

# The Ludic Bestiary: Misogynistic Tropes of Female Monstrosity in *Dungeons & Dragons*

Games and Culture  
2020, Vol. 15(6) 730–747  
© The Author(s) 2019  
Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/1555412019850059  
journals.sagepub.com/home/gac



Sarah Stang<sup>1</sup>  and Aaron Trammell<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

This article introduces the concept of the ludic bestiary, a game mechanic that the authors argue produces abject bodies. Using the “hag” in *Dungeons & Dragons* as a case study, the authors demonstrate how the game’s bestiary, the *Monster Manual*, functions as a tool of patriarchal control by defining, categorizing, and classifying the body of the female other as evil, abject, and monstrous. Importantly, the ludic bestiary not only exists as a core rulebook in *Dungeons & Dragons* but has also been remediated as a narrative-heavy submenu in several digital games. The authors find that the figure of the monstrous woman persists in games because of the widespread distribution of the *Monster Manual* to young men in hobby communities, the cultural influence of *Dungeons & Dragons*, depictions of monstrosity that blend the erotic with the maternal, and the discursive categorization and objectification of the female body by ludic systems.

## Keywords

*Dungeons & Dragons*, *Monster Manual*, bestiary, gender, abject

---

<sup>1</sup> York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

<sup>2</sup> University of California, Irvine, Irvine, CA, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Sarah Stang, Kaneff Tower, 4700 Keele St., Toronto, Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3.

Email: [smstang@yorku.ca](mailto:smstang@yorku.ca)

Monsters, monstrosity, and the monstrous have been important focal points of analysis for scholars interested in the ways in which nonnormative bodies and behaviors are policed, punished, and rejected from dominant social groups. The “monstrous” has been deconstructed as a broad category of alterity, marginality, abjection, deviance, and even potential agency and empowerment. Because of the monster’s omnipresence across cultures and time periods, it is particularly interesting to ask how monstrosity has evolved over time, been remediated across media forms, and the effects monstrosity has on the identity politics of social groups. In this article, we argue that a common narrative persists in games where White male heroes slaughter monstrous women and we trace this narrative to the instrumentalization of bestiaries as an apparatus of control in game design.

Bestiaries are books from the medieval period that chronicle the behavior, traits, and origins of creatures both real and imagined. As we will demonstrate, there are two features common to both the bestiary and the monstrous body in games: first, both situate the monstrous body as the other—the monster is different and distinct from either the reader or the player; it is an obstacle that must be killed or overcome. Second, both control the monstrous through an implementation of a database structure that catalogues, separates, and differentiates monstrosity, so that it can be better understood or controlled by the designer, reader, or player. The design of the bestiary produces abject bodies: It is an apparatus through which the body of the other is reduced to that of an animal and placed outside the Christian moral order. Likewise, what we refer to as the ludic bestiary is a database that situates monstrous bodies within an all-consuming statistical order. Although the ludic bestiary does not overtly rely on the Christian moral code to ascertain the human, it does incorporate morality in terms of labeling the monsters “evil.”

The historical link that connects bestiaries to game design is the *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax & Arneson, 1974–ongoing; hereafter *D&D*) *Monster Manual* (*MM*). Originally written by Gary Gygax and first published in 1977, the *MM* is an encyclopedic collection of monsters for use in *D&D* games. The *MM* includes illustrations, descriptions, and statistical information intended to give players the tools they need to include monsters in their games. As we demonstrate, women are dehumanized in the world of *D&D* by being symbolically represented in the form of hags, spiders, sirens, banshees, medusas, and so on. As such, they are designed in the *MM* to reproduce various misogynist tropes over the course of the game. Unlike horror media, which usually feature a singular, spectacularized monster, fantasy media often normalize abject monstrosity by populating fantastical worlds with monstrous others. The framing of female monstrosity as mundane therefore requires regular acts of violent misogyny. Texts like the *MM* are intended to provide scaffolding for players to construct a game world, but because the game is performative, misogynist monstrosity may be played up or down on a group-by-group basis as the rules are only one of many axes upon which gameplay rests.<sup>1</sup> That said, the rules encourage a gameplay session in which players enact a power fantasy by fighting

countless monsters, leveling up, and then seeking new quests. This fantasy is supported by the translation of monstrosity into statistical tables as a design motif in the *MM*. These tables teach players that monstrosity can be coded into an easily remediated set of numbers that persists as a database structure in many games today.

