaning sapient) 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 the 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 but is pre-scripted for their character to say—echoes the cultural framing of the aged female body as decayed, past its prime, loathsome, and abject.

Ambiguous Old Women—Powerful, Liberated, and Evil

That the designers of the water hag were inspired by Baba Yaga is important because she is perhaps the most well-known and infamous folkloric crone/witch/hag. 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, pp. 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 work to disempower and marginalize women, especially if they are powerful and old.

It is clear that the hag in all her guises—a green/sea/night hag, a Hagraven, a grave hag, or a water hag—embodies the kinds of fears and anxieties that a figure like Baba Yaga does. The creation of these monstrous, evil old women that haunt our myths, legends, folklore, fairy tales, and media is, like all female monsters, a projection of misogynistic attitudes and beliefs that coalesce in a hatred of powerful old women, especially if they are sexually active, reproductive, and/or physically anomalous. In this way, the hag exists at the intersection of sexism, ageism, and ableism as well as simultaneously representing all three archetypes of the Maiden, Mother, and Crone. She preys on her victims using deceptive magic, illusions, and false promises to seduce and beguile them; she steals and devours babies and children, using her own body to turn them into her hag daughters; and she is an old, physically anomalous woman whose body represents all that is hated and reviled about female ageing. Yet, she is a powerful figure—a physically strong and charismatic, all-female, queer-coded threat to patriarchal society who forms covens with her sisters and daughters.

She is deeply connected to nature and, like in many Indigenous societies, the most wise and powerful hags are acknowledged with the titles of Auntie or Grandmother. She cares not for the wants and desires of mortals, and presents a deeply ambiguous figure who may grant supplicants what they seek, or may instead destroy them. In many ways, a hag might represent an empowering figure of liberated, transgressive, queer, old womanhood. Yet, these games present this figure as a horrific monstrosity, delighting in the descriptions that paint her as repulsive and repugnant. The hag might be ambiguous in her actions, but she is unambiguously evil within the worldview of these games, and so most of the time players are forced to fight and kill her, with very few opportunities to explore what it means to be haglike. She resembles the kinds of ancient goddesses that were once worshipped around the world, goddesses of life and death, fertility and devastation, creation and destruction. Goddesses that Caputi (2004) and others have argued were systematically disempowered by patriarchy—erased completely, rewritten to be weaker or more submissive, or relegated to the female monsters of myths, fairy tales, and popular culture. In the next chapter, I continue to explore the figure of the Crone as she manifests in games, this time looking at female monsters and monstrous characters that are more clearly and directly described or treated as ancient goddesses.

References

Batylda, M. (2015a). *The witcher 3: Wild hunt art book*. CD Projekt Red.

Batylda, M. (2015b). *The world of the witcher video game compendium.* Dark Horse Books.

Bethesda Game Studios. (2011). *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim.* Bethesda Softworks. PlayStation 3.

Black Isle Studios. (1999). *Planescape: Torment.* Interplay Entertainment. Microsoft Windows.

Campbell, J. (1969). *The masks of god: Primitive mythology.* Penguin.

Caputi, J. (2004). *Goddesses and monsters: Women, myth, power, and popular culture.* University of Wisconsin Press.

CD Projekt Red. (2015). *The witcher 3: Wild hunt.* CD Projekt. Microsoft Windows.

Chivers, S. (2011). *The silvering screen: Old age and disability in cinema*. University of Toronto Press.

Creed, B. (1986). Horror and the monstrous-feminine: An imaginary abjection. *Screen, 27*(1), 44–70.
[https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/27.1.44]

Creed, B. (1996). Lesbian bodies: Tribades, tomboys and tarts. In E. Grosz & E. Probyn (Eds.), *Sexy bodies: The strange carnalities of feminism* (pp. 86–103). Routledge.

Farrimond, K. (2012). "Stay still so we can see who you are": Anxiety and bisexual activity in the contemporary femme fatale film. *Journal of Bisexuality, 12*(1), 138–154.
[https://doi.org/10.1080/15299716.2012.645725]

Garland-Thomson, R. (2002). Integrating disability, transforming feminist theory. *NWSA Journal, 14*(3), 1–32.
[https://doi.org/10.2979/NWS.2002.14.3.1]

Greno, N., & Howard, B. (2010). *Tangled.* Walt Disney Animation Studios; Walt Disney Pictures.

Gygax, G. (1977). *Monster manual*. TSR Hobbies.

Hancock, M. (2015). *Games with words: Textual representation in the wake of graphical realism in videogames*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Waterloo. https://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/bitstream/handle/10012/10189/Hancock_Michael.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Harrington, E. (2018). *Women, monstrosity and horror film: Gynaehorror*. Routledge.

Hart, L. (1994). *Fatal woman: Lesbian sexuality and the mark of aggression.* Princeton University Press.

Hinchliff, S., & Gott, M. (2016). Ageing and sexuality in Western societies: Changing perspectives on sexual activity, sexual expression and the "sexy" older body. In E. Peel & R. Harding (Eds.), *Ageing and sexualities: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 11–32). Routledge.

Hodes, J. M. (2019). *Orcs, Britons, and the martial race myth, part I: A species built for racial terror [Blog]*. https://jamesmendezhodes.com/blog/2019/1/13/orcs-britons-and-themartial-race-myth-part-i-a-species-built-for-racial-terror

Holmlund, C. (1994). Cruisin' for a brusin": Hollywood's deadly (lesbian) dolls. *Cinema Journal, 34*(1), 31–51.
[https://doi.org/10.2307/1225654]

Horsley, R. A. (1979). Who were the witches? The social roles of the accused in the European witch trials. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History, 9*(4), 689–715.
[https://doi.org/10.2307/203380]

Johns, A. (2004). *Baba Yaga: The ambiguous mother and witch of the Russian folktale*. Peter Lang.

Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection*. (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). Columbia

University Press.

Kristeva, J. (2010). Liberty, equality, fraternity, and... vulnerability. (J. Herman, Trans.). *Women's Studies Quarterly, 38*(1/2), 251–268.

Larian Studios (2023). *Baldur's gate 3.* Larian Studios. PlayStation 5.

Mearls, M. (2016). *Volo's guide to monsters.* Wizards of the Coast, LLC.

Melamed, E. (1983). *Mirror, mirror: The terror of not being young*. Simon & Schuster.

Millward, L., Dodd, J. G., & Fubara-Manuel, I. (Eds.). (2017). *Killing off the lesbians: A symbolic annihilation on film and television*. McFarland.

Perkins, C. (2014). *Monster manual* (5th ed.). Wizards of the Coast.

Reitherman, W. (Director). (1963). *The sword in the stone* [Film]. Walt Disney Productions.

Russo, M. (1994). *The female grotesque: Risk, excess and modernity*. Routledge.

Santa Monica Studio. (2018). *God of war*. Sony Interactive Entertainment. PlayStation 4.

Santa Monica Studio. (2022). *God of war ragnarök*. Sony Interactive Entertainment. PlayStation 5.

Santos, C. (2017). *Unbecoming female monsters: Witches, vampires, and virgins*. Lexington Books.

Schneider, F. W. (2004). The ecology of the night hag. In E. Mona (Ed.), *Dragon #324* (pp. 66–69). Paizo Publishing, LLC.

Schneider, F. W. (2005). The ecology of the green hag. In E. Mona (Ed.), *Dragon #331* (pp. 56–60). Paizo Publishing, LLC.

Sobchack, V. (2000). Revenge of The Leech Woman: On the dread of aging in a low-budget horror film. In K. Gelder (Ed.), *The horror reader* (pp. 336–348). Routledge.

Stang, S. (2021). Monstrosity and otherness in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. In M. Piero & M. Ouellette (Eds.), *Being dragon born: Critical essays on The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (pp. 60–74). McFarland Press.

Stang, S., & Trammell, A. (2020). The ludic bestiary: Misogynistic tropes of female monstrosity in Dungeons & Dragons. *Games & Culture, 15*(6), 730–747. [https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019850059]

Sturtevant, P. B. (2021). Improving dungeons and dragons: Racism and the "barbarian." *The Public Medievalist.* https://publicmedievalist.com/dungeons-dragons-racism-barbarian/

Witch of Hemwick. (n.d.). *Bloodborne wiki.*https://bloodborne.wiki.fextralife.com/Witch+of+Hemwick

Wood, R. (1986). *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*. Columbia University Press. [https://doi.org/10.7312/wood91452]

Young, H. (2016). *Race and popular fantasy literature: Habits of whiteness*. Routledge.

Zipes, J. (2013). *The irresistible fairy tale: The cultural and social history of a genre*. Princeton University Press.

Footnotes

1 For example, Sabrina from *Sabrina The Teenage Witch* and its remake, *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*; Hermione Granger from the *Harry Potter* series; or Samantha from *Bewitched*. Some people who practice Wicca also refer to themselves as witches. Even though these are perhaps more positive examples of witches, they are not necessarily empowering or free from misogynistic under- or overtones. For more on the "feminism" of *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, see Stang, S. (2023). "When will the world learn? Women should be in charge of everything": Lilith as villain, victim, and feminist in *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*. In H. McAlpine, R. Sweeney, & J. Wind (Eds.), *The Archie/Sabrina universe: Essays on the comics and their adaptations* (pp. 84–104). McFarland Press.

2 Parts of this section are adapted from work I previously published with my fabulous co-author Aaron Trammell in our *Games and Culture* article "The Ludic Bestiary: Misogynistic Tropes of Female Monstrosity in *Dungeons & Dragons*." See Stang and Trammell (2020).

3 Mother Gothel from *Tangled* (Greno & Howard, 2010) 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 clichés of female villainy.

4 This is especially because, for example, half-orcs have higher strength and constitution but much lower intelligence and wisdom. Because orcs have long been portrayed using racial signifiers (like non-white skin colours) and descriptive terms (like "tribal" or "primitive" or "savage") coding them in ways that evoke Indigenous or African tribal peoples and cultures, giving them such numeric statistics reinforces problematic assumptions regarding the physical versus mental prowess of real world racial and ethnic groups. For more on this, see Young (2016) and Hodes (2019).

5 This was announced via a post on the official D&D Beyond website, found here: https://www.dndbeyond.com/posts/1393-moving-on-from-race-in-the-2024-core-rulebooks. The new handbooks also no longer have specific categories and descriptions for the traditional "half-race" options (half-elf and half-orc), which used to be treated almost like separate or distinct races/species. While players can still choose this kind of character, their mixed race/species identity only manifests in their physical appearance, and players must choose which parent's racial/species statistics they want their character to have. This is ostensibly because the idea that a mixed-race/species character would be treated like an entirely different/unique race/species from either of their parents is problematic. However, as a result of this change, they have also done away with the potential nuance players could explore with a mixed-race/species character.

6 To his credit, Schneider, the man behind these "Ecology of the Hag" *Dragon* magazine articles, eventually co-spearheaded the creation of the 2022 *D&D* adventure anthology *Journeys through the Radiant Citadel*, a project that involved over 50 creators of colour and was specifically intended to signal Wizards of the Coast's commitment to diversity and inclusivity initiatives. Either he seeks to make amends for his past writing or perhaps no one remembers the sexist, ableist, and ageist things he wrote twenty years earlier.

7 If players do kiss her in this form, Ravel gifts them a tattoo that increases their 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 players 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.

8 *Baldur's Gate 3* was in fact the first game in history to with the Game of the Year award at all five of the major video game award ceremonies (the Golden Joystick Awards, The Game Awards, the D.I.C.E. Awards, the Game Developers Choice Awards, and the British Academy Games Awards). It was selected for Game of the Year by several prominent gaming publications and boats almost perfect fan and critic scores across publications, websites, and game platforms.

9 Some parts of this section have been previously published in my chapter "Queer Harpies and Vicious Dryads: Hagravens, Spriggans, and Abject Female Monstrosity in *Skyrim*" in the edited collection *Being Dragonborn: Critical Essays on The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Stang, 2021).

10 Note that I capitalize "Hagraven" throughout to adhere to how the word is capitalized in the game.

11 Like in *Dragon Age: Origins*, players can choose a nonhuman avatar, such as an Elf (basically humans with pointed ears), an Argonian (lizard-like humanoids), a Khajiit (cat-like humanoids), or an Orc (large, tusked humanoids). However, while these humanoid "races" are commonly disparaged within *Skyrim*'s human-dominated culture and the Orc is often considered a "monstrous race," the player-character is hailed as the heroic Dovahkiin or Dragonborn, slayer of monsters and dragons, regardless of their race, gender, or appearance. The Dragonborn is a clear example of the "chosen one" trope, as players can design an avatar that is more or less marginalized within *Skyrim*'s game world, but because they are Dragonborn, they get "special" privileges that allow them to bypass a lot of the oppression their character might normally face. The player-character, therefore, still functions as a representative of normative, dominant society and is complicit in its sustained and structural violence against monstrous bodies.

12 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.

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2026
S. Stang, *Maiden, Mother, and Crone*, Palgrave Studies in Mediating Kinship, Representation, and Difference
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-25115-2_7

7. Fates, Crones, and Witches: Monstrous Ancient Goddesses

Sarah Stang[1] ✉
(1) Digital Humanities, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada

✉ **Sarah Stang**
Email: sstang@brocku.ca

Keyword Old age – Divine – Sorceress – Greek Mythology – Gorgon

> 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)

As discussed throughout this book, feminist scholars have long noted how the divine feminine—whether in the form of mythological goddesses or archaic mothers—has been systematically and thoroughly disempowered, undermined, erased, or—perhaps worse—transformed into female monstrosities that haunt patriarchal cultural imaginations. Creed (1996) has argued that cinematic horror monsters are rooted in patriarchal denial, dread, and derogation of the "generative,

parthenogenetic mother—that archaic figure who gives birth to all living things [and] exists in the mythology of all human cultures as the mother-goddess who alone created the heavens and earth" (p. 51). Similarly, Caputi (2004) has argued:

> A core, if currently taboo, figure of worldwide myth that is of particular significance for feminist interpretation is the female divine, the goddess, a figure who signifies not only female potency but also the feminine principle … Negated in many contemporary religions and psychologies, this figure remains with us in the world of popular culture, albeit frequently in the form of a caricature, a fetish, or a monster. (p. 316)

In games, goddesses of creation, fertility, life and death, land and oceans, and fate itself become twisted into threatening but ultimately tameable or defeatable monsters and monstrous characters.

