Fear of Monsters:

Towards an understanding of the threat of the computational monster read through the theoretical lens of game-play

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Fear of monsters: Towards an understanding of the threat of the computational monster read through the theoretical lens of game-play.

Lasse Juel Larsen and Bo Kampmann Walther

Scary monsters, super creeps
Keep me running, running scared.
(David Bowie: "Scary Monsters (And Super Creeps"), 1999.

Abstract:
This article analyzes the configuration of fear generated by the computational monster in computer games. We view the monster as a computationel entity, which we approach through our theory of game-play coupled with the concepts of loss aversion and endowment effect. Of particular interest is player perception of the threat posed by monsters as they perturb the experience of progression and the sensation of control within the game. We scrutinize this aspect from a situational as well as an existential perspective. Furthermore, we advance an analytical scheme of the threat of the computational monster, which is radically different from the traditional academic approach with its emphasis on the representation of monsters. Overall, we argue that the threat players perceive when facing monsters in computer games springs more from the computational nature of monsters – how they upset progression and the feeling of control – and less from the representation of the monster(s).

Keywords: Monster, Threat, Computer Games, Computational, Ontology, Aesthetics, Game-play, World of Warcraft.

Introduction

Anxiety builds inside us as it always does, when we're about to enter a dungeon filled to the brim with scary monsters and dangerous bosses. Today, our group of five dedicated players face a multitude of intimidating monsters including four chilling bosses in the dungeon "Sanguine Depths" in *World of Warcraft's* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004-) latest expansion pack, *Shadowlands*.[1]

Before we begin our run through Sanguine Depths, we need to enhance our strength. So, we eat, drink, boost our armor, and sharpen our weapons in the lobby of the dungeon. When everybody is ready, we place the mythic keystone in the Font of Power, which will set the dungeon's timer in motion. The timer restricts the amount of time at our disposal to complete the dungeon. Today, the mythic difficulty level is set at +15. The higher the keystone level the shorter the time *and*, of course, the harder the eerie monsters become. Once the countdown begins there is no turning back. There is only one way forward, and that is through the dungeon.

This week, the spinetingling monsters are especially terrifying: the dungeon is fortified. This means that even though the bosses might be easier to kill, the reverse is true for all the trash mobs (the latter being the name for the monsters in the dungeon except the bosses). Next week the

[1] This article was written before the release of *Dragonflight*, the now latest expansion pack, released Nov. 28, 2022.

dungeons will be set to tyrannical: then the bosses are harder to combat since we need more time to slay them. Conversely, the trash mobs are easier to kill. Thus, dungeon difficulty shifts between either fortified or tyrannical. Regardless of that, we still need to complete all the dungeons of *Shadowlands* – within the time limit, of course – at both fortified and tyrannical mythic level +15 to obtain the highest achievement rank: The Keystone Master. Such an accomplishment is quite a feat. It demonstrates skill and knowledge of the game.

Immediately, when we begin the Sanguine Depths dungeon, we face several scary monster packs. The word 'scary' echoes in our minds as we collectively recall the YouTuber "Dratnos". In many of his instructional videos on how to handle Sanguine Depths he speaks of trash mobs as *scary*. Furthermore, Dratnos explains why particular packs of trash mobs are either scary or *very* scary. The very scary packs of trash mobs demand absolute focus, accurate knowledge of game mechanics e.g., the monsters' abilities, responses, and behaviors (Burgun 2015, Sicart 2008), clean and precise execution of our game mechanics e.g., abilities, trinkets, and cooldowns (Larsen 2022), but most of all coordinated team behavior to combat the monsters successfully.

Before we jump to the question fueling this article it should be noted, we perceive the monster predominantly as a computational entity and far less as a unit of representation. Now, with that out of the way, we have arrived at the question inspiring this article: *what is it that make computational monsters scary?*

This question is not as straightforward as it appears. When we write 'scary', 'computational', and 'monsters' in the same sentence, we allude

to the specific fear monsters in computer games infuse in players. This fear is different from the ones we get from movies, tv-series, and literature. Computational fear can be neatly illustrated with two examples from the world of analog games; later we shall return to Sanguine Depths. For instance, interesting specimens of scary computational monsters can be found in the Monster Manual of the long-lived and often revised role-playing game (RPG) *Dungeons and Dragons* (Gygax, 1977). Here players are confronted by evil level draining monsters such as Wights, Wraiths, Vampires, or Liches (Nylund, 2021). These monsters are alarming not because of their awful appearance (that counts also, of course), but because of the threat their mechanics pose. The reason these monsters are dangerous is because they aim to take away something from the players which they cherish: their beloved *progress*, effectively by erasing the players' *levels*. Thus, all the experience points (XP) which the players have accumulated up to this point are suddenly at risk! Such a level draining mechanic is deeply frightening.