We use Foucauldian genealogy and textual analysis (Foucault, 1984) to expose the bestiary's role as a tool of categorization, control, and morality and explain how it has been integrated into the practice of modern game design. We argue that although female monstrosity in games shares many similarities with its iterations in film, television, and popular fiction, the bestiary emerges as a new apparatus of subjugation alongside the databasing practices of game designers and programmers. The bestiary subjugates through dehumanization, a process that bears important parallels with the psychoanalytical concept of abjection. For this reason, we use Kristeva's (1982) work on abjection alongside feminist film theorist Creed's (1986, 1993) work on the monstrous-feminine in horror films to better understand the representation of female monstrosity in games. Like many horror films, the act of murdering monstrous women is a violent and cathartic reestablishment of normative, dominant, and patriarchal order. Analyzing and deconstructing the cultural objects involved in this mediated symbolic violence are therefore important components of a feminist project.

This article begins with an overview of the history of *D&D* and the *MM*. We then elaborate on the bestiary and connect it to the circuits of distribution which shape knowledge diffusion. We move onto monstrosity and the ways it has been theorized as the symbolic representation of difference before beginning our analysis of the hag in the *MM* as case study. The *MM* is full of tropes of monstrous femininity, from the *femme fatale* to the *vagina dentata*, but given the limited scope of this article we have chosen to focus exclusively on the hag. We choose the hag because she has appeared in all editions of the *MM* as well as in several acclaimed and successful digital games like the *God of War* series (Sony, 2005–2018) and *The Witcher* series (CD Projekt RED, 2007–2015). As MacCallum-Stewart et al. (2018) have demonstrated, narrative, and game design tropes found in *D&D*'s bestiary have been remediated in digital role-playing games and digital media more broadly. We build upon this point to highlight how many of those tropes are harmful and misogynistic and exist at the intersection of several sites of oppression—such as ageism and sexism, in the case of the hag.

### *A History of D&D and the MM*

Originally, *D&D* was published in small print runs through the cottage publishing house, Tactical Studies Rules (TSR). At the time of its inception in 1973, TSR saw itself as occupying a middle ground in the space of publishing. Founders Gary Gygax and Don Kaye did not see the company as an industry giant like Milton Bradley or Avalon Hill, nor did they see themselves as a small press like Diplomacy, a play-by-mail hobby community in which Gygax had participated. Instead, TSR

saw itself as a small company that catered to a niche market of like-minded people: “The members of TSR are long-time gamers who have found that there is a great deal of satisfaction in creating and/or publishing a good set of game rules or an enjoyable game, and please note the emphasis on the term gamers” (Blume, 1975, p. 1). TSR’s insistence on the importance of producing an “enjoyable” product for a core group of “gamers” emphasizes the historical boys-club nature of the endeavor.<sup>2</sup> It was this boys’ club that created early *D&D*—a rule set that privileges the normative values of a White male player base—thus defining and shaping the prototype of the ludic bestiary.

The game’s first bestiary, entitled “The Underworld & Wilderness Adventures,” was volume three of the first edition of *D&D*. Although this 30-page manual contained some lists of monsters that players could expect to encounter as they explored the dungeons and wilderness of *D&D*, they contained very few details about the monsters and lacked descriptions and statistics. Despite this, the fixity of citation had begun, and the various monsters noted in “The Underworld & Wilderness Adventures” would appear again in the *MM*.

By 1977, *D&D* had increased in popularity and Gygax presided over what had become TSR Hobbies, Inc. This boom in popularity was matched by an ever-increasing circulation of game materials. According to the hobby bibliographers at Aceaum.com who keep records of the game’s distribution, the first print run of the *MM* circulated with 50,000 copies (Anonymous, n.d.). The size of the *MM*’s circulation speaks to its material impact, which is especially noteworthy considering that the *MM* was authored by Gygax alone. The monsters in the *MM* are therefore related to his cultural positionality: In 1978, Gygax was a 40-year-old, married, Christian, White male insurance underwriter with a passion for wargames and science fiction who had lived most of his life in Lake Geneva, WI. Gygax’s privileged experience as a heterosexual and cis-gendered White male designer and his Christian background all shaped the monsters that he designed for the *MM* and thus the vision of the ludic bestiary that has now become fixed in our cultural imagination.

