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THE MONSTER ISSUE

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Dear Reader,

Welcome to October, Unwinnable's favorite time of year! This time around I've got a theme for you . . . MONSTERS!

Now, we bashed our heads together and folks took this in all sorts of directions.

This month's cover feature (cover by 1000 Dead Draculas) is Orrin Grey talking about a most beloved kind of monster and monster maker. Our other feature this month is Hyacinth Nil on the very specific kind of monster that is a place. Our sponsored feature is Caroline Delbert writing about *The Gap*.

A new quirk of how we'll be handling Theme issues is opening them up to *all* of Team Unwinnable so this is a jam-packed issue bursting to the seams. Honestly, the table of contents couldn't handle more! Please welcome Ruth Cassidy and Caroline Delbert putting in guest appearances in the features section! Oh, also, hey look, it me, on what it means to be a monster!

And please welcome Jay Castello to Team Unwinnable! Jay has a specific eye on place too and I think you'll find it pretty special in this issue.

As for our regular columnists allow me to present . . . Oluwatayo Adewole talks zombies. Yussef Cole encounters a polygonal zombie. Amanda Hudgins writes about an embedded horror. Emma Kostopolus ruminates on pursuit. Matt Marrone's family dreams of pocket-sized pals. Emily Price ventures to the edge of the merchant guild's grasp. Justin Reeve points out bastardized architecture. Rob Rich finds a monster within! Levi Rubeck hangs with something far longer than the rest of us would have. Phillip Russell raises hell. Ben Sailer spends a night in the woods. Phoenix Simms on the societally constructed monstrousness of half. Noah Springer with some monstrous beats. And Autumn Wright goes for the head.

And lastly, allow me to welcome you to our annual Subscription Drive! More details HERE, but please be kind, consider upgrading to our annual subscription, buying the gift of Unwinnable for a friend, enemy, or parent and help us carry this every growing cast of rogues into the next year **strong**.

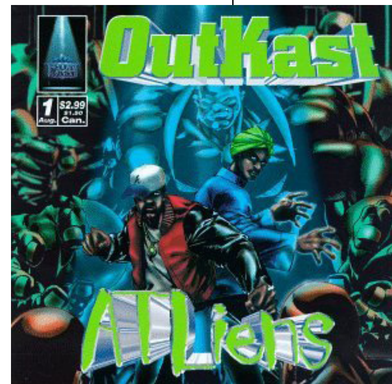
Stay safe, wear a mask and remember, we're here because you want us to be. Also, you owe it to yourself and your community to vote on November 8th!

See you all in a few weeks in Exploits!

David Shimomura
Chicago, Illinois
October 13, 2022

Western pop music has a fairly substantial history of embedding extra-terrestrial imagery going back at least to David Bowie beckoning Ziggy Stardust down from the skies to bless us all with his heavenly, cocaine-fueled riffs. Around the same time, George Clinton and the Funkadelic were downloading the *Mothership Connection*, infusing the same alien-theme with a heavy dose of funk and, well, cocaine. Later artists like the Flaming Lips and Janelle Monae would also come to use extraterrestrial imagery, but it seems to really have taken off within hip hop. Outkast dropped *ATLiens* in 1996, explicitly placing themselves on the outside of east coast/west coast hip hop dynamic; Del tha Funkee Homosapien and Dan the Automator crafted a full scale sci-fi classic as Deltron 3030; The Beastie Boys blasted into outer space with what may have been their biggest hit, "Intergalactic Planetary;" Kid Cudi and Lil Wayne have regularly referred to themselves as martians.

In a parallel lane, monsters have also made fairly regular occurrences in pop music over the years in everything from Warren Zevon to Michael Jackson to Alice in Chains. Monsters have of course made their way into the hip hop sphere too, often in the horrorcore space, with folks like Tech N9ne, Hopsin and Tyler, the creator. But monsters have also made their way in the mainstream in songs by Meek Mill, Eminem and maybe most notably in Nicki Minaj's breakout verse where the new MC swept the floor with two veterans.

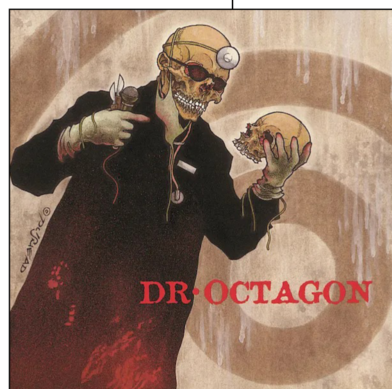


Clearly, these two themes – aliens and monsters –

have roots in the history of pop music, but I don't know of any genres other than hip hop in which the two are combined so effectively, specifically in the work of two of the GOATs: Kool Keith and MF DOOM. Both of these MCs spent years building up mythologies for a wide cast of characters that cross multiple albums, and they end up regularly featuring (for lack of a better term) space monsters. However, I think they both use these figures for slightly different purposes.

King Geedorah was a divergence from Daniel Dumile's previous characters Zev Love X and MF DOOM, in the form of a monster from outer space. DOOM developed the character as part of the underground group Monster Island Czars (MIC) that included MF Grimm, Jet Jaguar and X-Ray. Much like how members of the Wu-Tang Clan incorporated elements of Marvel comics into their characters, each member of MIC was meant to have a new identity from the Godzilla lore that would help generate a whole world to rap in, and DOOM chose King Ghidora, the three-headed dragon. According to Wikipedia, the group only had one full length collaborative album, 2003's *Escape from Monster Island*, but there are 39 solo albums from the members, including King Geedorah's *Take Me To Your Leader*. Even though many of the MIC crew make appearances on the LP, the metal hands of DOOM are evident throughout the production of the album.

With this new foe in the mix, Dumile's supervillain MF DOOM was no longer the ultimate evil in his universe. This is a common trope for comics, where the villain in one storyline can join the heroes in the next when a greater enemy arises. In many ways, Gheedorah serves to make DOOM seem less terrible, no longer the greatest threat in the universe. There is now an extraterrestrial threat to the survival of the world, so DOOM suddenly seems a bit more sympathetic, even cool. Well, to be honest, DOOM was always pretty cool, but now we could empathize with him a bit more.



In a similar way, Kool Keith's creation Dr. Dooom (no relation) serves to quash the threat of Dr. Octagon, but this storyline gets a bit more complicated. After leaving his breakout group, Ultramagnetic MCs, Keith dropped his first solo album, *Dr. Octagonecologist* in 1996, introducing Dr. Octagon, a murderous alien from Jupiter who sometimes tortures, sometimes seduces his patients. Ultimately, Doc Oc is a vehicle for Kool Keith to discuss

the horrors of bureaucracy and establishmentarianism. It only makes sense then that Dr. Dooom, a serial killer of sorts invented by Keith, would come along and kill Dr. Octagon in 2008 in response to a record label dispute when they released the sequel to his debut with little involvement in the production from Kool Keith himself.

Dr. Dooom (and Kool Keith in general) represents an approach to the monstrous echoed by King Geedorah and MF DOOM, but in a more specifically blunt excoriation of his label. In fact, excoriation may be too kind of a word because Dooom drowned Dr. Octagon, stabbed him 17 times, electrocuted him by electric razors and beat him to death with rocks. Octagon is deceased, and Keith made sure that we knew why, telling us the details of how the label used and abused the creation. Notably, Dr. Dooom isn't physically a monster at all, just a regular old serial killer; he isn't from outer space, but from our home planet. He's a monster we all can recognize with ease.

Dooom functions much like some of the more traditional scary characters that appear in hip hop. These serial killer type folks appear in the horrorcore space for sure, like how Earl Sweatshirt's debut mixtape features the incredibly fucked-up thoughts of a teenage serial killer or RZA's adventure into the genre with the Gravediggaz. But we also have more mainstream rappers working with the themes of serial killers, like Dr. Dre with "Murder Inc.," the "Body Parts" trilogy by Three 6 Mafia, or Method Man and Redman on "Cereal Killer," even though that one is pretty much for jokes. These hyper-violent songs and characters often just feel like the natural extension of the realistic-violent content of gangsta rap and more mainstream trap music where slinging guns and murdering your rivals is a sport, fun even.

Essentially, it seems that Keith and DOOM are following the clear line between the monstrous acts of street violence described by rappers like Ice-T, Chief Keef or ScHoolboy Q to create scary aliens who thrive on hyper-stylized, cartoonish violence. But through these metaphors, they speak to the same themes that pervade hip hop at large – the representation of Black Americans as the monstrous other. Through the figures of Geedorah, Octagon and Dooom, the two MCs both embellish this trope through exaggeration and hyperbole and work to dismantle it, by evoking sympathy for the super villain and attacking the true monsters who deformed their identity – the music industry and popular culture.

On Monsters and Ourselves

As a kid, I used to sneak around in the horror movie section of my local Hollywood Video while my Dad looked for British period piece dramas. I was entranced by the horror film's cover art. The more grotesque or monstrous, the more likely I was to pick it up. It was through this process that I found out about movies like *A Nightmare on Elm Street, Halloween, Friday the 13th* and *Hellraiser.*

What set *Hellraiser* apart from the rest was that Pinhead didn't exactly scare me, if anything, I found his design pretty cool. On the VHS for the first film, the tagline read, "Demon to some. Angel to others." The duality it presented intrigued me. I wanted to know what the golden box in his hands was and why he had pins nailed all over his head. His design was unsettling, but also a bit alluring too. That's always been the ethos of the *Hellraiser* franchise, it's most comfortable in pushing the viewers to cover their eyes while also asking them to take a peek at whatever gnarly, laceration is taking place on the screen.

It wouldn't be until my early 20s that I finally sat down with friends and watched *Hellraiser.* I was floored by it. The gore throughout the film is spine-tingling, and Pinhead and his fellow Cenobites are incredibly unique in their design. But the two things that stuck with me the most was how little the Cenobites are featured in the movie, and that Pinhead really isn't a villain, at least not in the typical horror film sense. While Pinhead's horror genre compatriots were terrorizing teens for simply living, he and the Cenobites

existed in a more liminal space – monsters to some, saviors to others. While harrowing in their aesthetic, there was a somber aura to them, one that made me feel a bit bad for them compared to the people the terrorized.

In the *Hellraiser* mythology, just like Clive Barker's other horror icon *Candyman*, the Cenobites must be willingly summoned. They are extra-dimensional beings who cannot discern pain and pleasure, they simply respond when beckoned by human desire. They reside in Hell and are brought to Earth through people solving a puzzle box contraption known as the "Lament Configuration," an alluring golden device that would probably tempt anyone that came across it.

What becomes clear by the end of the first film is that humans and their untamed desires are the true monsters. The Cenobites are simply the messengers that deliver what users of the Lament Configuration want – which usually entails sadomasochistic ends.

In a sense, the Cenobites become a reflection of our interior lives, a darker voice we tend to bury deep inside. This becomes clearer in the second foray in the franchise, *Hellbound: Hellraiser II*, which follows the protagonist of the first film, Kirsty Cotton, dealing with the traumatic aftermath of the death of her father and surviving an encounter with the Cenobites.

Much in the same vein as the first film, for the majority of the first half of *Hellbound* the cenobites are largely absent. Instead, the focus is on Kirsty and her struggles to stop the true villain of the film, Dr. Philip Channard, who co-founded a famed mental institute where he secretly uses patients as guinea pigs in his research of the Lament Configuration. The draw of *Hellbound* for fans of the franchise is that it shows the viewer what Hell looks like in this universe – a maze-like otherworld that morphs and changes based on whoever has entered it.

I was mostly interested in watching *Hellbound* as an experiment before Hulu's *Hellraiser* reboot dropped. The trailer for the reboot seemed to veer into Cenobites as slashers, which to me is the antithesis of the ethos of the characters.

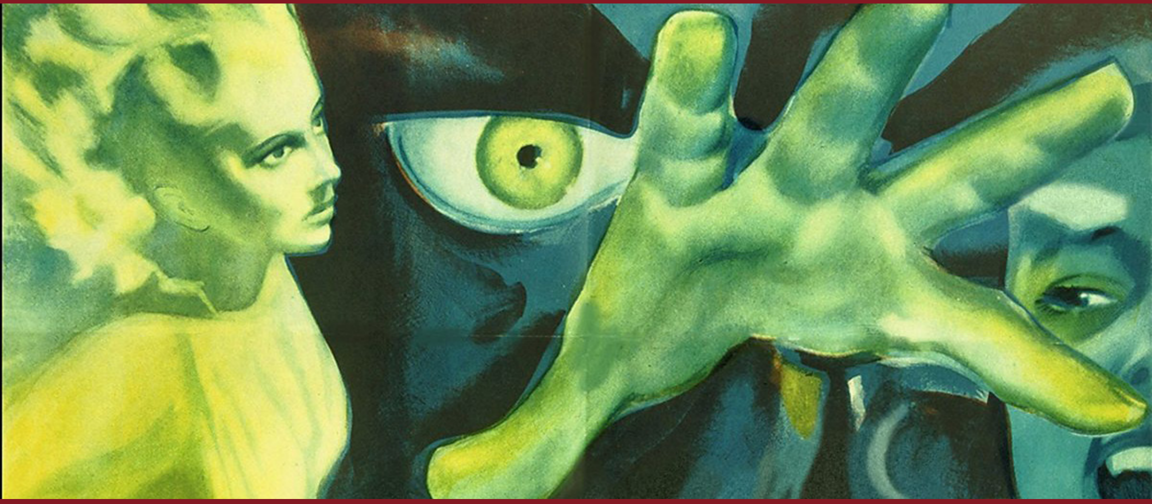
Something that is lost in later entries in the franchise is the indifferent positionality that the Cenobites embody within the world. Instead, the sequels transformed them into your typical horror film villains that come back each film, feverishly trying to top their previous cinematic murderous rampages with new kill set-ups.

I was pleasantly surprised to find that *Hellbound* doesn't take this approach, but instead feels like a true continuation of the first film. Instead of a horror film in the typical sense, *Hellbound* turns more into an adventure film as Kirsty attempts to stop Dr. Channard. The typical killing spree you expect throughout these monster-driven horror films happens, but it is more of an afterthought to the character dramas unfolding in the forefront. If anything, the Cenobites take on a role of perplexed bystanders to the human triflings unfolding on their home turf. In *Hellbound*, Pinhead and his "Gash" (essentially his gang of monastic followers) don't kill anyone, in fact, *they* are killed by Dr. Channard after he is transformed into a Cenobite himself.

Hellbound forces us to continue deconstructing what exactly monsters are and how monstrosity largely hinges on perspective. Hell in the *Hellraiser* universe reflects back to others what they struggle with the most. It's a fluid space that changes as our own sense of self does. *Hellbound* also attempts to further humanize the Cenobites by showing the viewer that they too once were human. It tells us that the Cenobites aren't bloodthirsty demons looking to kill any chance they've got, instead, they are beings that force those that summon them to face their inner yearnings.

I'm stuck on the feeling that this franchise, especially the first two entries are able to make me feel. After I'd watched *Hellraiser* for the first time, I had to check out the novella that Clive Barker wrote as a proof of concept for the film, *The Hellbound Heart*. Buying a copy of the book felt a bit scandalous, a little dirty even. Carting it around town, into classrooms and over to friends' houses felt a bit like revealing some of my own macabre desires.

The cover of my copy of *The Hellbound Heart* is a skinless man with a deadened stare. Looking deeper you quickly realize that not only is the man skinless, but his face is comprised *of* a naked man sitting cross-legged surrounded by grey beings who are grasping at him in a sensual manner. It's a piece of artwork that equally disturbs and entices you to look further, and to me, that's what the best fictional monsters always are – a dialogue between what we fear and want, transformed into confrontational form.



To create a zombi, a bokor must separate the flesh and the spirit. From then on, the new being is subject to the will of its maker/killer – at least until Baron Samedi intervenes.

I Walked With A Zombie follows a nurse hired to look after a plantation owner's wife, who has been in a not-quite-coma for an extended period of time. As the title suggests, it turns out that the woman has been turned into a zombie.

Tourner's vision of the (fictional) island of Saint Sebastian is a fascinating one. Rich white communities live amongst the descendants of former slaves, many of whom were (presumably) enslaved by the ancestors of those same wealthy white people. And the majority of those Black people we see work on the plantation of the wealthy white Rand/Holland family at the center of the tale.

We are repeatedly reminded of the violence that was required to construct a place like this. Almost every time that the naive lead Betsy Connell (Frances Dee) talks about the beauty of this place, someone reminds her of the violence of the flip side, whether it's from her beloved gloomy Paul Holland (Tom Conway) or the Black people living on this island who are descended from the slaves that built it. We are also reminded of how pathetic these colonizers are. Holland's heightened upper-class Englishness and his brother Wesley Rand's (James Ellison) charismatic cowboy act are both undermined by the petty shittiness of their characters. Instead of grand masters of the new world, they feel like squabbling children desperately holding onto the power of their ancestors.

