

Body Horror as Body Shaming: Fatness and Monstrosity in Video Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The study of representation in video games has been a crucial area of inquiry, especially as conversations about the cultural ramifications of stereotypical or harmful representations have entered popular discourse. The lack of diverse representations of minorities and marginalized groups has been a heated topic of discussion for years and many scholars have noted that developers overwhelmingly privilege white, male, able-bodied, fit/slim, heterosexual subjectivities (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Kennedy, 2002; Nakamura, 2002; Leonard, 2003 & 2006; Miller & Summers, 2007; Dunlop, 2007; Jenson & de Castell, 2008; Consalvo et al., 2009; Higgin, 2008; Hayes & Gee, 2010; Dietrich, 2013; Carr, 2014; Gray, 2016). Game scholarship has revealed troubling trends and statistics regarding the lacking, stereotypical, or offensive representation of white women, people of colour, and queerness in video games (Shaw, 2014 & 2016; Goldberg & Larsson, 2015; Malkowski & Russworm, 2017) and the marginalization of these groups within the game industry (Consalvo, 2008; Harvey & Fisher, 2014) and within gamer culture (Consalvo, 2012; Jenson & De Castell, 2013; Shaw, 2011).

Although the study of representation in games is a rich and growing area, most scholarship which focuses on representations of marginalized bodies has focused on sexualization and exoticization, whereas few studies have addressed the ways in which certain bodies are framed as horrific, repulsive, and abject in games. Diane Carr's (2014) work on the intersection of horror and disability in *Dead Space* (Visceral Games, 2008) was foundational for scholarship on the intersection of games, physical disability, and monstrosity, yet this area is still severely understudied. This proposed presentation contributes to this area of inquiry by focusing on the representation of fatness in a selection of commercially successful and critically acclaimed games, its common use as a horror trope, and how the offensive and often gendered association between fatness, disability, mental illness, and monstrosity contributes to the alienation and "othering" of already marginalized and vulnerable groups of people.

The objective of this research is to deconstruct how video games frame female and male monsters and antagonists as repulsive and horrifying due to their fatness. This presentation includes a discussion of the physical representation, in-game behaviour, and

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narrative function of these characters and creatures; how they fit into established conventions and tropes in horror, science fiction, and fantasy media; and a brief look at fan, critic, and developer discourse about them. The discussion begins with female monsters and antagonists, including the Broodmothers in *Dragon Age* (BioWare, 2009), Clotho and Euryale in *God of War II* (Sony, 2007), the Crones in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED, 2015), Darlene from *Dead Rising 3* (Capcom, 2013), and the mother in *The Binding of Isaac* (McMillen & Himst, 2011). I then discuss male monsters and antagonists, such as the various monsters in *Little Nightmares* (Tarsier Studios, 2017), Boomer in *Left 4 Dead* (Valve South, 2008), The Bloater *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013), Insane Cancer in *Silent Hill* (Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo, 1999), Sullivan Knoth in *Outlast 2* (Red Barrels Studio, 2017), and Alex and Luka in *Prey* (Arkane Studios, 2017).

This analysis was conducted by recording my playthroughs of these games and taking screenshots of relevant characters and scenes. I took detailed notes during and after each play session and connected these resources to identify themes, tropes, and associations within the games, particularly regarding gender, sexuality, body horror, mutation, contamination, gluttony, madness, monstrosity, and disability. My objects of study were classified into thematic, narrative, and visual categories, which were closely analysed in relation to the game as a whole, to the other games under study, and to horror, sci-fi, and fantasy media more broadly. The methods for this research follow Carr's (2014) visual and textual analysis of disability in the game *Dead Space*, an approach which is particularly useful because she focuses on representations of a group which is marginalized due to physical appearance. This research also builds upon scholarship on body horror in film and television and the visual and textual analysis techniques established in feminist film theory, especially Barbara Creed's (1986; 1993) work on the monstrous-feminine and abject maternal monsters in horror films and Jane Caputi's (2004) book on gender and monstrosity in popular culture. To analyse fan, critic, and developer discourse, I used online content analysis (McMillan, 2000) and critical discourse analysis (Gee, 1999; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; Fairclough, 2003) to classify and compare the ways in which these characters were discussed, with a focus on how the monsters/antagonists of different genders were designed, perceived, and critiqued. Overall, this research is underpinned by feminist scholarship on fatness, body shaming, and disability, especially work done by Cooper (1997), Shildrick (2001), LeBesco (2004), Farrell (2011), and Herndon (2011).

By analysing and discussing a wide range of fat characters and monsters, this research demonstrates some key differences between male and female fatness, particularly the ways in which fat female monsters and antagonists are constructed as grotesque specifically in connection to their gender, sexuality, and fecundity. Male monsters and antagonists, on the other hand, are presented as grotesque not in relation to their gender but due to their wealth, laziness, compulsive eating habits, or infection. In each case, whether the character is male or female, their fatness is associated with evilness, compulsion, madness, disability, disease/infection, and body horror. As such, these games all reveal and propagate the fear of non-normative bodies by presenting fat characters as horrific, repulsive, and grotesque. These representations are all tied to problematic assumptions about normative masculine and feminine bodies, including the connections between fatness, disability, madness, and monstrosity. This project thoroughly deconstructs the characters analysed and connects them to broader trends within media representation and within the game industry. The aim of this project is to critique current problematic practices in video game design, highlight ways to improve

representations of alternative body types, and contribute to research which supports inclusivity, justice, and equity in video games as a creative practice, cultural production, and representational medium.

BIOGRAPHY

Sarah Stang is a PhD candidate in the Communication and Culture program at York University in Toronto, Ontario. She completed her Master's degree in Cinema and Media Studies at York University and holds a Bachelor of Arts in History and Religious Studies from the University of Victoria. She approaches the study of digital games and other media from an interdisciplinary, intersectional feminist perspective. Her published work has focused on game adaptations, gender representation, fatherhood and familial bonds, representations of madness, and the monstrous-feminine in digital games. Her current research explores the representation of marginalized bodies and monstrosity in digital and tabletop roleplaying games.

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