### *The Bestiary and Discursive Control*

Teratology is a taxonomical structure with historical links to the bestiary and, as we will discuss in this article, the act of defining, classifying, and categorizing monstrous subjects—that is, subjects deemed aberrant by dominant ideological standards of normalcy—is an exercise of power and domination. As MacCormack (2012) writes, “Monster ontology manifests the truth of the aberrant in order to affirm the shift of the ‘normal’ from a cultural, arbitrary category to an idealized natural phenomenon” (p. 256). In naturalizing Christianity, bestiaries compared White women, Jews, and people of color to the beasts described within (Hassig, 2000). Building on this argument, we claim that the bestiary is an apparatus that produces abject bodies through a process of inference.

Bestiaries have long been used to categorize and control bodies. The earliest known precursor to the bestiary is the Greek *Physiologus*. It is described by medievalist McCulloch (1962) as “a compilation of pseudo-science in which the fantastic descriptions of real and imaginary animals, birds, and even stones were used to illustrate points of Christian dogma and morals” (p. 15). She explains that the moral allegories within it were its true “raison d’être” (p. 79). For example, Hassig (2000) points out that women were often compared to beasts in bestiaries and other medieval texts. The bestiary was used as a mechanism for policing sexual behavior, and the allegories within would compare women to animals and associate animals with an unkempt, lustful sexuality (p. 72). Hassig notes that sexuality is equivocated with evil and so therefore morality is associated with freedom from sexuality (p. 73). Although a woman may be chaste, because of her gender she is never truly free of the connotations of bestiality and sexuality described within the bestiary.

The *MM* is a bestiary, both in how it was envisioned and designed by Gygax and in how it has been viewed and utilized by players. Games journalist Inderwildi (2018), writing for *Eurogamer*, demonstrates that a game like *Monster Hunter World* uses the aesthetic tradition of the medieval bestiary in its design. Games scholar Svelch (2013) also notes the likeness between the bestiary, the *MM*, and abjection. Drawing on Kristeva’s work, he writes that the abject cannot be an object because abjection is indefinable. For this reason, Svelch declines to categorize monsters in digital games and the *MM* as abject. He explains that,

Video games, however, make the player face the monsters. They do become objects of the player’s actions . . . The logic of informatic control has now colonized even the things we fear: our monsters, previously deemed to be inscrutable and abject. (p. 195)

For Svelch, the *MM*, unlike the bestiary, reduces monstrosity to a quantifiable and comprehensible concept. It produces objects, not abject bodies.

Although we agree that the *MM* allows monsters to be understood as statistics and therefore seen, objectified, and controlled, we contend that Kristeva’s concept of the abject is concerned specifically with bodies which are set apart from the social order. Monstrosity, as a category, is implemented as a technique of objectification that sets the other apart. It is as much a technique of surveillance as it is a technique of separation used to control the morality of the social order. In other words, the monstrous other polices the boundaries of acceptable appearance and behavior while reinforcing the importance of adhering to Christian values such as purity and chastity in order to avoid being labeled “monstrous.”

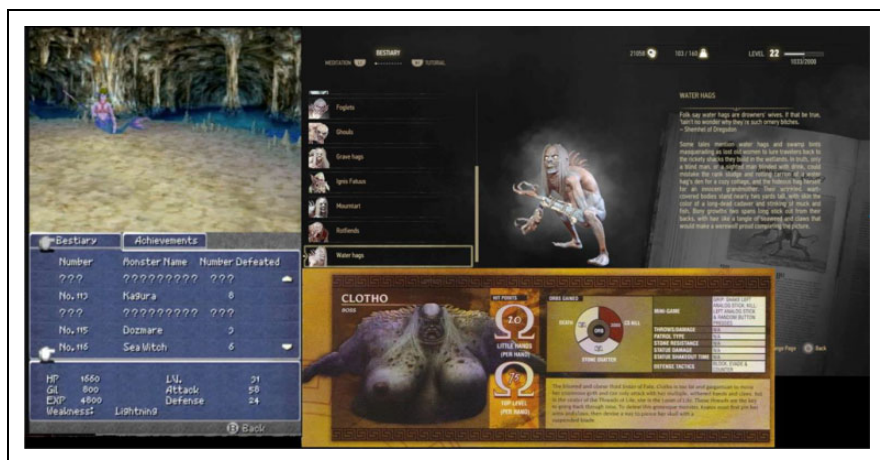
The bestiary was a model for producing abject bodies long before the ubiquity of statistics. The rise of scientism during the Enlightenment disturbed the hegemony of Christian morality in Western culture. New pseudoscientific methods such as phrenology were used to other and differentiate bodies in ways that made the allegorical storytelling of the bestiary anachronistic, obsolete, and mythical. As myth however, the bestiary nests within the shadowy edges of popular culture and emerges through