This means there are basically two modes of fright in computer games, two ways of being scared, separated and yet highly intertwined, as illustrated in the figure below (Fig. 1)

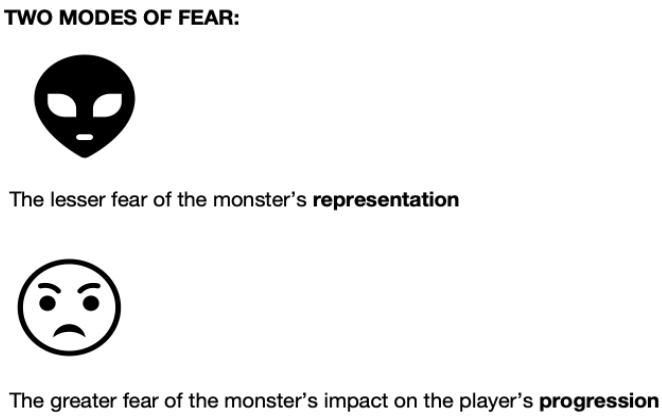

Fig. 1: Two modes of fright in computer games. The lesser fear of the monster's representation versus the greater fear of the impact on the player by the computationel monster's game mechanics.

Another example of a scary monster is The Rust Monster from the Monster Manual. The Rust Monster hungers for precious metals and therefore threatens the characters' equipment. Painstakingly collected game material such as weapons and armor hangs in the balance once the Rust Monster appears. This makes The Rust Monster a truly feared creature.

These two examples illustrate how the threat of monsters' spring from their computational nature. However, this approach calls for further investigation, which is the ambition of this article.

We aim to explore the specific and different threats monsters generate in digital games. Our case material is *World of Warcraft*, an aloof digital cousin to *Dungeons and Dragons*. We also, however, wish to tentatively understand computational monsters in a broader sense. Our point is that the computational monster shouldn't be confined to specific genres, such as survival horror or stealth action, or the creepy psychological terror in

games like *Silent Hill* (Konami 1999-2014), *Resident Evil* (Capcom 2002-) or *Dead Space* (Electronic Arts 2008-).

The strength of widening our approach is, we believe, that it allows our research findings to be applied to the computationel monsters in *Super Mario Bros* (Nintendo 1985-) and the like. Most of those computational monsters that emerge in such games are somewhat likeable, we get that, but they are also in a strict and simple sense computationel entities responding to and threating the player.

Thus, our approach to the computational threat that monsters pose in computer games covers a wide range of computational monsters in a host of different games. We insist that this approach is feasible since monsters in games are computational and share *computational traits*; and it is the threat stemming *from* the monster's computational nature that interests us in this article.

A note on methodology

Overall, our examination springs from hypotheses and assumptions derived from and inspired by our own experiences with play (Aarseth 2003; Lankoski and Björk 2015; Mäyrä 2012; Popper 1979, 2002). We are inspired by two sources. First, Sudnow's (1983) autoethnographic book *Pilgrim in the Microworld*. Here Sudnow captures the inner workings and difficulties of mastering the Atari game *Breakout* (1976); and much the same way we hope to apprehend the intricacies of the fear which the computational monster instills in players. Second, we combine our autoethnographic approach with analysis to formalize our findings into a

theory of what kind of specific fear that surrounds the computational monster. Analyzing particularities from 'fearful' instances in games (and other media) hopefully demonstrates the explanatory value of our grounding hypothesis – that the representation and experience of fear in games are notably different from other media – and thus we invite potential aims at falsification by critiquing the methodological framework itself.

Research tradition: a tripartite approach to understanding monsters.

The traditional research tradition broadly concerns how monsters are perceived within the realm of novels, tv-series, and movies. We claim it can be bundled into a tripartite methodology, which emphasizes 1) the *ontology* of the monster; 2) the *aesthetics* of the monster; and 3) lastly how the monster is situated within the frame of the narrative *structure*.

This tripartite approach highlights the following, 1) the monster as an *object*; 2) the *subject* as perceiver of the monster; and, finally, 3) the *narrative structure* in which the monster appears (Cohen, 1996, Kristeva 1982, Freud 2003, Hart 2020, Carroll, 1990).

