# Encoding monsters: "Ontology of the enemy" and containment of the unknown in role-playing games

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## Introduction

From the ancient to contemporary cultures, monsters have embodied the fear of abnormality and the unknown (Cohen 1996; Henriksen et al. 2017). A prominent strand of monster scholarship emphasizes the fact that monsters confound our perceptive and cognitive abilities, and fill us with awe and terror (see Carroll 1990; Kristeva 1982; Cohen 1996). The philosopher Stephen Asma calls this approach the "sublime thesis," based on Kant's understanding of sublime (Asma 2012: 192). This sublime thesis can be understood as a normative yardstick of measuring monstrosity.

But video games present us with a different kind of monster, a monster that is designed to be confronted and (usually) defeated by the player. Unlike the ideal "sublime" monster, it is encoded in computational systems and well defined in the game's rules. Role-playing and action games like *The Witcher 3* or *God of War* tend to contain whole hierarchies and databases of monsters that beckon us to figure them out, find their weak spots and defeat them. *God of War*'s *draugar*, for example, are a well-defined array of recurring enemy types with specific attack types and weaknesses, inspired by but very distinct from the *draugar* of Nordic myth, who embodied the fears of exclusion from local communities (Sayers 1996).

To understand video game monsters, we must thus contrast the sublime thesis with a new theoretical approach, which captures the tendency to *contain* and *encode* monstrosity. This tendency can be traced back to medieval bestiaries, which collected and catalogued hypothetical beasts from the unknown edges of the world (Hassig 1995; Mittman 2006). As I will show later, the idea of containment was an essential component of Cold War-era cybernetics (Galison 1994). In the medium of computer games, the tendency can be related to Murray's view of the medium as *encyclopedic*.

This paper represents a snapshot from work-in-progress research on video game monsters conducted within a larger project that investigates games and transgressive aesthetics.[1] My research on monsters aims to fill a notable gap in game studies literature. Although monsters are central to gaming cultures and experiences, and are probably the most numerous computer-

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[1] Read more at gta.w.uib.no.

controlled entities in the medium, there is very little research on them (Backe & Aarseth 2014; Kocurek 2015; Krzywinska 2017; Švelch 2013).

In this paper, I will illustrate the tension between the sublime and contained monstrosity and point out a shift in the values ascribed to a confrontation with monstrous others – from awe and terror to collection and elimination. I will use the example of the early editions Dungeons & Dragons (D&D), complemented by references to contemporary video game titles like *God of War* and *Dark Souls*. The case of D&D is crucial, as it was arguably the first game to systematically "simulate" magic and monsters. The game described beasts and monsters from various mythologies (as well as invented ones) in a uniform language of statistics and special abilities, and encoded these in spreadsheets and manuals. The early editions also assumed that any entity that the player encountered was a monster. This approach later became a staple of the role-playing genre and contributed to the games' representation of the other as a calculable and defeatable enemy.

**Mythical monsters and the sublime thesis**

When summing up existing theories of monsters, Stephen Asma identifies an underlying "sublime thesis," based on Kant's understanding of sublime (Asma 2012: 192). In Kant's words, an object that evokes the sublime does so because it appears "to be ill-adapted to our faculty of presentation, and to do violence, as it were, to the imagination." (Kant 2007: 76) Daniel Vella, who has studied the concept of the sublime in video games, has argued: "At its core, the sublime has continued to refer to the same aesthetic feeling attendant upon the contemplation of an object that exceeds both the field of perception and the grasp of the mind's faculties, and that opens up, in its various developments, to feelings of awe or terror." (Vella 2015). According to the sublime thesis, monsters invoke these feelings, brought about by their radical otherness. Another important element of the sublime thesis is what Asma has called "radical vulnerability," the danger of being crushed by the monster, whose scale and power far outweighs ours, or who can have powers that are difficult to understand (Asma 2012: 192).