The process by which the female divine is turned into a monster has been outlined by David Leeming and Jake Page (1994), as discussed by Caputi (2004). They have traced how it begins as something sacred and honoured, but once patriarchy takes hold gradually its various aspects, like "femaleness, animality, sexuality, nature, death, and darkness are increasingly seen as something abject, chaotic, 'dirty,' to be feared and controlled if not eradicated" (Caputi, 2004, p. 317). Yet, the terrifying and mysterious forces the goddess represents, especially chaos and change, life and death, have always ruled the world, "despite the best efforts of patriarchal gods and heroes" (Caputi, 2004, p. 319). In games, players are usually invited into the role of those patriarchal gods and heroes, and they always win (or they are supposed to win, at least). Murdering the goddess, according to Mary Daly's (1978) book *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, is the paradigmatic moment of worldwide patriarchal myth, which in turn legitimates the continued violence against women, especially transgressive and/or non-normative women, who represent that goddess. As Caputi (2004) has observed "in countless monster films as

well as any Disney movie in which a witch is climactically destroyed, the myth of mandatory goddess murder is replayed" (p. 321). We can certainly add games to that list.

The goddesses discussed in this chapter are also portrayed using signifiers that mark them as old, including more "neutral" markers like white or grey hair, wrinkles, and older women as voice actors, but also more ableist markers such as hunched backs or other physical anomalies as seen with the hag. They are also described using words like "old" or "ancient." Although other examples discussed previously in this book are also goddesses, like Lolth, they do not fit into the Crone archetype in the way the ones analysed in this chapter do. These characters are certainly examples of the feminine divine—literally, they are female goddesses or powerful witches worshipped as goddesses—and they are also examples of the Crone, the third and arguably most terrifying archetype in the tripartite division of the female lifecycle (which is, of course, also worshipped as a neopagan goddess).

God of War's Gargantuan Goddesses

Clotho

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.

The *God of War* series (Santa Monica Studio, 2005–2013) draws heavily on Greek mythology, and the Fates feature as prominent

characters and boss battles for the player as Kratos to fight. Seeking to change the past in *God of War II* (Santa Monica Studio, 2007) by using the Loom of Fate, Kratos confronts these primordial goddesses, called the Sisters of Fate. They refuse to let him use it, so he must defeat all three. The first battle is against Lahkesis (spelled this way in the game), the measurer of the threads of mortal life, who resembles an angelic warrior with white eyes, white hair, white robes, and large wings. Although she is described as ancient, she appears youthful and is scantily clad with a revealing robe that exposes her legs and leaves one breast uncovered. After defeating her, Kratos fights the oldest sister, Atropos, the one who cuts the threads of mortal life. She is a floating giantess who emerges from a mirror and is somewhat more monstrous in appearance, with wrinkled, green skin; incredibly long, sharp claws; yellow, serpentine eyes; long white hair; and her lower body ending in a trail of black smoke. After defeating her, Kratos fights both Atropos and Lahkesis together then goes on to face the youngest sister, Clotho, who spins the threads of life and so can be understood as a creation goddess. Although she is the youngest of the sisters and is often depicted as a beautiful young maiden in artwork, in the game she is portrayed as an old, fat, and gigantic multi-limbed, insect-like monster (Fig. 7.1). The game's Wiki notes that this portrayal is ironic compared to her traditional portrayals, and describes her as resembling "a giant silkworm with disgusting scaly flabby skin and two sets of arms and breasts" ("Clotho," n.d.). Her resemblance to a silkworm-like creature is likely because she spins the threads of life, but it is odd that she is so much more monstrous than her sisters.



Fig. 7.1 Official artwork of Clotho's full body, taken from https://godofwar.fandom.com/wiki/Clotho

Clotho's monstrosity is centred on her enormous size and her insect-like, scaly arms, which she uses to attack Kratos as he climbs up multiple floors that encircle her building-sized body. But the game highlights her monstrosity not because of her size and insect-like appearance, but because she is fat. The in-game bestiary underscores the repulsion her designers felt for her body using deeply fatphobic language:

> The bloated and obese third Sister of Fate, Clotho is too fat and gargantuan to move her enormous girth and can only attack with her multiple, withered hands and claws … To defeat this grotesque monster, Kratos must first pin her arms and claws, then devise a way to pierce her skull with a suspended blade.

Despite being the youngest sister, Clotho is also the one who looks the oldest. She has long, white hair like her sisters, but her hair is fine and thinning. She is wrinkled and covered with marks that look like age spots. The hags discussed in the previous chapter occupy the intersection of sexism, ageism, and ableism, and with Clotho we can add sizeism/fatphobia to that list. As Kathryn Kirigin and Carol Warren (2018) discuss, "the mass media glorify youth and slenderness" (p. 9). Indeed, "in Western culture, slenderness embodies youth, and to be overweight is to feel the world's unbearable gaze upon us" and "the cultural demand for slenderness does not diminish with the decades" (p. 99). Although old women are largely erased in popular culture, those who are allowed to remain public figures such as celebrities are mostly thin and often use tricks like makeup, clothing, and plastic surgery to appear younger than they are. "Age is stigmatizing; more so if it [is] combined with fat," as Kirigin and Warren (2018, p. 103) observe. In reference to the work of Susan Bordo, they point out that our (Western) society allows men opportunities to age gracefully, with old men seen as wise or even refined, whereas "the old fat woman is simply flesh; simply gross" (p. 104). Clotho embodies this to an exaggerated, monstrous degree: despite her power, immortality, and wisdom as an ancient goddess, weaver, and giver of life, she is simply a giant mountain of flesh—simply gross.

The game forces players to encounter her bulging, writhing, wrinkled body in a close, intimate, and gradual way, as they work their way up towards her chest and face from below. Kratos attacks her body as he climbs, while she tries to swat and grab at him with her weirdly shrivelled, and ultimately impotent, arms (arms that also have flabby upper arms, in case the message that she is both old and fat was not completely clear). Once he reaches the top level, he is finally face to face with Clotho. Kratos is dwarfed by her enormous, naked, age spot covered breasts and he must slash away at her as she attempts to pummel him with her fists (Fig. 7.2). Eventually he manages to impale her head with a massive blade and she slumps forward, her loom becoming her tomb. Kratos climbs on and within several giant bodies

throughout the series, as he hacks and slashes at titans and gods that far outsize him, but this is the only giant body he engages with and destroys that is also female, old, and fat. Her fat, wrinkled, age spot covered, naked body is on full display for the player, who destroys it piece by piece as if to say "how dare you exist? How dare you be so powerful? How dare you not hide and hate yourself, you fat old woman?" Kratos kills countless female monsters throughout his adventures, but only twice are they fat. Both times, the game seems to delight in having players destroy their transgressive, naked, unruly bodies.



Fig. 7.2 A screenshot of Clotho once Kratos reaches the top level of her body in *God of War II* (Santa Monica Studio, 2007)

Euryale

The other fat female monster is encountered in the same game. The *God of War* series, along with the previously discussed sirens, also features gorgons as a common enemy type. This all-female race/species of half-women, half-serpent, naked monsters with venomous snakes for hair and a gaze that can turn their enemies to stone are ruled by the three sisters Medusa, Stheno, and Euryale. In the series' first installment, the

playable protagonist Kratos is tasked by the goddess Aphrodite to slay Medusa by decapitating her. Like Perseus in Greek mythology, after slaying Medusa Kratos wields her head as a weapon, using it to freeze his enemies in place. In *God of War II*, Kratos must face Medusa's sister Euryale after battling his way through her temple. Kratos murders her by slicing her head off, and then proceeds to use it as weapon to freeze his own enemies, just as he did with Medusa's head in the first game.

Although Euryale is one of many boss monsters Kratos fights throughout the series, she is noteworthy for several reasons. She calls Kratos a "murderer of children" who has brought misery upon her brood and ruthlessly cut down her line. Euryale is therefore revealed to be the mother of the gorgons that Kratos has slaughtered throughout the game. In addition, most of the gorgons Kratos encounters are slender and even skeletal, yet Euryale is portrayed as large and fat (Fig. 7.3). As naked, hybrid, snake-women with exposed breasts, the gorgons' bodies are always on display to Kratos, and, by extension, the player. Euryale's body, however, is given particular focus by both the game's developers and its fans. The background song that plays during the boss battle against Euryale repeats a Greek phrase that translates to "fat bitch." According to the game's Wiki, "the developers and composers apparently found it amusing and laughed each time it was played" ("Euryale," n.d.). In addition, the in-game files for Euryale's character model refer to her as "Fat Medusa." The game's Wiki, which is written by fans of the series and can be edited by anyone, has a section dedicated to Euryale's appearance, in which she is described as "very fat" and "morbidly obese" ("Euryale," n.d.). The fact that Euryale's entry has a subsection dedicated to describing her appearance is noteworthy because most of the other characters do not have this—for example, Medusa's appearance is not described. This is likely because she is thin, and so the fans writing these entries did not feel the need to remark on her appearance, thereby demonstrating the cultural assumption that thin bodies are the default norm while fat bodies are cause for comment. The Wiki also notes that it is "ironic" that the actor who voices her, Jennifer Martin, is known for having a "deep sexy voice" and

providing the voice of attractive and/or sexualized characters in animated television series ("Euryale," n.d.). Presumably, this is "ironic" because a "Fat Medusa" would be considered by these fans as the antithesis of sexy. In this sense, fans of the series, like the developers themselves, have highlighted Euryale's positioning at the intersection of misogyny and fatphobia.



Fig. 7.3 Concept art of Euryale from *God of War II* (Santa Monica Studio, 2007)
Taken from https://godofwar.fandom.com/wiki/Euryale

As a fat, powerful, serpentine goddess-monster, Euryale also evokes Ursula from Disney's *The Little Mermaid*. I have discussed her briefly in relation to her eight black tentacles being similar to a spider's eight legs (tentacles can be seen as abject in the same way spiders are), so her hybrid body could be viewed as almost a kind of spider woman. With her fat body and tentacles, she also has some similarities to the Broodmother. Yet, I argue she most resembles Euryale with her fat humanoid upper half and animalistic lower half, as there are many similarities between serpents and tentacles (Ursula also has two eel companions, which are serpentine in shape). Ursula is also a kind of

maternally coded water goddess (Caputi, 2004, p. 321), becoming enormous during the film—though much bigger than Euryale, more like Clotho in size. In the end she is also viciously penetrated by a man's phallic weapon, though at least in the Disney film he does not cut off her head.

Euryale is not coded with many signifiers that mark her as old, but she is described as ancient and immortal, and her skin is wrinkled, so she can be interpreted as old. However, like Clotho, the descriptions both in the game and in the Wiki focus far more on her size than on her age in the way they describe and denigrate her body. Like Clotho, Euryale is an enormous, ancient, and powerful hybrid woman. She is transgressive, unruly, and abject, defying category and normativity. She and Clotho deserve better than just being called a "fat bitch" or a "grotesque monster," created to be laughed at, ridiculed, and ultimately murdered by a violent male agent of the aggressively patriarchal and misogynistic ancient Greece presented in the *God of War* series.

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: Wild Hunt* also features three Crones—a triad of ancient, powerful, manipulative, evil witches who can also be understood as adaptations of the three Fates or perhaps the trifold ancient Greek goddess of witchcraft, Hecate. These three characters differ from the hags discussed in the previous chapter as rather than being simply vicious monsters that Geralt periodically encounters, they are centralized as major antagonists and must be dealt with as part of the game's main story. Although Geralt refers to them as "the Crones," in their own swampy land of Velen they are worshipped as goddesses called the Ladies of the Wood. They are only called crones by those who would disrespect them (especially, as I shall discuss shortly, after seeing their true forms). 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, positioning them in opposition to the more "civilized" magic wielded by mages, who are trained in academies.

The bestiary also notes that the Crones are immortal and ancient:

> The isolated corners of our world harbor creatures older than humans, older than academies and mages, older even than elves and dwarves. The Crones of Crookback Bog are such creatures. No one knows their true names, nor what breed of monstrosity they in fact are.

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 implied intention of eating them recalls the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel, positioning the Crones alongside the familiar archetype of the predatory, child-eating, fairy tale witch. 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." This ambiguity and capriciousness, along with the fact that they live in a forest/swamp, are worshipped by peasants who have done so for generations, and bring blessings as well as curses also positions them alongside folkloric witches like Baba Yaga. Indeed, according to the game's official Wiki, Baba Yaga was a heavy inspiration for the Crones ("Crones," n.d.). The Wiki also states that the witches from *Macbeth* provided inspiration for their design, a fact supported by the in-game bestiary entry, which opens 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. 7.4). 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.



Fig. 7.4 A 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. The effects of instead killing the tree spirit and supporting the Crones will be discussed shortly.

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 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 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 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 (Fig. 7.5).



