Review report on the habilitation thesis by Dr Jaroslav Švelch:

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

The work that is presented by Dr Jaroslav Švelch as the habilitation thesis consists of the monograph *Player vs. Monster: The Making and Breaking of Video Game Monstrosity*, which is forthcoming in February 2023 by The MIT Press – one of the internationally leading academic publishing houses in digital technology related science and scholarship. The aim of this study is to provide critical and historical analysis of the videogame monsters, thereby producing new understanding of monstrosity and otherness as key elements of videogames.

The work is structured to have four analysis chapters with the introduction and summarizing conclusions chapters. The historically grounded introduction starts by outlining the motivation and significance of this research area. Dr Švelch is operating at the interfaces of multiple disciplines and research fields, thereby enriching, and developing further the new field of digital game studies with the theories, knowledge and interpretations derived from multiple other fields, such as philosophy, literary theory, art history, gender studies and folkloristics. The philosophical positioning of video game monstrosity positions these elements as a specific form of 'otherness' that has important gameplay related, computational as well as commodified (or business related) underpinnings. The conceptual, methodological and historical reach of the work is ambitious.

The thesis of Dr Švelch initially focuses on distinction that he has set between what he calls *sublime* and *contained* monstrosity. This directs attention to one of the key paradoxes of monsters – and perhaps 'horror culture' more generally: the monster should be something alien and unknown to be fearsome (a key cultural and psychological function of 'monsters'), but as the key function of popular monsters is being repeatedly (fictionally) killed, or vanquished, the monster also becomes familiar and sometimes even loved element of culture. Thus, the continuum that Dr Švelch analyses emerges: on the other end monsters are represented and function in a manner that is designed to evoke 'sublime' emotions like fear and terror, yet monsters are also 'contained' as they become parts of human knowledge and set to serve some human purposes. This is a particularly important observation regarding games and other forms of digital media culture, as in the "Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (Benjamin) repetition and various mechanical functions often take precedence over surprises or mythical originality.

Dr Švelch draws interesting connections to the 'daemons' of computers' processes, showing how the monsters of digital games have been set to the role of "algorithmic servants of the game designer", providing interesting challenges for anyone trying to win, or solve a conflict-based digital game. Consequently, the digital game monsters can be easily criticised for trivializing the monstrous otherness, turning the sublime into the contained and commodified forms – expendable enemies, tirelessly attacking the characters of progressing game players.

This analysis is further strengthened by the *God of War* case study (chapter three), where a Game Production Studies approach is adopted in order to show the technical, artistic,

usability and business-related reasons behind several design decisions in a contemporary videogame. Finally, Dr Švelch also includes discussions of recent "posthuman teratology" ("monster science"), where contemporary, new responses to otherness open up increasingly nuanced and sensitive encounters with monstrosity also in digital games. The ontological and ethical options available for game monsters appear to be developing into increasingly diverse and complex directions.

Looking beyond this, most recent work of Dr Švelch, it is clear that he is internationally known as a wide-ranging scholar who has deep expertise in the cultural era of Cold War, humour, as well as ethics and morality in the wider digital culture, social media and in games. His earlier book (also published by The MIT Press), *Gaming the Iron Curtain* (2018) is a notable and widely read example of this work.

Dr Švelch also has solid academic teaching experience, having taught games and media related courses from 2009 at least, and also having been invited to present keynotes in multiple international academic conferences and research seminars in different countries. His researcher profile is international and well connected to the leading academics of the field; he has worked as a postdoctoral researcher in the University of Bergen (in the *Games and Transgressive Aesthetics* project), and have research stays also in the USA (in The MIT Media Studies Department and in Microsoft Research, Cambridge). His publications have appeared in books, journals and conference proceedings that can be estimated to be among the internationally leading venues of this field (e.g., *New Media & Society*, *Television and New Media*, *Game Studies*, *Convergence*, and in books published by e.g., Palgrave, Routledge, Bloomsbury, The MIT Press, Amsterdam University Press, Indiana University Press and others).

On top of solid pedagogical and research experience from many universities, Dr Švelch has also served in multiple scientific and scholarly organisations, and has experience in running major academic events, networks and other larger organisational efforts.

To conclude my evaluation, I estimate that the habilitation thesis (*Player vs. Monster: The Making and Breaking of Video Game Monstrosity*) of Dr Švelch has high scientific value and as an important contribution it has potential to expand the impact of game studies to multiple areas of knowledge and scholarship. The research work of Dr Švelch has been published in the leading academic journals and other venues, and it is also clear that both the number of his publications and the number of citations (528 according to Google Scholar) greatly exceed the general requirements as set by Charles University.

Therefore, I am happy to recommend this thesis as a work that fulfils all requirements for habilitation, and I support the nomination of Dr Švelch as a Docent.

Sincerely,

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