

## **Book Review**

***Monstrosity in Games and Play: A  
Multidisciplinary Examination of the Monstrous  
in Contemporary Cultures*, edited by Sarah Stang,  
Mikko Meriläinen, Joleen Blom, and Lobna  
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## ***Monstrosity in Games and Play: A Multidisciplinary Examination of the Monstrous in Contemporary Cultures*, edited by Sarah Stang, Mikko Meriläinen, Joleen Blom, and Lobna Hassan (Amsterdam University Press 2025)**

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### **Abstract**

A review of Sarah Stang, Mikko Meriläinen, Joleen Blom, and Lobna Hassan's edited volume *Monstrosity in Games and Play: A Multidisciplinary Examination of the Monstrous in Contemporary Cultures*. Published by Amsterdam University Press, 2024. ISBN: 978-9-46372-568-2, 294 pages.

### **Keywords**

Monster; monstrosity; games; cultural studies; gender; ethnicity; mental health; otherness; zombie

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**Digital and non-digital games' preoccupation with monsters** dates back to at least the 1970s tabletop roleplaying and arcade games. Since then, monsters have become emblematic of the medium—and yet surprisingly little game studies literature has focused on them. Some of the earliest in-depth discussion of monstrosity in games appeared in Matthew Chrulew's environmental critiques of *Dungeons & Dragons* (Chrulew, 2005, 2006), which have been unduly overlooked in game studies because his work was situated in animal studies. Since then, there have been—among others—several studies about zombies (Backe & Aarseth, 2013; Carr, 2009) with even a whole edited collection about them (Webley & Zackariasson, 2020), a chapter of Bernard Perron's (2018) book on horror games, Tanya Krzywinska's articles that used monsters as a case of gothic aesthetics (Krzywinska, 2002, 2008,

2015), and Sarah Stang's feminist critiques of monstrosity in games (Stang, 2019; Stang & Trammell, 2020). I have contributed to the growing body of literature myself with the monograph *Player vs. Monster* (Švelch, 2023). The new edited collection *Monstrosity in Games and Play* (2025), edited by Sarah Stang, Mikko Meriläinen, Joleen Blom, and Lobna Hassan, is a welcome addition to the young subfield.

Not unlike the existing literature on monstrosity in game studies and in humanities in general, also the chapters in Stang, Meriläinen, Blom, and Hassan's edited volume diverge in many directions, from investigating in-game monsters in the narrower sense to using monstrosity as a metaphor for other cultural phenomena. As the editors note in the introduction, they avoided "being too strict about the definition[s]" (2024, p. 14) of both games and monsters. They also admit that the chapters incorporate "various ideas, conceptual and theoretical frameworks, and methodologies into a sort of chimera" (2024, p. 15). In part, this is because monstrosity is a slippery concept. In part, it shows the genesis of the collection. Although the book does not mention this, it is—with one exception—based on papers presented at the 2021 Tampere University Game Research Lab Spring Seminar, whose theme was *monstrosity*. The seminar was an inspiring event (although online-only due to Covid-19), in which I was also lucky enough to participate.

The book is divided into two sections. The first section, entitled 'Monstrous Representations' focuses on "different presentations of monstrosity in digital games" (2024, p. 15), in relation to gender, race, ethnicity, and mental health. The second section 'Monstrous Interpretations' is described as offering "novel, and even unorthodox, takes on how the monstrous manifests in phenomena in and around games and gaming" (2024, p. 15). However, at least two chapters in the second section of the book (de Wildt's and Harvianinen et al.'s) also study representations and would just as well fit into the first section.

The first three chapters of the 'Monstrous Representations' section explore the themes of nationalism, colonialism, and othering and feature some of the standout studies, written by Dom Ford and Joleen Blom (on the representation of Mongols in *Ghost of Tsushima* [Sucker Punch Productions, 2020]), by Rachael Hutchinson (on the containment of monstrosity in games as a parallel to Japanese colonialism), and by Christoffer Mitch C. Cerda (on the representation of Filipino folk monsters in *Nightfall: Escape* [Zeenoh & 7 Seals, 2016]). The studies provide rich context and contribute to the knowledge of transnational and transcultural power dynamics in monster representations. The following two chapters focus on female monsters, with Caighlan Smith critiquing games with 'bride of Frankenstein' tropes and Nazely Hartoonian close reading *The Evil Within 2* (Tango Gameworks, 2017) as a game that subverts the conventional tropes of feminine objectification and demonization. These are followed by two chapters on mental health and monstrosity in games. Keli Dunlap and Rachel Kowert provide an overview of stereotypical portrayals of mental illness in games, which works very well as an introduction to the topic but lacks a clear methodology and mostly limits itself to description of typical examples. Lisanne