strange and telling corridors, alleyways, and legends. It emerges as the beating heart of *D&D* to reveal true north on Gygax's moral compass. The *MM* configures morality through statistics, and in doing so reflects the designer's beliefs just as the bestiary reflected the beliefs of its Christian translators.

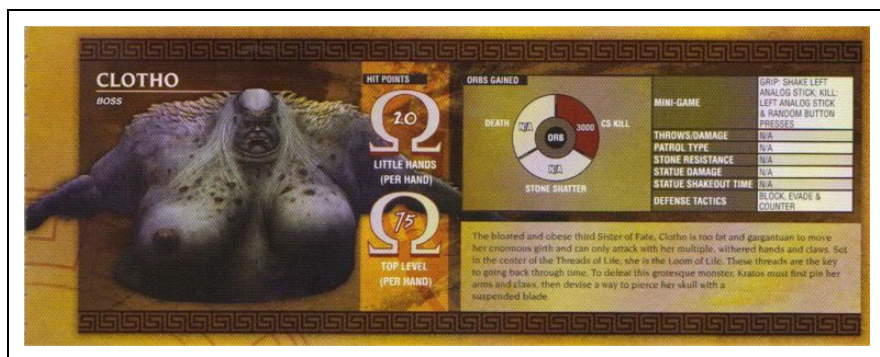
### *Circuits of Distribution*

Old knowledge, despite itself, is replicated repeatedly in print culture. The forms this fixity takes can be graphic (e.g., a woodcut image), stylistic (a particular layout or format), or citational (a passage; Eisenstein, 2013). Knowledge (and therefore power) gains strength through replication and circulation regardless of its relationship to validity or truth. Bestiaries are a perfect example of this point: Although they were widely understood to be fictional in the middle ages, they are a genre unto themselves because of how knowledge became fixed within them. Despite the fictional nature of the beasts described, they persist from one edition to the next due to the citational nature of each beast.

The relative fixity of old knowledge explains the bestiary's impact on the design of digital games. Not only are the concepts of certain beasts replicated from one bestiary to the next, the bestiary as an instrument of classification also becomes fixed. Its fixity is then iterated upon and remixed in the *MM* where statistical details are grafted alongside the allegorical knowledge presented in the bestiary. Finally, there is a sense of fixity between entries within the *MM* which themselves have a certain typographical format, layout, and classification structure. Typically, each entry in the *MM* provides a creature's stats—in the original *MM*, this included name, frequency, quantity, armor class, movement rate, hit dice, chance of encountering the monster in its lair, treasure type, number of attacks, damage, special attacks, special defenses, magic resistance, intelligence, alignment, size, and psionic ability—alongside its picture and description. This style remains in the *MM* today as well as the manuals, strategy guides, and integrated in-game bestiaries associated with contemporary digital games. Monsters are depicted through a picture, a "stat block" that contains a description of its statistics and vitals, and a thick description of its culture, behavior, and general disposition (see Figure 3). The body of a monster is a composition of behavior, image, and statistics, elements which are relatively stable over time. This format is that of the new ludic bestiary—a formula that brings together image, culture, and statistics to produce monsters in the game's world. This formula has been remediated in several digital role-playing games (see Figures 1 and 2), including the *God of War* series, *The Witcher* series, several games in the *Final Fantasy* series (Square Enix, 1987–2016), and even the family-oriented *Pokémon* series (Nintendo, 1996–2017). The classification and ordering of monstrous statistics, behaviors, and images in the *MM* is what philosopher Michel Foucault (1984) would term a discursive regime. Theorized as a politics of how science produces truth, a discursive regime connotes "what effects of power circulate among scientific statements" (p. 55). Where Foucault was concerned with the science of medical



**Figure 1.** Examples of in-game bestiaries from *Final Fantasy VI* (1994), *The Witcher 3* (2015), and *God of War 2* (2007). Common to all these examples are tropes where the female body is objectified and then presented in an easily reproducible, formulaic manner, often incorporating statistical information. Image used for purposes of critique.