This division is admittedly somewhat curtailed. It reduces the granularity and complexity of the monster's function in fiction. Nevertheless, we intend to replicate this tripartite structure with one considerate change, which is to concentrate on the *game* structure rather than the narrative structure. Monsters do appear in abundance and take on dominant roles in story-driven computer games; however, here we will

distinguish between ‘game-play’ driven games (Larsen and Walther 2020, Walther and Larsen 2020) and ‘story-driven’ games. Games such as the 3D shooter *Counter-Strike* (Valve 2000-) and the multiplayer online battle arena game (moba) *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2013) are thus placed in the ‘game-play’ basket as opposed to games like *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company 2013) and *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café, 2013), which falls under the story-driven category. We are fully aware of the fact that many games mix and remix ‘game-play’ and ‘story’ in their designs (thus potentially invoking ludo-narrative dissonance; Walther and Larsen, in press), and that it is no easy task to draw ironclad distinctions between the two.

The above separation is important for two reasons. First, because we, as we said, primarily wish to analyze monsters in game-play driven games rather than their twins in story-driven games. Second, because the kind of monstrosity found in game-play oriented games display the monster as a computational entity as opposed to the representation (how the monster looks) in story-driven games.

The remainder of this article will be structured over four sections. The first section concerns the traditional understanding of the fictional monster (novels, tv-series, and movies). The second section dives deeper into the notion of ‘game-play’, followed by the third section where we analyze the workings of the computational monster’s scariness in conjunction with game-play. Importance lies here in how monsters threaten the players’ **progression** of the game along with their **experience of control** of the game character. This threat, we shall argue, manifests itself both

situationally and **existentially**. In the final fourth section we summarize and reflect critically on our findings.

The traditional understanding of the fictional monster: object, abject, and sin

Through the history of horror-driven slasher movies such as *Halloween* (1978), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984-2010), and *Friday the 13th* (1980-2010) the monster has taken center stage. It's hard to forget Michael Myers' iconic mask, Freddy Krueger's composite glove of sharp knives, leatherwork, and plastic or the never truly dead Jason Voorheers who keeps returning to haunt the present.

When the monster is the primary point of attraction it simultaneously becomes an *object* of interest (Carroll 1990). Although the monster calls for rational scrutiny, it remains incomprehensible and veiled as it challenges our cognitive abilities and instills "awe and terror" (Švelch 2018 p.1). One the one hand, this perspective echoes Immanuel Kant's idea of the sublime and the terrifying traits it carries with it (Kant 2011), which disobey the synthesizing faculties of perception. On the other hand, the challenge in conceiving the monster and what it 'is' connects to Rudolf Otto's (1973) idea of the "*numinous*" (p. 7) and the creature-feeling of "*mysterium tremendum"* (p. 12.). Otto writes of the "tremor [and] emotion of fear" (p.13), which grips us when confronted with the numinous.

Carroll's examination of the monster follows and expands on the rationalistic tradition of Kant, especially his take on the sublime (Walther and Larsen, 2022). He is less inspired by Otto's phenomenological

approach to the numinous. In Carroll's view, the monster is an object that violates and transgresses the categorial order we normally abide to; the monster confronts and questions the integrity, solidity, and validity of the universal categorial order (Hart 2020).

What lies in this "categorial order"? Carroll takes off from Douglas' (2002) anthropological study *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* as it enables him to bypass the psychoanalytical reading of monsters as manifestations of the repressed. Instead, Carroll focuses on how we understand the world though mutually exclusive binary categories such as living/dead, human/animal, inside/outside, organic/inorganic, and singular/multiple (Carroll 1990, Douglas 2002, Hart 2020). These binaries constitute the schematics from which we qualify objects as either pure or dangerous (Douglas 2002). Monsters, in Carroll's view, violate these binary categories and as such they transgress the "categorial order" of any given culture. According to Hart (2020) the monster thus expresses anxieties about the stability of the categorial order by embodying those selfsame anxieties. Thus, the monster's shape and form manifest our unarticulated fears and anxieties. The monster's representational features allow us to address, confront, and combat those very fears and anxieties.

In opposition to Carroll's monster-centric (object) conception resides a subject-oriented (aesthetic) path, which focuses on the *effect* of the monster. H. P. Lovecraft and his *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1973) is a point in case. Even though he emphasizes the monster as an object, just like Carroll, he is equally eager to unlock the "sense of dread" the monster evokes in the reader/viewer. The source which creates the "sense

of dread", Lovecraft argues, emanates either from the presence of the unexplainable (the monster) or from the inconceivable drops left behind by the monster. In Lovecraft's world, monsters are two-faced. They are physical embodiments of fear and anxieties, but they also act as carriers who transport the unknown and unknowable into the safety of our physical world. Within this duality monsters ferry the intangible from somewhere 'outside' our world into the tangible 'inside' realm of everyday life. Thus, monsters besiege and incarnate a boundary ontology between the realm of the formless out-of-this-world and the physical, inhabited world. Kant would have called this, respectively, the noumenal and the phenomenal world.

