

Oponentský posudek  
Mgr. et Mgr. Václav Janoščík, Ph.D.

Habilitační práce:  
**Player vs. Monster**  
**The Making and Breaking of Video Game Monstrosity**  
Mgr. et Mgr. Jaroslav Švelch, Ph.D.

## Overview

Habilitation work of Jaroslav Švelch takes as its subject matter game monsters, their history, most general and popular tropes and models, or several of their subversive counterparts. The relevancy and attractiveness of the topic is well documented throughout the text and beyond reproach. Švelch's conceptualization is rich, meticulously contextualized and interesting even for non-gamer readers.

Overall structure holds pretty well, naturally proceeding from the more theoretical account of monsters and their conceptualization (1. chapter), through origins of setting monsters into gaming (2.), the typical player-vs-environment architecture of mainstream gaming (3.), towards examples of nonstandard or even subversive deployment of monsters.

After a dense and compact introduction the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter provides basic conceptualization so as apt problem-setting and representative view on the current literature. It inheres not only a cultural mini-history of monsters but also their intersection with the genealogy of computers themselves.

Nonetheless most of the concepts (Kant's notion of sublime, Kristeva's abject, Noël Carroll's theory of horror etc.) are brought up very quickly and used in rather hasty way, which will be a moment for further criticism. At times the text may resemble more a *recherché* than deeper research. Even the semi conclusion of this chapter (about prevalence of contained monsters) so as its specific edge could have been more substantial.

Namely the example of refusing the combative mode of gaming is put quite bluntly as representing the "sublime monstrosity" against the traditional system of contained monstrosity (p. 25). I would love to get deeper account of how (potentially subversive) action tackles, counters or dispels the predesigned space in computer games in particular. (In this respect I cannot resist but to mention Michel de Certeau's theory of reclaiming the space by users through their action or the work of collective Total Refusal.)

In the 2nd chapter the author focuses on *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Space Invaders* as prototypical examples of how the dominant form of player vs. environment model has been established and popularized in gaming. Švelch exposition of D&D is interesting and thorough, of

course focused on monster deployment and its influence on computer gaming, but still sounds bit too standard in comparison to his *Space Invaders* analysis that often meanders through other gameplays. But the the case-studies complement each other and form nice precursors for further analysis of monsters in more contemporary gaming.

Yet again the ending of the chapter and its thesis about dehumanization of monsters, could have been developed further. It is well documented but lacks more social, or political engagement.

3rd chapter tries to expose basic paradox of monsters, namely that it is their nature to be threatening yet they must provide player with satisfaction from their defeat. I consider this chapter the strongest since it focuses much more on analytical tools (monster design, monster realism, boss fighting) than information or context exposition, that is prevalent in first two chapters. Yet again I am bit sceptical about its semi-conclusion. Namely the three aspects of monster design (1. "conventions" of monster representation; 2. "technology" used; 3. "creativity" of the developers). This seems to me not only obvious but also too general and inexhaustive or not nuanced enough of a list.

Last part of the book delves into examples of different treatment of monsters. From general cultural streams of monster history Švelch gets to cold-war setting and its "ontology of the enemy". (I really like this concept, and would love to get it more into spotlight.) We get to see Grue from *Zork* lurking in the shadows of CRT screens; Shadow Man from *Prince of Persia* providing us with mirroring of hero-enemy, health-death, action-environment; later on monstrous nostalgia wit *Shadow of the Colossus* (that after *God of War* gets, I believe, the biggest amount of space in the text); cutification of monsters in *Undertale*; or basic socialization of orcs in *Shadow of War*; horrified passing by in *Amnesia: Dark Descent*; Astral Spike from *Control*; bodily-massification of rats in *A Plague Tale: Innocence*; innovative gameplay in *Metal Gear Solid*; AI behavior in *Alien: Isolation*;

In conclusion of the text Švelch focuses on summarization and brief glimpse into possible future of monsters, mentioning bigger drive for multiplayer gameplay (and therefore, possibly, less emphasis on the stereotypical player vs. environment model).

The final set of claims could succinctly exemplify not only building moments of Švelch's research but also its possible points of criticism. For instance, the economico-political conditions are merely mentioned as one of the possible limits (yet the capitalization of content ant brand, or capital consolidation in current gaming business are hard to ignore). Not only I would like to see their analysis in terms of monster design, but what I lack here is also the political perspective of monsters themselves. Monsters have been not only deployed but also theorized in terms of the (post)psychoanalytical concept of the Other, often functioning as a short-circuit for conceiving of an enemy. Although briefly mentioned, this perspective is absent.

just a very brief mention of the economic consolidation and drive to capitalize content and brands.

Similarly, when Švelch is finally staging the monster as something that “holds up a mirror to humanity and questions our knowledge of the world around us” (p. 110), it is general remark about the importance of studying monsters, rather than a thesis charged with philosophical intent.