Fig. 7.5 A screenshot of the Crones in their true, monstrous forms from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015)

Digging deeper into their monstrous appearances reveals much about the designers' intentions. According to the game's Wiki page, each Crone is designed to represent a way those accused of being witches during the witch hunts were commonly killed. Along with her trypophobia-inducing eye socket and extra set of lower limbs, Weavess has a noose tied around her neck, worn like a necklace. The in-game description notes "Though the youngest of the three Crones, the Weavess was not one jot less ugly or evil than her older sisters"

("Weavess," n.d.), implying that *normally* being younger means being more beautiful and good—or at least less ugly and evil—but this is not the case with the Weavess. Although this is a brief line of text, it confirms that the writer behind it believes, or assumes audiences would believe, that youth, goodness, and beauty are interwoven, as are oldness, evilness, and ugliness. This casual ageism (and beautyism) is clear in the design, description, and presentation of the Crones. Brewess has a basket on her head, similar to old-fashioned protective beekeeping attire, has ropes wrapped tightly around her body, and a metal padlock and chain around her neck. The Wiki suggests that this may be a "nod to how accused witches may have a bag or basket tied around their heads and weighted down with something like a sack of rocks and thrown in water to drown," though there is no official source for this claim ("Crones," n.d.). A more compelling reading the Wiki provides is that Brewess' body seems bloated, like a corpse decaying in water. On the other hand, she could simply be "the fat one," as the in-game description states that "the Crone known as Brewess was the middle of the three demonic sisters in terms of age—but the first in terms of size" and, evoking fatphobic stereotypes about body size and cooking/eating, Brewess is the one who concocts potions and brews soups made from human bodies. The oldest sister, Whispess, has more backstory, elaborated in the *Blood and Wine* downloadable content for the game:

> Whispess once … peered into a certain knight's heart, she saw that it was black and refused him aid. The knight reacted with wrath and burned her alive in the cave. Soon afterward, the knight went mad and killed himself—claiming he was tortured by a strange voice whispering in his ear that no one else could hear. ("Whispess," n.d.)

The Wiki claims that Whispess covers her face to hide her burns, and that her backstory alludes to witches being burned at the stake. Why the Crones would want to adorn themselves with elements that evoke

witch hunts and the murder of their own kind is unclear (if we want to be generous, it could be them paying homage to all those murdered women or wearing them as a sign of defiance), but it does suggest that the designers were thinking of real-world witches when they designed the Crones. Since the witch hunts are generally seen as a horrific atrocity that resulted in the torture and death of tens of thousands of innocent people, the fact that the game's developers present the Crones as evil monstrosities to be fought and killed by the male player-character—thereby allowing players to re-enact a similar kind of atrocity, at least in small scale—is questionable, to say the least.

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). Calling them "degenerate" is again an ableist term and another way to signal their bodies as anomalous, aberrant, and so the objects of horror, fascination, fear, and revulsion. This positions them alongside the hags discussed in the previous chapter at the intersection of sexism, ageism, and ableism. 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. 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.[1]

Old Age and Predatory Sexuality

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 just as with the hags like Ravel or the Hagravens discussed in the previous chapter. The Crones 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!" (again, connecting her fatness with gluttony) 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.

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. 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'

intriguing 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 seemingly serious responses, but with a clear undertone of sarcasm.[2]

Regardless of the Crones' confidence, their flirting is framed and perceived by players 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, and ugly old woman—it is less about evil behaviour and more about how they look.

Like the hags, Hagravens, and water hags, discussed in the previous chapter, the way these games present the sexual desire of the 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—including with powerful sorceresses who are technically much older than him but, importantly, appear youthful and are conventionally attractive but not just wearing a "disguise."[3] Sharron Hinchliff and Merryn Gott (2016) have noted that "there is no doubt

that women are disproportionately disadvantaged in comparison with men 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" (Hinchliff & Gott, 2016, 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 ageing. 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 ageing 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 ageing 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.

“I am but an Old Woman, Whom the World Has Largely Forgotten”: Flemeth the Witch-Goddess

One interesting exception to the pattern of sexism/ageism in these examples is Flemeth from the *Dragon Age* series. In *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare, 2009), 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. Flemeth rescues the player-character, nursing them to health in her hut in the swamp. The player gradually learns Flemeth’s backstory: in her youth she fell for a man who was not her husband, and 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.” Flemeth dismisses the legends about her, claiming “I am but an old woman, whom the world has largely forgotten” though it is clear she knows more than she lets on. 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.

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, *Dragon Age II* (BioWare, 2011), first appearing in her dragon form to rescue the player-character. When she transforms into a human again, she has changed her appearance, looking more stylish, glamourous, and perhaps more like a villainess or sorceress than she did as the Witch of the Wilds in the previous game. Flemeth appears throughout *Dragon Age II* and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014), always as an ambiguous, intimidating character who clearly has many secrets. 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 named Mythal who seeks vengeance against those who wronged her.

Her antagonistic and predatory positioning in relation to her daughter (whether it is true or not) aligns her with the monstrous motherhood seen in countless fairy tales and children's media in the form of deceptive shapeshifting witches who prey on younger women, often their own daughters or daughter-figures (such as those from Disney films, as discussed previously). If Flemeth does in fact use her daughters' bodies to maintain her own youth, then she certainly occupies a similar place as those infamous wicked witches. Although she denies the accusation, the game makes it clear she cannot be trusted and so the truth is left ambiguous. Either way, Morrigan believes it to be true, and considers herself endangered by her mother.

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. In this sense, the does not really fit with the other examples in this book—she is not actually a "monster." Although she is a vengeful goddess; a powerful witch; a shapeshifter; a "bad mother" who deceives, uses, and manipulates her daughter(s); briefly an enemy the player can fight; and appears to act only for her own gain, she is not monstrous and entirely unlikeable in the way the

hags or Crones are. Rather, Flemeth serves as a rare example of a more nuanced older woman character who is not forced into a 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 therefore may offer more space for identification and reclamation, especially as she is a popular subject for cosplay, fan art, and fan fiction.

Flemeth also does not seem to experience any self-revulsion or anger at her own ageing body, rather she seems to embrace it as well as her own sexuality with her tight-fitting and low-cut armour (as she appears in *Dragon Age II* and *Dragon Age: Inquisition*). Indeed, according to Elizabeth Toma (2015), "Flemeth is in control of her self-presentation" (p. 62). While this could be a liberating and empowering choice, she was designed by men and so her age does not necessarily mean that the developers did not design her to cater to the male gaze. Character artist Francis Lacuna describes her changed appearance from *Dragon Age: Origins* to *Dragon Age II* as going from "crazy old lady" to "hot babe" (qtd. in Pixologic, 2011). This is not BioWare's first time designing a sexy older woman character: Matriarch Benezia from BioWare's *Mass Effect* series is an older, powerful, and dominant mother figure yet she also wears a highly revealing top that shows off her cleavage. Given that the artists and designers behind both the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* series were mostly men, the sexualization of these older women may be interpreted as less empowering and more dehumanizing. Yet, the intention behind the design does not necessarily detract from the importance of her portrayal, given the dearth of powerful, confident, and beautiful older women in games and popular culture more generally.

Flemeth certainly adheres to some problematic tropes, yet she also represents something rarely seen in popular media: a powerful, confident, and beautiful older woman. A witch-goddess who embodies feminine and feminist rage against injustice. As Flemeth says of herself:

> Once I was but a woman... crying out in the lonely darkness for justice. And she came to me, a wisp of an ancient being, and she granted me all I wanted and more. I have carried Mythal through the ages ever since, seeking the justice denied to her.

Within a world like *Dragon Age*'s Thedas, controlled by patriarchal structures that vilify magic, where women are only allowed to be powerful if they adhere to religious dogma and obedience, it is not surprising that a woman like Flemeth would be an ambivalent, contradictory, and multifaceted figure—a villain, a monster, a survivor, a mother, a witch, a goddess.

Flemeth is an inherently ambiguous character, and so she can also be read as a Baba Yaga figure—a witch who is frightening due to her mystery, power, and capriciousness, yet one who may help you in your hour of need (Johns, 2004). But, unlike the hags, Clotho, Euryale, and the Crones, she is not physically "monstrous" (at least when she is not in her dragon form). Rather, she adheres to conventional beauty standards in that she has a normative, abled, thin body. This sends the message that video games only offer space for magical/powerful older women to be portrayed in an even remotely positive light if they are not too "ugly," old, fat, hunched, or otherwise physically anomalous.

"Haunted by the Horror of Growing Old"

Although this chapter and the previous one—which combined comprise my section on the Crone archetype—have only really examined a handful of games, the negativity towards the inevitable and natural developments of the female body is ubiquitous. As de Beauvoir (1949) has observed, "woman is haunted by the horror of growing old" (p. 547), and as I have tried to show, 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 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, which is very rare and usually only a superficial aesthetic choice that does not impact gameplay, playable protagonists skew young. That said, 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. Although there are some exceptions, when they are present in games, older women, like mothers, are often forced into one of two representation roles: kindly maternal figure or wicked abject monster. This duality can be applied to all women, regardless of their age, as I have shown throughout the book: the Maiden is either the chaste Madonna or the sexualized Whore, the Mother is either the self-sacrificing good mother (again, basically the Madonna) or the controlling/domineering bad mother, and the Crone is either the kindly asexual grandmother or the wicked old witch. In addition, the 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 all represent the fear, hatred, distrust, and revulsion towards female bodies and transgressive behaviours, and demonstrate how mediated representations serve to control, repress, and police them.

Despite the clear distaste the developers and players might feel for these monstrous, horrific, and dangerous old women they label as hags or crones, it is important to remember that ageing 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 ageing 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). Patriarchal society prioritizes the value of women who are young and sexually appealing to heterosexual men, or reproductive and maternal and so useful for the species (though it still polices their bodies and behaviours as well, lest they become monstrous succubi or Broodmothers!). Old age for women is therefore painted as a "loss" (of sexual appeal and fertility) and something to be mourned—old age renders women into something useless to patriarchy or, worse, something horrific and threatening. But that does not mean women have to believe that messaging. And if the choice is between accepting one's place as a useless body, sad and full of mourning for lost youth, or being a horrific and terrifying threat to patriarchy and all it represents, then I will choose to be monstrous.

With this in mind, we can try to read some empowerment in these old monstrous women. The Crones, as powerful goddesses, sorceresses, and leaders are revered and worshipped. They do not feel revulsion or horror towards their own aged, non-normative, monstrous bodies, rather they, like the hags in *D&D* or the Hagravens in *Skyrim*, embrace that which is perceived within dominant culture as "disturbing and unpleasant" (Perkins, 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 amusing in the games, there is something empowering and transgressive in their blunt refusal to adhere to "age-appropriate" behaviour. Additionally, the examples discussed here, apart from Flemeth, all form part of a sisterhood. The Fates, gorgons, and Crones are all groups of three sisters, thereby signalling the power of female familial and kinship bonds. Of course, within these games these sisters are killed off one by one, as all powerful witch-crone-goddesses must be destroyed in order to restore the primacy of violent patriarchy. Yet, while these games are conservative and ideologically complicit in the marginalization, objectification, and extremely negative framing of ageing female bodies, they also provide a complex cultural space in which the abject perils and pleasures of ageing can be found and explored. This is clear in the way the Crones are beloved and worshipped by their followers, even

though they ask a high price for their blessings, and can also be seen in examples from the previous chapter such as Ravel's insistence on her own individuality and feelings, Silvia's desperate desire to become a Hagraven and thereby empower herself, or the water hag's joyful naked dancing and cheeky sexual propositions. As Harrington (2018) has written of certain "hagsploitation" films and television shows, these kinds of powerful older female characters show that "there are many forms of power. In their refusal to act 'appropriately,' and adequately shrink back into a culturally sanctioned docility, abject barren bodies demand to be seen and heard" (p. 265).

Just as the Maiden speaks to female sexual power and the Mother demonstrates female reproductive power, the Crone 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, reclamation, and even identification. Caputi (2004) has noted that understanding the female monster as an ancient goddess "might help us to understand why some unruly viewers tend to identify not with the putative heroes and slayers (usually male, sometimes female), but with the monsters" (p. 316). Indeed, "despite social pressure, many women and men still long to unearth these buried aspects of the self and traverse these sacred/monstrous routes to knowledge" (Caputi, 2004, p. 317). These games do not offer space to make that process easy, however, meaning that identification and reclamation is a difficult and fraught process. The concluding chapter of this book 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.

References

Batylda, M. (2015). *The witcher 3: Wild hunt art book*. CD Projekt Red.

BioWare. (2009). *Dragon age: Origins.* Electronic Arts. PlayStation 3.

BioWare. (2011). *Dragon age II.* Electronic Arts. PlayStation 3.

BioWare. (2014). *Dragon age: Inquisition.* Electronic Arts. PlayStation 3.

Caputi, J. (2004). *Goddesses and monsters: Women, myth, power, and popular culture.* University of Wisconsin Press.

CD Projekt Red. (2015). *The witcher 3: Wild hunt.* CD Projekt. Microsoft Windows.

Chivers, S. (2011). *The silvering screen: Old age and disability in cinema*. University of Toronto Press.

Creed, B. (1996). Lesbian bodies: Tribades, tomboys and tarts. In E. Grosz & E. Probyn (Eds.), *Sexy bodies: The strange carnalities of feminism* (pp. 86–103). Routledge.

Daly, M. (1978). *Gyn/ecology: The metaethics of radical feminism*. Beacon Press.

De Beauvoir, S. (1949/2011). *The second sex* (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). Vintage. (Original work published 1949).

Euryale. (n.d.). *God of war wiki.* https://godofwar.fandom.com/wiki/Euryale

Harrington, E. (2018). *Women, monstrosity and horror film: Gynaehorror*. Routledge.