In this view, monsters come to represent the drama of two worlds – outsides and insides – that are at odds with each other, since monsters are not just "transporters" between realms but also the marked and terrible *locus* of the intangible and inconceivable.

This last Lovecraftian point can be traced in Julia Kristeva's conception of the "abject" in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), where she at length discusses how to perceive and represent the intangible. That which is "abject", like monsters and the monstrous, causes revulsion, fear, and terror. However, for Kristeva, the abject is not limited to a specific solid entity – a monster. Instead, the abject springs from the ambiguous and amorphous often associated with the monster; of something which escapes and evades our faculties to secure categorial closure. Thus, the abject is generated from what exists in-between the binary categories, which Carroll was preoccupied with. Julia's focus on the unsettledness of

the abject is precisely what makes it difficult to grasp, but also enables it to defy objectification and cause dismay and fear.

Kristeva's understanding of the abject is less about unwavering objects which transgress categorization (e.g., monsters), and more about the sensuous feeling associated with the abject. The kind of feelings invoked by the abject, Kristeva ponders, derives from a certain 'somewhere', which in fact is the spectating, interpreting subject itself.

It is important to note, that in Kristeva's understanding the interpretating subject projects onto the monster the phobias belonging to the subject itself. Therefore, Kristeva's abject is less concerned with the categorial transgression of the monster than with the psychological realm. She categorizes the monster as a phobic object where a host of unarticulated fears and anxieties can be placed. This adds up to an understanding of the monster as a *function* – a mere placeholder – upon which fears looming in the unconscious mind of the subject can be projected.

In addition to the monster-centric (monster as object) and the subject-centric (aesthetics of the monster) approaches in disclosing the complexities of scary monsters a third analytical path must be mentioned: a structure-centric way.

This structure-centric approach deals with how the monster is framed within the narrative design. The presentation of the monster is deeply intertwined with specific narrative techniques and devices as they determine how scary the monster is – not how the monster appears when we see it, but, rather, how the monster fits into the overall framework of the narrative to maximize its effect on the reader/viewer/player. In such

narratives the monster can be illuminated by a host of cinematic techniques ranging from lightning, sound design, visual style, camera settings and movements, to editing philosophies. In terms of how the horror plot can be designed, Carroll zeroes in on what he calls "the discovery plot", in which the monster is revealed through four stages of narration: "onset, discovery, confirmation and confrontation" (Carroll 1990, p. 99).

During the *onset* the monster's presence is hinted at to the audience. The viewers may suspect that there is monster on the loose. This presentation can be either immediate or gradual. The second stage, the *discovery*, is where one person or a small group realize the existence of the monster. Both onset and discovery can manifest in many ways, mostly through a surprise (jump scare) or through a deliberate investigation of traces of horrific acts leading to the revelation of the monster. The third stage concerns the *confirmation* of the monster's presence. Normally, a protagonist in this stage convinces the authorities that there is a monster and that its existence should be taken seriously. This confirmation act is often, Carroll explains, "quite elaborate" (p. 101). The final stage of the four-fold structure is the *confrontation* where key players venture out to combat the monster.

The general point of Carroll's typology is that 'the monster' is more than just the sum of its representational features and therapeutic potentials; the placement of the monster within the structure of a delivery system – the narrative – matters just as much (see Fig. 2).

In fact, presenting the monster is equally a matter of (graphical) representation, the monstrous outline (which Kant believed could be either

"dynamic" or "mathematic"), and inscription within the narrative framework.

Fig. 2: Three 'why's' of the monster.

Now, let's shift the perspective a little bit, from an analytic one to one that's rooted in making the monster stories work, so to speak. In Blake Snyder's influential screen-writing book series *Save the Cat* (2005, 2007, 2009) he unearths a 'master structure' of the narrative composition, which is grounded in the transformation of the main character. *Save the Cat*'s approach has been expanded to encompass tv-series (Nash 2021) and novels (Brody 2018).