The sublime thesis has been influential in the humanities, and permeates the work of leading monster scholars. So, philosopher Richard Kearney argues that monsters are "tokens of fracture within the human psyche"; they are "unnatural, transgressive, obscene, contradictory, heterogeneous, mad." (Kearney 2002: 4) Religion scholar Timothy Beal sees them as "figures of chaos and disorientation within order and orientation." (Beal 2002: 5) Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, too, aligns with the sublime thesis, as it claims that the horrific and monstrous cannot be an object of human action. In her view, abject is "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite." (Kristeva 1982: 4); "it is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine." (Kristeva 1982: 3). Noël Carroll's "philosophy of horror" takes a cognitive rather than metaphysical approach, but underlines the unknowability of the monster by translating the sublime into instances of category jamming – the werewolf, for instance, is frightening because it is neither man nor beast (Carroll 1990). In the introduction to the most extensive handbook of recent monster scholarship, art historian Asa Mittman explicitly suggests to define *monstrous* in terms of its impact – as a radical or sublime kind of otherness that is difficult to describe or categorize, creating a sense of cognitive "vertigo." (Mittman 2013: 8; Asma 2012)

According to the sublime thesis, then, monsters can be awe-inspiring and intractable, and our systems of representation struggle to cope with them. We can see this in an example from ancient myth, where descriptions of monsters are often vague, such as this description of the monster god Marduk from the Mesopotamian myth:

> "His limbs were ingeniously made beyond comprehension,
> Impossible to understand, too difficult to perceive.
> Four were his eyes, four were his ears;
> When his lips moved, fire blazed forth.
> The four ears were enormous
> And likewise the eyes; they perceived everything.
> Highest among the gods, his form was outstanding.
> His limbs were very long, his height outstanding." (Dalley 2000: 236)

In fiction, a prototypical example would be Lovecraftian horror, or the Lovecraftian monster, which is often not seen in its entirety: "The Thing cannot be described – there is no language for such abysms of shrieking and immemorial lunacy, such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order." (Lovecraft 2007: 74)

**Encyclopedic impulse and the ontology of the enemy**

We can call the contrasting way of thinking about monsters "encyclopedic containment." My conceptualization of it derives from Janet Murray's discussion of the encyclopedic nature of games and digital media. She argues that "the capacity to represent enormous quantities of information in digital form translates into an artist's potential to offer a wealth of detail, to represent the world with both scope and particularity." (Murray 1998: 84)

This encyclopedic impulse is not just an attribute of digital media, although the computer may be so far its ultimate expression. It is connected to the general urge to control and contain the unknown, and the contingencies of the chaotic world. In essence, it is a colonizing move. In the history of medieval Europe, but also China, collecting monsters into books went hand in hand with mapping of unknown territories. Pliny's *Natural History* and medieval bestiaries enumerated and described monsters from different corners of the world. Mittman suggests that the process of naming and sorting monsters is a process of containment through which a culture defines its borders and distinguishes itself from monstrous others (Mittman 2006). Richard Strassberg speaks similarly of Chinese bestiaries: "The reader willingly consumed an illusion that all the important objects of reality had been collected and ordered according to a fundamental taxonomy and that these things were now manageable and available for exploitation." (Strassberg 2002: 9)

This logic of control became pervasive along with the spread of statistics, bureaucratic administration and computation. It leads to a totalizing vision of the world, in which everything can be turned into an object, reduced to discrete units of information and filed into nomenclatures. Early computational models of the world quite understandably built on these ideas. Cold War-era Wienerian cybernetics promoted "military models of reality" designed to

attain "total control over a world reduced to calculable, mechanical operations." (Crogan 2011: 91). In these models, whatever appeared in the computational representation of the monitored territory was a potential enemy. The historian of science Peter Galison has dubbed the underlying principle behind these models the "ontology of the enemy." He notes that this enemy was ultimately knowable and calculable: "On the mechanized battlefield, the enemy was neither invisible nor irrational; this was an enemy at home in the world of strategy, tactics, and maneuver." (Galison 1994: 233)

Besides this powerful vision of the other as a calculable enemy, there was also a series of more subtle developments in popular cultures. There is a long tradition of monsters used as amusements and attractions. Medieval bestiaries are an early example, as they were often used as for instruction and entertainment (Clark 2006). In 20th century popular culture, film and TV created an ever-expanding roster of monsters. The popularity of dinosaurs and dinosaur parks, which had started already in the 19th century, also contributed. The *Pokémon* franchise and toys like *Monsters in My Pocket* represented demons and monsters as an ever-expanding catalog of numbered creatures that can be added to one's collection. To sum up – while the "sublime thesis" emphasizes the impossibility of the monster to become an object, "encyclopedic containment" decidedly objectifies them, eliminating their unknown and sublime features.


