Demonic Games: Demonic Figures and Functions in Contemporary Digital Games

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INTRODUCTION

Games and demons are linked together by a rich and often contradictory cultural history. Already in the early computer games of the late 1970s, often inspired by the *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D; TSR, 1974) table-top role-playing game, the adventures in underground dungeons and confronting and various supernatural monsters played a central role.

In the 1980s, D&D and other role-playing games were at the centre of a moral panic with religious overtones, especially in the United States. During this time, it was publicly claimed that role-playing games lead the players into the dangerous world of the occult, witchcraft, Satan worship, even leading into suicides. Although the religious threat images associated with games have largely faded over the years, on the other hand, demons and demonological imagery have persistently maintained their position as part of gaming culture. Much of these debates and moral panics have already been covered in literature (see, e.g., Laycock 2015).

In this study, I will discuss the rich history of the demonic imagery and agency in games, and, through popular game examples, detail various key gameplay and aesthetic solutions through which the demonic characters and imagery have left their mark on the game culture. There exists already relatively detailed discussions of monster figures and functions of monstrosity, also in digital games (see, e.g., Carroll 1990; Cohen 1996; Perron 2009; Mäyrä 2011; Backe & Aarseth 2013; Krzywinska 2015; Ruberg 2018; Švelch 2018; Stang & Trammell 2020), but the theory of demonic in games is still underdeveloped. The present study will provide contributions to this specific area.

THEORY OF THE DEMONIC

As an initial theoretical framing, I will use my own earlier theory of demonic polyphony and internally contradictory textual self (Mäyrä, 1999). One of the key elements in this approach is how it directs attention into the ways how demons and demonic imagery signal underlying conflicts in contexts where the agency or subjectivity (the "Textual Self") is constituted by internal tensions. For example, the figures of cyber-demons or cybernetic monsters can be interpreted to be powered by an uneasy relationship towards information technology as a problematic Other that is both empowering and extending human agency, as well as limiting and amputating it in uncertain and ambiguous manners (cf. also earlier work the extension/amputation

dynamic in: McLuhan 1964/1991; Haraway 1991). Analogous dynamics can be analysed in the context of human-animal hybrids, including the supernatural threat captured in the figures of werewolves, or (at the borderline of human body and inanimate matter) zombies, vampires, and other "walking dead". Such figures stage confrontations for what it means (and/or does not mean) to be a 'human' agent, fundamentally.

DEMONS AS MONSTROUS ADVERSARIES

For the purposes of this study, it is important to highlight the visible role that action and shooter games in particular have played for the rise of popularity for the demonic in games. In these games, demons have served rather straightforward roles in providing endless gameplay adversaries (cf. Švelch 2023, 65–67) as well as inspiration for the games' visually grotesque and violently transformable monster characters, such as those met in the classic first-person shooter game *DOOM* (id Software 1993). The futuristic fantasy of military empowerment via advanced technological augmentations can be seen to be charged by the underlying anxieties particularly in the historically male relationship to power, sexuality and technology (cf. Theweleit 1977/1987; 1978/1989). The diversification on this tradition in game culture can be further analysed with the help of "action RPG" games such as those in the popular *Diablo* series (Blizzard 1996; 2000; 2012, etc.) These games modify the positionality of player (in the move from first to third person view), pacing and level design, among other genre defining features – but in *Diablo* games the diverse demonological, mythical and religious traditions are still framed by the underlying ambiguous gameplay dynamic of armoured bodies and their difficulties in controlling the instinctual impulses (or, the various "chthonic", underground and corporeal powers). There is a step towards integration of the demonic with the Self in *Diablo*, as even the player character becomes host and possessed by Lord Diablo at the end of first game in the series.

COMPLICATING THE DEMONIC IN GAMES

To provide examples of the directions where the demonic tradition has evolved in more contemporary games, a newer action-adventure game *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory 2017) will also be discussed. This game serves as an example of the psychological deepening in certain aspects of the game culture, game design, and about the variety in the application of demonic imagery and agency in games. Combining Scandinavian mythology, combat, and psychological horror, this game offers the opportunity to interpret the featured demonic monsters, spirits or voices in a variety of ways – as psychosis, schizophrenia, or through a religious-mythical and/or gaming framework. There is also complex dynamic between the Self and the demonic in this game, as the player and Senua both are struggling while trying to separate truths from the lies, and the destructive Other from those voices that can be integrated into the Self.

By building a dialogue between the theory of demonological textuality and games of different genres that contain demon imagery, this study will construct a loose interpretive framework as a tool for analysing, understanding and classifying the basic nature, functions and development directions of 'ludic demons' and the demonic in games.

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