Back to the zombie itself, I don't think there is a singular signifier you could apply and capture the whole picture. This is not helped by how, alongside Tourner's critiques of these historical violences, he is also very clearly leaning

into the fetishistic fascination with vodou that became particularly sharpened in the wake of the US occupation of Haiti. That is perhaps most clearly embodied in Victor Halperin's *White Zombie*, since both films show a struggle between two white men over a beautiful woman leading to her zombification.

However, what makes this film more interesting than *White Zombie* is that the threat to the revered white femininity comes from within. Sure, the tools of this violence are foreign, but the perpetrator is very much of the white imperial class, and it's a pretty sharp portrayal of the inherent self-destructiveness of this sort of need to conquer and possess. And crucially Tourner does not doubt the vodou in the way that other contemporary works do. While there is no certainty, the best explanation we are offered is that Mrs. Rand leaned into the power of the divine (or at least the magical) to cause the zombification – something Edith Barrett sells in her performance. And how small-minded could you be?

What kind of person does it take to finally connect with power so much greater than yourself and to use it for something so small-minded? How do you see that the world is bigger and more full of mystery than you had ever imagined and yet still your purest impulse continues to be to subjugate? That is the rot at the core of the colonial psyche that this film skewers.

Of course, even with the imperial violence turned inwards, it is still first and foremost aimed at subjugating the Other. At the same time as this film was shot, Haiti was still paying France as punishment for freeing themselves from enslavement. These indemnity payments had to be paid while huge swathes of the Haitian population starved and played no small part in the social and economic turmoil that the island nation experiences to this day.

To create a zombi, you have to kill the victim first.

In Langston Hughes' *Freedom Plow*, he tracks a history of labor and freedom in the US, how the promises of universal freedom that were so evidently false and yet Black Americans still held the will to make them manifest. The plow becomes a metaphor for the enduring power of Black labor. At the same time, Black people across the globe were going to war against the fascism enabled by their colonial masters, and History would reward them by deliberately forgetting their existence. But the steady beat of the plow goes on and on and on like a throbbing heart. As long as the beat goes on, we remain alive and can't be made subject to complete control – there is always the chance that revolutions wait in the wings.

That is where power lies – in the swings of the plow.

Kids used to have this song, how did it go?

> The harshest pathway leads
> To the dragon's lair
> Those who search for treasure
> Do you truly dare?

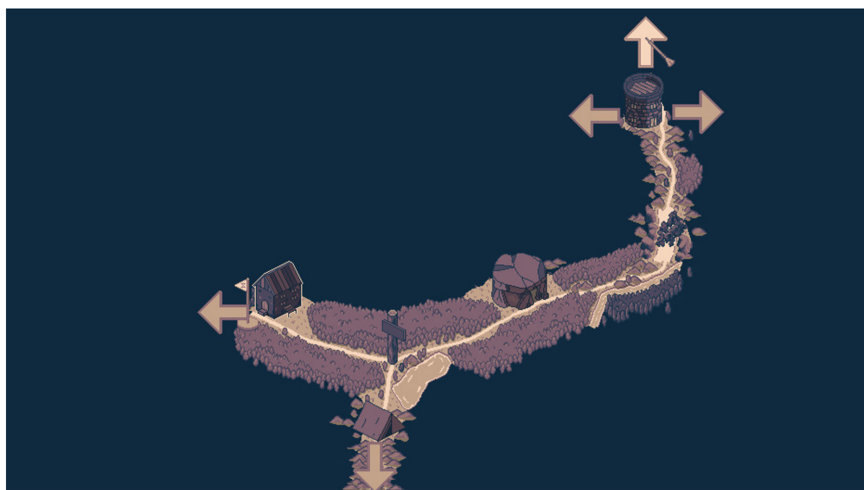
I met a man with no nose on the highest gate outside the largest town in the whole peninsula, a man who was the last barrier to the woods, now hemmed in between a circle of walls perpetually threatening to crumble. I couldn't bribe him with money, which I had, but only with food; in the wilderness, money was no use to him. Trapped between a plague on one side and the forest on the other, he told me about the things that lived behind the gate: apes with fur and human faces, lizard mounts gone feral with long sharp claws. I knew that eventually, I'd have to disregard his warnings and go, bringing human maps to chart a place where the old rules simply didn't apply.

Roadwarden is a text-based game where you play as a new initiate to the title's trade, a hybrid caretaker (think of a witcher) who is responsible for dealing with hostile monsters, running errands and keeping the roads safe enough for travelers. You are also serving the merchant's guild in the city of Hovlavan, assessing the Northern peninsula's potential as a trade route, in the 40 days before autumn comes.

This constriction makes *Roadwarden* feel like fall. It shows the days getting colder and shorter as the seasons change, but it also distills autumn's chill

with its muted color palette and its careful descriptions of natural change. It also feels like a callback to older text-based games like *Genesis*, but with more integrated choice and graphics, and has the sidequest-front focus of *Morrowind*. To me, though, its influences are more novelistic: it feels like a cross between the *Dragonlance* novels and *Name of the Wind*, with a similar amount of food descriptions. It is low-stakes fantasy adventure, distilled.

Your most important role is as a mediator, regulating the interactions of the people living on the peninsula with the preexisting beasts and monsters who prey on them. The peninsula is hostile to human life, but humans have made a home there anyway. This image is sustained by a monumental amount of writing. Returning to the city of Howler's Creek, to give just one example, will reward you with a string of reports on what people in the city are doing: the washerwomen laugh as their clothes dry in the sun, or a woman forgets a joke she's telling halfway through. Without human sprites, voiceover or even dialogue, these asides conjure a living, breathing city that is proud of the walls it's built against the wilderness, and confident that they will never fall. Not every city has this level of detail, but each has their own character, and plenty of interactions that build a sense of what they are.



Parts of *Roadwarden* are almost like magic. There's a repeating prompt where you can ask people about any subject you want or search for anything ("what do you want to know about"/"what do you want to find?") If you've read a fantasy novel, it's easy to guess what the game is hiding from you, but I was amazed at how many responses the game was hiding behind these questions. The innkeeper in the first inn I found, for example, knew Quintus, the man on the gate, and considered him a friend; the guards outside thought he was a madman, though a kind one. You can also ask one of those guards about

monsters (a level of intimacy I never reached) or gamble on an axe-throwing game.

All these little interactions take place in a landscape in which human efforts are perpetually overtaken by nature. There is a gate made out of living thorns, a tree that drinks your blood, and a river with birds that call to you in human screams. True, there are also orchards of fruit trees that bend to meet your hands, and a few friendly strangers who have truly found a home within nature. This is not your purview, though. You're an inspector: every insect and fish and skeleton knows you're not supposed to be there, and will do their best to keep you out.

It would be simplistic, in this issue full of monsters, for me to ask who *Roadwarden* thinks the real monsters here are. But it's also straightforward: the monsters are the monsters. That term doesn't have a particular weight: the game wants you to be afraid of the deep woods, and for going there to feel like a risk even when you're at your strongest. It wants you to feel like you're in a fight against weather, time and your own supplies, let alone the gnashing teeth in the night.

Despite this, my time in the peninsula felt adventurous, not hostile. *Roadwarden* lives in the contrast between inside and outside, but it does so without creating a hierarchy. Playing it often feels comforting in the same way as a hot shower after you've been walking in the rain, like a full meal after a hike. It's about traveling, but it never lets you forget that the object of your travel is to survey and assess for capital – something nature absolutely does not want you to do.

Monstrous Pregnancy

As a child of a science fiction family, pregnancy itself has always been a horror trope. The Goa'uld parasite in *Stargate* comes to mind, something that lives inside of you until it no longer requires you and then bloodily is pulled out of you. The first time a peer was pregnant, she told me that her child had rolled over in her stomach and I made the mistake of asking how she knew, and discovered that her baby's body had contorted the skin of her pregnant belly to the point where you could see his shoulder pressing visibly through her flesh. It's a strange sort of benevolent parasitism, pregnancy, which invites adoration and horror. Birth is one of the few acts of love that can kill you, a messy, bloody affair that demands everything of the birthing partner.

Some birthing parents in the US are required to go back to work while they can still feel their pelvis moving, presumably unmoored in their own bodies. Pregnancy is a necessary part of being alive – being human is still intrinsically tied to those months spent inside of another person – and growing up means seeing more and more of the people you know go through the process themselves, carry children inside of their body, watch as they are inherently changed and hormonally unbalanced and split, physically apart, sometimes surgically in order to create life.

Necessary, yes. Beautiful even, the way that bodies can create life. But media is nothing without its tropes, and in horror and fanfiction we can often see that in the monstrous pregnancy.

This is a trope oftentimes seen in both traditional media and also derivative fiction. I've discussed this before, male pregnancy in fanfiction specifically,

but this is a deeper dive on the topic. Monstrous pregnancy is an interesting concept – for starters, base level pregnancy is often seen as something inherently beautiful – media often shows pregnancy as this idyllic experience, the visual representation often something softly lit, pastel bright. Even in works that eventually have horrific elements – *mother!* or *Annabelle* – they show soft white, blonde women who are perfectly svelte save for round cheeks and perfectly round bellies. Motherhood – and pregnancy in these cases is explicitly motherhood – is tied to a pastoral image of feminine representation, nestled softly in protective layers.

One of the first ways that media ties monstrosity to pregnancy is through gender – the Alien franchise is a masterclass in monstrous pregnancy. The alien symbiote is an unwanted pregnancy, a forceful impregnation through violent means. The facehugger shoves its strange appendage deep inside of whatever orifice is necessary, impregnating the host with a creature that will then force its way out of the body, typically from the chest. But the chestburster in *Alien*? Even with a female protagonist, the chest that bursts is a man's. Through the course of the series, women will carry the alien symbiote as well – but even in *Prometheus* where Elizabeth Shaw carries the symbiote in her body, it's still a monstrous pregnancy. In her case, previously thought to be infertile, she carries the alien in her body after being impregnated by her partner's intentionally infected sperm – she's simply a vessel for someone else's science experiment. To remove the unwanted creature, a creature that is growing too fast for her body and which will kill her – which insidious outside forces want her to keep – she must perform emergency surgery. The film makes sure that we know that it's a surgery – the machine tells her it cannot do a Cesarean because it is only calibrated for men, so Dr. Shaw must tell it

instead to remove a foreign body from her abdomen. Even in that case, her pregnancy is monstrous.

In fanfiction, the monstrosity of pregnancy is typically tied to male pregnancy (or mpreg) and how it relates to the strange alien biology of a biological male carrying a child. The addition of a secondary layer of gender in fanfiction pregnancy is important because it allows for secondary gender characteristics – where is the baby? How is it carried? These are biological quandaries that lesser writers would gloss over – but in certain parts of fandom are perhaps overly explained. Fandom has done everything from so-called "ass babies" (don't think about it), cis-female anatomy, to more complicated choices. One work I remember reading had Stiles Stilinski pregnant, and as time went on, he basically grew a seam along his belly – a place where he would split when he finally gave birth. Like an alien had ripped its way out of him.

Pregnancy in horror is an exercise in lack of bodily autonomy, specifically when applied to gender. In the *Twilight* series, itself an allegory for Mormon ideology specifically related to abortion and gender roles, you see the way in which Bella Swan is effectively forced to carry her child to term because she is pregnant. Her pregnancy is intentionally monstrous – so much so that in the film adaptation they had to physically build a copy of the actress because it would be a moral quandary to starve her to the point where she would need to be that frail. It is canon in that series that to birth her child, Bella Swan's hips are broken, her back as well and that she has to have her pregnant belly torn apart so that the baby can arrive. The process of giving birth literally kills her. The baby, above all else, is what Bella Swan deems important and as such, she suffers for it.

Due to its highly gendered aspects, pregnancy can also be dysphoric. Horror is often best viewed through a queer lens and monstrous pregnancy is a perfect way to encapsulate that –the dysphoria of your body being used in a way that you did not intend. Media is tied to traditional gender roles, and pregnancy itself is seen as an incredibly gendered act – even though not all women can or do become pregnant. In cases like Dr. Shaw or Bella Swan, where a child is unexpected or impossible but not inherently unwanted, the horror is even greater. A body twisted by an interior force, a parasite that only wants you dead when you only desired to love it. It takes an act that could be beautiful (pregnancy, birth, life) and twists it; and that is the heart of the monstrous pregnancy.

On Being Chased

It's a nightmare so common as to almost be universal: you're being chased. Maybe the thing chasing you has a face, a shape, a physical presence. Or maybe it's something you cannot look directly at, but you know that it's right behind you. And no matter what you do – how fast you run, how many doors you lock behind you – it will continue to follow you. And eventually, it will catch up.

The trope of the constant pursuit has populated horror films for decades, and is particularly prevalent in the slasher film; the killer always finds their victims in the end. Since it's such a popular conceit, it only makes sense that it makes several healthy appearances in survival horror videogames. The most famous examples come from the *Resident Evil* franchise, which uses the mechanical device across several games, from Mr. X in *RE2* to Nemesis in *3* to Jack Baker in *7*. With these enemies, the only course is to flee. While they can deal damage to you (and often hit hard enough to kill you in short order), you cannot harm them in any permanent way. In some cases, you can sink a substantial amount of ammo into them to stun them temporarily, but you cannot kill them. No matter what you do, they will follow you.

This idea, of being pursued by a force outside of your power to destroy, is especially scary in videogames because it disrupts the central power fantasy of a lot of action game experiences. In many videogames (including some entries in the *Resident Evil* franchise, like *RE4*), the player acts as a kind of apex predator – with minimal management of ammunition and some skill in aiming, the player can mow down enemies with relative ease. And as enemies

get tougher, so do you. The central idea is that there is no challenge you cannot overcome. But the unkillable monsters of games like *Resident Evil* douse that fantasy. You cannot overcome. Instead, you will *be* overcome.

Being in a position of very little power to control your situation is a classically anxiety-inducing scenario. It happens in our daily lives, with our jobs, our families, our futures. Videogames can often be seen as an escape from that uncertainty, into a world where the player holds ultimate power – as long as they follow the rules of the game, they cannot help but triumph. With enemies like Nemesis, *Resident Evil* turns that narrative on its head. It reminds the player that not only are they not in control of the situation, the idea of control is an illusion. Every choice made, every button pressed, is nothing more than feeding input into a limited, deterministic system. The actions of players and their success are inherently limited by the code of the game itself – even open-world experiences are ultimately finite and dependent on scripted encounters created by the developers. While many games try their hardest to hide the fact that players have never had free will or any particular power to alter the experience of play, horror games use these monsters to put that idea at the forefront. And it works, because it is terrifying.

Ultimately, then, these monsters are more than bundles of code: they are a concrete reminder of the lack of control that we have over our own lives. Throwing the power fantasy of the general action gaming session out the window shows us that this, too, is something we cannot manipulate; we are powerless to do anything but respond. And even though in most cases the game eventually provides you with a means to kill this once unstoppable juggernaut, the player is left with the fear of being followed by something much more powerful than themselves.

So, my ending questions are many, but they boil down to this: Is it actually the monster that we fear? Or is it what the monster represents? We are powerless against all the fundamental truths of our lives: the passing of time, the inevitability of death. We can run as fast as we can, or we can lock ourselves away in hiding. But death finds us all in the end, no matter what we do, whether it takes the form of old age, illness, accident, or a seven-foot-tall mutant in a trench coat. When games like *Resident Evil* force us to reckon with these immovable objects as monsters, it also makes us consider the unstoppable forces of time in our lives, and how at the end of the day we don't really get a say in how or when we go out.

And that's maybe the most terrifying idea of all.

The Boomer Death Cult of Possum Springs

Sometimes circumstances can push people to do things they would never normally consider. This axiom beats in the heart of the horror that underpins Infinite Fall's side-scrolling adventure title *Night in the Woods* (2017), a videogame that only feels faintly like a monster tale until it takes a dark turn toward its conclusion. The antagonists at the core of the story are at once real and imagined, both a metaphorical representation of an actual threat, and a fantastical being from the underworld that (probably) isn't real.

As we enter this spookiest (excuse me, *spoopiest*) of all seasons, which this year happens to immediately precede mid-term elections in the United States, now seems like a fitting time to revisit a game that seamlessly threads a coming-of-age plotline with cosmic horror and incisive socio-political observation. By telling a story where hardship turns some toward one another for support, while turning others into monsters, *Night in the Woods* still resonates nearly six years after its release date.