**Monstrous spreadsheets of *Dungeons & Dragons***

Early *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) rulebooks rank among the most influential texts in the history of computer and video games, although they do not rely on computer technology. The game underwent many iterations and experienced significant evolution since the 1970s, but I will draw exclusively from the first edition of D&D released in 1974 and the first edition of Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (AD&D) from 1977–1979. Each ruleset edition was usually issued in the form of multiple handbooks, one of which was completely or partially dedicated to monsters. In D&D, it is called "Monsters & Treasure" and in A&D, it is the "Monster Manual" (Gygax & Arneson 1974; Gygax 1979b).

As the name itself suggests, monsters (including dragons) are a cornerstone of D&D. The game originated in the miniature wargame culture, which had traditionally emphasized realism of combat. In the 1960s, several gamers introduced fantasy elements, including magic and monsters, into miniature wargaming. This was in part because the inclusion of mages and supernatural beings allowed for more interesting and diversified mechanics, in part because of the popularity of Tolkien, whose work was also driven by the encyclopedic impulse (see Peterson 2013). In 1974, D&D was the first commercially published game to let players play a party of adventurers that embark on fantasy campaigns into dungeons and wilderness to confront monsters.

Although D&D does not require a computer, it is definitely a *computational* game. Its monsters are driven by algorithms and statistics. Unlike medieval bestiaries, which were primarily educational and descriptive texts, D&D monster manual is a constitutive text – it declares the existence of monsters in a simulated world and ascribes statistics and powers to them. The fact that monsters appeared in an extension of miniature wargame required them to be present – on an appropriate scale – in the game's simulated world, and to conform to the rules of the game. They could not remain simply "outstanding" like the monster god Marduk of the Mesopotamian myth.

There is a certain paradox, or even folly, in the way that D&D attempted to meticulously simulate battles with fantastic monsters that never existed. In order to do so, the monster manual eventually introduced a universal language to describe all potential monsters within this fictional world. In effect, the D&D publications were possibly the first in history to describe such a wide range of monsters on such a level of detail. At the same time, we could argue that this process demystified the monsters' sublime qualities.

Figure 1 shows the "monster reference table" from the original D&D booklets (Gygax & Arneson 1974). You can see the basic characteristics of a monster here. In general, we can see how creatures from different mythologies and popular culture texts are made to fit into one matrix of mathematical rules. In more detailed descriptions, we would also see particular weaknesses or special attacks of individual monsters; in the later editions, we can also find illustrations. On Figure 2, we can see how an encounter with a dragon would play out in terms of game mechanics (ibid.) The passage nicely demonstrates how mechanized and meticulously simulated a mythical beast can become.

**THE MONSTERS**

MONSTER REFERENCE TABLE, HOSTILE & BENIGN CREATURES:

Special characteristics are dealt with in the separate paragraphs pertaining to each monster which follow this table.

| Monster Type | Number Appearing* | Armor Class | Move in Inches** | Hit Dice | % In Lair | Type or Amount of Treasure |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Men | 30–300 | All variable ----------- | | | 15% | Type A |
| Goblins/ Kobolds | 40–400 | 6/7 | 6 | 1 – 1½ | 50% | 1–6 G.P. ea. |
| Orcs | 30–300 | 6 | 9 | 1 | 50% | Type D |
| Hobgoblins/ Gnolls | 20–200 | 5 | 9 | 1 + 1/2 | 30% | Type D |
| Ogres | 3–18 | 5 | 9 | 4 + 1 | 30% | 1,000 G.P. + Type C |
| Trolls | 2–12 | 4 | 12 | 6 + 3 | 50% | Type D |
| Giants | 1–8 | 4 | 12 | 8–12+2 | 30% | 5,000 G.P. + Type E |
| Skeletons/ Zombies | 3–30 | 7/8 | 6 | ½/1 | Nil | Nil |
| Ghouls | 2–24 | 6 | 9 | 2 | 20% | Type B |
| Wights | 2–24 | 5 | 9 | 3 | 60% | Type B |
| Wraiths | 2–16 | 3 | 12/24 | 4 | 20% | Type E |
| Mummies | 1–12 | 3 | 6 | 5 + 1 | 30% | Type D |
| Spectres | 1–8 | 2 | 15/30 | 6 | 25% | Type E |
| Vampires | 1–6 | 2 | 12/18 | 7–9 | 20% | Type F |
| Cockatrices | 1–8 | 6 | 9/18 | 5 | 35% | Type D |
| Basilisks | 1–6 | 4 | 6 | 6 + 1 | 40% | Type F |
| Medusae | 1–4 | 8 | 9 | 4 | 75% | Type F |
| Gorgons | 1–4 | 2 | 12 | 8 | 50% | Type E |
| Manticores | 1–4 | 4 | 12/18 | 6 + 1 | 25% | Type D |
| Hydras | 5–12 hds. | 5 | 12 | 5–12 | 25% | Type B |
| Chimeras | 1–4 | 4 | 12/18 | 9 | 50% | Type F |
| Wyverns | 1–6 | 3 | 9/24 | 7 | 60% | Type E |
| Dragons*** | 1–4 | 2 | 9/24 | 5–12 | 60% | Type H |
| Gargoyles | 2–20 | 5 | 9/15 | 4 | 25% | Type C |
| Lycanthropes*** | 2–20 | Variable --------------- | | | 15% | Type C |
| Purple Worms | 1–4 | 6 | 6 | 15 | 25% | Type D |