Additionally, the 'master structure' of *Save the Cat* is accompanied by 10 story genres, which each carry lots of variations. Each genre is defined

by a specific structure. The horror genre is craftly called: “monster in the house”. In its abbreviated form, this genre is defined by three main traits: 1) a “monster” (material or immaterial, but evil at its core); 2) a “house” referring to the enclosed space where the monster roams ranging from the interior psyche of a person, a family unit, to a town or even “the world; 3) a “sin” pointing toward someone’s guilt for bringing the monster into the house. If we read the movie *Jaws* (Spielberg 1975) through a *Save the Cat* lens we get the following result: a white shark (monster) haunts a specific area, a beach (basically a ‘natural’ habitat, i.e., a house), but the shark is brought into this area by greed (sin): the mayor of the small town doesn’t want to close the beach because it would mean the loss of important income generated from visiting tourists. Likewise, in the movie *Alien* (Scott 1978), the audience is presented with an alien (monster) onboard a mining spaceship (house) invited once again by a secret agenda (sin). The company behind the mining spaceship is fueled by greed while their cyborg scientist is consumed by fascination of the monster’s ‘purity’. But how about, say, the Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex* (Sophocles 1996 [429 BC]). Once again, we are confronted with a sin (Oedipus marrying his mother), a monster (the plague) and a house (the city of Thebes). This reading distinguishes *Oedipus Rex* as a “monster in the house” story, which would probably surprise many readers.

The important point here in embracing the assessment on creative writing is the focus on ‘sin’ as a doorway; it opens a pathway for the monster. And not only that: ‘sin’ also delivers a reason for the monster’s incidence. Not just, ‘how did the monster get here?’, but also *‘why* did it get here?’. The reason for the latter, quasi-psychologically speaking, is of

course *us*. We are the ones responsible for monstrous happenings and the fright they cause; and, interestingly, this explanatory 'trick' of sin acting as both conveyer and cause of monsters has been largely overlooked by academia.

In the following, we shall look at 'sin' from a twisted angle; namely the 'sin' of letting the monster in a computer game get away with destroying one's progression and level climbing, and to do that we need to dive deeper into the notion of game-play.

Game-play and loss aversion

Defining 'game-play' is notoriously difficult. We have written extensively thereof elsewhere (Larsen and Walther 2020, Walther and Larsen 2020), but since our goal in this paper is to clarify how the computational monster (also) threatens player progression and control, we need to briefly situate the discussion within the conceptual realm of 'game-play'. Note that we use a hyphen to accentuate the composite nature of the concept.

'Game-play', roughly speaking, can be divided into two states of player experience. The first one focuses on the 'game' state in the player's experience of game-play while the second one evolves around the 'play' state. Here we make an analytical distinction between 'game' and 'play', but in real-life gaming scenarios they are closely interconnected: players swiftly toggle back and forth between the two states of experience.

To be in a game state, we argue, is to be invested in progression; or, more precisely, it is to highlight that side of the game which favors 'the game' (and not free play). Whilst aligning one's game-play with that of

progression, one is also deeply focused on playing the game in such a manner that it leads to the potential, valorized outcome that we call the desired endgame state. Thus, one's effort lies in the *not yet realized results* of an engagement with the game. Progression inserts a *projective state*, which hold a promise of something which will be realized somewhere in the future (once all the levels are progressively tackled). This projective state heralds a sense of always "being-there" in the future: one does something *for the sake* of a future state.

Such sensation of 'being-there' (a pun on Heidegger's *DaSein*, 'there-being'), tied to the game-state, manifests itself in the various reasons motivating players to confront monsters and to perform dungeon runs like Sanguine Depths. In the course of game-play the realization of a desired future state in the game can become profoundly embedded in the activity of playing the game. In fact, so much so that we ought to phrase this kind of progression-driven activity to '*game'* a game (instead of 'play' a game) (Walther 2003).

The 'play' state is markedly different in that it is inherently situational (Stevens 1978, Salen and Zimmerman 2004, Malaby 2007, 2009). It encompasses the here-and-now circumstances in the very activity of playing a game and is thus an expression of the player's 'being-here', within the game, as opposed to the 'being-there' modus found in the game-mode of game-play. This version of game-play can be coined play-mode as it delves in the situational and presential (rather than future oriented) aspects of the game.

Overall, player experience is characterized, analytically, by the swapping between two separate states - game-mode and play-mode - a being-there (future) and being-here (present).

In the following section we will apply this analytical schematic of 'game-play' to the computational monster and argue that the fright of facing dreadful monsters is to confront two dangers simultaneously: the monster's attacks the progression-oriented game-mode of being-there *and* assault the situational play-mode of being-here. Thus, the computational horror of the monster is a disruption of the whole of the duality of game-play. 'Game' as well as 'play' is severely affected by the computational monster.