Night in the Woods opens with protagonist Mae Borowitz arriving at the transit station in her hometown of Possum Springs. She expects someone will be there to welcome her back; instead, as she steps off the last bus in town, she's greeted only by a janitor who happens to be working late. With no ride to her parent's house (where she's moving back after dropping out of college), she tightrope-walks along a powerline over a locked fence, before falling to the dirt and getting picked up by a cop. The officer drops her off at home, where

Mae argues with her dad, who thought she was arriving the next night.

Sounds like an introduction to a story about coming to terms with yourself. Throughout the game, Mae struggles with her inability to turn back the clock on the last two years of her life, as she sometimes fights with her parents, frustrates her friends who are similarly trying to find their way through early adulthood, and finds that nothing feels quite the same anymore. It's a relatable narrative for anyone who has (or may currently be) trying to figure out who they are and what they want to be in an unforgiving place.

Meanwhile, there are dark forces lurking beneath the surface in Possum Springs, and it doesn't take long for the story to start dropping clues that something sinister is afoot. When Mae and her friends find a severed arm outside the town diner, a police officer orders them to disburse, and to leave in pairs of two. Since she doesn't have a vehicle, Mae catches a ride home with Bea, an acquaintance who didn't get the opportunity to go to college that she feels Mae has squandered. She kicks Mae out of the car a few blocks early after she asks an awkward question about her job at the hardware store.

For most of its duration, this is about as much conflict as you find in *Night in the Woods*. It isn't a "horror game" in the traditional sense, as journalist Ellie Kovach wrote for *The Believer* earlier this year; the game is a narrative-driven slow burn rather than a tense thriller, and it lacks the gore and jump scares of something like *The Evil Within* or *Outlast.* There are no explicit enemies to defeat nor any combat mechanics to speak of either, and aside from some puzzle-platforming during distressing dream sequences, most of the game is spent at a relaxed pace, traipsing around town and advancing the story through branching dialogue trees.

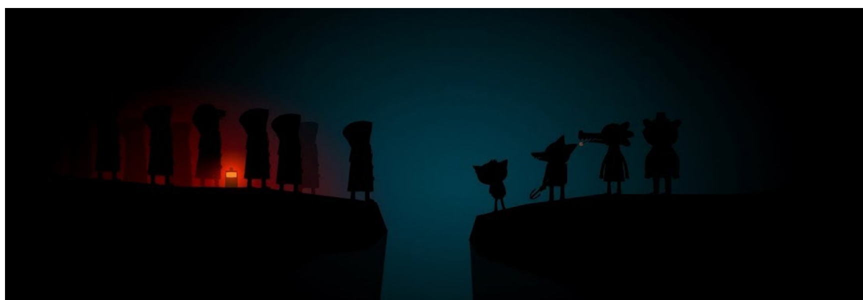
Indeed, *Night in the Woods* takes its time reaching its pivotal plot twist, peeling back layers from its character's back stories, steadily revealing more details about their struggles. And if there's a unifying thread that connects the populace of Possum Springs, it's that everyone in the town is being crushed by economic decline. The loss of unionized mining jobs, combined by local businesses either being driven out or swallowed whole by national chains, has left the town looking and feeling like a ghost of its former self.

Mae came home expecting to return to her carefree pre-college life only to realize that the version of Possum Springs where she grew up is never coming back. There's a deep sense of despair that permeates the town, and its residents do what they can to cope. For Mae and her friends, this means trying to restart their punk band, commiserating over pizza, and committing petty theft at the mall. For a shadowy group of middle-aged residents however, that means forming what could best be described as a Boomer death cult, one that sacrifices those they deem unworthy (sometimes including their own members) to the Black Goat in the bowels of an abandoned mine.

The cult claims its goal is to protect Possum Springs and to safeguard the town from sloth and outside influences. It's instead a violent organization that preys upon ignorance by leveraging hopelessness as a recruiting tool, murdering the innocent and the vulnerable as a means of taking revenge against the unfairness of the world. They are common people who have turned monstrous under the weight of unmet expectations, fearful of the rot and decay that surrounds them, and searching for someone, anyone, other than themselves to pin the blame on.

As a narrative device, the cultists are a clear commentary on how older generations often turn more conservative with age, kicking the ladder out from underneath the generations that follow them. If you believe your economic fortunes are 100% a reflection of your own work ethic, and you're willing to take that thought to its furthest logical extreme, it becomes easy to believe that a lack of wealth equals lack of righteousness. And if you don't see those less fortunate than you as fully human, maybe that's how you find yourself becoming an accessory to unimaginable cruelties.

Night in the Woods uses dark imagery for dramatic effect, but the truth of its metaphor remains on point. It reflects a monstrousness that's frightening because it's real and often hiding in plain sight (or, increasingly, no longer feeling the need to hide itself at all). It's a story that shows how the personal and the political are inseparable, in a way that's relevant to our current moment, with equal parts depth and urgency. It remains a rare achievement for its medium and one that is more than worth revisiting now.



Half-Humans and Half-Lives

There's some dialogue from the anime film *Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust* (the English dub version) that's burrowed its way into me over the years and made a home there. For those who haven't watched it before, it's an adaptation of one of Kikuchi Hideyuki's famous novels, about a character who is described in the title sequence as a vampire "hunter unlike all the others." He's a Dhampir or, in plain terms, a half human, half vampire. How D is characterized as a Dhampir in the film is actually fairly close to the original folklore. He is the son of the union between a human woman and a male vampire, who makes his living as a vampire hunter because he's preternaturally-suited for the position.

In this particular adventure, D is hunting down Meier Link, a vamp of the most powerful order – the Nobles, who has kidnapped a human woman named Charlotte Elbourne. D is not the only hunter hired by the Elbournes to retrieve her and dispose of Meier, however. The Elbournes also hired a group of human vampire hunters to ensure the job gets done. Naturally, a rivalry forms between both parties. A further complication arises early in the mission: Charlotte doesn't want to be rescued and cares deeply for Meier, one of the last of his kind. D's iconic left hand, which is host to a symbiotic demon face, suspects that D's motivations for hunting Meier are rooted in a fear that Charlotte might eventually give birth to another Dhampir, like him. So, at the throbbing heart of this vampire tale is a fear of different beings mixing to create (in the eyes of this fictional world) a monstrous being. And forbidden love.

With this context in mind, here is the aforementioned dialogue/scene. Leila, the human vampire bounty hunter, has crossed paths more than once with D, the half-vampire or Dhampir bounty hunter, at this point of the movie. The two have saved each other's lives, D having previously bandaged Leila's wound from a close encounter with Meier Link and Leila having dug a temporary grave for D when he's struck down with sun-sickness (one of his only weaknesses other than bloodlust as a Dhampir) during another battle with one of Link's hired demon bodyguards, called Barbaroi. Subsequently, the two have now progressed far enough in their "enemies to... perhaps friends?" arc that Leila opens up about her backstory when prompted by D – how her mother was kidnapped like Charlotte was, how she was turned into a vampire and killed by the village Leila's family lived in. This event set Leila on her path to become a vampire hunter. She then suggests they make a pact with one another since they've trauma-bonded over their shared line of work and their loneliness. The pact is simple yet heartfelt, whoever dies first, the one left behind will bring them flowers to their grave. While Leila falters and believes she's being overly sentimental for suggesting it, D cuts her off belying his usual stoic demeanor with earnest and determined acceptance of the pact:

> **D**: I'll do it. I'll bring you flowers if I survive this – but I don't expect to.
>
> **Leila**: Stop, I didn't really mean it when I said that. And anyway, I don't really understand why you should keep on doing this.
>
> **D**: Because I'm a dhampir. I don't get to have a life; not like you.

D's last line in this scene, in particular, struck me. On the one hand, it's pretty straightforward, no one wants to be an immortal yet unliving creature like a Dhampir. And throughout the film many characters express their intimidation or hatred of D's existence. But on the other hand, the subtext took me aback as someone who is of mixed heritage. Being someone who is neither wholly one category of being or another, D is condemned to a between place in his world. He is a being that is considered unnatural and monstrous, or at least less than human, *because* he's mixed. His father in fact was the Vampire King. In addition, at least in the world of the film (I don't have much experience with the series except for reading the first translated novel a long time ago), D is the only Dhampir around. The Japanese script is somewhat different, but emphasizes the same points, although it's noteworthy that Leila's lead up to the pact is a lot more barbed, comparing D to Noble vampires who are "less than animals" and that he's "just like them."

Of course, it's important to note that one must consider this half-human character's representation within the context of the culture that created him. In Japan, the population is mostly homogenous and although there are a relative number of foreigners and half-Japanese people (called "hafus") living there, the number pales in comparison to the amount of Japanese-descent people. According to a video interview by Asian Boss , 98 per cent of the country's people are ethnically Japanese, which means foreigners and those who appear phenotypically foreign stick out. An equally interesting and frustrating social dynamic results from this.

Some half-Japanese people visibly pass as Japanese, until they are found to be lacking in Japanese language or culture fluency. Other half-Japanese people, especially those who are dark-skinned, are often immediately subjected to racism but often surprise the public when they are native Japanese speakers or understand the country's customs. Some recent high-profile cases of this discrimination are Miss Universe Japan 2015's Ariana Miyamoto and tennis grand slam singles winner Naomi Osaka. Regarding Miyamoto in particular, she entered the Miss Japan contest in honor of a multiracial friend who committed suicide due to the pressure of being unaccepted in Japan.

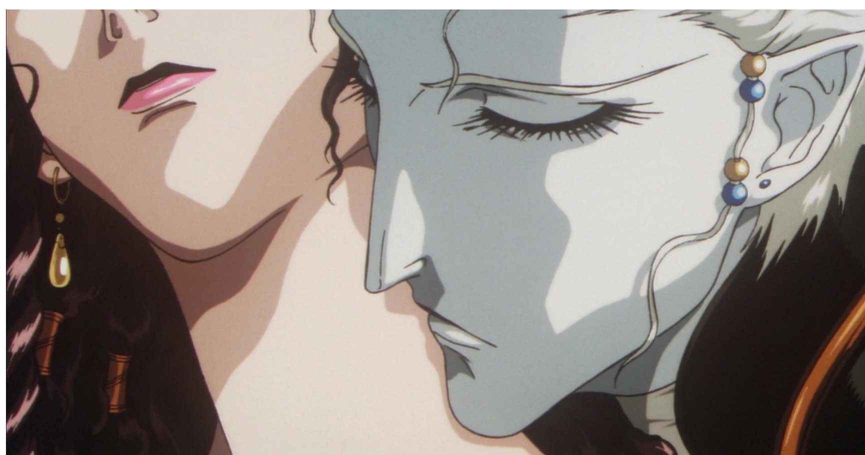
Although interracial families in Japan are more common today, there is still a debate about whether those considered hafu will ever be accepted as part of Japanese society. This ambivalence is shown even in the description of a recent documentary on the hafu population, which mentions some hafus feel "caught somewhere between two different worlds." As well, it's an ongoing issue that discrimination of hafu people often goes unnoticed or ignored in part because they are not considered a distinct ethnic group (legally or otherwise) in Japan. To tie this back to D's characterization, the Dhampir shares certain features

with Noble vamps like Meier (deathly pale skin, pointy ears and fangs). Yet characters both human and vampiric recognize him on sight as a Dhampir and condemn him often for it. This condemnation could also be due to his reputation as the lone hunter. In other words, D cannot "pass" as a human or a pureblooded vampire, emphasizing his position as a figure that is caught in-between.

D's pact with Leila is not wholly tragic, however. In making such a pact of friendship, despite Leila's history with vampires, the two find common ground as individuals. They put aside their differences to do their best to make their world a safer place, even though doing so as hunters means either of them likely will be killed by their calling. Throughout the movie, we learn that Charlotte and Meier also made a pact with each other to find a way to "the kingdom at the end of the stars", and that she wasn't so much kidnapped as she was eloping with him. This last point may be up for debate, as this could also be explained away as Stockholm syndrome. Still, there are enough scenes showing the two's mutual respect for one another and Meier's reluctance to turn Charlotte that perhaps she truly did want to elope with him. And although I'm focusing on the English dub of this film, it's worth noting that in the Japanese script D mentions early on that despite Meier being a Noble vampire (who are usually known for treating humans like chattel to be slaughtered as needed or on a whim) he has a reputation for never using his fangs on humans. The movie seeks at least some nuance regarding themes of how prejudice and intergenerational trauma affect people.

I remain conflicted about what I took from *Bloodlust*'s subtext however. D's character strikes me as somewhat of a tragic mixed-race stereotype, someone condemned to a purgatorial state because of mixing. I can't help

but think of the term that preceded miscegenation, amalgamation. Both are archaic American epithets for interracial relationships, but the latter was derived from the metallurgic term for mixing metal with mercury. Interracial relations have a long history of being treated by systemic racism as a kind of unholy alchemical act, mixing one supposedly stable or pure category with another less predictable and toxic category. As writer Esi Edugyan puts it in her exploration of race and storytelling *Out of the Sun*, "The story of miscegenation is the story of the blood's corruption, of damaging one's name and one's line through taint." The fact that D's very existence is described as monstrous and that D himself possibly fears another like him being born carries similar fears underscoring narratives like *Birth of a Nation*, in which interracial relationships was a central tension, or which inspired writers like H.P. Lovecraft for him miscegenation was a terror of cosmic proportions.

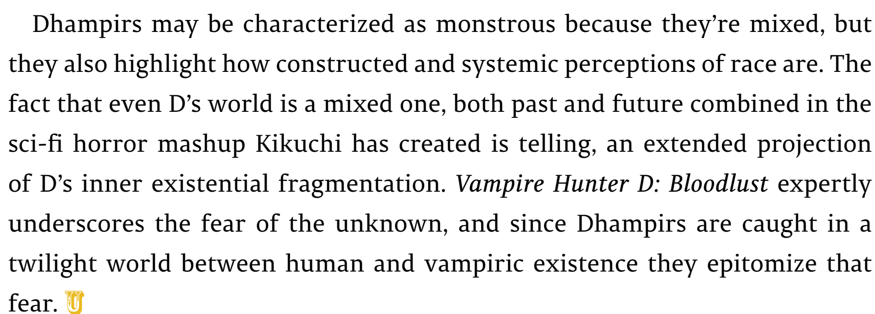


He is also even when viewed with a more positive lens dangerously close to being an example of an interracial figure who "solves racism" simply by existing against all odds and being an example of a rare virtuous Other. Although I think D is meant sometimes to be more of a potential bridge than a role model. Near the climax of the film at Carmilla's hallucinatory Castle Chaythe for instance, D confronts an illusion of his human mother lamenting that he must hate her for falling in love with his father, the vampire king, but that she couldn't help who she fell for. In a behind-the-scenes featurette, director Kawajiri Yoshiaki states that because D is half vampire and half human "he has an evil side and a good side. He is extremely beautiful and extremely tough." Kikuchi has been quoted more than once as having conceived D as someone who's beauty is enhanced because he's a Dhampir. This makes D something of an exotic Other, someone both desired and despised. A figure that inspires the infuriating question "what are you?" at every turn. The stable scene where D

is confronted at gunpoint by the sheriff and his men and told to leave town because they don't sell to Dhampirs is also very charged in this sense.

Having lost his cyborg horse in a fight with Benge, another of the Barbaroi, D visits a local stable to buy another steed from the gruff old mechanic Polk. Although Polk quotes him a steep three grand and tells him that if he doesn't like the price he can "go somewhere else," he stands up for D when he faces aggressive discrimination by the sheriff and crew, levelling a large weapon he was working on at the men. It turns out Polk is someone D saved when he was a child along with ten other children who were kidnapped by vamps. He remembers how D was violently run out of town and tells the sheriff "I would much rather be an old fool than what you are, sheriff" before thanking D for what he did for him and noticing that D has remained as beautiful and young as he appeared all those years ago. I found it odd that they excised Polk's line "It's not by choice that Dhampirs have the Nobles' blood." from the Japanese script here. But the scene's tone remains fairly unchanged.

Overall, I think *Bloodlust*'s moral ambiguity suits it as a Gothic tale about a post-apocalyptic sci-fi and cowboy western-inspired world. I don't believe that there's necessarily ill-intentions regarding how a Dhampir like D is depicted. But I do think there are often troubling parallels between the tropes being half-human and the tropes of being mixed or multiracial. These parallels often go unmentioned and seemingly unexamined in the making of this film. The way D is portrayed is not unique to Japanese media, although this template for purgatorial mixed background characters continues on with characters like *Castlevania*'s Alucard and *Devil May Cry*'s Dante, Vergil and Nero. In the case of recent characters whose purgatorial nature is made very literal, there is Zagreus of *Hades* (a figure I could spend another whole column musing on). I'd love for there to be more characters like Aveline of *Assassin's Creed: Liberty*, who consciously recognize and subvert mixed racial tropes.