Hinchliff, S., & Gott, M. (2016). Ageing and sexuality in Western societies: Changingperspectives on sexual activity, sexual expression and the "sexy" older body. In E. Peel & R. Harding (Eds.), *Ageing and sexualities: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 11–32). Routledge.

Johns, A. (2004). *Baba Yaga: The ambiguous mother and witch of the Russian folktale*. Peter Lang.

Kirigin, K. A., & Warren, C. A. B. (2018). *Our bodies not ourselves: Women aging from menopause to one hundred*. Routledge.

Leeming, D. A., & Page, J. (1994). *Goddess: Myths of the female divine*. Oxford University Press.

Perkins, C. (2014). *Monster manual* (5th ed.). Wizards of the Coast.

Pixologic. (2011). Dragon age II interview. https://pixologic.com/interview/dragon-age2/1/

Santa Monica Studio. (2005). *God of war*. Sony Computer Entertainment. PlayStation 2.

Santa Monica Studio. (2007). *God of war II*. Sony Computer Entertainment. PlayStation 2.

Santa Monica Studio. (2010). *God of war III*. Sony Computer Entertainment. PlayStation 3.

Santa Monica Studio. (2013). *God of war: Ascension*. Sony Computer Entertainment.PlayStation 2.

Sontag, S. (1979). The double standard of aging. In J. Williams (Ed.), *Psychology of women* (pp. 462–478). Academic Press.

Toma, E. (2015). Powerful elderly characters in video games: Flemeth of Dragon Age. *Journalof Comparative research in Anthropology and Sociology, 6*(2).

Ussher, J. M. (2006). *Managing the monstrous feminine: Regulating the reproductive body*. Routledge.

Weavess. (n.d.). *Witcher wiki.* https://witcher.fandom.com/wiki/Weavess

Whispess. (n.d.). *Witcher wiki.* https://witcher.fandom.com/wiki/Whispess

---

Footnotes

1 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 moves like 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.

2 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.

3 Interestingly, Geralt's love interested Yennifer could also be read this way. Originally suffering from severe kyphosis (a hunched back), Yennifer transformed into a normative, conventionally attractive, and ageless beauty when she became a fully fledged sorceress (for the price of her fertility, a trade-off she comes to regret and again underscores the connection of powerful/magical women with infertility, like the Ardat-Yakshi). However, she is not framed as deceiving Geralt because her transformation is permanent and although her attractive appearance does serve the purpose of gaining power and manipulating men, is it not a removable "disguise."

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2026
S. Stang, *Maiden, Mother, and Crone*, Palgrave Studies in Mediating Kinship, Representation, and Difference
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-25115-2_8

8. Conclusion: Monstrous Misogyny and the Journey Towards Reclamation

Sarah Stang[1] ✉
(1) Digital Humanities, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada

✉ **Sarah Stang**
Email: sstang@brocku.ca

Keyword Feminism – Subversion – Empowerment – Medusa – StarCraft – Undertale – Baba Yaga

> 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 book, 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 demonizing female kinship and constructing the female body as monstrous—the sexual Other to be hated, feared, and destroyed. While

women's bodies 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. It is also directed at the alternative networks of kinship and support these women form in spite of, and outside of, harmful, oppressive, and controlling patriarchal structures. 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 ageing. 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 book 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 book 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*, for example, even hailed as a "masterpiece" (Dingman, 2015) and winning several "Game of the Year" awards.[1] 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. And given that heterosexual white men make up the majority, and sometimes the entirety, of the development teams combined with the fact that these games were largely 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 ageing 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 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, and/or old women and get praised and rewarded for it.

Ambiguity, Empowerment, and Disgust

Because the design behind these ludic monsters is influenced by 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 (1994), 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, 1994, 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, 1994, 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, 1994, 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 ageing 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 hag—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). Sara Ahmed (2004) has developed a theory of abjection as that which threatens the fantasy of ontological integrity, arguing 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 work, Ahmed (2004) 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 (2004) 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.

In other words, 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. Many films, books, comics, and shows have attempted to develop more nuanced or sympathetic kinds of monsters—for example by portraying them as misunderstood victims of persecution or desirable romantic partners—or have pushed back against the association of physical anomaly with monstrosity and evilness, thereby signalling what Jeffrey Weinstock (2012) has called the "contemporary disconnection of monstrosity from physical appearance" (p. 276). Specifically, Weinstock (2012) has noted that "one significant trend in representing the monster has been to decouple physical abnormality from assumptions about intelligence, character, or morals … looking different is no longer sufficient to categorize a creature as monstrous (p. 276). Instead, monsters have become (sometimes) protagonists while "culture becomes the antagonist," that is, "oppressive cultural forces that unjustly ostracize or victimize those who are physically divergent" are to blame, not the ones that are labelled "monster" (Weinstock, 2012, p. 276). This shift is important because it encourages us to reflect and reconsider our ideas about normalcy, normativity, otherness, and monstrosity. As Weinstock (2012) has explained:

> What is monstrous is always defined in relation to what is human … To redefine monstrosity is simultaneously to rethink humanity. When our monsters change, it reflects the fact that we —our understanding of what it means to be human, our relations with one another and to the world around us, our

> conception of our place in the greater scheme of things—have changed as well. (p. 275)

This is a nice thought, yet does not seem to be manifesting as much in games. This is perhaps because, as Švelch (2023) has argued, "most video game combat follows the principles of the ontology of the enemy, the Cold War-era approach to otherness that sees anything that moves as a hostile, calculable target" (p. 107). In the case of the games I have discussed in this book that hostility is bound up with gendered, unruly, transgressive, and disgusting bodies.

Although, like monstrosity and the abject, disgust is ambivalent and that which is disgusting can be appealing or fascinating, the games I discussed in this book 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 "normative" or "natural," like menstruation, pregnancy, or ageing. 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, pp. 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." 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). 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. Fast forward a few thousand years, and players get to enact the role of Perseus as Kratos in *God of War*, tearing off Medusa or Euryale's head and using it as a weapon.

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 who has experienced pregnancy and childbirth, when I encounter the siren, the succubus, the spider woman, 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.

Playable Monstrous Women[2]

There are certainly some games that let players become monstrous women, though they are rare and they often come with their share of problems. I already discussed Elise and Widowmaker, and there are also several monstrous women players can choose from in the fighting game *Mortal Kombat 11* (NetherRealm Studios, 2019) such as the hive

mind insect-like D'Vorah or the mutant, hybrid, clone Mileena (who is sexualized and has a fanged *vagina dentata* mouth, like the sirens or bruxae discussed earlier), but like Elise and Widowmaker they are simply character options among many rather than centralized as mandatory playable characters. Similarly, in *Baldur's Gate 3*, players can choose from a range of "races" for their player-character, including monstrous races traditionally portrayed as evil such as tieflings, githyanki, half-orc (but not full orc, of course), and drow. Players can even choose a drow character who is a devotee of Lolth, but of course that makes them evil and they even have red eyes as a default setting to signal their evilness. Conversely, players can select a "Seldarine" drow, which is one who rejects Lolth and her corruption and is sworn instead to Lolth's daughter, Eilistraee, whom I discussed in Chapter 3. Interestingly, while the game positions Lolth-sworn drow as evil and gives them distinctly evil, cruel, and violent options, players can still choose to play a "good" Lolth-sworn drow—though the game's writing reflects the developers' assumption that players would be doing an "evil" playthrough with such a character. Because *Baldur's Gate 3* is such a choice-heavy game, players can choose to play against the assumed evilness of their character and thus enact resistance against these tropes.

Sarah Kerrigan from the popular and long-running science fiction strategy video game series *StarCraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 1998–2017) is another playable monstrous woman, and although she is also an optional avatar the player can select, she is the focus of several key narrative developments in the series regardless of which avatar the player chooses at the beginning of each game. Though she is portrayed in problematic ways, she is therefore far more centralized in the series compared to most monstrous women, albeit largely as an antagonist/villain, and is worth discussing here in the context of reclaiming the monstrous-feminine.

First introduced as a highly trained Terran (human) espionage agent and assassin with powerful psychic abilities, Kerrigan was captured by the Zerg, a race of biologically advanced, hive-minded,

arthropodal aliens. Dedicated to the pursuit of genetic perfection, the Zerg relentlessly hunt down and assimilate advanced species across the galaxy, incorporating useful genetic code into their own. Kerrigan was chosen for this process, placed in a chrysalis, and forcefully infested by the Zerg. Through this painful process, reminiscent of the way Darkspawn turn women into Broodmothers, Kerrigan became a Zerg-Terran hybrid, under the control of the Zerg Overmind. The Overmind is the leader of the Zerg swarm, and while it is ostensibly genderless, it is voiced by male actors. The Overmind was responsible for capturing Kerrigan and turning her into a Zerg weapon, and it also refers to her as its "daughter." Kerrigan in turn refers to the Overmind as her "father" whom she "live[s] to serve." Her "infestation" caused her to physically mutate, developing green skin, a hard carapace, skeletal wings, claws, yellow eyes, and worm-like protrusions which grow from her head (Fig. 8.1). In the first game's expansion, *StarCraft: Brood War* (Blizzard Entertainment, 1998), the Overmind is killed and Kerrigan fights to claim undisputed control over the Zerg, becoming the self-proclaimed Queen of the Blades. In this expansion, Kerrigan is a central character, although a villainous one. She is ruthless, cunning, and manipulative, willing to brainwash, blackmail, and betray when it suits her purposes. She is completely self-aware and unapologetic, as exemplified by her observation that "at this point, I'm pretty much the Queen Bitch of the Universe"—evoking my discussion of Lolth earlier in this book—and her declaration that "every living thing in the universe will bow before the Queen of Blades, or else they will die." Instead of being driven mad by her abject mutations like the Mother in *Dragon Age*, Kerrigan embraced them.



Fig. 8.1 Official promotional concept art of Kerrigan as the Queen of the Blades in *StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010).
Taken from https://starcraft.fandom.com/wiki/Sarah_Kerrigan

In *StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010), Kerrigan is defeated by the Terrans and is de-infested, a process which alters her DNA again, rendering her more human than Zerg. This de-infestation was done to her against her will, and the attack against her was led by her former lover, Jim Raynor. Unfortunately, the de-infested Kerrigan struggles with her own identity and the guilt she feels for her behaviour under the influence of the Zerg infestation. As she laments to Raynor, with whom she has rekindled a romantic relationship, in a companion comic to *StarCraft II*: "I was a billion claws. A billion fangs. I was in control. I killed. And killed. I was in control. At my word, mountains fled. Planets died. I was in control, and I was the monster" (Dayton, 2013, p. 9). Kerrigan's de-infestation also disempowers her:

she loses her confidence and her self-assurance, questioning her own identity and purpose. In this sense, Raynor's work to remove Kerrigan's Zerg infestation is also a project to turn her from a threatening *femme fatale* into a "damsel-in-distress" for him to protect. Indeed, as soon as they are reunited, players are shown several scenes of Raynor acting "manly" and protective, and Kerrigan looking up at him with loving eyes. However, Kerrigan is not really the damsel-in-distress that Raynor desires: she still retains her powerful psychic abilities and in *StarCraft II: Heart of the Swarm* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2013) Kerrigan discovers that although she appears mostly human, she can still control the Zerg and even spawn Zerg and Zerglings at will. This positions her as a monstrous mother who parthenogenetically creates insect-like offspring, similar to many of the examples discussed in this book. While her maternity is not as abject as that of BioWare's Broodmothers, she orders the Zerg to create larva-producing hatcheries, which briefly look like pulsating yellow sacs. Kerrigan can then mutate the larvae into various types of Zerg creatures. She can also spawn larvae-like parasites out of her hand, which can infest others and become Zerg Broodmothers. Kerrigan created intelligent, sapient Broodmothers who could take over the swarm in case of her death. In this sense, Kerrigan is the mother of Broodmothers, or a Broodmother Queen. The Mother from *Dragon Age* similarly controlled other, unawakened Darkspawn Broodmothers and, like Kerrigan, she was once human but was mutated against her will into a monster, then ruled and propagated the very species that tortured and mutated her. Unlike the Mother, however, Kerrigan is not presented as mad—though she is clearly driven and passionate—and she is framed as a villain rather than as a monster.

While she struggles with guilt and the awareness that she would never again be fully human, she is also driven by a desire for vengeance against the evil Terran emperor, Mengsk. Kerrigan originally served emperor Mengsk before her capture by the Zerg, but he used her as a weapon, ruthlessly torturing and brainwashing her to increase her powers. Although she was his most powerful soldier, Mengsk did not

bother trying to rescue Kerrigan from the Zerg Overmind, instead leaving her for dead. After their reunion, Raynor begs Kerrigan to give up on her plans for revenge against Mengsk and focus on their relationship instead. However, Mengsk captures and supposedly executes Raynor, rekindling Kerrigan's obsession with vengeance. In order to gain enough power to defeat Mengsk, Kerrigan decides to secure her role as Zerg queen once again. She reinfests herself by entering the spawning pool where the Zerg first evolved, losing her humanity and being reborn as the Primal Queen of the Blades. In this form, she is more powerful than ever, and is finally able to murder Mengsk.