However, before we carry out this analysis, let's look at a relevant notion, the concept of loss aversion (Engelstein 2020, Kahneman and Tversky 1979, Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler 1991). It is a psychological phenomenon originally derived from the theory of economics, and as Engelstein (2020) points out it also has a clear place within the realm of computer games. Engelstein explains loss aversion as a state when "losing something makes you feel worse than gaining the same thing makes you feel good" (p. 5).

This straightforward definition implies that we humans feel good about gaining 10 dollars, but losing the same amount makes us feel worse than we did when we gained 10 dollars. Loss aversion points to an asymmetrical relationship between gain and loss of the same thing and that "the prospect of losing something weighs more heavily in our decision-making that the prospect of gaining something." (p. 6)

This concept and its implications are interesting not only because they speak about the emotional impact of a gain/loss relationship, but also since this relation is far from instrumental. On the contrary, loss aversion is ever present, we claim. It is, to use the language of game-play, situational, a snippet of a being-here while we cannot help but strategize about a being-there. Thus, the concept influences us in all gain/loss relationships, and it impose an always cumbersome tinge whenever humans are placed in scenarios of gain and loss.

Exactly how does loss aversion tie in with the theory of game-play explained above? When players wage war against a monster their endeavor is enticed by progression, a promise of the game. This promise is an implicit message of the game, which points toward a glorious future of unearthed hidden treasures: rewards.

In other words, if players successfully defeat the monster, they can expect rewards. This means that the game makes a promise of rewarding players sometime in the future, in the being-there state, but if players fail in their quest, then the future reward is denied (the player dies, fails, or is left on her own). This promise of progression is precisely amplified by loss aversion. It intensifies the threat of failure (loss), not just in terms of missed prospects (the reward) but also in terms of the promise of progression itself. Thus, loss aversion places a burden on the prospects of rewards because losing them is more heartfelt than gaining them.

However, loss aversion also relates to the player's sensation of control, the 'play mode' of game-play, the situational being-here. Just as the game dangles a promise of future rewards it already awards the player with

control. The player can move the game character around as she pleases (within the confines of rules of the game of course).

We interpret this award of control as a gain, or to be more precise, the game *endows* the player with control. This word, 'endow' is important since it reference the endowment effect (Engelstein 2020), which means that something gains value simply because it is mine. Thus, the player experiences the sense of control as theirs, something that is given to them by the game. In other words, the endowed sense of control, which the game bestows on the player is experienced as innate and owned: the control is *mine*.

In this light, 'control', the *modus operandi* of game-play's situational being-here, is not an outward thing but an inherently 'owned' player belonging. Losing control means losing something that the game has gifted the player. The player feels that the sense of control belongs to her, it is something she owns. Thus, the deprivation of the players sense of control not only violate the endowment, it also immediately kickstarts loss aversion, even though these experiences only are felt for the briefest of moments.

The asymmetrical nature of loss aversion and the endowment effect - creates an undercurrent, which raises the stakes of game-play: losing the promise of progression and the gained sense of control weighs more heavily on the player compared to gaining them.

Analyzing the threat of the computational monster

Below (fig. 3) we propose an analytical scheme to give the reader an overview of on the one hand how the computationel monster threatens the player and on the other hand how these threats interweave with game-play coupled by loss aversion and the endowment effect.

As explained above, the ‘game’ side of game-play has to do with progression while the ‘play’ side is all about control. Each side – progression and control – manifest both situationally and existentially.

All in all, we argue, this scheme holds the explanatory power of the kind of fear that the computational monster implants in players:

<table>
<tr><th colspan="4">The threat of the computational monster</th></tr>
<tr><th colspan="2">Game</th><th colspan="2">Play</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Fear of not progressing</td><td colspan="2">Fear of losing control</td></tr>
<tr><td>Situational:
a) Immediate threat from a monster or pack of monsters.
b) Confined threat from all the monsters in a dungeon, level, or specific area.</td><td>Existential:
a) Monster threatens the game character's progression.
b) Monster threatens the player's game engagement.
c) The monsters threaten the game itself.</td><td>Situational:
a) Loss of control over game character
b) Loss of control over encounter with monsters.</td><td>Existential:
a) Loss of synchronization between player and game.
b) Loss of connection between player and game.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">The endowment effect together with loss aversion amplify the fearful anxiety generated by the computational monster.</td></tr>
</table>

Fig. 3: The threat of the computational monster, an overall scheme.

Overall, fear of the computationel monster stems from its threat toward players navigation through the game space (Aarseth 2000).

The players confrontation with the computational monster manifest itself situationally and existentially.