**Figure 2.** A close-up of the in-game bestiary entry from *God of War 2*. The image, statistics, description, tactics, and rewards for beating Clotho—a giant, naked goddess-monster derived from Greek mythology and closely resembling the hag archetype—are clear indicators of the bestiary format. Image used for purposes of critique.

informatics, we are concerned with the computational science of game code. The *MM* offers insight into how the bestiary was reconstituted through a quantitative computational logic. Instead of constituting monstrosity only through image and behavior as bestiaries had in the Medieval era, the *MM* constructs monstrosity through image, behavior, and *statistics*, thereby superimposing a quantitative layer alongside the mythic and fantastic. This could be understood as echoing Charles





**Figure 3.** The 1977 and 2014 *Monster Manual* entries for the Night Hag. All bestiaries in *Dungeons & Dragons* align monstrous bodies with a stat block. Images used for purposes of critique.

Darwin's (1859) categorization of species in *The Origin of Species* and the subsequent popularization of racist interpretations and applications of his theories through social Darwinism. The bestiary has therefore become a "science" for producing monstrosity as well as a network of texts which simultaneously manage our collective imagination of monstrosity. The discursive weight given to monsters in the bestiary stabilizes a coalition of monstrous icons in our imagination and produces a sense of truth via the statistics which govern how these monsters act.

### *Teratology, Monstrosity, and Alterity*

Given its metaphorical and literal connections with otherness, difference, and reproduction, the monster is a particularly fruitful object of study for feminist scholars. Female monsters in mythology, folklore, fairy tales, art, literature, film, and television have been thoroughly explored by scholars seeking to articulate the myriad ways in which the female body has been constructed as monstrous within patriarchal society. Scholarship on monstrosity posits that monsters function as embodiments of cultural fears and anxieties (Davis & Santos, 2010; Halberstam, 1995; Wood, 1986/2003); as means to demonize, alienate, and "Other" certain groups of people (Dijkstra, 1986; Graham, 2002; Kearney, 2002; Rearick, 2004; Young, 2016); and as a cathartic way of engaging with the abject, the uncanny, and the taboo (Caputi, 2004; Creed, 1986, 1993; Grosz, 1996; Harrington, 2018). One of the most influential texts on female monstrosity is Creed's (1986, 1993) analysis of what she termed the "monstrous-feminine" in film. Like many scholars of popular culture, Creed argued that the stories told within religions, mythologies, and folklore are continually remediated and so the monsters that have always haunted the margins of human society and psychology reappear, sometimes directly and sometimes symbolically, within contemporary art and media objects. We seek to bring Creed's scholarship on film to games by highlighting how the



*MM* has applied tropes around motherhood, sexuality, deception, and beauty to a statistical and mythological form.

Alongside Creed, this project builds upon the work of Caputi (2004), who considers how the primal, powerful mother goddess figure has been systematically transformed and maintained as a monster or *femme fatale*. The *femme fatale* speaks to how cultural anxieties around women and deception transfer from myth to popular culture. Her work explores the ways in which patriarchal myth resurfaces in film, advertising, art, literature, and news (Caputi, 2004, pp. 51–73). Santos's (2017) work is also useful in that it connects the various stages of the female sexual maturation cycle to monster archetypes such as vampires, werewolves, and witches. In this way, Santos analyzes the process by which phallogocentric discourse exercises dominance over the female body by depicting women "who fail to accept their predefined roles within their culture and society as monstrous" (p. xv). Finally, Harrington's (2018) concept of "gynaehorror," which she uses to articulate the entanglement of monstrosity and female reproduction in horror film, also runs parallel to our project. She explores various stages of female sexual development, including virginity, pregnancy, birth, motherhood, and menopause, as they are symbolically or literally represented in film in order to shock and horrify.