Meinen's chapter meticulously analyzes the portrayal of psychosis in *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017), a go-to object of analysis for scholars interested in games and mental health.

The second section, *Monstrous Interpretations*, starts with Lars de Wildt's analysis of conspiracy aesthetics in games like those in the *Assassin's Creed* (2007–2025) and *Metal Gear* (1987–2025) franchises, whose apparent enemies are controlled by scheming shadowy elites, who are the real elusive monsters. Rachel Linn's chapter interprets Twitch chats as monsters. Using monstrosity as a metaphor rather than an object of study, it is an entertaining essay, likening the chats to monsters, swarms, and cacophonous assemblages. The following chapter by Sarah Lynn Bowman explores the benefits and risks of role-playing that includes working with players' Shadows, or "characteristics of personal or collective unconscious that cause extreme discomfort" (2024, p. 202). While the text is situated in Jungian psychodynamic psychotherapy, it lacks a discussion of this approach, merely noting at one point that "many psychologists have rejected [it] from a therapeutic perspective" (2024, p. 203), without mentioning any such authors or any specific reasons for rejection. Such a discussion might have been unnecessary if the chapter was included in a book on psychotherapy but in a book that is largely situated within cultural studies and game studies, it would be more than welcome. The following chapter by J. Tuomas Harviainen, Johanna Granvik, and Henry Korkeila offers a poignant environmental critique of *Diablo III's* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2012) monster slaying mechanics, arguing that its game world is a hypermarket of "destructive joy" that would never work as a real ecosystem. It is a convincing argument, although it would benefit from a more detailed explanation of its "ecological perspective" (2024, p. 232). The final chapter is a collaborative experimental essay by Diane Carr, Shakuntala Banaji, and Hakan Ergül about marginalization and oppression in academia.

It is clear from the descriptions that the chapters are dazzlingly diverse. As I mentioned above, monsters and monstrosity are almost infinitely malleable concepts and many humanities (and even social sciences and STEM) scholars can find something 'monstrous' in their work. Some chapters therefore stretch the meaning of 'monstrosity in games and play' quite far. While a wide thematic range is a boon at a seminar where the audience can interact and immediately discuss the papers, it can be slightly disorienting in an edited collection where readers might expect a higher degree of thematic cohesion. Nevertheless, the editors of the book are upfront about embracing the term's breadth and conceptual flexibility, in line with the program of the original seminar. The collection's 'chimeric' nature emphasizes the novel and unique contributions of the individual chapters.

Despite the thematic diversity, most chapters in the book are based on close reading and textual analysis. There are many reasons for this tendency: it is a method of choice in many branches of humanities (including much of the literature on monsters in cinema and literature), and it does not require large research budgets and research ethics approvals. At the same time, though, the book shows the limits of

this approach. Close readings may identify biases, stereotypes, or subversive potential of monstrous representations, but research of production processes and reception of monstrous representations might lead to a more contextualized and complex understanding of how these representations arise and what they mean to various social groups. If a follow-up to this book is considered, production and reception of monstrosity might be fruitful avenues to explore.

Overall, *Monstrosity in Games and Play* is an edited collection that enriches the study of monsters and monstrosity in games and showcases the diverse meanings of the core concepts. It is professionally edited and polished (save for the surprising lack of any images), and often inspiring and entertaining. In addition to that, *Monstrosity in Games and Play* is also (to my knowledge) the last book in the *Games and Play in Contemporary Culture and Society* series published by Amsterdam University Press before the controversial sell-out of its English-language books program to Taylor & Francis and its incorporation into the Routledge brand (van den Beukel, 2025). The series has had a significant, positive impact on the discipline of game studies. One can only hope it will continue and maintain its quality under Routledge—or anywhere else.

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