Dhampirs may be characterized as monstrous because they're mixed, but they also highlight how constructed and systemic perceptions of race are. The fact that even D's world is a mixed one, both past and future combined in the sci-fi horror mashup Kikuchi has created is telling, an extended projection of D's inner existential fragmentation. *Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust* expertly underscores the fear of the unknown, and since Dhampirs are caught in a twilight world between human and vampiric existence they epitomize that fear.

Introducing "Pocket Monsters"

R*ainbow Rare Charizard VMAX*.

Since Unwinnable readers surely wouldn't know what that string of obscure, seemingly random words means, I'd like to let you in on a little secret.

There is, I have recently come to learn, something out there called Pokémon. There are TV shows, videogames, posters, plushies and all kinds of associated merchandise related to it, but the main thing is the cards. They come in packs and boxes just like baseball cards do, and people like my seven-year-old son are obsessed with them.

Let me back up a step, since I'm coming at you fast with all this new information: Pokémon is a portmanteau. It means pocket monsters. Ostensibly, fans of Pokémon are encouraged, nay instructed, to "catch 'em all." This they can attempt in many ways, but based on my seven-year-old's YouTube history, the main strategy is to become an adult and buy (or be given) large amounts of Pokémon card packs and open them live on camera, reacting way too enthusiastically at a rare "pull" – which is typically any card with "full art." And, if you believe these YouTubers, as my elder son does, these cards are as good as legal tender.

Among these rare pulls are those categorized as Rainbow Rare. At least one of these Rainbow Rares is of a pocket monster called Charizard. Full-art cards are often labeled as VMAX. Put those terms together and you've got it:

Rainbow Rare Charizard VMAX.

This is a joke, you're thinking. But it's not! These cards really do exist. And now, my seven-year-old son's life's dream is to save enough money that when he is older he can buy himself a *Rainbow Rare Charizard VMAX*, which, depending on whom you believe, is either worth a couple hundred bucks in mint condition, or your eternal soul.

My elder son once dreamed of saving up for a house. I thought this wise and prudent, although it did seem a little sad he was hoarding his birthday money when he could at least allow himself a toy or two every now and again. We even opened up a bank account for him to help him learn more about managing his fledgling finances. Lately, though, that talk of saving for a house has died down. No, it's now mostly about the *Rainbow Rare Charizard VMAX*, the dream of my kid when he imagines himself a fully grown adult with enough disposable income to buy whatever toys he wanted when he was seven.

As I said earlier, there is no one in the Unwinnable community – readers, writers, editors – who has any idea what I'm talking about. So, you might find my son strange. You're probably Wikipedia'ing Pokémon right now to check that I'm not totally shitting you. Again, I assure you I am not.

The *Rainbow Rare Charizard VMAX* exists, and when my son is old enough, I hope that he has plenty of cash to buy it. And that he still has money left over for a house.

Evil in Residence

It was a few years past the original PlayStation's release date before our family could afford to buy one, so my brother and I would often play early PS1 games at the houses and apartments of neighborhood friends. In our apartment building there was a pair of brothers who were about as old as us and who lived just one floor below. My brother and I would spend hours at their place, especially during the long, lazy days of summer, when nothing was expected of us besides needing to leave the house (and our parents in peace).

Probably the most memorable moment over the many years we spent playing games there or watching the same movies over and over on their unlocked cable box, was the day the older of the two brothers came home with a certain new PlayStation game tucked under his arm. Beneath the hard plastic surface of the jewel case were the tall red letters of the game's title: *RESIDENT EVIL*.

We didn't have much of an idea of what we'd be in for, based solely off of the nonsensical title and the generic soldier man surrounded by shadows just beneath it. So, we sliced apart the shrinkwrap with a fingernail, popped open the case and snapped the disc firmly onto its mount in the console bay. We laughed and cracked jokes during the straight-to-video-lookin' introductory cutscene, but then grew nervously quiet once our troop of special agents made it within the mansion proper, shutting the door behind them and thus transitioning from grainy, soft bodied actors into beings of hard blocky polygon instead. These new depictions seemed more real in spite of their clunky shapes and accompanying hammy voice actors. They seemed like they could be hurt or maimed by way of our actions, or lack thereof.

We navigated cautiously through the first few rooms, empty of anything besides scenery, which our characters would clumsily bump and slide against, victims to our poor understanding of the game's unorthodox, fixed camera and its tank controls. The setting was unsettling, quiet. Our characters' footsteps drummed loudly against the mansion floors, boots marking a steady bass against the hardwood, a high-pitched timpani treble against the marble. Whatever was surely skulking offscreen would be certain to hear us as we made our halting progress deeper inside.

It wasn't long before we discovered precisely what would be waiting for us in this mansion. The brother who had bought the game had been the one piloting one of the game's protagonist, Jill Valentine, so far. He led her down a darkened servant's passageway, long and claustrophobically narrow. His Jill rounded a corner and in doing so triggered the camera change which revealed what was on the other side. This scene before us was utterly monstrous: a hulking form was bent over a combat gear-clad corpse, one of our own. The thing's pixels and shading were a mess of brown and green, all gross, all wrong. It was something prehistoric, from the swamps, of the earth. In stiff, jerky movements its head bobbed over the body, moving with animalistic fervor.

The camera took over at this point, as if to help us out in our horrified, frozen stupor. It drifted closer to the creature's back, closer, as if to see, to see what it could be possible doing to that poor rigid corpse. As the camera slowly angled up, revealing a diseased-looking skull, furrowed deeply with cracks and veins, the thing's head bobbed again, one final time. Through the television's speakers came a sharp crunch, like bones breaking, like a foot cleaving through a light crusting of ice into a frozen lake. On screen, a pool of blood quickly began to pool out from the creature's hidden victim, spreading rapidly toward our feet. Before we could react, however, the creature's head lifted, and turned, finally altered to our presence.

Large, slick yellow eyes, poking out from a ghastly brown skull turned and stared directly at the camera. It didn't feel like the monster was looking at our character, but at *us*, us four, quaking boys gaping helplessly at the TV screen. The brother holding the controller let out a frightened yelp and tossed the thing away like it was on fire. Chaos immediately followed. Our character stood stock still on the screen in front of the monster, which slowly got up, turned and began ambling, inevitably toward us.

"Someone take over!" The boy who'd just abdicated responsibility not-so-helpfully commanded. The controller sat between us, a horrid little pain box, there to mete out punishment for whosoever dared pick it up. I made the brave or stupid decision to be the next supplicant and I reached out and grabbed it, its

surface warm and slick from the sweaty hands of its previous operator. By this point, the beast had already halved the distance between us, its outstretched arms patiently reaching out for us. I jammed my thumbs against what I hoped were the right buttons, having not been allowed the buffer of the game's tutorialization moments. My Jill slowly rotated left, then made a quarter turn to the right, then backed up, directly into the thing's waiting arms.

It sunk its jagged fangs into the neck of my character and we all helplessly shrieked with terror. I cajoled and tugged at the controller to little avail, I could only wait until the creature was done, finished with me, sated. It finally released us, and Jill, bloodied, staggered back and away. Hitting pause brought up the menu screen showing the game's grid-like inventory next to a small heart rate monitor which pulsed out a threatening orange. I saw that Jill held a gun in her inventory and worked out how to equip it. Closing the screen revealed the gun had appeared in Jill's hands, so I brought it up and fired. The first shot flew wide of the beast's grinning maw. Before I could fire again it had again flung its impossibly long arms around us. Once it was done with us I checked again, the heart rate monitor now glowed a weak red.

We were lost. We had thought this was just another ordinary videogame, another careless stroll through some colorful world full of coins and spells and power ups. Another power fantasy with which to show off our petty prowesses to each other. *Resident Evil* is decidedly not this. It's a *Hellraiser* puzzle box; an invitation to partake, to play along, only to realize (too late) that the controller itself is a portal through which the game itself can reach out and draw its horrifying tithe. This was why none of us wanted to touch the controller. None of us wanted to feel that panic, burn our fingertips on that live wire. Which is why we abandoned Jill, in that moment, to her fate; to the first monster in a game lousy with them. We wouldn't try again for weeks, couldn't be persuaded by the remorseful purchaser of the title to give it a try once more, to dive once again through those slowly creaking double doors, back into the frightening darkness.

I wrote a book about tabletop roleplaying games. It's called *Monsters, Aliens, and Holes in the Ground: A Guide to Tabletop Roleplaying Games from D&D to Mothership*. It will be published by MIT Press in October of 2023.

What follows is an excerpt from the book, the chapter, appropriate for this issue, on the *Monster Manual* (1977), the first core rulebook of the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* game. As this is drawn directly from the final text of the book, it has style and formatting that does not match the rest of this magazine. Sorry about that.

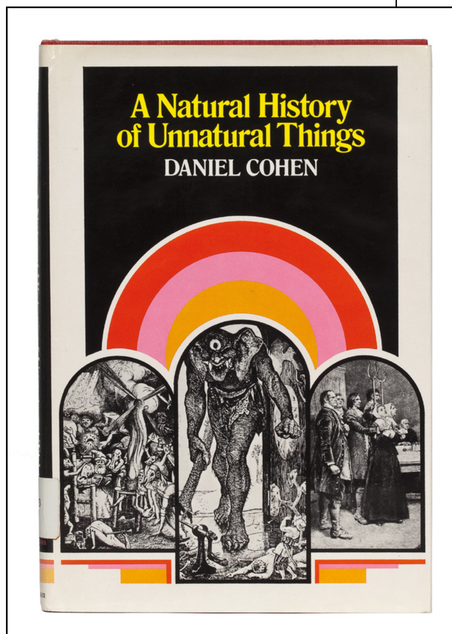
* * *

Monster Manual (1977)

The *Monster Manual* marks the start of a strange time for TSR, *Dungeons & Dragons*, and, to a certain degree, the broader world of RPGs. There is a deeper sort of magic at work here, which makes sense, because a book of monsters is a powerful, imagination-capturing thing.

My entrance into *Dungeons & Dragons* was because of monsters. As a little kid, I loved dinosaurs. A little older, I learned about cryptids, like my own local Jersey Devil and the Loch Ness Monster—is it a dinosaur or a monster? Why not both? A little older, and I had a stack of Daniel Cohen books, like *The Encyclopedia of Monsters* and *A Natural History of Unnatural Things*.

It didn't matter if a monster was supposedly real or entirely fictional, I wanted to know all about it. I was not alone in this. Cohen's books, of which there are many, also covered ghosts, horror movies, and pop culture topics outside the paranormal and were aimed squarely at children. They most often took the form of a cyclopedia, with short entries arranged in alphabetical order, crammed with just the juicy details; there was no room for the boring stuff. This sort of reference book was a common format in the pre-internet days—I have piles of them for kids and adults alike on monsters, mythology, the occult, and general oddness, like Barbara Ninde Byfield's *The Glass Harmonica* (1967) and Rossell Hope Robbins's *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology* (1959).



A NATURAL HISTORY OF UNNATURAL THINGS, E. P. DUTTON AND CO., 1971
DANIEL COHEN

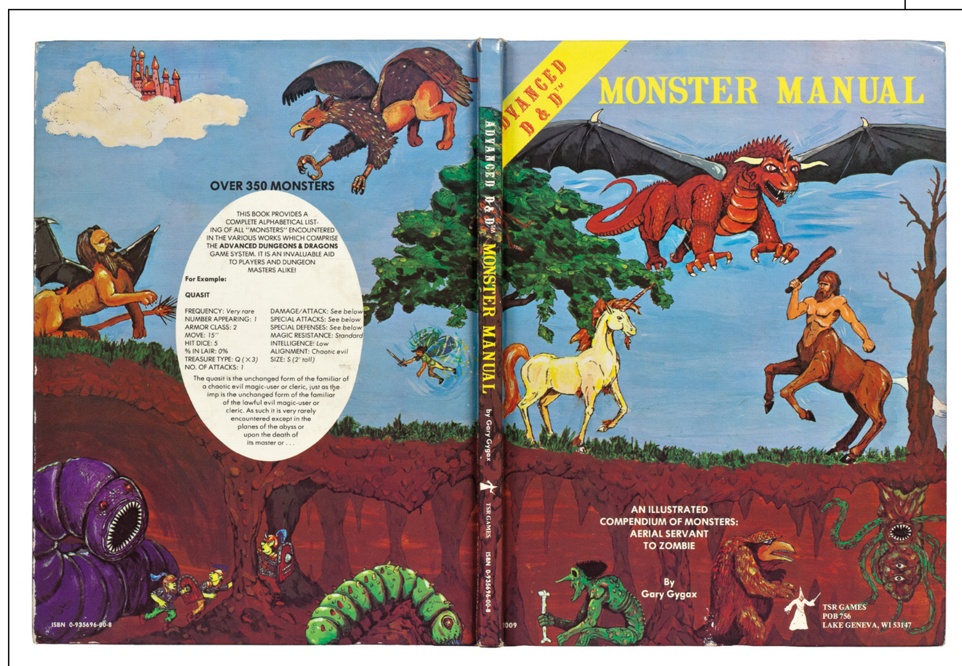
Most of them are illustrated, the very best strikingly so, like Louis Le Breton's diabolical engravings of Goëtic demons for the 1863 edition of Collin de Plancy's *Dictionnaire Infernal*. While the Victorian era might seem long ago, the origins of this sort of book go even farther back, to the bestiaries. These books, more properly called bestiarum vocabulum, are chronicles of creatures both real and imagined, best known as illuminated manuscripts produced in Renaissance-era monasteries. But the earliest, *The Physiologus*, dates all the way back to the second century and draws from still older sources. Human beings have long been interested in compendiums of monsters, so the emergence of the *Monster Manual* is no surprise, nor is the enduring popularity of RPG monster books among players.

What is surprising, though, is that, once again, TSR was not the first to release a book of monsters. *All the Worlds' Monsters*, from Chaosium, hit shelves before *Monster Manual,* thanks to printing problems that delayed the latter's release from September to late December. Now, throughout its history, TSR occasionally engaged in poor sportsmanship and aggressive tactics (a well-worn joke I've heard was that TSR stood for "They Sue Regularly"), but the company usually appeared above the fray in public. *All the Worlds' Monsters* seems to have riled the company, though, if TSR vice president of game design, Mike Carr's belligerent foreword to the *Monster Manual* is any indication:

> The success of *Dungeons & Dragons* has spawned a considerable number of imitations and spin-off products, perhaps inevitably. Some of these have merit; many, however, do not – and although we may concede their right to exist (however dependent they may be on *D & D*'s audience), we would caution the prospective buyer to consider their true value and not to be confused with those items which bear the *Dungeons & Dragons* or *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* name and constitute the official *D & D* family of products. As for value, let the others be measured against the standard of quality we have striven for – a hardbound encyclopedia of monsters, for instance, as opposed to a low quality collection which is poorly assembled and bound.

Salty! Fit more for an editorial in *The Dragon* magazine than at the front of the first book in a much-hyped new line, the foreword is entirely odd. The rest of it is one loud toot of *D&D*'s own horn and sounds insecure more than anything. While the low budget *All the Worlds' Monsters* was the first RPG monster book, it was not the touchstone that the *Monster Manual* was about to become, in part, because of what it is: A luxurious, even decadent book.

This is the first hardcover RPG book and, until the late '80s, the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* line produced the *only* hardcover books in the hobby. That TSR could produce such a book, with its full color wrap-around cover



MONSTER MANUAL, TSR, 1977
GARY GYGAX, COVER BY DAVID C. SUTHERLAND III

art and interior illustrations on every page (for nearly every monster!), was a testament to their lofty position in the world of RPGs. Those qualities further added to the company's prestige by helping them gain access to the shelves of general bookstores, where they got in front of the eyes of shoppers outside of the tiny gamer niche.

The player response to the *Monster Manual* was overwhelmingly positive (it's the only *AD&D* book that got both a direct and an indirect sequel, for one thing) and a clear contrast to whatever was going on internally at TSR to spur that. Certainly, the book's subject matter of monsters, the most evocative and dangerous component of *D&D*, contributed to its success, as did its scope—over 350 monsters received attributes and descriptions—but I suspect that it was the artwork that cemented its place as an instant classic.