Let's begin by explaining the situational threat of the computationel monster. It is instant and is shaped by the present challenge of combatting the monster. This threat is, we argue, both immediate and confined.

The *immediate* situational threat is defined simply by the urgent threat the monster poses. Here, players only have one thing in mind: successfully combatting the incoming challenge. It is a question of defeating the monster or dying in the process.

The *confined* situational threat revolves around a limited space crammed with monsters. Normally, they are dungeons, and in them monsters bundle together to form one cohesive and coherent challenge: surviving the dungeon. Player success hinges on the killing of the required monsters including bosses. Think of Blizzard's mythic dungeon design where the player must fulfill three goals: 1) defeat the final boss before the timer runs out; 2) kill all the bosses of the dungeon; and 3) kill a specific number of monsters along the way. If either of these goals are not achieved, players fail the dungeon.

Returning to the Sanguine Depths dungeon in *World of Warcraft* we see that each pack of monsters poses an immediate situational threat to the player's progression through the game space. However, all the monsters that are there in the dungeon, viewed as one uniform mass of obstacle, manifest a much larger threat than a single pack would. The bundling of monsters suddenly embodies a different threat altogether – that of

surviving the *entire* dungeon, rather than overcoming a separate challenge within it. This counts as a far more complex (and thrilling) feat than slaying one singular, roaming monster or a pack of monsters.

Seasoned *World of Warcraft* players face these challenges, for instance, when joining random groups for dungeon runs. They experience, firsthand, how such groups can fall apart, especially when dungeon challenges are too high. After the first wipe groups disband to a heated blame game as to which fault it is that the group died. Such blame games specify players' agony of broken hopes of efficaciously resisting the final monster, the end boss, to redeem the progressive dungeon promise: to receive new and higher-level equipment.

Thus, situationally, the monster exhibits the threat of player progression along two lines: one being immediate in confronting a monster pack, while the other concerns the bundled monsters in a confined space. Players distinguish between "we killed the monster pack!" (immediate) and "we beat the dungeon!" (confined).

Importantly, however, the monsters in Sanguine Depth also threaten the player's progression existentially. This existential threat manifests itself in three ways: 1) in the development of the game character; 2) the player's engagement with the current challenge that she faces; and, finally, 3) the game itself.

The first existential threat comes into view when players are unable to survive an encounter with a monster or pack of monsters in a dungeon, their game character is excluded from further progression. In the case of Sanguine Depth: denied loot dropping at the end of the dungeon brings progression to a halt (and thus also blocks the character's ability to do what

it's supposed to do best). Such impairment constitutes a serious scourging and a troubling existential distress, which often lead to abruptly changed player activity. The activity gets diverted away from running dungeons by securing towards a desired endgame state. Therefore, players' loss of progress is existentially speaking far more profound and deep-seated than the instrumental slaying of one or a dozen monsters.

Yet there's an even deeper existential threat tied to the loss of progression. If the player finds herself continuously unsuccessful in combatting monsters, the monsters will threaten her involvement with the game. As a result, monsters transform into something that is superior and truly transgressive in nature, which is halting the player from playing the game. It goes without saying, that game developers, like the before mentioned Blizzard Entertainment, are acutely aware of this threat and constantly try to mitigate it by fine-tuned level design, game balance, and character progression.

But a third existential threat is at play: an alarming danger toward the existence of the game itself. If players stop playing and leave the game, because they cannot make their game character progress or because they fail to manage the challenges the game present (e.g., monsters and dungeons), then the sheer existence of the entire game is suddenly jeopardized. Thus, monsters not only carry threats aimed at players; they also endanger the existence of the computer game to which they themselves belong.

So far, we have concentrated on the 'game' aspect of game-play, the progressive minded, end goal oriented being-there of playing games (Silverman and Simon 2009, Grimes and Feenberg 2009, Golumbia 2009).

Looking at ‘play’, and how it is perturbed by monsters, we encounter the being-here, the now-ness of playing computer games, which fundamentally is tied to the player’s sensation of control. This is the sensation of (being in) control that readily can be depleted when running into a wild monster pack. Monsters threaten the play of players, their being-here-ness, their sensation of control, both situationally and existentially.

Control should be understood both as the sensation of controlling a game character in the confine of the game space *and* the control of handling the game character during an encounter with one or several monsters. On the one hand, monsters directly upset the experience of game character control, i.e., what the character can (and cannot) do in the game. They lose control and can no longer effectively steer the game character. On the other hand, players also loss of control during an encounter with monsters, which is to say: players panic.