Although Kerrigan certainly embodies aspects of the abject and the monstrous-feminine, with a hybrid insect-like body and the ability to instantly spawn monstrous alien beings, she is not as physically grotesque as many of the examples I have discussed in this book. Kerrigan is conventionally attractive and is the subject of much fan art, fan fiction, and cosplay. While she is a human-alien hybrid, she is alien in a more traditional science fiction media sense: mostly an attractive human but with subtle elements of exotic Otherness. One aspect of her Otherness is her skin colour, which becomes green after her transformation. As discussed earlier regarding the Asari, alien women characters are often portrayed in science fiction media as beautiful humanoid women but with "exotic" skin colours. A second aspect that reinforces this reading is her hair: her human form had long, straight, red hair and her eyes were green, coding her as white, but once she was transformed, her hair turned into long, brown, dreadlock-like tentacles.[3] Like the alien from *Predator*, these brown dreadlock-like protuberances code her as racialized, placing *StarCraft* into a long popular culture tradition of visually depicting alien and alien-human hybrid characters as racialized Others (see Bernardi, 2008; Guerrero, 1993; Nama, 2008). Interestingly, when she temporarily becomes (mostly) human again—the form I refer to as "de-infested"—Kerrigan's brown dreadlocks remain, suggesting that her hair represents her alien aspect. Indeed, the *StarCraft* Wiki states that "Kerrigan's new state had

a mostly human form, but still had some zerg traits such as her dreadlock-like antennae instead of hair" ("Sarah Kerrigan," n.d.). In an attempt to rid herself of her Zerg aspects, Kerrigan even tries to remove her "hair," though she is unsuccessful. Kerrigan's relationship with her own hybrid identity is fraught, by making her appear white in her human form but symbolically coded as racialized in her alien (monstrous) form. *StarCraft*, like much science fiction media, thereby creates an association between humanity/normalcy and whiteness and between monstrosity and the racialized/exotic Other.

While Kerrigan is undoubtedly empowered in the sense of being a powerful queen, her empowerment came at the cost of her own agency and placed her within a militaristic command structure. She also has a past filled with abuse and suffering—a common backstory given to "strong female protagonists" as well as many of the monstrous women discussed in this book. She developed psychic powers as a child and accidentally killed her own mother and severely injured her father. She was then conscripted into a militaristic Ghost Program where she was tortured under the guise of training her to use her powers. Her training turned her into a ruthless, remorseless assassin, and her mental conditioning meant she was unable to refuse any direct order given by a superior officer. Her infestation was done to her against her will by a male-coded character, as was her later de-infestation. Although she did choose to re-infest herself, she did so to get vengeance for the death of her lover, meaning that she sees her powers and her offspring (and the entire Zerg species) as tools for her own violent ends and her motivation is tied to her relationship with a man. In this sense, Kerrigan's empowerment is undermined from a feminist perspective, so it is challenging to read her as a feminist reworking of the monstrous-feminine. Although she is complex, fully developed, and certainly designed in a less misogynistic way than other examples I have discussed in this book, she is still framed using tropes common in the representation of female characters in games.

As a violent, ruthless, power-hungry, vengeful queen who cares little for the well-being of her subjects and offspring, Kerrigan certainly

embodies the monstrous-feminine. Like many powerful nonhuman or hybrid female characters in science fiction, fantasy, and horror media, Kerrigan is villainous, deceitful, violent, and cruel. In this sense, Kerrigan is a monstrous, hybrid, *femme fatale*, Broodmother queen/bitch—like Lolth, but playable. Yet, she is also a fully developed character, with a personality, emotions, and even a love story in *StarCraft II*. And unlike Lolth, she gets to be redeemed, though that redemption comes with a high price. Towards the end of *StarCraft II: Legacy of the Void* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2015b), Kerrigan becomes a Xel'naga (Fig. 8.2)—a race of powerful god-like beings—and sacrifices herself to save the universe. While Kerrigan is (effectively) forced to die by merging with a god and then exploding, she dies as a hero and a giant flaming goddess, rather than simply being murdered by the violent playable representative of masculinist patriarchal society like the other examples discussed in this book. Kerrigan leaves the Zerg in the care of one of her Broodmothers and her ultimate fate is left unknown, though a blurry silhouette of her human form appears in a cutscene with Raynor at the end of the game.



Fig. 8.2 A screenshot of the cinematic cutscene showing Kerrigan ascended as a Xel'naga in *StarCraft II: Legacy of the Void* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2015b)

In this sense, Kerrigan is granted a "happy" ending; however, it requires her redemption through self-sacrifice, just like many of the maternal monstrous/powerful women discussed in this book. It is also important to note that she appears fully human in the final scene, suggesting that the monstrous-feminine can only get a happy ending if she gives up her monstrousness in favour of normalcy—in this case in the form of a heteronormative romantic relationship. While the games seem to suggest that Kerrigan's happiness can only occur with her in human form and with Raynor as her lover, she spends most of the games as a monstrous-feminine character, and most *StarCraft* fan art of Kerrigan features her as the Queen or Primal Queen of the Blades. In this sense, when players use her as their avatar, they are not really choosing to play as a regular human woman, rather they are enacting the role of monstrous-feminine, of Broodmother, of villainous *femme fatale.* Indeed, due to her popularity, she—in her monstrous form—is also a playable character in the multiplayer online battle arena game *Heroes of the Storm* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2015a). However, Kerrigan cannot be uncritically celebrated as an example of "positive" female empowerment: though Kerrigan is undeniably "empowered" in the sense that she is powerful, her powers—both psychic and Zerg—were forced upon her against her will by male characters and her empowerment occurs within the violent, militaristic context of galactic conquest and bloody vengeance. Kerrigan's lack of care for her "children"—which she simply uses as weapons—means she is not an example of a positive maternal figure either.

Like the monstrous-feminine and the abject itself, Kerrigan is ambiguous. Her character shifts and develops considerably throughout the games: Kerrigan appears as a tormented human soldier; an obedient Zerg hybrid; the cold and calculating *femme fatale*-like Queen of the Blades; a self-doubting damsel-in-distress; the ruthless and vengeful Primal Queen of the Blades; and a giant, fiery Xel'naga goddess. Although she is ambiguous, this depth and her status as playable character makes Kerrigan an interesting example to discuss, showing that the monstrous-feminine and hybrid, abject maternal can

successfully exist in a centralized, playable role. Of course, this is at least partially because Kerrigan is only slightly physically abject compared to many other examples I have discussed and is empowered within a violent, militaristic context. She is also framed as a villain rather than as a monster, and while her death is heroic, she still dies at the end. Like most monstrous women she is not allowed to remain monstrous *and* get a happy ending. Kerrigan is, therefore, an ambiguous character—a monster, a villain, a damsel, a *femme fatale*, but also a playable character and in many ways a very different manifestation of the monstrous-feminine.

The imagery of Kerrigan as ruthless alien hybrid Broodmother Queen and then as a fiery, unstoppable goddess reinforces a reading of her as empowered and empowering, though she is couched within a problematically patriarchal context in a game designed by men primarily for male players. The enduring popularity of Kerrigan, particularly as she is envisioned and remixed by fans and as she appears in other titles as a playable character, speaks to the power of allowing for direct identification with the monstrous-feminine. The argument that (some) monstrous women could be empowering for female audiences rather than simply function as misogynistic constructs has been also made by Sady Doyle (2019) in her book *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers: Monstrosity, Patriarchy, and the Fear of Female Power*, in which she highlights how the female monster embodies male fears of female power:

> Monsters haunt powerful men with the knowledge that their control is only temporary; that women are canny creatures, and the cage of patriarchy is flimsier than it looks, and it is only a matter of time until we find our way out. (p. xx)

Similarly, in their recent book *Monsters vs. Patriarchy: Toxic Imagination in Global Horror Cinema*, Patricia Saldarriaga and Emy Manini (2025) contend that "monstrous female subjects are becoming empowered and are revealing the ways in which victims can transform into powerful

avatars, using the tools of their monstrification to smash the colonial, white supremacist and misogynistic structures that created them" (p. xii). While this positive and hopeful development might be happening in other media, I am unfortunately not seeing the same kinds of reclamations and reimaginings happening much in mainstream games. Players are welcome to interpret characters as they wish, and some figures like Kerrigan might be more suited to feminist reclamation than others, but most games make it challenging to find the female monster empowering when they force players to murder her as an inevitable part of gameplay. Perhaps the answer lies outside of big budget, mainstream, "AAA" games.

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

As I have demonstrated throughout this book, 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 largely a more diverse—and so often more 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?" (qtd. in Ellison, 2013). Although she may have been joking about the vomiting,

as I have shown in this book, 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.

As Švelch (2023) has observed, monsters "embody a specific kind of computational and commodified otherness that is designed to be confronted and defeated" (p. 5). Yet, there are some examples of games that present monsters that are impossible to defeat or, perhaps more subversively, monsters that *should not* be defeated. For example, *Undertale* (2015), an independent game created by Toby Fox, pushes back against the framing of monster-as-unwanted-Other by humanizing the monster, highlighting the association between monstrosity and marginality, and questioning 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 role-playing 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. Showing mercy often means figuring out what each monster needs or wants by paying close attention to subtle or not-so-subtle cues or by trial and error, all while dodging their attacks. This is a counterintuitive and challenging way to play, but this "pacifist" route reveals a joyful, positive, and friendship/acceptance-oriented story. Rather than being horrific or repulsive monstrosities that are designed to make the player want to kill them, the monsters of *Undertale* are charming, quirky, unique, and several of them are fully fleshed out characters. Many of them are also queer or queer-coded, but rather than adhering to the problematic association of queerness

with monstrosity, it instead celebrates their queerness as sweet and authentic, presenting a way to reclaim the monstrous, the hybrid, and the "weird." The game's subversion of typical violent, masculinist, and cis-heteronormative role-playing game tropes can also be understood as an example of "queering" gaming and game design. *Undertale* has received extensive critical acclaim, being praised as an innovative, progressive, and unconventional approach to the role-playing game genre and winning countless accolades. The game's fandom is filled with devoted players who discuss their adoration for its lovable monsters, even developing parasocial relationships with them (Elvery, 2023) and vehemently rejecting any genocide playthroughs performed by streamers so as not to see their beloved "friends" murdered (Spencer, 2017). 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.[4]

Some other notable examples focus on Baba Yaga, the legendary witch from Slavic folklore that I have discussed in relation to the hag and crone figures. *Blacktail* (The Parasight, 2022) is a surreal first-person shooter in which players enact the role of Yaga, a young woman exiled from her village for being a witch. Using her bow, Yaga hunts down memories from her past that have manifested as spirits while exploring a magical forest and searching for her missing sister. The game incorporates a morality system wherein players can make choices that orient Yaga towards good or evil, determining what kind of Baba (meaning "grandmother" or "old woman") she will become when she grows older. While reviews were mixed, this game is remarkable in that it allows players to become the legendary witch—albeit her younger self—rather than fighting her, as in, for example, the downloadable content for a mainstream game like *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2015), called *The Temple of the Witch*, in which the famous Lara Croft is pitted against Baba Yaga. Lara discovers that Baba Yaga is

really just a regular old woman, a former biochemist who weaponized a flower pollen with hallucinogenic properties, using it to make it seem like she was a witch with magical powers dwelling in a nightmarish realm and to even hypnotize and enslave animals and soldiers. Her monstrous form is really just a disguise made up of animal bones, and in the end she is defeated by Lara and gives up her witchy ways.[5] Although it is still in early access and needs considerable bug-fixing and polishing to be playable as of this writing, *Reka* (Emberstorm Entertainment, 2024) is another Baba Yaga-themed game in which players adopt the role of the legendary witch's apprentice, learning witchcraft and how to use herbs to create potions and medicines, and players can even build their own magical house that can walk around on chicken legs, just like Baba Yaga's. This is a "cozy" style of game, meaning that although Baba Yaga is presented as an intimidating and mysterious figure with dark secrets to uncover, the game focuses on more lighthearted themes and activities such as decorating, helping others, and exploring. Giving players the opportunity to become the witch's apprentice potentially allows for a more positive and humanizing portrayal of Baba Yaga as a mentor, teacher, and guide. This is important to note because cozy games are a very popular genre, often considered more "feminine" and "casual" in terms of gameplay, themes, and aesthetics. Some players, developers, and critics also consider cozy games more feminist and inclusive, offering comfort and safety to players while still potentially engaging with "witchy vibes and haunting worlds" (Boudreau et al., 2025, p. 2653). Perhaps those vibes and worlds can offer space to reclaim the monstrous.

Undertale is a unique kind of game, yet it serves as an important intervention into and subversion of the convention of monster slaying. And while *Blacktail* and *Reka* are only two examples, they indicate that perhaps some developers are starting to understand that many players want to *be* the witch, rather than murder her. As has been the case for decades, the independent game scene—including cozy games offering players low-stakes gameplay, safety, and comfort—seems to be the space where risky, unconventional storytelling is happening while the

mainstream industry remains conservative and traditional. On the other hand, the independent game industry has also given us disturbing, misogynistic, body horror titles like *The Binding of Isaac* (McMillen & Himsl, 2011), a roguelike game designed by Edmund McMillen and Florian Himsl. In this game, players take on the role of a small boy whose mother becomes a violent, abusive monstrosity, convinced God wants her to sacrifice him just like his biblical namesake. Isaac must explore horrific levels; defeat grotesque, abject monstrosities; and battle against his mother's monstrous body, divided into parts. For example, in fleshy, bloody, wet areas called "Womb" or "Utero" (or, the decaying, scar tissue and skin graft covered version called "Scarred Womb"), the boss battle against "Mom" (with a heart after her name) features her bloodshot eyes; veiny hand with painted red fingernails; and swollen, veiny, boil-covered leg, complete with red high heel and polka-dot skirt. These enormous body parts squeeze themselves into the room to grab and stomp at Isaac, as he shoots at her flesh and players hear the mother's voice calling Isaac's name. She wails his name in despair once she is defeated, and later players also fight a boss called "Mom's Heart," which is literally a giant, beating heart that also calls Isaac's name. Later in the game, Isaac battles another boss, called "Mother" (with a broken heart after her name this time), which features a completely inhuman, monstrous, undead/corpse-like version of Isaac's mother descending from the ceiling and attacking the player. This game literalizes the concepts of the all-controlling phallic mother; the engulfing, monstrous womb; and the child rejecting his mother, rendering her (and her fat, aged, reproductive, maternal body) abject.