Up to this point, artwork was scarce in RPGs, both because of the small budgets available and printing constraints. What did appear was often crude and amateurish. Even the color cover art of the *Monster Manual*, by David C. Sutherland III, isn't exactly a well-crafted piece by most standards. His interiors are much better examples of his skill, and the final full-page illustration is an exquisitely detailed rendering that implies the garishness of the cover was a measured artistic choice. And there is something compelling in the cover. It always seemed to have a vibe, perhaps due to its cross-section view, that reminds me of a children's activity book. It certainly promises adventure and exploration.

Inside, Sutherland is joined, primarily, by David Trampier, whose clean, precise lines often evoke the feel of medieval woodcuts. Together, they create a world where green slime drips from the ceiling and treasure chests can come to (hungry) life. RPGs take place in the theater of the mind, but the importance of finally seeing these creatures, often in tableau with unfortunate adventurers meeting their dooms, can't be overstated. Because the illustrations tend towards the cartoonish, these depictions never feel set the way they do in later editions with more detailed, realistic art.

Carr wasn't wrong about *All the Worlds' Monsters*—it was a slapdash affair with typewritten entries and sporadic illustrations of largely arbitrary monsters. *Monster Manual* set the mold for others to follow, including: *Out of the Pit* (1985) for *Fighting Fantasy*, *S. Petersen's Field Guide to Cthulhu Monsters* (1988) and *Malleus Monstrorum* (2003) for *Call of Cthulhu*, *Creatures of Barsaive* (1994) for *Earthdawn*, *The Gloranthan Bestiary* (1988, 2018) for *RuneQuest*, *Galaxy Guide 4: Alien Races* for West End's *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game*—all embrace a standard of art and detail created here by Gygax and his collaborators.

In her book *Stonehenge: Making Space*, anthropologist and geographer Barbara Bender invites us to think of landscapes as something contested. Meanings are made by combining its inherent qualities with the subjective viewpoint of the observer. To English Heritage, Stonehenge is something which must be carefully managed, protected and projected as a point of national pride. To modern pagans, Stonehenge may be a site of religious significance. Their understanding of the stone circle as a place for celebration, dances and offerings is in direct conflict with English Heritage's ropes and cordons.

To the gamer, Stonehenge may be something visited through the eyes of the *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* protagonist Eivor, or carefully cut around in *Lawn Mowing Simulator*.

This isn't (or wasn't, when Bender was writing) as well-explored in geography as it is in media, where it's broadly accepted that the audience is at least a collaborative participant, if not the sole interpreter in the act of meaning-making. In a book or a movie, the description or visual representation of whatever space the characters move through is both carefully considered by the creator and subjectively understood by the audience.

The same is true of games, of course, but in games the player is often moving through that space themselves. As well as pan-media considerations like tone and worldbuilding, the landscape might need to communicate navigational cues, or have enough cover for the player character to hide behind, or conceal hidden collectables.

And yet the concept of space in games seems to most often come up as a bragging point followed by immediate backlash. "Our game is 10,000 square

miles!" vs. "who the hell has time for that!" and then the immediate devolution into repetitive discourse. On Twitter it seems that the best nuance that can be summoned is a gesture towards density, towards having things to do in that space. And that is an element of it. But exploring how the space itself expresses meaning, how players experience that, and how different players might do so differently is what I want to explore in this column. (Off Twitter, of course, these discussions are happening; far be it for me to say that I'm breaking new ground just because I'm writing something slightly longer than a 12-part thread.)

Where better to start in this endeavor than monster month? Horror is perhaps the genre where contested space is most easily found lurking. Twisting a once-familiar place into a new context grounds the fear for audiences to tap into. The meaning we feel we ought to create from these spaces is lost, leaving a void that can be filled by the imagination. And in horror games, the player is given both the autonomy to explore those spaces themselves and the complicity of outcome that goes along with that. In B-movie inspired *The Quarry,* for instance, a player might feel more in control of their environment if they send their character along what seems like a safer path and feel tricked by it when that causes the sweet boy developing a blossoming romance to end up [redacted for spoilers].

But that's not the only layer of contestation. Bender is also adjacent to a field known as landscape phenomenology, which studies the lived experience of researchers in the landscape. *The Quarry*, for example, has a movie mode for people who would rather watch than play. Even if it didn't, streamers provide that service for those of us who are horror averse – like me, who watched it played by Jack de Quidt and Kat Brewster (at katbamkapow on Twitch). That layer of remove is the only way that someone I (a coward) am able to engage

with horror at all. On the other hand, I mentioned that I was writing about *The Quarry* in passing to my friend and previous *Unwinnable* columnist Diego Nicolás Argüello who just replied "lol but the quarry isn't scary."

The Quarry presents contestations both textual and phenomenological. Textually, it's a fun summer camp, and a site of supernatural horror and the place where a past tragedy occurred. Phenomenologically, it's a game where all your favorite characters died, or you went back and tried over and over again to save them, or you were jump scared by your own choice to progress in a certain direction, or you successfully avoided that by looking away from the stream.

But it also has limits. No matter what Diego thinks, there's no interpretation of its space where everyone is having a fantastic time in the woods. And that obviously works for its genre. Where *The Quarry* invites contested meanings it does so effectively, building both in-game tension and meta-level considerations like replayability, and approachability for those of us not usually into horror.

Other games flatten interpretation of their spaces and do so much less effectively. To return to the example of Stonehenge, in *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla,* it can only be an ancient monument mysteriously linked to the precursor race. At this time in real history, it may have been an important site of pilgrimage for people looking for healing, but *Valhalla*'s NPCs barely reference the circle at all. Conversely, other stone circles around England are made into miniature Stonehenges, erasing its unique architecture and those other circles' own beauty.

This is not a plea for historical or geographic accuracy, but an invitation to see how these representations reflect the real contested meanings of Stonehenge – and which ones are centered. Where it becomes something common, alien and marketable for *Valhalla*, it emphasizes some understandings of the space while burying others.

By exploring those twin processes of complicating and flattening the meaning of spaces in games, I hope we can explore how landscapes both digital and real are presented to us, and to what effect. And maybe, finally, we as gamers will know what touching grass really means.

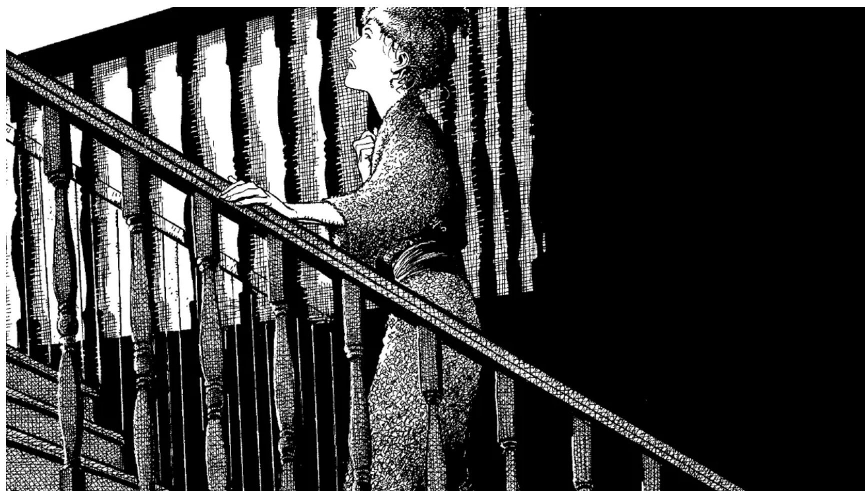
Barry Windsor-Smith's Taxonomy of Monsters

This is not a tome full of the fun monsters. Here we have a lavishly inked non-stop thread of the grotesque, the domestic and the systemic selection of monsters. A graphic novel so confident from page to page that there are no omniscient explanations, no breaks, no titles, no section breaks to speak of. The first few pages lay out exactly what's going on with *Monsters*: a boy is beaten half-blind in a shed by an adult man shouting in black letter gothic German, the boy's mom saves him, if you can call it that. The monsters are given shape, indisputably outlined.

But Barry Windsor-Smith is a veteran of superhero comics, and as such, knows that you can't title a book *Monsters* without a menagerie of such. You don't need a slice of Windsor-Smith's bibliography on your shelf to immediately appreciate what's going on with this opus, a book that reportedly took him 35 years to complete. I didn't, and even to my average eye it was clear that this was the work of someone absolutely in charge of their craft. Oversized compared to the usual comic or graphic novel formats, each page rings with meticulously placed ink to vary from intimate conversations through action scenes and malignant science and back around again and again, cycling through time and the astral world to wind every loop back together.

Windsor-Smith plays with the assumptions we've cultivated over years of comic book publishing—a father psychologically ground up by war literally cursed by that pain to distribute it to his family almost immediately upon his

return; a Nazi scientist so comically evil we almost forget that we first meet him as a member of the US Army, not in disguise but someone the forces embraced and promoted and granted a black budget based solely on what he promised he could deliver; the hulking metastasized boy vat-grown into a terrifying mass; and the unknown monstrous in Elias's familial powers of telepathy and communication with the dead. Each of these tropes has played through half-tone pages over the decades, themselves metaphors for what we fear about ourselves and the universe in which we live and understand so little about.



All of this is upfront, clear, and understood. It's also likely the least engaging aspect of *Monsters* – rather, beyond the impeccable artistic accomplishment from page to page, we are treated to the admirable attempts of humanity to face its monsters. More often than not we fail in these confrontations, often not for a lack of moral fortitude or desire to overcome such evil. It's that monsters are often born from our sense of being overwhelmed and losing control with nowhere to turn. This is where systems fail, or worse, were built to exploit such moments of need and fear. Whether it's an army full of soldiers explicitly trained to follow orders from a clear sociopath such as Roth, stomping around with a leadership style built on the foundational text of toxic masculinity, or a housewife determined to appease a broken husband until it's too late, so brainwashed by an indifferent society so as to never even consider escaping the domestic violence let along being deposited right back into the hellscape by law.

Why read a graphic novel like this? Let alone award it an Eisner, one of the highest possible acclaims available to comics? Beyond the illustration and flow, which honestly stands among the defining work of Eisner himself, it's that

the book refuses complicity with the destructive unknown, even at personal cost to characters like Elias. The soldier sacrifices himself to set right events put into place when he wasn't much more than a toddler himself, devastating his family. Maybe such a sacrifice is monstrous in itself – I'm sure his wife Bess thinks so, despite Elias's efforts to help her understand. But she cannot know, and dare not believe what he tells her about his abilities, themselves not enough to save him.

Elias breaks the cycle established within *Monsters*. His kids will likely be OK despite the hardships he leaves them to suffer with, but he sees his role within the machine that chewed up Bobby Bailey and spit out a tower of destructive misunderstood flesh, and uses his gifts to bring Bobby some peace. Because at the end of any good comic book, no matter how nebulous, we must be left with a sense that the monstrous has been exorcised.

There are Decapitations

At the risk of being timely, the current month has been rife with wide-reaching accusations of intention. Velma is a lesbian, and always has been according to two of her past writers. Always been *intended to be*, that is. In my introduction to the function of intention in August, I mentioned how our reverence for timelines, for canonicity – realism in the driest sense – has displaced representation into alternate realities. The dual nature of intentionality, which is imbued or assumed to specific ends, demands an author confirm interpretations of the images on the screen, else its absence deny such interpretations.

Another. A factoid, a tidbit, a piece of trivia self-professed film fans *will* tell you about, riding a convection current that continually resurfaces on the timeline, about how Akira Kurosawa didn't *intend* to push the visual language of violence in film forward with the immense amount of blood spilled in his 1962 film *Sanjuro*. This invocation not made to refute any reading, but as if this is interesting to an end in and of itself. My friend Renata concisely explained her discontent for these conversations as obsessions over the "why" rather than the "how." Of Kurosawa's films, and of texts more broadly.

These *why's* that exist as evergreen SEO articles function to close texts teeming with meaning, defang art of its more unwieldy elements, and, as writer Nathalie Olah puts it in her manifesto *Steal As Much as You Can*, create a mode of media "the country can understand and comfortably talk about over the dinner table." We could imagine the dinner table, dressed in the severed limbs of Flanderized characters, reduced to self-caricatures by a rotating staff

of burnt-out writers or maybe misdirected into hollow archetypes by fickle executives – depending on your interpretation.

Casper Kelly's 2014 short film, *Too Many Cooks*, parodies the '80s sitcom intro with a series of successive skits riffing off one another for far too long into absurdum. Drawing on the tropes and imagery of '80s television, *Too Many Cooks* is at once an absurdist comedy sketch and a critical cautionary tale, full of pastiche referents like "relics of a time that we long for but shouldn't return to." Writing for BuzzFeed News, Jace Lacob describes how these fetish objects are "insidiously comfortable," with the power to both "tug on your heartstrings, but also to rip them right out of your chest."

And *Too Many Cooks* relishes in that turn. Robert Lloyd's description of events in the LA Times best summarizes the plot, how the cyclical universe "comes loose from its axle; noise is introduced into the signal; the actors become detached from the credits, though still wearing their names like badges; there are decapitations." Like comets in the sky, excess and non sequitur always come back as modes of expression in online culture. (Just a week before *Too Many Cooks'* television premier, Rob Cantor uploaded the extravagant music video for his song "Shia LaBeouf" – featuring two choirs, dancers, a string quartet, aerialists and papercraft – to YouTube.)

All these absurdities lead many to ask why? *Why*, as a disapproval of art that seems meaningless, of time and money seemingly wasted. *Why*, like a child who does not know they're asking questions more fundamental than general, leading us – as *Too Many Cooks* takes Mike Rugnetta – to the existential questions. Lloyd himself can't resist the thought, asking of the film: "Is it comedy? Absolutely, as intended. Is it art? I'm tempted to say so, though surely

it was on no one's mind in the making of it." Again, the inquiry is carried by assumed (un)intentionality.

The contradictory uses of intention in critical discourse, to both reify and undercut interpretation, leaves the author in a precarious state. Beholden to the fandom, they are at best a sort of demiurge that can channel continuity. Provenance takes the form of nostalgia. And the fandom, zealots, asks questions that tease apart the limits of one's ontology. In a Reddit AMA, one commentor asks Kelly what result of one of the films more ambiguous moments was. Kelly responds. "Should I even say what I think? What if you disagree?" In another thread, editor Paul Painter silences one commentors *why's* with the maxim: "Television is fiction."

These questions are part of the critique *Too Many Cooks* is trying to make, perhaps unsuccessfully given the fielded questions. What more can you do with the surface level absurdity of trying to make sense the biological incongruities of a puppet cat in an absurdist black comedy sketch airing in the early morning hours of Adult Swim programming? In seeking to "destroy our collective nostalgia" for the '80s sitcom, and counter the evolving audience relationship to media as content carried by it, *Too Many Cooks* can't evade the very killer it exposes.

Monstrous Architecture

While buildings have been described as monstrous for centuries, people have generally been commenting on their outward appearance instead of something more sinister. The term tends to be synonymous with unattractive or perhaps even ugly. The fact of the matter, however, is that architecture has a dark side.

What defines a monster? When you look at most conventional depictions, you'll see that monsters are nearly, but not quite human. This could be in terms of either body or behavior. Think along the lines of Medusa or Grendel. They might walk and talk just like us, but something about them is definitely not right. Medusa for example has a full head of snakes and Grendel pigs out on people. When you take this principle to its logical conclusion, you could probably say that monstrous architecture is about more than just buildings. The structures in question transcend their own construction materials, becoming truly terrible. I suppose the same could be said about architectural styles.

When I think about monstrous architecture, I immediately think of Neoclassicism. This particular style was invented in Europe during the nineteenth century to revitalize the sort of architecture that was favored by the Greeks and Romans, at least in theory. The reality is of course that Neoclassicism has very little to do with anything that was actually made by the Greeks and Romans, but the style certainly drew inspiration from this

practically inexhaustible source. You might call this type of architecture a modern derivative. When it comes to the Greeks, they built in a variety of different styles, most notably Doric and Ionic. As for the Romans, they had several styles of their own including Corinthian and Tuscan. The main takeaway is that Neoclassicism can't possibly trace a direct lineage back to antiquity because multiple styles of architecture were in use at the time. There isn't a point of origin.

What you need to know is that Neoclassicism quickly became shorthand for Western. The nineteenth century is often called the Age of Orientalism for a good reason. Europeans were desperately trying to differentiate themselves from people in the Middle East and Asia, something which resulted in a rather dubious distinction between East and West. Neoclassicism played a key role in this process, becoming a sort of cultural touchpoint. Proponents took pleasure in placing the elegance of its unadorned surfaces into contrast with the ostentation of the Middle East and Asia. When methods of excavation became sufficiently advanced, Europeans found out that most of the buildings made by the Greeks and Romans were actually covered in color, but nobody really got to enjoy the irony. The response by curators at museums around the world was to launch a conspiracy aimed at preventing any of this knowledge from going public. I'm not even exaggerating. People for the most part are still under the false impression that everything was made out of gleaming marble.