MONSTER REFERENCE TABLE, CONTINUED

| Monster Type | Number Appearing* | Armor Class | Move in Inches** | Hit Dice | % In Lair | Type or Amount of Treasure |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sea Monsters | All variable and at referee's discretion --------------------- | | | | | |
| Minotaurs | 1–8 | 6 | 12 | 6 | 10% | Type C |
| Centaurs | 2–20 | 5 | 18 | 4 | 05% | Type A |
| Unicorns | 1–4 | 2 | 24 | 4 | Nil | Nil |
| Nixies | 10–100 | 7 | 12 | 1 | 100% | Type B |
| Pixies | 10–100 | 6 | 9/18 | 1 | 25% | Type C |
| Dryads | 1–6 | 5 | 12 | 2 | 20% | Type D |
| Gnomes | 40–400 | 5 | 6 | 1 | 60% | Type C |
| Dwarves | 40–400 | 4 | 6 | 1 | 50% | Type G |
| Elves | 30–300 | 5 | 12 | 1 + 1 | 25% | Type E |
| Treants | 2–20 | 2 | 6 | 8 | Nil | Nil |
| Pegasi | 1–12 | 6 | 24/48 | 2 + 2 | Nil | Nil |
| Hippogriffs | 2–16 | 5 | 18/36 | 3 + 1 | Nil | Nil |
| Rocs | 1–20 | 4 | 6/48 | 6 | 20% | Type I |
| Griffons | 2–16 | 3 | 12/30 | 7 | 10% | Type E |
| Invisible Stalkers | -------- | 3 | 12 | 8 | Nil | Nil |
| Elemental | 1 | 2 | Variable --------- | | Nil | Nil |
| Djinn | -------- | 5 | 9/24 | 7 + 1 | Nil | Nil |
| Efreet | -------- | 3 | 9/24 | 10 | Nil | Nil |
| Ochre Jelly | 1 | 8 | 3 | 5 | Nil | Nil |
| Black Pudding | 1 | 6 | 6 | 10 | Nil | Nil |
| Green Slime | -------- | - - | Nil | 2 | Nil | Nil |
| Gray Ooze | -------- | 8 | 1 | 3 | Nil | Nil |
| Yellow Mold | -------- | - - | - - | - - | Nil | Nil |
| Light Horse | -------- | 7 | 24 | 2 | Nil | Nil |
| Medium Horse | -------- | 7 | 18 | 2 + 1 | Nil | Nil |
| Heavy Horse | -------- | 7 | 12 | 3 | Nil | Nil |
| Draft Horse | -------- | 7 | 12 | 2 + 1 | Nil | Nil |
| Mule | -------- | 7 | 12 | 2 + 1 | Nil | Nil |
| Small Insects or Animals | 6 – 36 | Variable ···································· | | | | |
| Large Insects or Animals | 2 – 16 | Variable ···································· | | | | |

*Figure 1.* "Monster reference table" from *D&D Monsters & Treasure* (1974).

A "Very Old" 11 Hit Dice Red Dragon is encountered asleep in its cavernous lair. Three fighters creep in and strike to subdue. All three hit, scoring respectively 2,3, and 6 points, or 11 points total. 11 ratioed over 66 (the number of hit points the Dragon can absorb before being killed or in this case subdued) is 1/6th or 17%. The referee checks to determine if the Dragon is subdued and rolls over 17 on the percentile dice. The Dragon is not subdued, and a check is then made to see whether he will bite or use his breath weapon during the second melee round. The result indicates he will breathe. The attackers strike again and once more all hit for a total of 12 points. The Dragon breathes and as none make their saving throws the attackers are all killed for they take 66 points of damage from Dragon fire. Subsequently, the referee rolls 01 on the percentile dice (any roll up to 34 would have indicated success) indicating that had the attackers survived, they would have subdued the Red Dragon that turn.

