1-Bit Skin: Materializing Abjection in *World of Horror* (2023)

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In 1980, Julia Kristeva published her seminal work, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Building on the psychoanalytical theories of Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud, Kristeva purports that abjection is experienced when humans are confronted by an inability to distinguish between a subject and object (Kristeva, 1980). This text would go on to shape the critical study of visual and textual representations, particularly in the genre of horror. Unbeknownst to Kristeva at the time, the ever-growing videogame industry would become a playground with which abject fantasies are often explored. Colin R. C. Bronsema (2017) captures this idea in the assertion that 'video games offer a visual, psychological, and physical immersion' that can allow players to transcend spectatorship when engaging with the abject. If the grotesque film, image, or text can elicit a physical reaction, effectively externalising the process of abjection, then a videogame possesses the unique quality of enabling its player, not only to react to audio-visual stimuli, but also to interact with it. How might the confrontation between an otherwise peripheral entity be challenged by the videogame's capacity to interfere with it?

World of Horror (WoH) is a retro-style, role-playing game (RPG) released by Ysbryd Games in October 2023. The game resembles a rogue-like, and requires the player to solve five randomly generated, branching mysteries in a fictitious 1-bit interpretation of Shiokawa, Japan. The rogue-like elements are owed to the inability to practice and enhance strategy during new runs. Each run is determined by a randomized selection of variables that alter your abilities and actions. You are assigned a new player-character, Old God, and set of cases at the outset, and virtually never experience the same set of variables again. Solving certain cases can aid you in other cases. However, the game does not delineate which order you should approach them in, and it is not guaranteed that cases that relate to one another will appear in the same run. Whilst the turn-based format allows the player time to contemplate their actions, the unpredictability and consistent sensation of entering the unknown throughout gameplay is a large part of what elicits feelings of discomfort and abjection.

This 'quiet horror' is described as a 'love letter to the works of Junji Ito and H.P. Lovecraft' on the game's official website.[1] However, an expansive *WoH* compendium, populated by the Steam community, has unveiled decades of popular culture references to cosmic and body-horror tropes featured in the game.[2] For

instance, the 'Koi Woman' (figure 1.), an enemy that players can encounter when investigating the seaside in *WoH,* assumes the same wrinkled forehead, bulging eyes and gaping mouth as 'The Gil-man' (figure 2.) from the cult-classic film, *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954). The figure of the 'Gil-man', a hybridization of an aquatic animal and a human, confronts the viewer with the boundary whereby 'man strays on the territories of animal' (Kristeva, 1980), provoking an existentialist human-hybrid abjection. Thus, *WoH* can also be viewed as a virtual archive of the abject in popular culture. Yet, it is equally generative in the production of new meaning for these icons, as the medium of videogames enables a different way to interact with the content. The contained space of the game creates a playground of grotesque figuration that can allow new intertextual meaning to be generated, not only on a referential level, but by placing abject icons in physical proximity within the game.

Figure 1. 'Koi Woman'. An enemy encountered when investigating the Seaside area during gameplay.

Figure 2. Still from *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954)

Beyond an exploration of the abject as expressed by enemies, gameplay, and reference to popular culture, this research focuses on a particularly rich site for abjection: skin. Skin can be theorised as a mode of corruption, and a vessel without

which abjection could not occur. The notion of skin as intrinsically linked to sin and corruption can be traced back to Galenic philosophical assumptions about the materiality of the soul (Anthony, 2013). Anthony asserts that Galenic ideas formed the basis for Augustine of Hippo's doctrine of original sin 'which has had incalculable effects' in shaping Western thought on skin and the body. In fact, much of Kristeva's ponderings on the corporeality of the body, and the dichotomy between the interior matter, and exterior 'waste', echo ideas of 'corporeal disorder' between different parts of the body in Early Modern thought – which was imbued with Augustinian principles (Biernoff, 2002). What is especially notable in tracing this history, is the emphasis on the materiality of skin. Whilst *WoH* undeniably defiles skin through its virtual museum of the grotesque, what might the 1-bit world say about the represented materiality of its character's bodies?

The methodological approach that will be undertaken during this research project will be interdisciplinary, combining art historical analysis with the player-as-analyst approach widely used within game studies scholarship. This hybrid approach will consider the abject via Kristeva's principal discipline of psychoanalysis, set against the historicity brought about by the theological issues elicited when animating horrors of the body. Meanwhile, the player-as-analyst approach conceived by Carr (2019), will enable me to produce a ludic, and reflexive analysis that will capture fragments of abjection in action. Given the game's prevention of repetitive runs, Carr's framework suits the purpose of this research. As Carr highlights in their work, videogame analysis warrants the idiosyncratic and subjective reiteration of one's play: 'what does it mean for a player-as-analyst to document each version of a dialogue exchange, if that is not how anybody actually plays?'.

World of Horror offers an interesting case study for the materialization of abjection in video games. It brings together a catalogue of disturbing figures and creatures in a 1-bit format, reducing the materiality and texture of their skin to pixels. And yet, the game still manages to reinvoke the visceral and tangible texture of the abject.

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ENDNOTES

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