Neoclassicism eventually made its way to America. The style soon took on a far more sinister tone, somehow going from bad to worse, disgusting to downright rotten. This didn't happen overnight. The whole process took about

a hundred years, reaching its current stage of development only a couple of decades ago. But first you need to know about World War II. The dictators Adolph Hitler and Benito Mussolini were incredibly fond of Neoclassicism, turning this type of architecture into an officially sanctioned style, mostly because they believed Neoclassicism to be distinctively Western. Similar to earlier supporters of the style, they considered this kind of architecture to be a legacy or perhaps even a heritage of the Greeks and Romans. Hitler and Mussolini believed that by carrying on the tradition, they were doing their part to promote the moral, ethical and cultural values of the West. Hitler had bold plans for Berlin, but Mussolini wasn't far behind with Rome. The dictators naturally associated the style with race, most notably what they perceived as Caucasian.

Americans have always been fascinated with Neoclassicism, but not necessarily for the same reasons. The interest was tightly bound up with Manifest Destiny back in the nineteenth century. Similar to how Europeans thought about Africa, presidents like James Polk and Andrew Jackson wanted to spread the supposed fruits of civilization across the continent, emulating the Greeks and Romans. There was no style of architecture better suited to representing this newly established national identity than Neoclassicism, buildings like the Capitol and Supreme Court providing perfect examples. The associations got even more malign a little bit later, becoming all about race after World War II, with Hitler and Mussolini helping things along. Neoclassicism has been steadily declining in popularity, so this type of architecture is rarely talked about in purely practical terms, turning the style into something of a dog whistle. When you talk about Neoclassicism these days, what you're

actually discussing is race. The style has been openly espoused by groups on the far right including many which are better left unmentioned.

The former president Donald Trump launched a program several years ago that was meant to establish the "classical architectural style" as the "preferred and default style" for buildings belonging to the federal government. The response was praise from people on the far right, but condemnation from anyone with even slightly left leaning politics. The aim was clearly to confine a large portion of people to the margins of society. Trump wanted to make the national identity all about the West, cutting anyone who isn't "Caucasian" out of the picture. While the policy wasn't explicitly racist, I doubt that anyone failed to get the point. This of course was in sharp contrast to the previous policy emphasizing a totally different type of architecture, Brutalism. This particular style was based on the socialist principles of openness and equal access. Brutalism shifted the focus from owners to occupants, moving the people who make use of buildings to the center of attention. Trump naturally hated Brutalism.

I guess you could say that a monster of a building is nearly, but not quite architecture. You're talking about structures that have meaning beyond their construction materials, particularly in the negative. I think that Neoclassicism fits this description rather well. The style never actually had any positive connotations and became increasingly sinister over time, going from somewhat dodgy to entirely despicable. Neoclassicism by this point is nothing but a watchword for some of the most biased and bigoted people out there. The style sounds pretty monstrous to me.

The problematic nature of Neoclassicism provides a reminder that practically nothing is beyond politics. People have used architecture to push all sorts of different agendas in the past, mostly for the betterment of basically nobody. Structures have always been designed in such a way as to glorify their owners and architectural styles are just a part of this process. You could make the case that Neoclassicism for example is all about extolling what amounts to little more than a hateful ideology and the worst part is that you wouldn't be wrong. This kind of architecture is definitely grand in appearance, but somewhat sick in substance. I think we finally need to move past Neoclassicism in the search for a truly socialist style that brings the best as opposed to the worst elements of society to the forefront, something like Brutalism.

The Monster in My Belly

Six years ago, I ate at Chipotle (not uncommon for me at that time), and I don't know what was in that burrito other than what I normally order but what began with some unexpected gastric distress ballooned into something much worse. I endured months of chronic stomach pain because that's how long it took to see a doctor. I eventually started feeling better once my GP recommended antacids. Turns out my stomach was over-producing acid and constantly burning itself – something that took several *more* months to heal. But here's the thing: Even after six years, the monster never left my belly. In fact, the monster *is* my belly.

The thing I hate most about this monster is how unpredictable it can be. I'll go months, or even a year or two, without any major problems. Then suddenly it'll feel like there's molten lead in my guts and I'm not sure which way it's planning on leaving. If it leaves at all. When the monster gets angry, it might be a quick little outburst that lasts for an hour or two. Maybe a couple of days, or a week. But other times it goes on a ceaseless rampage for a month or more.

Sometimes I can quiet it down with more antacids, probiotics, or a temporary change in diet. Sometimes I'm afraid to try eating anything that isn't extremely mild, like bread and crackers. Sometimes I'm afraid to eat anything at all.

I can't eat onions anymore.

As I'm writing this, the monster is quieting down after another almost two-month long bender. At least I hope it's calming down. I thought I was okay a

few weeks ago, but then, suddenly I wasn't.

I miss being able to eat what I want. I'm either too scared to try eating a lot of the foods I love right now, or I just straight up can't because it won't let me. I miss being able to leave home without thinking about how the monster might lash out again. I miss leaving home and not creating a mental checklist of where I know restrooms are along my route, just in case something goes wrong. I miss feeling like I can leave home at all.

This isn't all the monster's fault – I know this. Some of it is wrapped up in a whole lot of personal stress and anxiety stemming from 2020-2021. It's the kind of stuff that gives a monster like this more power. And I suppose, in a way, a part of me welcomes this monster now. It's miserable and I hate it, but it's also been a part of me for a long time. I'm sort of used to being afraid, even though I don't necessarily want to be. It's familiar. In a twisted way, it's safe. It keeps me inside, where I don't have to worry about any surprise attacks.

It's easy for me to say I wish I could go back in time and prevent myself from letting the monster in. And honestly, if it were possible I probably would. But we're stuck with each other now. The only thing I can do is talk to more medical professionals and continue to steadily push myself back towards my own personal normal. And hope that someday I'm able to go outside again without having to suppress my fears first. Or maybe even go out with no fear to suppress in the first place.

Features

STOP/MOTION

Ray Harryhausen and the Magic of Stop Motion Monsters

By Orrin Grey

A few years ago, I was dying, though I didn't yet know it at the time. For months, I had been lowkey sick with something the doctors struggled to diagnose. Then, in October of 2017, I finally got a CT scan – and, from there, I was sent directly to the emergency room.

It turns out that my appendix had ruptured some months before and had been rotting inside my torso all this time, poisoning me. I was in surgery for hours, and awoke in the most terrible pain I have ever experienced. Recovery was a long, slow thing, and by the beginning of that December I was still far from returning to anything like normal.

However, that December I took a trip, the first time since my surgery that I'd left the house for much more than to see a movie. It was thanks to my spouse, who arranged for me to travel from Kansas City to Oklahoma City to see a Ray Harryhausen exhibition at the Science Museum Oklahoma.

The exhibition consisted of actual models, maquettes, armatures, and so on from his films, as well as extensive illustrations and other ephemera. Though it's trite to say such things, there are few experiences in my life that have been quite as magical as getting to see these items in person – an experience heightened, most likely, by my own recent brush with mortality.

At the entrance to the exhibit was a quote from Ray Harryhausen, written on a black wall in big, white letters: "If you make things too real, sometimes you bring it down to the mundane."

* * *

I would argue that Harryhausen may just have been the greatest creature designer in the history of cinema. But this is more than just a function of how he drew or sculpted his monsters – it was in how he understood them. Watching

a Harryhausen creation move on screen is like watching a real creature. His monsters have a life to them, a heart and a soul.

A part of this comes from that tension, that push and pull between realism and fabulism that is contained in that quote. Harryhausen, in a way that few other creature designers ever did, understood how these creatures should move and act. He studied real animals, watched how they moved not merely when they were engaged in what would be "action scenes" in a movie, but how they acted when they were bored, restless, frightened, waiting.

He also knew when to ignore that stuff. He understood the fragile alchemy that means the difference between verisimilitude and bringing something "down to the mundane." Harryhausen's monsters feel like real creatures, but they also feel like real monsters – even when they *are* just mundane animals like the elephant that fights Ymir in *20 Million Miles to Earth*.

* * *

Part of this comes from the fact that Harryhausen was doing stop motion. Indeed, if anyone can be said to have perfected the form, it was probably him. Plenty of others have worked in the medium both before and since – Harryhausen himself learned at the feet of Willis O'Brien, who created the stop motion effects in *King Kong*, in many ways the "big bang" of the monster movie qua monster movie.

I have argued and will continue to argue that stop motion may be the greatest of all special effects techniques – though I don't think anyone, even someone like Harryhausen, would ever argue that it should be the *only* one. This is not because stop motion is the most "realistic." Indeed, you would never mistake a stop motion creation for a real animal. No matter how studied their animations, the *way* that a stop motion creature moves is unique to it – nothing

else, alive or special effect, moves in quite the same way.

No, what makes stop motion so perfect is that it *feels* real, even when it doesn't look real. There's a reason why old tokusatsu pictures have a charm that Hollywood's recent Godzilla movies can't match. At the end of the day, they're people dressing up in monster costumes and playing with toys. There's something wholesome about that, even (and maybe especially) when it doesn't feel remotely realistic.

Similarly, stop motion animation feels like what it really is – toys that seem to be moving on their own. I think we have all, at one point or another, imagined our toys coming to life, moving under their own power when we weren't watching. And despite what *Toy Story* would tell us, I think we all know that, if they did, they would move like a stop motion creation.

That is the real magic of stop motion animation. Not only does it allow for creatures (and robots, and other things) that can do things no other technique – prior to the advent of CGI – could accomplish, but it contains that sense of wonder because, even when you don't buy what's happening on the screen, it still feels, deep down, like your toys are coming to life.

* * *

Ray Harryhausen passed away back in 2013, and it would be easy enough to believe that stop motion animation died with him. These days, computer animators do what stop motion once accomplished, in a manner that is perhaps less painstaking, though probably no less complicated. But the artform isn't entirely dead, as evinced by the 2022 release of Phil Tippett's thirty-years-in-the-making stop motion opus *Mad God*, an almost impossibly elaborate cacophony of shit and noise and, yes, endless stop motion monsters.

Mad God is a masterpiece of grime and ugliness, in many ways the antithesis of everything Harryhausen did – and yet, brought to life with the same techniques, and the same amount of love and dedication. And it isn't even just the people who are carrying stop motion ahead into the future where its influences can be felt. There's a story that Guillermo del Toro tells on the commentary track for the 2004 *Hellboy* movie, about how he tried to hire Harryhausen as a consultant on the film.

Ultimately, the stop motion maestro passed, citing the film as "too violent" – which, again, he probably would have hated *Mad God* – but the influence of his vision is still apparent in the way that the computer-animated Sammael creatures in the film move, or the scene when Sammael is being reconstituted from salt "gathered from the tears of a thousand angels."

Whenever we bring monsters to life, whether it's on screen or even in prose, there is room for the influences and inspirations of stop motion. It's there in the juddering motion of pale specters in modern ghost movies, and it's there whenever a monster on screen feels like more than just a monster, but a genuine part of its environment.

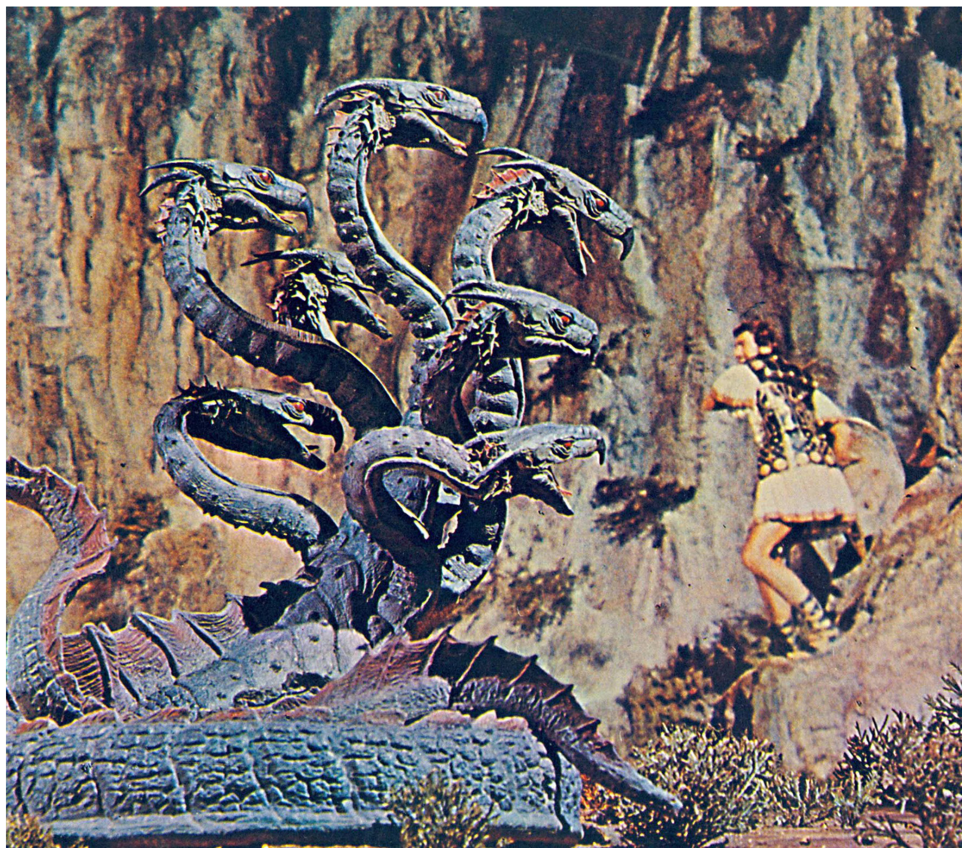
It can even be there in fiction, where the monsters are only in our imaginations, after all. As I said before, there's a way that stop motion creations *move* that is not quite like anything else, and most of us have seen at least one or two of them in our lives. A writer can at least *try* to capture that odd form of movement, that sensation of a creature at once alive and artificial. It's certainly something I've done in my own stories, time and again.

* * *

The first – and, to date, only – novel I've ever published was a piece of licensed fantasy fiction set in the world of the Iron Kingdoms, a setting I've done work-for-hire writing in frequently, most recently creating large swaths of the 5e-compatible *Iron Kingdoms: Requiem* roleplaying game. That first novel involved, among other things, a hydra, and knights fighting gigantic armored creatures like dinosaurs. I dedicated it to Ray Harryhausen.

Though it's the only such dedication, it's far from the only time Harryhausen (and other stop motion animators) have appeared in or on the fringes of my work. They're there in "Baron von Werewolf Presents: *Frankenstein Against the Phantom Planet*," my love letter to (among other things) Willis O'Brien's unmade *King Kong vs. Frankenstein* film. And they're also there in less obvious places, in the diorama monsters of "Doctor Pitt's Menagerie," in the uncanny title creature of "Mortensen's Muse."

Unsurprisingly, my house is filled with monster toys, and when I look at them, as often as not, I'm imagining them lurching into lifelike (but not *quite* lifelike) stop motion. So long as there are those of us who dream of monsters – even as we dream of our toys coming to life – there will be a place for such old-fashioned techniques, and their legacies. They'll stay around in our dreams, even after they've departed from movie screens altogether.



MONSTERS BUILT BY HUMAN HANDS

A Close Reading of Lakeview Hotel

By Hyacinth Nil

Presumably, *someone* built the town of Silent Hill. It looks not too dissimilar from the place I grew up; few distinct features on first blush and easy to find familiar. There are stores, a hospital, a church, all abandoned now for seemingly no reason. The town itself isn't ontologically bad, cursed or putrefied; it is, however, not meant for people to live in. Anyone who doesn't have a reason to be there is no longer there. Someone probably built Silent Hill, but it feels like it always has been. It's the body of a monster, each building a mouth ready to bite down and each apparition shuffling through their halls like grasping fingers clawing at those who enter.

Everyone who comes to Silent Hill is there for a reason. The town makes sure of it.

No discussion of the Silent Hill games is complete without looking closely at how each game uses its setting. The place that each character in every game finds themselves and their specific path through the twisting metal and flesh corridors is deeply personal and reflects their trauma back at them. This extends beyond the narrative and is intertwined deeply with each game's level design and monster design. While the first Silent Hill game hadn't quite found its footing regarding how intimate and specific to make the narrative, the second game in

the series sets out to callously observe and systematically dismantle its main character, James Sunderland.