And again, when in the very end the author closes his book with sketching the vector of player *in, of or with* and not *against* environment, it is rather a rhetorical, not really conceptualized or thoroughly articulated dynamics. The alternatives are left tacit and not mentioned (yet there are actually quite many developers working against the grain of player vs. environment model; just as examples, *Caves of Qud*, *Citizen Sleeper*, games of Molleindustria, *Outer Wilds*, *Dwarf Fortress* not to mention super-indie games made by artists).

### Short evaluation

Despite these points of criticism pointed towards the conclusions of each part specifically, I found the work of Jaroslav Švelch vast and solid. I must value meticulous contextualization (at times touching even perspective as distant as archaeology, military history or romanticism), high readability, very polished English and the immense knowledgeability with remarkable robustness of referential apparatus.

Overall the text gives avid players so as non-gamers a vivid view not only on the genealogy of game monsters, but also a very valuable sense of the development of games themselves. All chapters complement each other, yet provide very different perspectives on the subject matter. Conceptual framework of *player vs. environment* (and the proposition however brief of player in/with/of environment) is very usefull and well established by the author. I really like the notion of the *ontology of the enemy*.

I appreciate very much the insight into game development and various background information that definitely enriched my knowledge about particular games. In this respect I would enjoy even more *storytelling work*. Since this could make the text even more compact, resourceful and affective. (Not only the narratives of games themselves, but also stories from behind their evolution or even larger histories composed in more narrative way.) The influence of Ray Harryhausen’s skeletons from *Jason and the Argonauts*, or David Wengrow’s remarks on early human cultures in the middle of the book, just for instance, are genuinely interesting examples, maybe if these are supported by more continuous or sustained narration, the arc of the text might have been even more intriguing.

### Two points of possible criticism

My biggest point of criticism, or rather what I miss is (1) more complex and deeper political perspective, but also (2) a methodological discussion or going deeper philosophically, beyond

the usually descriptive and historical perspective. It may be an “advanced” critique from slightly different perspective than the one of the author; to some extent even representing my own approach or preference; nonetheless I really think the work would have bigger impact or robustness if these two perspectives were truly addressed.

(1) Of course the text features for instance the context of the cold war (and war gaming), but on the other hand it does not comment for instance on the *othering* of monsters (the sublimation of fear and political discontents in monsters), their sexualisation or other forms of violence (beyond the actual combative gameplay, there are so many other ways how players are forced to generate figurative, symbolic or social violence; or even reconsider those in cases of some subversive games (*Everything*, or the entire genre of walking simulators)).

And on the other hand are examples like *Undertale* or *Amnesia: Dark Descent* really so genuinely subversive? (To put it bluntly, the former is making you ponder or re-evaluate killing cute, relatable monsters, the later making you avoid them.) Even more so in the case of *Control* and its Astral Spike, that has “no mass” or is untargetable. I believe there is lots of similar non-combatable NPCs, monsters or other types of inhabitants of gaming worlds that afford far more nuanced ways of dealing with them. For instance, *Caves of Qud* is a game with complex cultural and quasi-diplomatic options how to treat other inhabitants of the game world (and still possesses D&D in its DNA). And of course there are many non-combative games featuring diverse “monsters” and ways of interaction with them. What I found missing is also the popular “summoning” logic in relation to monsters that in this case fight to help you (*Magic: The Gathering* is only mentioned in the conclusion, or *League of Legends*).

The inventiveness and post-cold-war vibe of *Metal Gear Solid* series strikes me as a better example in terms of finding some subversive avenues to monsters and gaming in general, but still relatively modest. Maybe *Death Stranding*, although bit over-interpreted in current theory, may present even more rich material for interpretation and monster setting.

(2) The lack of any particular methodological perspective or discussion makes for me bit unclear the question of example or the status of particular games that are being discussed. It is totally fine in case of D&D and Space Invaders that possess historic relevance and are analysed in respect to it. But am not so certain in other cases. Do they present the mainstream gaming? Are they “representative” or do they present just model examples? Are some of the larger descriptions case studies? Do they simply represent most spread forms and tropes; are they just the most interesting illustrations of authors theses? Why sometimes the developer related sources are more important; at times it is just a description of gameplay; sometimes the personal experience of the author is principal? Of course the text in form of a book does not need to address these questions. But a habilitation should.

To put it in a succinct and bit daring way, I see certain *undertheorization* (of course there is an immense number of theoretical sources, but they are usually treated relatively “uncritically” (in terms of methodology or revision)) and *overhistoricization* (which on its own is not so sustained or bulletproof through the text). Philosophical issues (the sublime, realism, ontology of enemy,

combative/antagonistic basis of virtual worlds, emergent system etc.) that could be thought or developed more boldly are in certain regard reduced to historical issues to be described or explained.

These are just some critical and friendly remarks on the possible limits of the work, not a fundamental criticism. It was a great intellectual pleasure to read Jaroslav Švelch's habilitation thesis. I dearly value his erudition, dedication and insight. I see no point why not to provide my approval for its successful defence.