*Figure 2.* An example encounter with a dragon from *D&D Monsters & Treasure* (1974).

Despite the important role of dice rolls, behaviors of monsters are predictable. D&D is a game of fantasy, but also control – it is not just about dungeons & dragons, but also dice & spreadsheets. It combines the thrill of exploration of the unknown with the security of an ultimate knowability. The tendency of systems like D&D to contain whole fantastic worlds in their rules resembles the containment strategies of medieval maps and Cold War cybernetics. In one of the rare pieces of critical academic writing about D&D, animal studies scholar Matthew Chrulew writes: "In FRPGs, the environment and the numerous creatures that inhabit it function similarly to the other cultural material: as fantastic challenges to be overcome by the characters. Moreover, they are defined and quantified according to the game mechanics in methods that reflect and fetishize the technocratic operative modes of late capitalist societies." (Chrulew 2006: 137). D&D allowed the players to confront a hostile world in a way that was familiar to American, mostly white middle-class players – through turning challenges into capital based on calculable strategies. Through mechanics of looting (including the looting of dead monsters) and levelling, one could accumulate enough gold pieces and experience to defeat stronger and stronger monsters. These monsters were in limitless supply, revealing that for all the supposed realism of combat, the ecology of these simulated fantastic worlds is highly improbable (Ooijen 2018).

With its business model based around selling additional campaign "modules", D&D thrived on the demand for more content – and more monsters. At first, D&D adopted, transformed and extended the lore of Tolkien's Middle-Earth, along with ancient Greek and European mythology. But it never stopped at that. Tu quote Chrulew, "FRPGs plunder history, literature, science, and mythology, portraying and playing with all." (Chrulew 2006: 142) D&D writers found inspiration in world's mythologies and folklore, and its depictions of other cultures were – unsurprisingly – orientalist (Trammell 2016). What is less known is that in the pursuit of more creatures, some of the original D&D monsters – like Owlbear and Bulette – were even inspired by cheap plastic toys imported from Taiwan, which might have in turn been knock-offs of Ultraman, the Japanese kaiju TV show (DiTerlizzi 2013). While we can agree that D&D was colonizing mythologies and popular culture with little cultural sensitivity, it did so in a rather lo-fi, do-it-yourself way.

D&D, at least in its initial stages, firmly represented monsters as objects of player actions, negating the main tenet of the sublime thesis – the monsters' cognitive inaccessibility. In fact, the

game assumes that *every being* you encounter is a monster. This led to an interesting terminological confusion over what the term monster really means. As the 1979 AD&D *Monster Manual* puts it:

> The term "monster" is used throughout this work in two manners. Its first, and most important, meaning is to designate any creature encountered - hostile or otherwise, human, humanoid, or beast. Until the encountering party determines what they have come upon, it is a monster. The secondary usage of the term is in the usual sense: a horrible or wicked creature of some sort. (Gygax 1979b: 5)

The rules thus equate monsters with any mobile enemies and postulate that being monstrous is the default mode of being "other" within the game, in an uncanny echo of cybernetic warfare's "ontology of the enemy." This kind of othering is also emblematic of the mode of play later known as *player versus environment*, which D&D helped create.

Although D&D presents a complex holistic system simulating weapon physics, wilderness ecologies as well as fantastic religions, it does make important distinctions between the player party and monsters. In the 1979 Dungeon Master's Guide, Gygax, strongly advises against players choosing to play as monsters, because the game is – in his view – "unquestionably humanocentric" and "heavily weighted towards mankind." (Gygax 1979a: 21) The monsters are equal among themselves, but not equal to men and other selected humanoids, who – unlike monsters – can gain experience and become more powerful.[2] In other words, monsters are relegated to the position of objects.

The previous descriptions of the game's rules, as well as its critique by Matthew Chrulew, might leave us with the impression that D&D was a straightforward grinding affair governed by all-encompassing mechanistic rules. But D&D was not as neat and precise as its tables might make us think. Fan histories and period sociological studies of D&D communities, as wells as the rulebooks themselves, show that rules of the game were in many ways undefined and contradictory (Fine 1981; Peterson 2013). The designers themselves have left large parts of the rules intentionally vague. So, for all its over-specification, there is also a lot of underspecification, which left space for improvisation and role-playing, which grew to become one of the most prominent elements of the pen and paper RPG cultures.