By almost all metrics, James is a terrible person. He murdered his terminally ill wife, whilst lusting after all manner of different people as his attraction to his wife deteriorated. I'm not going to try to argue that he does or does not deserve what befalls him throughout the course of the game, but rather how his awfulness is manifested. Lakeview Hotel as a videogame level is specifically focused on James, his history and what he has done. What follows will focus exclusively on the hotel and how it functions, both as a compelling videogame level and something akin to a monstrous final boss.

Before getting into the nuts and bolts of how the level works, it's worth noting that Lakeview Hotel is specific to *Silent Hill 2*. It might exist in the diegesis of other games in the series, but is never referenced or shown. It is specific to James and his story, as a location where he and his wife Mary stayed while vacationing in Silent Hill. It is punishment made manifest for James, as his deeds are etched into every wall and every encounter with an enemy; the monsters serving more like fingers of the space than individual actors in their own right. This general structure is not unique in horror; haunted hotels are fairly commonplace in our cultural consciousness. Stephen King's book *The Shining* and Stanley Kubrick's film adaptation are almost blueprints for this kind of story; a terrible man stays in a hotel, his underlying badness is exploited by the hotel (which slowly reveals itself to be akin to a living creature, watching and feeding on the main character's trauma). *Silent Hill 2*, while not outright discarding this pattern, changes it by implying that the hotel, or at least this version of it, does not preexist James, like the Overlook Hotel from *The Shining* has existed before every caretaker as a malevolent

presence that harms many, if not all, who stay inside it. The instance of the Hotel that appears in *Silent Hill 2* was constructed for James by the town, as a vision of Hell just for him.

The experience of playing through the final act of *Silent Hill* starts a bit before entering the Hotel's doors with a slightly too long row boat ride across Toluca Lake. This sequence's bare nothingness, quiet and repetitive action for several minutes allows a seeping feeling of dread to settle in, especially as you see the hotel silhouetted through the fog, the only piece of land you've encountered throughout your trip across a vast, seemingly endless void of calm water and gray. Through the front entrance of Lakeview Hotel, both James and the player are greeted with expansive darkness and an atonal and distant soundscape. Any of the features that make the Hotel unnerving and cognitively dissonant (like sound effects including footsteps and doors being mixed very loudly compared to the background audio, characters not really talking or affecting like people, animations and their resulting sound not quite lining up) are present throughout the rest of the game, but here they're slightly adjusted for greater impact.

Much of the first section is silent, amplifying James' isolation as his rhythmic gate reverberates through the empty space. The quiet also makes encounters much more experientially vicious, as they acutely breach the stillness felt elsewhere. I cannot emphasize enough how every monster encounter (in the Hotel and otherwise) feels wretched and

violent. Each monster except for one is a symbol of an aspect of James that he'd rather forget. Much like James they often feel pitiful and tortured as opposed to threatening. They operate much like the Jungian shadow leaking out, a repository for everything James does not want to acknowledge about himself and his deeds. They scream horribly (whether they have a mouth or not) when James blows them apart with shotgun blasts, each having distressed human voices mixed into their formless growls and static. When they're downed, they wriggle on the ground waiting to be crushed and ended by James, in an act of symbolic self-destruction.

At this early point in the level, the audioscape highlights areas of importance. The consuming and ominous placidity is semi-frequently disrupted by an industrial thrum accompanied by a heavy but nonhuman exhalation. It's not clear how much of the background audio in the game is diegetic (we know the static that heralds an imminent encounter is), but I interpret almost all of the audio backdrop that isn't associated with encounters to be the sounds of the hotel's innards breathing and creaking in acknowledgement of the man it's waiting to digest. This "music" often accompanies areas where there's some artifact that echoes a bit of James' psyche and repression.

Upon exiting a room where a short scene plays out with Laura, the game's representation of untarnished innocence, James is met with two Abstract Daddies blocking his way through a tight hallway. This is the first time the state of the Hotel changes outside of James' action. The Abstract Daddy is a very interesting monster to drop on James at this point, as they are the only creature in the game that does not directly arise from James' experience. Rather, they're representations of another character's trauma, a trauma so great that it reverberates

outside of her and becomes tangible to others. Functionally, they're a very apt fit for this section, as their bulk makes them almost impossible to run from, given the constraints of the corridor they're placed in. Narratively however the metaphor is a bit strained. Fighting through this encounter and entering another room branching off of the main corridor, James is again greeted by that familiar industrial murmur in a room where he discovers a note left by a concierge telling him that he left a video tape in room 312 – the room where he and Mary stayed.

Upon entering, the camera is trained on James at a high angle and from the front. Fixed cameras have been integral to Silent Hill since the beginning. As opposed to some of its earlier contemporaries like the first *Resident Evil*, which used fixed cameras out of technical necessity, Silent Hill has used them almost purely for aesthetic effect. A fixed camera allows level designers to impart added meaning to scenes based on what they frame, as well as to occlude or draw attention to elements within the frame. The kind of high angle shot is fairly common in *Silent Hill 2*, but in this space, it is amplified by the camera tracking James as he makes his way towards the concierge desk, adding the omniscient feeling of the hotel watching him. James, and by extension the player, are not agents in and of themselves, but are being watched and guided by something oppressive outside of their control, underscored by the sound of churning remote machinery.

The game shifts tone when James tries to access the Hotel elevator. Downward movement is crucial in Silent Hill games, materializing the descent into a psychological hellscape. The elevator in question won't move without James becom-

ing lighter. To this end, there is a nearby shelf where the player must deposit every piece of inventory that they have, operationalizing that the items in their inventory do in fact have weight. The elevator groans as it descends, rebelling the entire way. The doors open on the first floor showing a dark L-shaped hallway. At this point, James is entirely defenseless, as well as not having his flashlight or his radio, which emits static and broken moans when monsters are near. Without them, the timbre of the level changes and instantly becomes more oppressive.

This floor uses the classic level design trick of placing a bright red light above a door in order to draw the player towards their next destination. The hotel is guiding James. It wants him to solve its puzzles, leading him deeper into its bowels. Opening a door to a hallway after collecting a key from the red lit room hammers home the aesthetic effect of losing your radio. There's a single mannequin, an enemy that's haunted James throughout the entire game obstructing the path ahead. *Silent Hill 2*'s mannequins are often emblematic of James' sexual frustration and desires, as they're two sets of constructed women's legs roughly sewn together at the waist. Here, however, it's purely functional. As enemies they do not move until the player gets close; in this corridor, the player has a beat to realize that they do not have the familiar static signaling that a monster's nearby. Everything feels muted on this floor, the color and audio less pronounced than it is everywhere else, again making material your downward trajectory into a hell of your own making.

Proceeding through a few lock and key puzzles, James again finds himself in the main lobby of the hotel. Wandering

through the angular hallways, he passes over the corpses of the monsters he's slain. It's often easier on game hardware to remove bodies after they no longer serve a purpose, so not removing them is an aesthetic choice. They lay motionless, as reminders of the pieces of himself that he's destroyed. Thankfully, we're back in familiar space, though still ineffectual and impotent.

The way is open for James to regain his inventory items and proceed to one of the most narratively meaningful puzzles in the level. The statues that you've been collecting throughout need to be placed in slots on a wooden music box with an engraving on it, which varies based on difficulty. Each engraving is both about the fairytale princess in question, meant to guide the player to put them in the correct order, and not-so-subtly about James and Mary's relationship. I won't recount each engraving here, but two lines in Hard mode really stick out to me: "Even so, I still want to believe that she was happy." Completing the puzzle causes the music box to play a haunting melody that continues throughout your stay in the room. It gives you the key that opens a path to room 312 and the revelation that James killed his wife.

This sequence is delivered through a broken VHS tape, first showing Mary alive and somewhat well, and then cutting to her barely conscious in a bed while James approaches and smothers her with a pillow. James looms large in frame and we never see Mary's face, only a cacophony of burnt images, silhouettes of Mary and shapes that look like monsters we've seen. After the memory returns and the tape ends, James sits on a chair in front of a snowy television, the high angled camera rotating around him, keeping him in the center of the frame. The scene is completely silent as he internalizes what he's done. The silence is broken by a door opening and Laura returning. What fol-

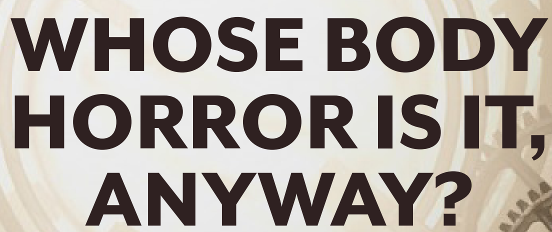
lows is a painful scene where James admits what he's done, both to himself and to Laura. The scene is shot from increasingly removed Dutch angles that map to the increasing tension and awkward rhythm of the scene. After the scene ends and a few more quiet beats, James hears Mary's voice pleading through the television for him to find her.

The entire hotel, upon exiting the room, is slowly filling with water. We can hear it dripping down the walls, signifying progressive ruin and decay for the structure. It continues to molder as we continue. Moving through the collapsing space, James finds another artifact that triggers memories of a doctor telling him that Mary's illness is terminal and incurable.

He makes his way through the flooded muck that used to be he and Mary's "special place" to a set of wrought iron doors that loom ominously over him. Through the door he sees an aspect of Mary, being impaled by two Pyramid Heads, the game's iconic executioner and the representation of James' unconscious desire to punish himself. This is the only time in the game where James can harm the monsters and also one of the only parts in this level where the themes become a bit muddy. The scene of their emergence uses cinematic language and dialogue to suggest that James is somehow redeemed, when none of the rest of the level ever suggests that. When defeated, both skewer themselves on their own spears. The hallway that follows triggers another memory for James; audio of him visiting a dying Mary. All the player needs to do is proceed down a long rotting hallway as the scene plays out. They have the choice to leave before the scene ends, mirroring Mary's insistence that James leave her alone, followed by her begging him to stay. Through the door at

the far end of this incredibly sad memory space, James ascends a stairway to the final obstacle of the game, another aspect of Mary, crucified upside down to a hospital bed. The symbolism is some of the clearest in the entire level. He must reject what he wanted her to be and face how she was and what he did. She says she'll be all he desires and that she'll never hurt him as she proceeds to vomit flesh eating beetles down on him. After she's defeated, she lays on the ground whispering his name and heaving, waiting for James to kill her once again.

Lakeview Hotel is a tightly crafted three-act story compressed into a single videogame level. It's in turns ominous, terrifying and tragic, almost perfectly encapsulating the game's themes around grief, loss, longing, self-destruction, and how we choose to deal with those feelings. Its atmosphere starts oppressive and slowly layers on the pressure, while always pointing towards those themes. It is a singular entity with a purpose; to make James suffer. As someone who makes psychological horror, this level changed me the first time I played it. It has densely layered meaning, using its level design art and audio to create a vision of pain that few other games even approach. It is a monster that consumes and alters everyone who enters its mouth.



WHOSE BODY HORROR IS IT, ANYWAY?

By Ruth Cassidy

Monstrousness is held in the body. The rotting cadaver, the mindless horde and the sickly pallor of contagion all belong to different zombies, who all hold different horrors. A werewolf is first unlike you because of its nature – it has succumbed to something that you have not – but its animalistic impulses are inextricable from how its body expresses them. We have to fear that we *could* become like the monster – that the same potential for corruption is inside us, and could make itself known.

This understanding then goes two ways, and the possession of a healthy body becomes reassurance that you are *good*. We know our bodies as whole and find it wrong when they change. Aging and disabled bodies easily become the object of horror, because in a just world (the tempting thought goes) this only happens to people who have done something to deserve it.

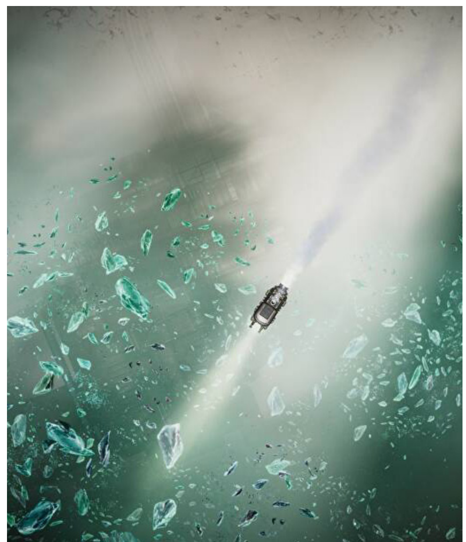
As you explore the world of *Sunless Skies,* you gain new facets to yourself – like experience being carved into a gemstone. You're changed by the depths you travel, the knowledge you seek and the choices you commit to. Sometimes it's only a memory that haunts you, but other times that change is carried in your body.

If you go to Albion – seat of the New British Empire and the equally nightmarish Clockwork Sun – you can acquire the aspect of Pestilence: "You are turning – imperceptibly slowly – into glass." It's a side effect of, quite literally, flying too close to the sun.

It's up to you whether that change manifests deep in your lungs, or on the surface of your chest. Do you hide the part of it that consumes you, or live with your terrible vulnerability transparently on display? Your breath, or your beating heart?

It's an opt-in process – to choose the aspect, to choose how it manifests – but also to ever have chosen to adventure that thoroughly at all. The captains of *Sunless Skies* embody the choices they willingly make. It's a sickness, but it's also a gamble: the price paid for embracing horror.

There is a strange self-reinforcing direction to how we think of monstrous bodies and deserving bodies, and *Sunless Skies*' pestilence cuts through it with two very interesting contradictions. The manifestation of monster makes you both less *person*, and more evidently mortal; and the flaw that causes the illness is not weakness, but an embodiment of hubris. Not an error, but a conscious indulgence, and one that's tempting to my corrupt, disabled self.



DIMENSIONS

With Enough Narrative Room, You Become the Monster

By Caroline Delbert

For ten years now, I've looked forward to each new year's *My Brother, My Brother & Me* name. My favorite one ever is Twenty Grifteen, The Con Is On. But this month, another one is back on my mind: Frankensteinteen, Become the Monster.

The other day, I was discussing "monster theory" with Unwinnable's editor in chief, David Shimomura. I'm not a scholar, so don't mistake this for scholarship – David has a monster's degree, but I'm just some jamoke. What's interesting to me is the way monstrosity is a reaction to some set of rules. To be monstrous, you must be "other" in some way from the status quo. And what your status quo is, is mandatorily dependent on cultural context. Without the rules of culture, from the micro to the macro, there is nothing monstrous.

Rules, rules, rules. We're swimming in a miasma of them at all times. They govern the air we breathe, the planet we live on, and most of the universe we live in. But that's not all. Something I realized when I recently read Doc Burford's 2021 essay you are capable of writing better horror stories is also intuitive once Doc has pointed it out. Rules are fucking boring:

"If you know that, hey, it turns out eating a carrot a day will keep you from becoming a zombie or even being attacked by zombies, then suddenly, all of those unknowns stop mattering. There are Rules now. If something abides by rules, and you understand those rules, then everything becomes a lot less uncertain, and as a result, it's a lot less scary.

"It's not to say that you shouldn't have rules – but those rules should never, in my very firm opinion, rob the horror story of tension."

Rules are often used as narrative stopgaps, stuff that makes sense in one scene even as it hews the story down a

little more and a little more until nothing tense is left. But talking with David made me realize that some of the scariest monsters follow the rules almost exactly. Their concealment within the rules is what makes them frightening. The uncanny, the vampire or werewolf, the ersatz, the doppelganger, the sociopath. They're all *wearing the human suit*.

So, when do you become the monster? Two indie games will help us explore the margins.

* * *

Jeremiah Reid's 2017 roguelike game *Golden Krone Hotel* (*GKH*) is, by its Steam tags, a traditional roguelike dungeon crawler that is difficult, Gothic and horror. The evocative pixel art shows your character, a fighter in robes, who learns the ropes of turn-based combat during a brief tutorial in a hospital wing. And at the end, without ceremony, you become a vampire. The nurse says she tried to hold it off, but it was inevitable.

GKH has a small overarching story that explains why you're in the hotel, but really, it's not that kind of game. It's a dungeon crawler where the difficulty increases until you face a final boss. But what I find most interesting about the game is that you transform back and forth, from a vampire to a human and back again, without any ill effects. The game drives you toward vampirism as your destiny, but the right potions can bring you back. As a human, you have access to more skills, and as a vampire, you're more powerful in your attacks. There are other monstrous forms you can access briefly by using potions.

Reid has turned "wearing the human suit" into something more like the stat effects of changing equipment or armor. As Doc pointed out, these kinds of rules work to reduce the horror effect, in this case demystifying the transformation

and exploring how it can even be good. In fact, Reid is surfing the inflection point between human and vampire as a way to force players to strategize how they will or won't transform in order to progress through the levels of the hotel. And because of the game's potions and mechanics, you're never too far gone to come back again.