In the end, mainstream games in which monstrous misogyny seems to be the norm carry far more weight than independent games do, with much higher sales and far more aggressive marketing campaigns, and clearly not all independent games seek to present more nuanced visions of gendered monstrosity. Mainstream games continue to be the driving force behind the medium as a whole and while there is a lot of potential in the independent scene, critics have praised *The Binding of*

Isaac just as much as they have praised *Undertale*. As this book has demonstrated, most developers seem to have little interest in subverting genre expectations or facilitating a reclamation of the monstrous, though perhaps that might be changing with more games that feature sympathetic or likeable monsters, or even let players become monstrous women. In seeking new visions of monstrosity and nonhumanness in general, the independent game industry is likely the only space to offer much hope, but even then change is slow.

The Perils of Video Game Play

As Kishonna Gray and David Leonard (2018) have written, video game play is not enjoyable for everyone:

> While video games may be a distraction to some communities and a source of power and pleasure to others, they can at times also be a source of violence, oppression, pain, and trauma. Our identities shape these complex and messy relationships with games. … Our disparate social locations and varied privileges shape our relationship to gaming and gaming's relationship to us. (p. 5)

In his book *Repairing Play*, Aaron Trammell (2023) has similarly argued that while the common understanding is that play is a "constructive and positive form of leisure," it is actually "often hurtful, toxic, and haphazard" for many people (p. 9). Trammell's book explores how play can be oppressive and traumatic, and this book has sought to do the same.

While I love video games and do not really want to be a buzzkill, I have perhaps been what Sara Ahmed has called a "feminist killjoy" throughout this book.[6] As she notes, "all feminist are killjoys" (Ahmed, 2023, p. 10) in that they will be judged as such by those who see feminist critique (especially of something that is supposed to be "just for fun" like video games!) as killing the fun—"as if to be a feminist is to deprive yourself of enjoyment or to be intent on depriving others of

enjoyment" (p. 11). I embrace this label not because I hate the games under discussion in this book—on the contrary, some of them are games I adore and have played multiple times—rather, I am enacting the role of feminist killjoy here because if others' enjoyment involves role-playing the violent murder of monstrous women who are labelled monstrous primarily because they are powerful, non-normative, hybrid, fat, old, disabled, non-white, queer, maternal, etc., then I will gladly deprive them of that "joy." Similarly, if this work makes me a "social justice warrior" then I will gladly embrace that (admittedly very cool) label as well. As Zimmerman (2021) discusses, the label "social justice warrior" stems from the instinct to denigrate and deride women's anger because "there is little more threatening to the social order than a woman who's angry" (p. 123). This book is my modest (and yes, rather angry) threat to the social order, leveraging the tools of my trade, because, as Amanda Phillips (2018) reminds us, "there are many, many ways to do game studies for great justice" (p. 117).

The quote at the start of this concluding chapter suggests that there is a desire and a possibility to reclaim and find power in the identity of the non-normative, villainous, monstrous woman. A "dark power" found within the "will to disturb." I acknowledge and respect (and often share) this desire. 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 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 previously 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, 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 role-playing games like the ones under study in this book, 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." Scholars who are also fans of the media they analyse 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 may not be the case for mainstream role-playing games, many women do enjoy playing these kinds of games, myself included.

Perhaps this explains my stake in writing this book: 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 role-playing 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. Women who are presented as either too horrific or too powerful (or both) to be allowed to exist. 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.

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 pregnant banshee, or the vicious and 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.

Gray and Leonard (2018) have argued for the "ample potential and possibility of gaming culture":

> We see the ways that people of color, women, LGBTQ people, and their allies have challenged the hegemony of whiteness and hetero-maleness within gaming culture in terms of both production and representation. Even as the mainstream industry continues to be dominated by heterosexual white men, a huge diversity of people outside the industry, on the margins, have been creating their own video games for years, beyond the focus of mainstream gaming culture. (p. 7)

Indeed, the effort and passion are certainly there, and overall things have gotten better, and I do not want to discount all the positive changes that have happened over the lifetime of this medium. However, I am not sure that marginalized people should be the ones doing *all* the work. The game industry is still desperately in need of a feminist intervention (perhaps more of a revolution at this point), 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, and I believe those changes will have rippling effects on society as a whole: "To change gaming in an effort to change culture—to use gaming as an

instrument and technology within larger social movements—is to bolster the toolbox for justice" (Gray & Leonard, 2018, p. 8). Although I do not have the perfect solution, this book 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 transgressive and non-normative female sexuality, reproduction, and old age—for embracing and reclaiming the "grotesque" and "abject" monstrous-feminine.

References

Ahmed, S. (2004). *The cultural politics of emotion*. Edinburgh University Press.

Ahmed, S. (2023). *The feminist killjoy handbook: The radical potential of getting in the way*. Basic Books.

Bernardi, D. (Ed.). (2008). *The persistence of whiteness: Race and contemporary Hollywoodcinema*. Routledge.

Blizzard Entertainment. (1998). *StarCraft: Brood war.* Blizzard Entertainment. MicrosoftWindows.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2004). *World of warcraft.* Blizzard Entertainment. Microsoft Windows.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2010). *StarCraft II: Wings of liberty*. Blizzard Entertainment. MicrosoftWindows.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2012). *Diablo III.* Blizzard Entertainment. Microsoft Windows.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2013). *StarCraft II: Heart of the swarm*. Blizzard Entertainment. Microsoft Windows.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2015a). *Heroes of the storm*. Blizzard Entertainment. Microsoft Windows.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2015b). *StarCraft II: Legacy of the void*. Blizzard Entertainment. Microsoft Windows.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2016). *Overwatch.* Blizzard Entertainment. Microsoft Windows.

Boudreau, K., Consalvo, M., & Phelps, A. (2025). *Whose vibe is it anyway? Negotiating definitions of cozy games*. Proceedings of the 58th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, 2645–2654. https://hdl.handle.net/10125/109161

Caputi, J. (2004). *Goddesses and monsters: Women, myth, power, and popular culture.* University of Wisconsin Press.

Chess, S. (2020). *Play like a feminist*. MIT Press. [https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12484.001.0001]

Covino, D. C. (2004). *Amending the abject body: Aesthetic makeovers in medicine and culture*. SUNY Press.

Crystal Dynamics. (2015). *Rise of the tomb raider: The temple of the witch.* Microsoft Studios; Square Enix. PlayStation 4.

Dayton, C. (2013). *Kerrigan: Hope and vengeance*. Blizzard Entertainment.

Dingman, H. (2015). The witcher 3: Wild hunt (PC) review: An utter masterpiece that reveals the fundamental flaws in open-world games. *PCWorld*. https://www.pcworld.com/article/2932282/the-witcher-3-wild-hunt-pc-review-an-uttermasterpiece-that-reveals-the-fundamental-flaws-in-open-w.html

Doyle, S. (2019). *Dead blondes and bad mothers: Monstrosity, patriarchy, and the fear of female power.* Melville House.

Eidos-Montréal. (2018). *Shadow of the tomb raider.* Square Enix Europe. PlayStation 4.

Ellison, C. (2013). Anna Anthropy and the twine revolution. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2013/apr/10/anna-anthropy-twinerevolution

Elvery, G. (2023). Undertale's loveable monsters: Investigating parasocial relationships withnon-player characters. *Games and Culture, 18*(4), 475–497. [https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120221105464]

Emberstorm Entertainment. (2024). *Reka.* Fireshine Games. Microsoft Windows.

Farrimond, K. (2020). "Being a horror fan and being a feminist are often a conflicting business": Feminist horror, the opinion economy and *Teeth*'s gendered audiences. *Horror Studies, 11*(2), 149–168. [https://doi.org/10.1386/host_00016_1]

Fox, T. (2015). *Undertale.* Toby Fox. Microsoft Windows.

Gray, K., & Leonard, D. (2018). *Woke gaming: Digital challenges to oppression and social injustice.* University of Washington Press.

Guerrero, E. (1993). *Framing blackness: The African American image in film*. Temple University

Press.

Hooks, b. (1992). *Black looks: Race and representation*. South End Press.

Johnston, E. (2016). The original "nasty woman." *The Atlantic.* https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/11/the-original-nasty-womanof-classical-myth/506591/

Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection*. (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). Columbia University Press.

McMillen, E., & Himsl, F. (2011). *The binding of Isaac.* Microsoft Windows.

Nama, A. (2008). *Black space: Imagining race in science fiction film*. The University of Texas Press.

NetherRealm Studios. (2019). *Mortal kombat 11.* Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment. PlayStation 4.

Phillips, A. (2018). Game studies for great justice. In J. Sayers (Ed.), *The Routledge companion to media studies and digital humanities* (pp. 117–127). Routledge. [https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315730479-12]

Russo, M. (1994). *The female grotesque: Risk, excess and modernity*. Routledge.

Sarah Kerrigan. (n.d.). *StarCraft wiki.* https://starcraft.fandom.com/wiki/Sarah_Kerrigan

Sarkeesian, A. (2015). We must be critical of the art we love. *Time.* https://time.com/4030632/anita-sarkeesian-sexist-media/

Spencer, C. (2017). The undertale drama. *Kotaku.* https://kotaku.com/the-undertale-drama1798159975

Stang, S. (2019). The broodmother as monstrous-feminine: Abject maternity in video games. *Nordlit, 42: Manufacturing* Monsters, 233–256. https://doi.org/10.7557/13.5014

Stryker, S. (1994). My words to Victor Frankenstein above the village of Chamounix: Performing transgender rage. In S. Stryker & S. Whittle (Eds.), *The transgender studies reader* (pp. 244–256). Routledge.

Švelch, J. (2023). *Player vs. monster: The making and breaking of video game monstrosity*. MIT Press.

The Parasight. (2022). *Blacktail.* Focus Entertainment. Microsoft Windows.

Toge Productions. (2020). *Coffee talk.* Toge Productions; Chorus Worldwide. Microsoft Windows.

Trammell, A. (2023). *Repairing play: A black phenomenology.* MIT Press.

Valentis, M., & Devane, A. (1994). *Female rage: Unlocking its secrets, claiming its power*. Carol Southern Books.

Vossen, E. (2018). *On the cultural inaccessibility of gaming: Invading, creating, and reclaiming the*

cultural clubhouse. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Waterloo.

Weinstock, J. A. (2012). Invisible monsters: Vision, horror, and contemporary culture. In J. A. Weinstock (Ed.), *The monster theory reader* (pp. 275–291). University of Minnesota Press.

Wilk, S. (2000). *Medusa: Solving the mystery of the gorgon*. Oxford University Press.

Zimmerman, J. (2021). *Women and other monsters: Building a new mythology*. Beacon Press.

Footnotes

1 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.

2 Parts of this section have been previously published in my article "The Broodmother as Monstrous-Feminine—Abject Maternity in Video Games" in the journal *Nordlit* (Stang, 2019).

3 It is interesting to note that some fans assumed human Kerrigan was a woman of colour because her avatar in *StarCraft* has a tan and her hair, although red, already appears to be dreaded. Her clearer and more graphically advanced portrayal in *StarCraft II*, in which she is more clearly coded as white and her red hair is not dreaded, therefore surprised some fans.

4 *Coffee Talk* (Toge Productions, 2020) is another notable example, though it is not exactly a role-playing game but more of a visual novel. Players work as a barista serving coffee to nonhuman patrons, including a vampire, werewolf, alien, elf, orc, mermaid, catgirl, and succubus. The patrons discuss their lives and problems, and while their nonhumanness or monstrosity is mostly just aesthetic, it does serve to humanize the kinds of monsters that are normally presented as enemies to fight and kill in games. For more on *Undertale's* subversive approach to violence and what it has meant for independent games, see Anastasia Salter's 2025 book, *Undertale: Can a Game Give Hope?*

5 This game's sequel, *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* (Eidos-Montréal, 2018) also features monstrous women as enemies with the Yaaxil—female guardians who protect a magical artefact near a legendary lost Incan city Lara has discovered. Created by a goddess and led by a powerful priestess called Crimson Fire, the Yaaxil are initially introduced as horrific monsters that terrify and attack Lara with long, sharp claws, but in the end she works together with them to prevent the end of the world (as is tradition in *Tomb Raider* games).

6 See Ahmed's book *The feminist killjoy handbook: The radical potential of getting in the way* (2023) as well as her blog at feministkilljoys.com.