Moreover, designers of D&D knew that too much knowledge of monsters may not rob the game of its entertainment value. The A&D Monster Manual even warns against consulting it too much: "As valuable as this volume is with its wealth of information, some DMs may wisely wish to forbid their players from referring to the manual in the midst of an encounter, since it will be considerably more challenging to confront a monster without an instant rundown of its strengths and weaknesses." (Gygax 1979b: 2)

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[2] Neverthless, the selection of playable races has expanded since 1974. The recent fan expansion *Monstrous Races* even offers instructions on how to play (and role-play) all monsters from the 5th edition D&D Monster Manual, including Gelatinous Cube or Animated Objects. This makes it a captivating vernacular articulation of object-oriented ontology (Kamstra 2016).

**Computer game bestiaries**

D&D and AD&D immensely influenced computer and video games, which is not surprising given the overlap between the wargaming and early tech subcultures. First D&D-inspired games – such as *dnd* for the PLATO network – surfaced already around 1975. The early 1980s marked the releases of several classic computer RPGs. These included *Rogue*, which gave name to the "rogue-like" set of mechanics, the *Ultima* series, which introduced a series of innovations throughout 1980s and 1990s, or the *Wizardry* series, whose combat system was appropriated pretty much wholesale by Japanese computer RPGs. In the late 1980s, these unofficial adaptations were joined by licensed AD&D products such as the "Gold Box" titles, the *Eye of the Beholder* series (1991-1993), or, later, *Baldur's Gate* (1998). Today, even shooter and action games tend to contain elements of the RPG genre, including its treatment of monsters (Schules et al. 2018).

In early computer RPG adaptations, killing monsters was an even more prominent component of the game than in the pen and paper versions. Combat, looting and levelling mechanics were well-defined ready-made algorithms that were easily implemented in computer software. Monsters tended to be one of the few computer-controlled entities moving around the game world, demonstrating the agency of the computer and standing in for the machine. They motivated much of the player action, and became an essential type of game content. It is not surprising that the numbers of monsters in the game were used to attract prospective players (see Figure 3).
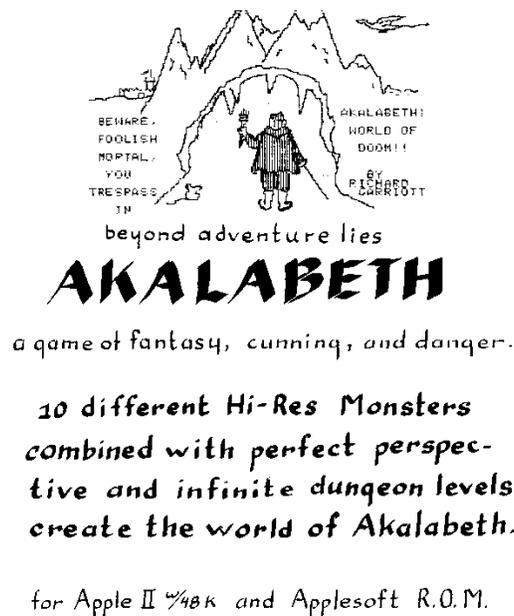


*Figure 3. Akalabeth* (1980), the predecessor to the *Ultima* series, boasting "10 different Hi-Res Monsters"

Following the recommendations of the AD&D Monster Manual, computer RPG games tend not to display all of the monsters' statistics.[3] However, the existence of these statistics is usually

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[3] The manual of *Wizardry: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord* from 1981 emphasized this difference from pen and paper systems: "This manual is designed to teach you how to play Wizardry. Only rarely, however, will we reveal information about the internal workings of the Wizardry game system. This is in direct contrast to other game

assumed. When players uncover them, either through in-game experimentation or hacking, they tend to share them in walkthroughs or, more recently, on the game's respective wikis. As soon as data storage capacity of gaming hardware allowed it, monsters also started appearing in bestiaries and codexes accessible within the games themselves.