To me, all of this makes *GKH* a great metaphor – I know, I'm sorry. But it's poignant to express that even our monstrous aspects can have power and positive impact when kept in context and used in moderation. What sets the Incredible Hulk apart from other superheroes isn't his abilities or how much good he can do; it's that he only transforms when he loses control. In *GKH*, that story is subverted by giving you back the power to choose.

* * *

Melancholy Marionette is the pen name of a visual novel developer who specializes in stories of obsessive love. Her 2020 game *Impostor* is one of the purest distillations of *yandere*, a Japanese term for the "if I can't have you, no one will!" spirit of *Fatal Attraction*'s Alex Forrest or *Misery*'s Annie Wilkes. Earlier this year, Melancholy told me she started making games because she wanted to see more "English voiced yandere dudes;" *Impostor* lets you choose a main character who's male or female and offers two voice options for each.

Things start normally, with an attentive romantic partner who asks typical questions about your day. But they quickly flip on you and accuse you of being an impostor. What more poignant example is there of wearing the human suit than a literal impostor: someone who looks just like you, sounds like you, does what you do? More importantly, does an impostor that persuasive ever really exist – or do you just believe they do?

Impostor is a horror game, and it's menacing to see how the main character plays out the story. Melancholy has made a clever choice by positioning the player as the impostor, because you literally have no idea! You really are an impostor. It's a much more restrained version of iconic "fourth wall" visual novels like *Doki Doki Literature Club* or *MetaWare High School Demo*. People who play visual novels, myself included, are used to stepping into an unseen role and

pretending to be the perfect partner. This time, it just isn't working.

"Stepping in" and "pretending" . . . That sounds a lot like wearing the human suit, doesn't it? I like all of Melancholy's games, but this is why *Impostor* is my favorite. The main character may treat you in a frightening way, but they're not wrong to suspect you, because you really are the monster all along. They're just the confused spouse, and they resort to desperate means to try to make you reveal the truth. It's debatable whether or not they're a monster at all.

* * *

Something both *GKH* and *Impostor* reveal to me, as a player, is the latent power that lies in being recognized for who you really are. In *GKH*, considering yourself uncritically and without judgment lets you embrace the monster of your nature in order to keep fighting for your freedom. And in *Impostor*, the main character identifies you as the monster and works to eliminate you. You've gambled by putting on the human suit, but you've run up against a worthy adversary.

Both of these games also highlight a uniquely human fear, which is that of being replaced or cloned. The fear is so piquant that philosophers commonly use the idea of a doppelganger to help people embody and internalize thought-provoking questions. You know the trolley problem, sure; but what if the people on the train tracks are all copies of you, with all of your thoughts, memories and feelings? You're definitely the monster now, and it's time to pull the lever.

This brings us back to the small spark of otherness. If what's monstrous is the other, then it makes sense that what's most monstrous is almost undetectable. In the series finale of *Sex and the City*, a character says something about haute couture that I think about a lot: "If it doesn't fit perfectly, it's a disaster." And sure, that's intuitive. I get it. But with the human suit, it's much more frightening to imagine that it does fit perfectly after all.

By David Shimomura

When I took the reigns at Unwinnable I had a fairly simple editorial mantra, don't stand in the way of the writers. Let people feel comfortable to critically explore where they might with as little interference as possible. Don't tamper, just let people guide their own discovery. But the funniest part of theme issues, something no one told me I *had* to do, is that people started to want more guidance.

Originally, my answer to "does this fit the theme" was to insist that people follow their own star and figure that out for themselves. Most days, I still try to say some version of this. But for *this* theme, for Monsters, it strangely became a greater question, what *is* a monster?

As initially rendered from queer/feminist theory by Brian Taylor, the Western conception of monsters have some role in upholding the hegemonic normativity of a status quo, typically as view in bodies. Upholding you say? Yes, fictively they threaten the norm and thus operate to reinforce it.

But I also think monsters, and by extensions, monstrousness implies a directionality. Greedo in *Star Wars* is not a monster; Greedo is a part of the status quo, a citizen of the world operating completely within its bounds. It's not enough to have the head of a green fly, one has to challenge the fabric of society.

This non-embodied view of monsters is perhaps most apparent in the two Halloween towns. In the Disney Channel Original Movie *Halloweentown* we're transported to the eponymous town where everyone is a "monster." Except that virtually no one is a monster. In a world full of ghouls simply going about their standard midcentury style American lives they're not just agents *of* the status quo, they're all perfectly normal. Certainly, they have problems specific to their embodied forms but truly this is no different from the mundane lives of most people in most people. In a world of *creatures* being a creature becomes normal.

Elsewhere this is exemplified in *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. As this Halloween Town prepares to make *Christmas* this idea of the normal is foregrounded. Though the idea of Christmas is foreign to the town's denizens, they're trying their hardest to "make Christmas" as best they know. All of their presents are clearly inappropriate for Christmas Town but they see nothing wrong with what they're doing. Frame of reference matters. In a world that spends all year planning an all-hands-on deck musical number being the shadow on the moon at night is par for the course. It's not until we see the threat to Christmas and "our" world that we can truly contextualize what is happening as monstrous.

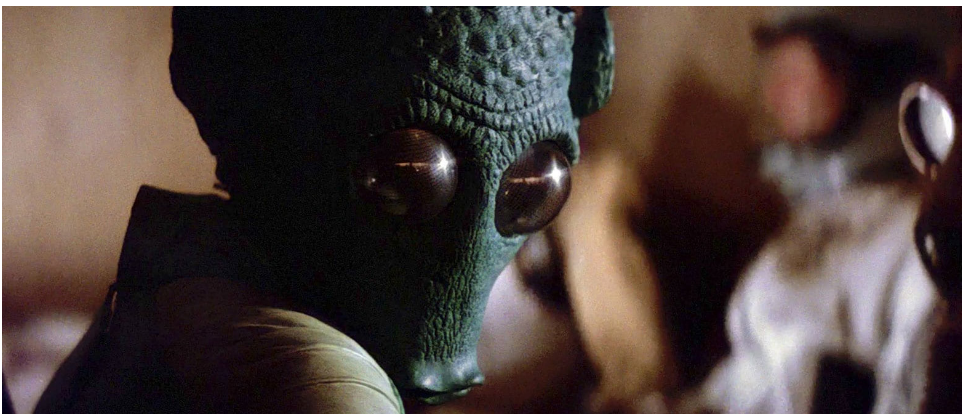
This is where the daylight between *monstrous* and *monster* are necessary. It's easy to point to the other, the created, and say "monster." What is more difficult is to identify the qualities that make any particular being monster-like. To behave as a monster does is, often, essentially to make one's self into a monster.

In *Godzilla: King of Monsters* the titular monsters are actually a panacea to our woes. The Titans, as they are called, are the original stewards of Earth and through their presence the world will be healed. Crucially, in this world there are really only two monsters then. First, Vera Farmiga's Dr. Emma Russell who is point blankly called a monster by her daughter. Dr. Russell's goal is kill millions, perhaps billions, by freeing the Titans, and there is the threat. She aims to remake the world into one where the Titans are no longer dormant. But in that frame of reference, Godzilla necessarily cannot be a monster, he just *is*. Who is a monster is King Ghidorah, a prehistoric alien who would upend this new (or rather *old)* hegemony.

Perhaps reductively, true monsters have no art. Monsters, at their most base, are the *threat*. To have art is to have interiority. It is to have society. In a world where vampires compose music with their own values and tensions the vampires are not monsters. They may certainly still be *villains* or otherwise antagonistic, but they aren't monsters. They're simply beings in that world. King Ghidorah has personality but we're never able to know there's any kind of productivity (this itself is a representation of the hegemonic, Western status quo I view as normal.)

But beautifully, you'll find all sorts of *other* theories of monstrous, monstrosity, and, most basically, the other, in this issue. I'd like to think that's because I've done little enough to stand in anyone's way. But importantly, in creating this issue it became necessary for me to have a firm, well thought out definition for what is a monster. Even if I had to be pushed to articulate it. But monsters, necessarily, cannot be "bad." Instead, like many horrors, the true monsters are dark reflections of our anxieties and stresses. They are the coagulated, coalesced transgressions made manifest. They are the scapegoat returned.

And we should welcome them with open arms because without their threat we'd have no chance to examine and alter our frame of reference and escape the hegemonic normativity of the status quo that pushes such beings to the fringes. Yes, to be *monstrous* is to be outcast but to be a monster is to be an agent of change as well.



MIND
THE GAP
By Caroline Delbert

This series of articles is made possible through the generous sponsorship of Epic Games. While Epic puts us in touch with our subjects, the recipients of MegaGrants, they have no input or approval in the final story.

Jan Gortnar and Sara Lukanc are game developers, based in Slovenia, whose narrative exploration game *The Gap* is supported by an Epic MegaGrant and slated for release in 2023. In *The Gap*, you play as neuroscientist Joshua Hayes, who is suffering from a degenerative genetic disease that sounds like something like Huntington's: "slowly [eating] away at one's personality, ability and sanity." Hayes volunteers for an experiment that might help him reclaim his life, and he spends the game trying to reconnect missing pieces of memories that are triggered by objects in his stark surroundings.

Gortnar and Lukanc started the game in 2016 while collaborating for their BA thesis in 2016. "After graduating in 2018 our journey started to have a snowball effect, slowly turning the game into a more professional venture," Lukanc says. "Before receiving the MegaGrant we had worked on the game in our free time, which has stretched the development process into years, rather than months."

They prepared for the grant application by completing two support programs. Receiving the grant transformed their game development process. "Getting the grant enabled us to work on the game full time for approximately six to seven months, polishing and extending it for about an hour and a half. The playtime extension from approximately 2.5 hours to 3.5 to four hours also sat well with our (future) publishers," Lukanc says. Especially on Steam, the two-hour boundary is seen as key for many indie developers – people can return shorter games even after playing them.

To get to this point, Gortnar and Lukanc have put in a ton of work and done a great deal of self-education. "Since our primary goal for the game was to get us a BA thesis, and we had no academic background in game design (our field was visual communication design), we wanted to limit the scope of the project as much as possible, while still making it interesting enough to work on," Lukanc says. "One evening we decided to grab a drink and talk about possible concepts when

the idea of parallel realities, throughout which some sort of mystery would stretch, came along."

They shared the work and divided tasks along the same natural lines as their interests. Lukanc enjoys writing, illustration and graphic design while Gortnar does 3D design, programming, sound design and music. Dividing the work helped them to scale together as their game concept developed. "The idea quickly grew from a small game that takes place in a single apartment throughout different parallel realities to something which takes place in multiple different environments," Gortnar says. "We didn't really have any idea how big of a project we were undertaking back then, but it grew organically to where it is now."

"The primary concept of the game was more of a 'walking simulator' without many puzzles, but we slowly realized that the game needed more interesting and diversified gameplay," Gortnar says. "Adding puzzles was the obvious choice. Designing those puzzles has definitely been a challenge though, since we wanted for every puzzle to make sense in the game world and overall story. We hope we managed to make the puzzles satisfying and fun to solve."

By keeping the game's art style relatively simple, the two have controlled the graphic complexity that can add a ton of programming and modeling work to a small game. Lukanc was able to use her art background and tools like Adobe Illustrator, Adobe Photoshop and Procreate to make assets for the game. She also used "analogue techniques" to bring one character's professional paintings and

artworks to life. “This also makes the creation process more versatile and fun,” she says.

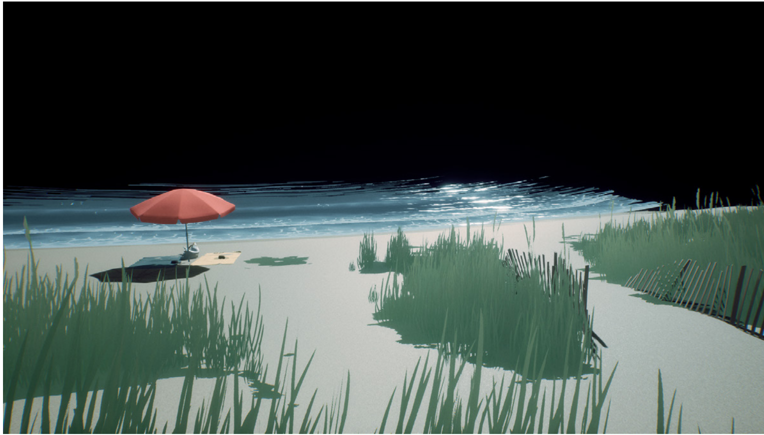
Gortnar has handled most of the environmental design using Unreal Engine, which he started to learn when they began the project. “At first, I only started to work on the environments, and after Sara and I joined forces and *The Gap* was born, I started to also learn the Blueprint visual language and how to actually make a game in Unreal Engine. In the years we’ve worked on *The Gap*, I’ve also participated in a few Epic MegaJams that helped me understand the engine further and also used Unreal for freelance work and personal projects,” he says.

I’m a lover of spaces in games (see my column elsewhere in this issue!), and *The Gap* stood out to me right away. The environments are 3D, decorated with classic “memory game” adventure clues like objects, papers and phrases. But what really struck me was the light: it’s expressive and crepuscular, with rays and shadows falling into each different environment. “We based a lot of storytelling on environmental design, and the right type of light adds the essence to all our environments,” Lukanc says.

“Since the materials in the environment are mostly simple without any unnecessary details, it was important to make the lighting look as good as possible,” Gortnar says. “At first, we tried to make the game’s lighting look more stylized and ‘flat,’ only using dynamic lighting, but we quickly realized that fully baked lighting gives us a much better atmosphere and fits better with the style of our game. I spent a lot of

the time tweaking each light source's position and parameters to get the shadows and lighting just right."

The lighting goes a long way toward warming and dynamicizing the game's spaces, and it also heightens tension in a game where the places *are* the characters. "The game mainly takes place in the apartments that you've lived in throughout your life, which we've tried to make look lived in and homey," Gortnar says. "From those apartments you can 'visit' your memories, which are the scenes you see on the screenshots. Each memory is a small vignette of an important event of your life, and we've wanted to make them diverse to help break up the exploration of the apartments."



The Gap is set in 2045, far enough that the pair hopes players will go along with the narrative lift. "The main reason why the story is set further on in the future is because we wanted to make all the necessary technological advancements believable so we wouldn't break the player's immersion," Lukanc says. "The story mainly deals with memory loss and its implications on our identity, relationships and day to day lives. There are some essential parts of the story dealing with nanotechnology and advanced neuroscience (which are yet to be accomplished by the real scientists), making the game hard sci-fi.

"We also don't want to go into too many details about what these memories are, since we want the players to enjoy and be surprised by the unknown and unexpected parts of the game," Lukanc says. "Still, we can promise you that they are as interesting and diverse

as possible. Also, since we are far from being scientists ourselves, we adopted some scientific theories and hypotheses which supported our concept and story. Any scientific gaps that appeared along the way were filled with our own imagination."

Lukanc and Gortnar began with a concept they believed was reasonable for two university undergraduates with no game development experience to take on. And it's true that the final game sounds like it's a substantial size that will still be manageable to players as well as the developers. But the scope has grown and complexified quite a bit, something that makes sense given the often-hidden realities of game development and even things like introducing settings that require some scientific research.

"We didn't have any plan for this project beyond the final BA thesis back then, so we're still really surprised on how much it actually managed to grow," Gortnar says. "We were also surprised by how long things in game development actually take, from the development itself to the business and management side of it."

Lukanc is frank. "If I could go back in time and be able to change anything, though, I'd try to come up with a less complicated story [and] concept for our first game, and think about long term goals for the project early on," she says. "For an inexperienced indie developer without an academic background in game design, it can be especially hard at times to dive straight into a professional setting without much guidance. On the other hand, we can consider ourselves extremely lucky to get the MegaGrant and a publisher, which will help us get

through the rest of the development and all the marketing hurdles ahead."

It's clear that different Epic programs and software have helped Gortnar and Lukanc feel supported as they developed their game, and that's especially important within the small but burgeoning game development scene in their home of Slovenia. *The Gap* is set in a general way in North America, very different from the small Central European nation where they live.

"The game developer culture in Slovenia is still in its infancy," Gortnar says. "There aren't really any AAA studios here apart from mobile developers. The industry is mostly made up of smaller indie studios and individual hobbyists. Things are starting to grow, however, with more developer workshops, meetups and events happening each year."

* * *

For more about The Gap*, check out the official site or add the game to your Steam wishlist.*

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Illustrations

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