This loss of control manifest itself in two ways. The first when the game mechanics of the monsters disrupt the players control of their game character. E.g., monsters stun, freeze, silence, confuse, blind, slow, or otherwise impact the control of the game character. Thus, monsters’ game mechanics momentarily suspend players’ ability to execute the necessary game mechanics. The result is to deny players the ability to perform counter measures to the monster’s attack thereby rendering them vulnerable.

Normally, players tend to strive toward minimizing the impact of the monsters’ marred game mechanics while maximizing the situational control of game characters. Control is imperative. If players lose control

of their game characters, the entire group is at risk of dying. Basically, the control of the game character is a matter of life and death.

The second is that the commotion monsters cause not only ties to the loss of game character control, but also to the loss of control over the monstrous encounter itself. This means losing oneself to panic during an encounter of a monster pack. In these not uncommon situations players desperately hammer the keyboard in blind fate with the fruitless hope of correcting a situation run amok. When players lose control during an encounter a horrific confusion occurs and often culminates in wipes and disbanded groups.

Thus, players' dread of monsters is tied to the fear of losing control of their game character, but also to their control during an encounter with a monster pack since it threatens the cohesion of the group of players deep inside the dangerous dungeon. This explains why some monster packs are deemed scary and some *very* scary.

However, fear of losing control not only manifest itself situationally, but also existentially. The existential threat reveals itself in two different ways: the sensation of the seamless connection between the player and the game and the inherent threat of losing the connection to the game itself.

It is relevant to tie the kind of fear players have of losing their seamless control over the game to the concept of *game-feel* (Swink 2008). However, the theoretical pursuit here means that we ought to reach beyond Swink's game design laden definition: "Real-time control of virtual objects in a simulated space with interactions emphasized by polish." (p. 6). Rather than emphasizing polish, we dive below the surface of the endowed real-

time control to find an existential threat, which hinges on phenomenological situatedness.

The reason players care about their precious real-time control is due to an ongoing *synchronization* with the world through what Merleau-Ponty (1967, 2014) has described as the body-subject's condition of being-in-the-world (Dreyfus, 2002a, 2002b, 2016). This synchronization comes along as the smooth everyday flow of coping upon which we base our existence: an existential seamless condition, which is always present *and* anticipated. If this connection breaks down or is disrupted in any way, we enter a state of alarm, anxiety, and fear (e.g., we all know about this from either memory loss, loss of muscle functionality, or when we misjudge a step). Thus, the experience of the existential dread arises from the disruption of the always-already anticipated synchronization with the game: the broken real-time control.

Noteworthy is also that player experience of loss of control happens unintentionally, namely when the game lacks thereby drawing attention to itself as a game ruining the experience of playing. Both instances separate the player from the game on an existential level.

Conclusion

In this article we argued that the computational monster read through the theory of game-play, loss aversion, and endowment effect produces fear in the player by threatening the player's experience of progression and sensation of control. Progression and control can, as we saw, be understood

situationally and existentially. A threat to player progression, invoked by the monster, extends beyond the situational moments of play. It puts the progression of the player's character in peril along with her engagement with the game. This is noteworthy, because then the monster also threatens the game from *within itself*. If the player fails in demolishing the monsters of the game, she will most likely abandon the game. This abandonment puts the entire game in an existential risk of surviving. Alas, on an existential level the monster threatens not only the player, but also the game itself.

Furthermore, the monster poses a risk when it comes to players' fear of losing control, neatly coupled with endowment effect (e.g., the game endows the player with a sensation of control thus making it more disturbing when the player loses control. This is directed at the game character, the encounter packs of monsters, and/or the synchronization between player and game character including the connection to the game itself. The stir of panic in losing control is raised by endowment effect together with loss aversion because of the endowed control and the asynchronous relation between gain and loss when the game character, situationally, suffers impacts from immobilizing effects (e.g., stun, daze, sleep). Or when the player loses control of the encounter with a very scary pack of monsters: the player erupts in panic, and everybody dies. These immobilizing effects range beyond just situational. They point to a deep-rooted existential fear of losing the synchronization with the game to the point of cutting the cord to the game itself.

We have seen throughout this article that our understanding of the fear of computational monsters is radically different than the traditional,

academic ones and their aptitude towards sublimity, therapeutic reasoning, and lessons of the abject. We claim, nonetheless, that our model (see fig. 3) of dealing with the computational monster yields valuable insights as to how we should perceive the monster in computer games, but also in the way we cognize the nature of fear. Does fear spring from aspects beyond what we already know? Or should our perception of fear also include the parameters presented here – progression and control in their situational and existential soups? Such questions point toward future research (unless pursuing answers to those questions is too frightening, of course).

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