Monstrum

Player vs. Monster: The Making and Breaking of Video Game Monstrosity by Jaroslav Švelch, MIT Press, 2023, 240 pp., $26.95 (h/c)

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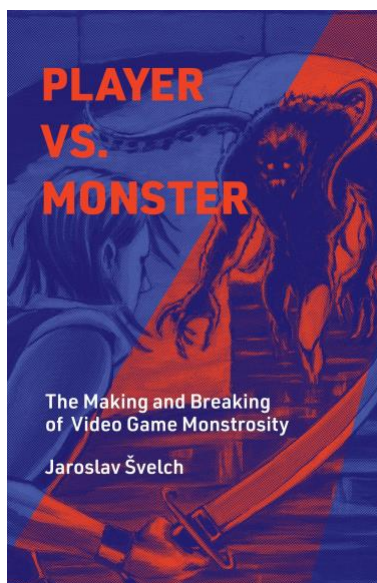**BOOK REVIEW**

Player vs. Monster: The Making and Breaking of Video Game Monstrosity

By Jaroslav Švelch
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Jaroslav Švelch's monograph *Player vs. Monster: The Making and Breaking of Video Game Monstrosity* is a fruitful and much-needed analysis of ludic media guided by contemporary monster theory. While scholars such as Bernard Perron and Tanya Krzywinska have written extensively on the role of horror in gaming and the suitability of ludic media to sustaining horror, Švelch's work fills a gap that has been overlooked in the (albeit short) history of the field. Švelch's writing style is engaging and clear, demonstrating a deep appreciation for games as a media worthy of cultural analysis. As seems to be the trend with academic monographs now, the volume does not require a specialist level understanding of critical theory to appreciate its arguments, and the relevant theory is laid out with concision. *Player vs. Monster* is a valuable contribution to the fast-growing field of game studies but can also be appreciated by the non-academic special interest reader.

As a methodology, contemporary monster theory—first formally theorized in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's seminal text *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1990) but with roots in Foucault's lectures on abnormality—broadly regards monsters as cultural products through which we might gain a contextual understanding of the anxieties of that culture. The meteorological sea monsters Scylla and Charybdis are the mythological embodiments of maritime dangers to the seafaring Ancient Greeks, while Frankenstein's monster is a corporealization of the humanist anxieties of Enlightenment Europe. By creating monsters, we not only externalize our fears, but also render them vulnerable to attack, and consequently, defeat. The pleasure in triumph forms the basis for many contemporary video games. But how did "killing monsters" become the default model for video games, where many other modes of playful interaction (now re-emerging in indie games) exist?

Švelch addresses this question by first looking back at the history of digital games. He suggests that Player vs. Enemy (PvE) gaming became the de facto mode of computer and console gaming in the 1980s, in part due to

the success of *Space Invaders* and *Dungeons & Dragons*. The PvE model also resonated with a power fantasy, which had particular relevance in the individualistic culture of Cold-War/postwar capitalism. Although fascinating, this historical background to the dominance of PvE reads as slightly truncated; its function in this volume is to set up the core argument about the monster. Readers interested in gaming history in the context of the Cold War may want to consult Švelch's extensive list of previous publications, including *Gaming the Iron Curtain: How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Computer Games* (2018), also by MIT Press.

The PvE environment, argues Švelch, was suitable for emerging consumer practices at the time and made for a satisfying player experience. They maintain the flow of the game by providing obstacles that are overcome through persistence and thus reward players. Their annihilation is also psychologically gratifying. However, turning monsters into expendable antagonists trivialises their otherness, ultimately limiting creative possibilities. This leads to the question at the core of the monograph; the paradox at the heart of the video game monster: video-game monsters are there to be defeated. They are there to present a challenge that is difficult enough to grant satisfaction upon defeat but not so difficult as to impede flow. Their defeat comes with rewards: experience, new weapons, new armour. They may be "farmed" for their drops—the ultimate form of humiliation. How can the video game monster, therefore, be scary?

Švelch proposes that monstrosity is either "sublime" or "contained." Sublime monsters are those of myth, inherited and made indescribable in the works of H.P. Lovecraft, who emphasizes the monster's unnameable qualities. Contained monsters are those represented in attempts to understand and confine the monster, such as those described in the medieval bestiary. Video-game monsters are largely constructed in terms of containment as they are essentially lines of code that represent an achievable challenge: they are obstacles that are overcome by persistence, resourcefulness, player skill, or co-operation. Monsters therefore paradoxically embody a commodified form of otherness in that they are created to be defeated.

In setting up the historical context for the commodified containment of monstrosity in video games, Švelch's discussion of monstrous containment first addresses the consumption of monsters in the form of toys, figurines, and other mass-produced paraphernalia. He details the fascinating process of how 1950s and 1960s film monsters were repackaged as child-friendly toys. This process made monsters accessible and collectible, while at the same time, stripped them of their sublime qualities. Creature-collector games such as *Pokémon* commodifies and objectifies the monster:

Pokémon are multiple, expendable, reproducible. When caught, Pokémon are turned into code that can be transferred across devices and digitally, both in-game and in the real world; so that players can trade locally and online. Švelch compares the Pokédex (the player's personal catalogue of Pokémon, which fills out as they catch each type) to the Medieval Bestiary, as both are attempts to contain the monster through categorisation and systematic understanding.

This background to the cultural commodification of monstrous containment leads to Švelch's consideration of the possibility of sublime monsters in gaming. Arguing against a tendency in game scholarship to highlight the sublime quality of monsters without considering their extra-diegetic function, Švelch instead argues that there are very few instances of sublime monstrosity in digital games. Video-game monsters are designed with the aesthetic signifiers of monstrosity in mind, responding and reproducing our cultural ideas of monstrosity, but are turned into playthings within the context of ludic battle. Their defeatability contains them as lines of code within the game. Švelch's single example of a monster that comes close to achieving sublimity is in a description of his non-combat encounter with Ebretias in *Bloodborne*, who later becomes a defeatable boss upon acquiring the right item. As a Soulslike enjoyer, I am left wanting some further discussion as to how video-game monsters could be sublime, as this discussion falls short.[1] To me, as there are plenty of bosses in the Soulsborne games that, in my opinion, maintain a sublime quality through their lore, unique design, (sub)cultural iconography, music, and above all, extreme difficulty.

In his short conclusion, Švelch asks if gaming is moving away from "killing monsters." While PvE models still dominate the market, Švelch points towards recent scholarship surrounding a shift to PvP (Player versus Player) gaming due to the popularity of online multiplayer. He (perhaps setting up his next book) suggests that the two modes are likely to converge but does not elaborate—an almost impossible task at this point in time where the very definition of a digital game is under interrogation.

— Prema Arasu

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[1] "Soulslike" describes a gaming subgenre with origins in *Demon Souls* (2009); it is characterized by dark fantasy, mystery, interpretation of cryptic lore, rich worldbuilding, and environmental storytelling.

scientific, literary, and cultural imaginations. This work is necessarily interdisciplinary, involving aspects of animal studies and environmental philosophy to ask questions about the deep sea, its inhabitants, and the people who study it.