Index

A

Abject 17, 19–21, 23, 30, 33, 47, 49, 51, 73, 78, 83, 89–93, 95, 96, 98–100, 110, 114–117, 124, 129, 130, 134, 136, 139, 141, 145, 146, 152, 161, 168–171, 175, 178–182, 189, 190, 192, 193, 195–199, 206, 207, 214, 215, 219, 232, 235, 238, 240, 241, 248, 253, 254, 263, 265, 268, 269, 273, 274, 276–279, 283–285, 288, 291, 294, 296, 299
Abjection 17, 20, 23, 49, 61, 78, 139, 147, 159, 170, 181, 182, 189, 191, 193, 195, 196, 232, 238, 239, 268, 277
Ableism 31, 195, 207, 223, 232, 237, 239, 241, 251, 260
Ableist 176, 192, 209, 214, 216, 237, 248, 260
Aging 213, 239, 258, 267, 276
Ahmed, Sara 198, 277–279, 295
Alien 23, 133, 134, 136, 140, 146
Alien 5, 9, 10, 94, 95, 110, 112, 134, 138, 178, 181–185, 188, 189, 192–194, 274, 282, 285, 288, 292
Anomalous 2, 32, 185, 192, 209, 214, 215, 232, 239, 241, 242, 260, 267, 276
Appearance 9, 19, 25–27, 57, 60, 61, 66, 72, 73, 78, 91, 96, 103, 108, 111, 140, 145, 154, 184, 189, 193, 208–211, 213–216, 218, 220, 228, 231, 236, 237, 249, 250, 253, 258, 260–266, 268, 277, 278
Arachne 91–93, 95, 100, 102, 113, 114
Archetype 12, 17, 19, 23, 29, 30, 32, 45–48, 61, 73, 76, 82, 89, 90, 96, 97, 112, 113, 116, 157, 186, 191, 206, 209, 231, 241, 248, 249, 256, 267, 274, 275
Ardat-Yakshi 186–188, 190, 191, 196, 197, 263
Asari 184–188, 193, 285

B

Baba Yaga 32, 221, 226, 241, 256, 265, 267, 269, 292, 293
Bait-and-switch 45, 77, 91, 102, 116, 158, 211
Baldur's Gate 32, 109, 219, 221–223, 225, 281, 282
Banshee 25, 31, 51, 150, 168, 188–196, 198, 215, 281, 298

Beauvoir, Simone de 18, 19, 26, 267
Bestial 115, 134, 171, 179, 214
Bestiary 48, 49, 51, 52, 54, 57, 58, 61–66, 68, 70–72, 89, 109, 217, 222, 224, 230, 234–236, 250, 255, 256, 258, 260
Binding of Isaac, The 32, 293, 294
BioWare 29, 31, 58, 60, 61, 96, 124, 162, 167, 168, 170, 177, 183, 186–190, 192, 193, 196, 264–266, 284
Birth 2, 26, 30, 31, 97, 100, 107, 123, 126–133, 135–138, 141–143, 145, 146, 148–150, 160, 169, 172, 180, 182, 196, 198, 210, 214, 247
Bitch 72, 82, 83, 98, 105, 108, 109, 253, 254, 256, 282, 286
Black widow 45, 48, 83, 91, 93–95, 108, 112, 186–188, 231
Bloodborne 31, 125, 130, 147, 150, 151, 235
Body horror 31, 73, 75, 128, 129, 132, 135, 157, 162, 167, 168, 172, 188, 192, 193, 195, 197, 293
Braidotti, Rosi 1–3, 23, 81, 116, 126, 146
Brood 128, 174, 253
Brood, The 128, 130, 139, 151, 158, 169, 192, 194, 197
Broodmother 29, 31, 168–180, 182, 195–198, 207, 215, 254, 268, 276, 281, 282, 284, 286–288, 297
Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons 30, 94
Bruxa 68, 69, 83, 150, 211, 236, 264

C

Cannibalism 20, 93, 139, 169, 178
Cannibalistic 105, 169, 178
Caputi, Jane 17, 19, 23, 82, 98, 105, 108–110, 115, 117, 126, 134, 241, 242, 247–249, 254, 269, 270, 289
Carroll, Noël 20, 22, 27, 89, 147
Castlevania series 30, 91
Castrating 82, 97, 98, 141
Castration 21, 97, 179, 235
Castrator 83, 98, 99
Chaos Witch Quelaag 100–102
Child 1, 4, 67, 68, 94, 95, 106, 107, 111, 127, 130, 131, 134, 139, 142–144, 146, 148, 151–154, 159, 160, 169, 176, 179–182, 186, 191, 206,

208–210, 215, 218, 219, 224, 226, 236, 241, 242, 253, 256, 258, 265, 286, 288, 291, 294
Cleopatra 77–80, 182
Clotho 249–252, 254, 267
Cohen, Jeffery Jerome 3, 23
Corpse 51, 66, 77, 78, 94, 138–140, 150, 151, 157, 158, 189, 190, 221, 226, 232–234, 236, 259, 294
Creed, Barbara 9, 17, 19, 21, 26, 47, 65, 70, 77, 89, 97, 99, 101, 107, 112, 124–126, 128, 130, 134, 136, 137, 139, 141, 146, 161, 167, 169, 170, 221, 231, 247
Crone 25, 28, 29, 31, 32, 96, 191, 199, 206, 207, 209, 211, 213, 214, 218–221, 230, 232, 237, 241, 242, 248, 249, 255–269, 276, 279, 281, 292, 297, 298
Cronenberg, David 31, 128, 168, 188, 192, 194, 195, 197
Cyborg 5, 168, 183–185, 188–190, 192–195
Cydaea 76, 96, 106, 111, 114

D

Dante's Inferno 30, 75, 76, 79, 83, 182
Dark Souls 30, 100–102
Darkspawn 168, 169, 171, 172, 174, 176, 179, 180, 282, 284
Daughter 80, 96, 106, 107, 130, 134, 137–143, 151–154, 158–160, 186, 187, 191, 209, 210, 217, 224–226, 228, 229, 242, 249, 257, 258, 264, 265, 281, 282
Daughter-figure 191, 209, 210, 265
Deception 47, 60, 68, 208, 213, 226, 236, 238, 258, 264
Deceptive 45, 48, 67, 81, 92, 103, 113, 209, 211, 213, 218, 223, 225, 242, 263, 265, 273, 276
Dehumanization 58
Dehumanize 52, 57, 58, 160
Demon 5, 26, 47, 52, 54, 56–61, 72, 75, 76, 83, 96, 103, 106, 110, 116, 186, 191, 220, 264
Demonization 58, 79, 273
Demonize 1, 52, 280
Diablo III 30, 75, 76, 96

Disability 2, 3, 6, 11, 13, 23, 32, 208, 213–215
Disabled 178, 215, 219, 232, 233, 273, 295
Disgust 12, 20, 21, 31, 32, 66, 73, 78, 95, 144, 173, 179, 181, 198, 206, 207, 215, 218, 220, 232, 233, 237–239, 261, 262, 276–279, 291, 296, 298
Disney 95, 137, 208, 209, 248, 253, 254, 265
Doane, Mary Ann 9, 48, 65, 89, 90, 112, 187, 194
Doom 3 46, 96, 182
Dragon Age series 29, 32, 58, 171, 174, 176, 184, 188, 197, 264, 266
Drow 103–109, 216, 281
Dungeons & Dragons, D&D 29, 30, 32, 48–55, 57, 60, 95, 103, 104, 106, 107, 109, 110, 113, 114, 207, 211, 212, 214, 216–221, 223, 226, 227, 229, 230, 232, 234, 236, 268

E

Elise 111–114, 281
Empowered 71, 110, 136, 143, 183, 286, 288, 289
Empowering 32, 72, 98, 108, 117, 152, 194, 206, 229, 242, 266, 269, 276, 277, 280, 288, 289, 298
Empowerment 67, 105, 109, 143, 178, 268, 276, 279, 286–288
Euryale 32, 252–254, 267, 280
Evil 23, 26, 46–52, 57–59, 65, 66, 82, 83, 94, 101, 103–105, 107–110, 114, 116, 117, 124, 128, 137, 138, 147, 158, 169, 175, 180–182, 186, 187, 191, 206–209, 211, 218–226, 229, 230, 241, 242, 255–260, 262, 265, 266, 276, 281, 282, 284, 292
Evil Within 2, The 31, 130, 152, 153, 155, 156, 158, 159

F

Fairy tale 1, 3, 4, 12, 24, 48, 80, 94, 191, 209, 210, 226, 236, 241, 242, 256, 265, 289, 290, 296
Fantasy 3, 5, 9, 11, 12, 28, 31, 48, 50, 51, 55, 58, 62, 64, 66, 71, 75, 82, 99, 103, 106, 114, 129, 140, 158, 159, 161, 162, 167, 170, 172, 188, 206, 227, 231, 277, 286, 289, 290, 296, 297
Fat 33, 176–178, 215, 219, 225, 233, 250–254, 258, 259, 267, 273, 275, 276, 294, 295

Fatphobia 251, 253
Fecund 137, 196, 197
Fecundity 108, 126, 128, 129, 134, 168, 171, 196–198, 267, 275
Femme fatale 45, 46, 48, 59, 65, 71, 76, 81, 89–93, 96–98, 105, 108, 112, 113, 138, 139, 186–188, 191, 207, 231, 274, 278, 284, 286–288, 296
Flemeth 32, 264–267, 269
Folklore 12, 17, 24, 25, 32, 47, 49, 80, 97, 224, 241, 255, 292

G

Gender 2, 5–7, 17, 22, 23, 26, 27, 49, 52, 54, 55, 58, 60, 62, 67, 79, 94, 99, 107, 110, 124, 127, 128, 168, 171, 185, 194, 196, 207, 228, 233, 270, 274–276, 280, 289, 291
Goddess 17, 19, 28, 30, 32, 72, 82, 91, 98, 103–110, 113, 115–117, 132, 143, 145, 241, 242, 247–249, 251–255, 257, 258, 262, 264–269, 276, 286, 288, 293, 299
God of War series 30, 73, 74, 113, 249, 252
Gorgon 25, 32, 113, 252, 253, 269, 280
Greek mythology 32, 51, 74, 91, 95, 97, 113, 148, 227, 249, 252, 258
Grotesque 25, 32, 73, 76, 96, 99, 100, 114–116, 124, 132, 138, 139, 144, 151, 169, 175, 178–180, 185, 192, 194, 195, 198, 199, 206, 215, 218, 220, 233, 234, 238, 239, 250, 254, 260, 263, 264, 266, 274, 276, 285, 288, 291, 294, 299
Gygax, Gary 49, 103

H

Hag 10, 25, 29, 31, 32, 47, 50, 51, 62, 68, 82, 145, 186, 191, 195, 199, 206–227, 229, 230, 232, 234–242, 248, 251, 255, 260, 261, 263, 265–269, 276, 281, 292, 297
Hagraven 32, 218, 227–234, 237, 240, 241, 261, 263, 268, 269
Haraway, Donna 3, 115, 193
Harrington, Erin 19, 98, 126, 133, 134, 153, 161, 191, 196, 209, 219, 238, 247, 267, 269
Horror 3, 5, 11, 12, 19, 20, 22, 30, 31, 46, 70, 73, 74, 76, 77, 81, 89, 97–99, 101, 106, 124–126, 128, 130, 133–138, 140–142, 145–147, 151,

153, 154, 160, 161, 168–170, 172–175, 178, 181, 183, 188, 189, 192–196, 206, 207, 210, 213, 215, 231, 239, 247, 260, 264, 267, 268, 279, 286, 291, 296–298
House of the Dead: Overkill 31, 130, 143, 146, 147, 176
Hybrid 10, 20, 29, 30, 51, 55, 57, 64, 66, 70, 71, 78, 81, 83, 89–91, 94–96, 99, 100, 103, 104, 111–116, 132, 137, 138, 157, 169, 176, 182, 185, 186, 189, 192, 194, 195, 227, 231, 253, 254, 281, 282, 285, 286, 288, 291, 295
Hybridity 20, 27, 30, 52, 70, 71, 74, 78, 89, 90, 95, 103, 113, 115–117, 168, 169, 183, 185, 188, 189, 192, 194

I

Identification 4, 7, 23, 50, 111, 139, 152, 176, 178, 198, 266, 269, 270, 279, 288
Identity 5, 7, 11–14, 17, 20, 21, 23, 24, 33, 52, 114, 115, 124, 125, 128, 146, 159, 161, 216, 218, 283, 285, 295, 296
Impregnate 131, 135, 137, 141, 142, 148
Impregnation 130, 140, 143, 147, 148, 160
Indigenous 50, 117, 171, 216, 224, 242, 290
Infection 31, 129–131, 133, 137, 140, 143, 147, 160, 175, 183, 185, 188, 189, 192, 193, 195, 197

J

Japan 124, 125, 161
Japanese 11, 25, 26, 30, 31, 95, 116, 124, 125, 130, 135, 136, 141, 167, 182

K

Kerrigan, Sarah 32, 112, 282–289
Kin 181, 229
Kinship 30–32, 65, 82, 152, 186, 217, 218, 224, 229, 269, 273
Kristeva, Julia 19–21, 52, 78, 80, 89, 115, 124, 126, 136, 146, 169, 170, 182, 196, 197, 215, 235, 279

L

League of Legends 111

Legend 4, 5, 17, 25, 47, 49, 64, 97, 115, 212, 218, 224, 237, 241, 264, 289, 290
Lesbian 65, 67, 112, 187, 188, 231
Lolth 103–111, 114–117, 216, 248, 281, 282, 286
Ludic 4, 5, 11, 17, 48, 49, 55, 58, 61, 103, 108–110, 125, 130, 191, 194, 199, 207, 276