As a contemporary example, let us focus on *God of War* (2018). It is a fairly standardized action RPG game that follows many conventions of the genre, despite being released 44 years later after D&D. Most *God of War* monsters, and especially *draugar*, are cannon fodder similar to D&D's zombies or kobolds. The game's *bestiary* can be considered a partial remediation of its medieval counterparts, a somewhat fitting format given that the game's fictional world is inspired by Norse mythology. Its visual representation takes form of a leather-bound codex, which contains drawings and descriptions of individual monsters (see Figure 4). Whenever a new creature is encountered, a new page is added. The descriptions are stylized as though they were written by Atreus, the son and companion of the game's main character Kratos. At times, the descriptions try to capture the awe and wonder that a young boy might feel when encountering *draugar,* ogres and dragons. The description of the *stone ancient*, for example, begins: "One of the Ancients… I can't believe it! Did Mom know they were still alive? They're, well… ancient!"



*Figure 4.* A bestiary page from *God of War* (2018) showing *"Draugr (projectile)"*

After subsequent encounters, however, the entries are expanded by hints on how to best dispose of these enemies, highlighting their weak spots as well as their status as knowable, defeatable entities. Moreover, the naming and classification of the monsters seem to reflect the database

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systems where all the rules are visible. Part of the fun of Wizardry is experimenting to find out the best methods for handling various situations." (manual of Greenberg & Woodhead 1981: 2)

structure of the game rather than any subjective sublime experience or mythological meaning. The various sub-types of *draugar* bear names such as *draugr (projectile), draugr (power weapon), draugr (speed) or draugr (shield)*. Despite the strong allusions to Norse myth, these names sound like labels invented by the development team to differentiate between various types of mechanical behavior. Nevertheless, these parenthesized codenames inhabit the (virtual) pages of a codex bestiary, exemplifying the extent to which the "encyclopedic containment" approach to monsters has become standard in computer (and video) games. The game does contain spectacular scenes and satisfying combat, but most of its awe and terror is experienced by the character of Atreus, who can – unlike the player – experience the monsters as something that is still surprising and unknown.

**Conclusion**

Over the course of this paper, I have shown the tension between the two approaches to monsters – the *sublime thesis* and *encyclopedic containment*. Thanks to their computational nature and the heritage of D&D, computer role-playing games tend to present monsters that conform to the latter. After all, monsters that are simulated by computational systems can hardly be unknowable.

As demonstrated on the case of D&D, the concepts related to *encyclopedic containment* can serve as useful tools for critique of computer game content. Far too often, role-playing games trivialize the unknown, the mythical and the monstrous and turn it into neat tables of cookie cutter monsters; into pests that need to be cleared. Rather than provoking awe and terror, they merely give players something *to do*. Their monsters may look ugly, but they rarely behave in a way that would confound us. Their transgressiveness is merely superficial. Like enemy bombers in Cold War-era cybernetic warfare models, their purpose is to be destroyed through skill and rational strategizing.

However, the notion of the sublime monster remains an important normative ideal. Although most ordinary monsters leave little impact, game designers do attempt to impress the players with monsters that are out of the ordinary. Here, *Dark Souls*, put forward by Vella as an example of "ludic sublime," can be a fitting example. The monsters of *Dark Souls* may evoke awe and terror through extreme difficulty or through grotesque, repulsive audiovisual design. Also, *Dark Souls* purposefully obfuscates interface and rules. Using this title as an example, Vella has argued that a player may strive for the mastery of a game, but there is always "a gap between her experience of the game, her understanding of the game as system, and her awareness of an underlying implied game object: as I shall argue, it is in this gap that we can locate the operations of the ludic sublime." (Vella 2015) In other words, there can be a temporary sublime which precedes any potential full, encyclopedic knowledge of a system. Sublime monstrosity would then be able to survive in this moment of temporary sublime. But even the monsters of *Dark Souls* are ultimately knowable, and detailed information about them is shared on fan wikis. We might, however, still be able to envision other monsters that are unknowable or at least highly unpredictable. Some of these could be driven by artificial intelligence, as was the alien in *Alien: Isolation*. Another potential avenue to explore is procedural generation of monsters.

**Games**

ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS, 1ST EDITION. TSR, 1977-1979.
AKALABETH. Lord British, Apple II, 1980.
DARK SOULS. From Software, PS3, 2011.
DUNGEONS & DRAGONS. TSR, 1974.
GOD OF WAR. Sony Interactive Entertainment, PS4, 2018.
THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT. CD Projekt, PC, 2015.
WIZARDRY: PROVING GROUNDS OF THE MAD OVERLORD. Sir-Tech, Apple II, 1981.

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