It’s a Monster’s World

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INTRODUCTION
In the horror-themed single-player digital role-playing game Vampyr (Dontnod Entertainment, 2018), the player assumes the role of Jonathan Reid who is a doctor and also a newly initiated vampire in the early 20th century London. Reid is a player character stuck between two identities, a doctor whose job is to heal, and a vampire who must feed on people, and this dilemma helps bring out the complex personal and sociocultural dimensions in gameplay. Reid is free to explore a semi-open world that is inhabited by vampire hunters and mutant vampires, as well as civilians who will provide narrative strands, side-quests, and food for him.

The game narrative is motivated by the player character’s (and player’s) attempts at learning how to be a vampire and at understanding how the choices made will affect the overall structure of the gameworld, the beautifully rendered Victorian London. In addition to looking at how this gruesome worldbuilding brings the human and the vampire realms together, playing as a monster gives us the possibility to analyse the game as a ‘technology of subjectivity’ (Halberstam 1995).

Even though spilling blood is unavoidable, it is possible to play Vampyr without actually killing anybody if the player so wishes. However, the more “humanely” the player wants to play, the more difficult the game becomes. The player’s disposition is thus complicated by game mechanics that dictate, for instance, that by far the most effective way of gaining XP is to drain the blood of named NPCs, innocent civilians that have a personal connection to Reid and may even consider him as their friend. Even bigger boost to levelling up can be gained by first healing those NPCs from any illness and acquiring withheld information about their lives – before using this information against them and sucking their blood (see Eurogamer, 2018).

In Vampyr, the usual role-playing narratives and mechanics are therefore complicated by presenting the player with only morally ambiguous options to choose from. In a further attempt to make the gameplay even more interesting, the context of play has as if sociopolitical connotations, as the game space is divided into distinct areas that each have a ‘health rating’. While Reid’s unnatural drives urge him to feed on humans, he is also guided to maintain the ecological balance of each neighborhood by curing the inhabitants from ailments such as migraine and bronchitis, and killing as few of them as possible. The player character’s unselfish behaviour is rewarded in the game: if citizens are not doing well, a region may fall into chaos and unusual monsters start roaming in its streets. In that case also many NPCs disappear completely, locking out questlines as they go.
The *Vampyr* gameplay is based on the player embracing and accepting the incongruity of their player character Reid as part of their play experience. Indeed, *Vampyr* has been mentioned as an example in a conversation about ludonarrative dissonance (Seraphine, 2016) that results in the player having a sensation of detachment or being pulled out of the play experience while playing. What causes this “emersion” seems to be a dissonance between what *Vampyr* is about as a game, and what it is about as a story (see Hocking, 2007). Taking the concept of ludonarrative dissonance as a starting point, this paper aims at analysing *Vampyr* gameplay as the player takes on the role and viewpoint of a monster. How does the game direct the player to act “monstrously”, and what kinds of aspects is this designated monstrosity based on?

It is interesting to see how ludonarrative monstrosity is constructed in a game that requires its player – and not the antagonists – to act in a dreadful way. The *Vampyr* player character is no longer the hero that rights the wrongs and saves the day but the antithesis of a hero, a monstrous hybrid character that both saves people and destroys them. In many digital games, slaying opponents is considered an essential game mechanic, so any attempt at making the player to question this and actively refrain from violence can be seen as norm-breaking. As vampires indulge us in transgressions normally forbidden to us (e.g. Auerbach, 1995), the player of *Vampyr* is asked to bring the monstrous side of themself out in the open and transgress from the general norms of digital gameplay.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