M

Madness 31, 62, 129, 176, 215, 221, 257
Maiden 28–31, 46, 64, 76, 91, 96, 106, 112, 114, 116, 117, 191, 206, 209, 211, 236, 241, 249, 268, 269
Marginalization 269
Marginalized 8, 9, 12, 13, 33, 170, 224, 228, 277, 278, 290, 298, 299
Masculine 18, 20, 21, 26, 59, 69, 70, 82, 90, 114, 115, 136, 158, 182
Masculinity 8, 27, 65, 77, 116, 140, 195
Mass Effect series 188, 193–195, 266
Maternal 20, 21, 23, 28, 29, 31, 33, 77, 81, 96, 105, 106, 111, 114, 117, 123–126, 128, 134–138, 141, 142, 146, 150, 151, 153, 154, 158, 160–162, 167, 168, 171, 173, 176, 181, 182, 186, 195–197, 199, 206, 268, 287, 288, 294, 295
Maternity 30, 31, 114, 126, 130, 137, 153, 161, 162, 167, 209, 211, 268, 284
Medusa 21, 79, 80, 113, 213, 252, 253, 280, 298
Menstruating 20, 26
Menstruation 20, 196, 210, 279
Misogynistic 5, 6, 8, 9, 12, 14, 15, 21, 23, 25, 31, 46, 51, 55, 57, 62, 71, 76, 79, 92, 94, 95, 101, 102, 108–110, 114, 115, 125, 126, 136, 139, 168, 182, 183, 193–196, 198, 206, 218, 229, 241, 254, 262, 268, 269, 275, 286, 289, 293, 298
Misogyny 8, 9, 17, 25, 28, 51, 52, 61, 68, 73, 75, 77, 81, 83, 100, 108, 109, 115, 116, 124, 128, 147, 173, 182, 192, 193, 195, 197, 206, 218, 221, 253, 274, 275, 280, 289, 294, 296, 298
Monster 1–5, 9–12, 15–19, 22–32, 45–51, 54, 55, 57, 58, 61–68, 70–83, 89–92, 94–100, 102, 103, 105, 107, 109, 110, 112–117, 123–126, 128–132, 136, 137, 139–145, 147, 149, 152, 154–160, 162, 167–169, 171,

173–178, 181–183, 186, 188, 189, 192–199, 207, 211, 213–216, 218, 219, 223–225, 227, 228, 230–234, 236, 239–242, 247, 248, 250, 252–255, 260–262, 265, 267–269, 274–278, 280, 283, 284, 288–294, 297
Monster Manual 48–54, 61, 104, 208, 210, 211, 213, 217, 218
Monstrous 1–5, 9–13, 15, 17, 19–23, 25–27, 29–33, 45–49, 52, 57, 62, 65, 67, 68, 70, 72–74, 76–83, 89–95, 97–103, 106–114, 116, 117, 123–126, 128–131, 135–143, 145–153, 156, 158–162, 167–171, 178–183, 185, 187–199, 206, 207, 209–211, 213, 215, 216, 218–221, 224, 226–228, 231–233, 237, 240–242, 248–251, 255, 258, 259, 261, 262, 264–268, 270, 273–282, 284–299
Monstrous-feminine 17, 19, 21, 47, 65, 68, 70, 83, 89, 91, 94, 97, 99, 107, 113, 117, 124, 125, 130, 136, 137, 141, 168, 171, 195–197, 199, 218, 221, 274, 279, 280, 282, 285–288, 290, 299
Mother, The 28–30, 47, 96, 106, 125, 126, 128–131, 144–146, 151–153, 158, 161, 162, 174, 176, 177, 179–182, 186, 191, 198, 199, 206, 209, 211, 247, 253, 264, 268, 269, 276, 283, 284, 294, 298
Mother-figure 80, 134, 182, 227, 266
Motherhood 11, 31, 126, 128, 134, 142, 151, 153, 161, 162, 191, 209, 210, 265
Mothers 19, 23, 29, 31, 68, 77, 80, 94, 96–98, 105–107, 113, 114, 116, 117, 126–128, 130, 133–147, 149, 151–153, 156, 159–162, 169–172, 174, 180, 182, 186, 187, 190, 191, 194, 197–199, 206, 210, 211, 217, 218, 224, 226–229, 235, 236, 241, 247, 249, 257, 258, 265–268, 278, 281, 284, 286, 294
Mutant 133, 135, 143, 145, 189, 191, 192, 238, 281
Mutation 11, 20, 31, 129, 131–133, 135–137, 142, 147, 160, 167, 176, 183, 186, 188, 189, 192–195, 197, 283
Myth 4, 5, 12, 17, 23, 25, 49, 74, 79, 91, 97, 98, 115, 146, 148, 224, 241, 242, 248, 249, 257, 258, 280, 289, 290, 298
Mythology 2, 3, 5, 9, 11, 12, 17, 19, 24, 25, 28, 30, 47, 49, 79, 80, 95, 97–99, 103, 115, 117, 124, 126, 146, 148, 186, 191, 196, 247, 255, 273, 289, 290, 296

O

Offspring 96, 111, 114, 117, 124, 126, 128–130, 133, 136, 137, 142, 146, 148, 150, 151, 153, 160–162, 170, 180–182, 185, 190, 197, 224, 276, 284, 286, 297
Orc 50, 57, 216, 227, 228, 281, 292
Other 2, 3, 5, 8–12, 16–22, 24–27, 29, 32, 45, 47–52, 54, 57, 59, 62, 67, 68, 72, 74, 75, 78, 79, 81, 90, 91, 98, 100, 102, 106, 107, 110–112, 115–117, 127, 132, 135–139, 142, 148, 149, 153, 154, 159, 160, 162, 168–171, 175, 176, 179–181, 185, 188–190, 192, 193, 195, 199, 206–208, 213, 217–220, 223, 224, 229–231, 235, 248, 252, 253, 256, 259, 261, 265, 273, 274, 276, 278, 284–286, 288–293, 297
Otherness 20, 193, 278, 279, 285, 290, 291
Overwatch 112

P

Parasite Eve 31, 130–135, 141
Paratext 66
Parthenogenesis 111, 128, 185
Parthenogenetic 31, 107, 128, 129, 139, 160, 168, 210, 247
Patriarchy 23, 106, 142, 153, 160, 229, 242, 248, 268, 269, 280, 289
Phallic 65, 67, 69, 70, 76–78, 131, 134, 137, 141, 144, 160, 169, 179, 182, 235, 254, 294
Planescape: Torment 32, 219, 220
Posthuman 65, 82, 132, 184, 185, 193
Pregnancy 20, 30, 31, 93, 100, 126–131, 133, 140, 142, 149, 151, 160–162, 167, 183, 192, 197, 198, 232, 279, 281
Pregnant 26, 29, 31, 46, 96, 123–126, 128, 129, 132, 133, 136, 142, 145, 149–151, 158, 160–162, 167, 168, 172, 175, 182, 186, 188, 190–193, 195–199, 206, 224, 225, 275, 276, 297, 298
Primal 69, 70, 98, 108, 109, 115, 134, 146, 153, 171, 214, 255, 284, 287, 288
Protagonist 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 48, 66, 70–72, 91, 99, 103, 110, 126, 128, 129, 131, 133–136, 138, 141, 147, 152, 153, 162, 183, 252, 267, 274, 278, 286, 298
Psychoanalysis 17, 20–23, 124, 146, 147

Q

Queen 30, 47, 75, 77–79, 96, 103, 105, 107–111, 113, 115–117, 134, 135, 137, 142, 146, 149, 150, 209, 283, 284, 286–288, 299
Queen Algenie 96, 100, 106, 111, 113, 114, 117, 143
Queer 8, 14, 30, 52, 65, 72, 82, 157, 158, 187, 191, 192, 195, 196, 210, 211, 223, 226, 229, 231–233, 242, 273, 291, 295, 298
Queerness 3, 6, 17, 30, 32, 158, 187, 291

R

Race 2, 5, 11, 14, 50, 55, 57, 75, 103, 107, 108, 115, 116, 129, 131, 168, 169, 171, 180, 183, 188, 189, 214–218, 221, 228, 252, 281, 282, 286
Racialized 30, 50, 106, 108, 110, 115, 116, 192, 224, 285
Racism 8, 51, 105, 108–110, 115, 116, 298
Reproduction 12, 26, 29, 31, 80, 101, 107, 115, 117, 123–125, 128–130, 138–140, 142, 143, 148, 168, 179, 186, 188, 190, 194–198, 210, 217, 218, 226, 274, 299
Resident Evil series 23, 130, 137, 140
Role-playing games (RPGs) 4, 9, 11, 31, 51, 55, 90, 103, 114, 167, 170, 173, 175, 296, 297
Russo, Mary 100, 115, 195, 238, 239, 276

S

Santos, Cristina 19, 126, 219, 232
Science fiction 5, 11, 12, 31, 99, 103, 162, 167, 183–185, 188, 189, 193, 194, 274, 282, 285, 286, 290, 296, 297
Seduction 47, 55, 94, 96, 111, 209, 212, 226
Seductive 29, 45, 46, 48, 51, 57, 61, 67, 80, 83, 94, 95, 98, 103, 109, 111, 112, 195, 211, 219, 223, 227, 279
Sex 25–27, 47, 52, 57, 59, 62, 63, 65, 67, 71, 73, 75, 77, 81, 82, 98, 144, 183, 184, 186, 218, 219, 233, 262
Sexuality 12, 17, 21, 26, 29–31, 47–49, 55, 58, 60, 65, 75, 79, 81, 83, 90, 98, 114, 179, 185, 191, 192, 218, 232, 234, 240, 248, 261, 266, 274, 275, 279, 281, 299
Sexualization 7, 30, 71, 73, 117, 264, 266

Sexualized 6, 9, 29, 30, 52, 62, 66, 67, 70–73, 75, 78, 79, 81, 82, 90, 94, 96, 103–106, 109–111, 113, 125, 134, 156, 183–185, 218, 236, 253, 268, 275, 281, 296, 298
Shelob 90, 114
Shriek 66, 68, 69, 74, 156, 176, 179, 181
Silent Hill series 23, 130
Siren 10, 19, 25, 29–31, 45, 48, 51, 58, 63–70, 72, 74, 75, 81, 83, 89, 90, 99, 113, 129, 150, 181, 191, 206, 219, 227, 229, 233, 236, 238, 252, 264, 276, 281, 297, 298
Skyrim 227–231, 268
Sobchack, Vivian 205, 207, 213, 233
Sorceress 10, 19, 66, 208, 218, 263, 265, 268
Spider 30, 50, 51, 83, 90–97, 99–114, 117, 125, 132, 154, 155, 157, 169, 176, 253
Spiderlings 92, 96, 97, 100, 111, 155, 160
Spider woman 30, 76, 81, 83, 90–93, 95, 96, 99, 100, 103, 104, 106, 107, 109–114, 116, 117, 129, 143, 157, 206, 211, 253, 281
StarCraft series 32
Stereotype 9, 22, 57, 60, 72, 82, 110, 111, 127, 187, 194, 234, 260, 275
Stereotypical 6, 8, 187
Subversion 291, 293
Subversive 195, 207, 276, 288
Succubi 10, 45–47, 50, 55, 57, 59, 60, 62–64, 68, 70, 75, 76, 83, 89, 95, 96, 218, 233, 268, 297
Succubus 16, 25, 29–31, 45–48, 51–58, 60, 62, 63, 67, 68, 71–76, 81–83, 90, 91, 111, 116, 129, 130, 139, 186, 187, 191, 196, 206, 211, 219, 220, 231, 238, 281, 292, 298

T

Techno-zombie 168, 188, 189, 191–193
Temptress 45–47, 76, 77, 80, 83, 110, 191
Teratology 2, 3, 116, 214
Tolkien, J.R.R. 90, 114
Transformation 20, 27, 72, 75, 99, 108, 115, 129, 130, 135, 137, 142, 148, 160, 161, 168, 169, 171, 172, 175, 189, 194, 240, 263, 285

Transgression 3, 31, 60, 89, 98, 130, 178, 212, 240, 277, 289
Transgressive 1, 12, 23, 29, 32, 33, 46, 70, 79, 80, 82, 98, 110, 124, 128, 130, 168, 183, 194, 196, 198, 199, 210, 218–220, 227–230, 233, 239, 242, 248, 252, 254, 268, 269, 275, 279, 281, 297, 299
Trope 11, 16–18, 21, 22, 25, 27, 31, 51, 54, 55, 57, 58, 67, 72, 73, 76, 79, 89, 91, 95, 97–99, 107, 111, 112, 116, 124, 125, 128, 132, 133, 141, 143, 145, 147, 158, 162, 176, 178, 182–185, 187, 192, 195, 197, 208–210, 221, 228, 231, 266, 273, 278, 282, 286, 291

U

Ugly 116, 206, 208, 209, 211, 218, 220, 221, 233, 256, 258–260, 262, 267, 276
Undertale 32, 291, 293, 294
Ursula 95, 209, 253, 254
Ussher, Jane 80, 126, 171, 196–198, 268

V

Vagary, The 46, 96, 111, 114, 182
Vagina dentata 21, 74, 97–99, 141, 179, 181, 235, 281, 298
Vampire 10, 19, 29, 48, 51, 62, 63, 67, 68, 71, 81, 82, 95, 110, 112, 138, 139, 160, 186, 187, 191, 206, 210, 211, 219, 231, 292, 297
Virgin 19, 60, 61, 79, 80, 105, 148, 191, 206, 219
Vossen, Emma 14, 26, 83, 99, 114, 127, 296

W

Wicked 50, 209, 265, 268, 298
Widowmaker 112, 113, 281
Witch 19, 25, 32, 66, 71, 83, 191, 206, 209, 210, 219, 221, 224, 226, 227, 229, 230, 232, 235, 236, 241, 248, 255, 256, 258–260, 264–269, 292, 293, 298, 299
Witcher, The series 30, 62, 67, 113, 230
World of Warcraft 29, 55, 56, 59

X

Xenomorph 133–135, 140, 146

Y

Yharnam 125, 147, 149, 150
Young 28, 46–48, 67, 72, 74, 89, 94, 105, 112, 125, 127, 134–136, 143–145, 152, 187, 206, 210, 220, 224–227, 229–231, 237, 239–241, 249, 256, 258, 260, 261, 264, 267, 268, 292
Young, H. 11, 50, 57, 106, 109, 216

Z

Zombie 5, 11, 78, 154, 188, 189, 192–194, 197