By constructing the female body as a site of deception, vulgarity, and horror, monstrosity reinforces the idea that the female body is abject. The concept of abjection is therefore central to our project. Although critical of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, Creed effectively applied the psychoanalytic concept of the abject, as theorized by Kristeva (1982) in her book *Powers of Horror*, to a wide selection of well-known horror films. Kristeva drew on Lacanian psychoanalysis to articulate the abject as that which disrupts, disturbs, and is rejected by the normative, patriarchal realm of law, order, and propriety. Activities or substances which invoke disgust are all part of the abject, such as bodily fluids and excrement, disease, open wounds, death and decay, cannibalism, bodily alteration, dismemberment, and even sexual perversion. The abject is, paradoxically, associated with both fear and *jouissance*, as we are often both disgusted by and drawn to that which is abject, which explains the popularity of abject imagery in horror media.

Importantly, Kristeva demonstrated the ways in which female bodies, particularly menstruating and maternal female bodies, have been considered abject within cultural and religious traditions and discussed how rituals of purification relate to patriarchal control over abject bodies. Abject bodily substances are associated with nature, which is itself associated with the feminine. This division between the embodied, natural feminine, and the mental, "civilized" masculine reinforces the taxonomical hierarchy which places women beneath men (MacCormack, 2012, p. 257). This is a universal problem because, as Creed (1986) stated, "All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (p. 44). Of course, she also noted

that “the feminine is not per se a monstrous sign; rather, it is constructed as such within a patriarchal discourse which reveals a great deal about male desires and fears” (p. 70). Our conceptualization and analysis of the ludic bestiary demonstrate how female monstrosity reinforces that same patriarchal discourse within the design structure of *D&D* and other role-playing games.

### *Monstrous Motherhood and the Hag*

The word “teratology”—the study of monsters, from the Greek word *tera*, meaning monster, and *logia*, meaning study/knowledge/theory—is used in medical discourse to refer to the study of birth defects. The etymology and continued usage of teratology suggest that individuals born with nonnormative bodies were (and are) therefore considered medically monstrous. As Huet (1993) recounts, “the Renaissance combined two elements of monstrosity: the deformed child and the aberrant mother” (p. 24). This combination has persisted and, as this article will discuss, being born monstrous and giving birth to monsters are both associated with deviancy, evilness, and corruption. The fecund female monster can therefore be considered the most horrifying of creatures, which explains why the psychoanalytical concept of the abject has been so closely associated with the maternal (Creed, 1986, 1993; Kristeva, 1982). Monstrosity in this sense is a gendered construction: While monsters can certainly be of any sex, giving birth to monsters is an inherently female act, and one which has traditionally placed the responsibility for the child’s monstrosity squarely with its mother.

Given the ubiquity of maternal monstrosity in film, it is unsurprising that the same motif should find its way into games as well. The *MM* reproduces this motif so clearly that it includes a section entitled “Monstrous Motherhood” in its description of the hag. According to the *MM* (2014), “Hags represent all that is evil and cruel,” and it describes them as resembling “withered crones . . . whose forms reflect only the wickedness in their hearts” (p. 176). The description continues, drawing a clear image of women with “withered faces . . . framed by long, frayed hair” complete with “horrid moles and warts [which] dot their blotchy skin” (*MM*, 2014, p. 176). This imagery draws deeply from Western stereotypes of the hag, crone, or witch—imagery that speaks to the intertwined ideologies of ageism and sexism which have shaped Western society for centuries.

Historically, the majority of the tens of thousands of women accused of and executed for witchcraft during the witch hunts of the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries in Europe and North America were poor, elderly, widowed or unmarried, and childless (Horsley, 1979). The notion that witches would steal infants and children was embedded in the assumption that they would do so because they could not have their own. This assumption reveals itself in the monstrous motherhood of the hags in *D&D*, which is described as follows:

Hags propagate by snatching and devouring human infants. After stealing a baby from its cradle or its mother's womb, the hag consumes the poor child. A week later, the hag gives birth to a daughter who looks human until her thirteenth birthday, whereupon the child transforms into the spitting image of her hag mother. (*MM*, 2014, p. 176)

Hags are immortal, so their aged appearance has nothing to do with actual aging; rather, the writers reveal their ageist ideology by equating this elderly appearance with the hags' "wickedness." In the original *MM* (1977), Night Hags are also responsible for the reproduction of evil. Their abilities allow them to infiltrate the nightmares of evil characters by "riding the victim until dawn" until their bodies wither into larva (p. 73). These larvae are then used as currency in Hades, the realm of the dead, where they can be shaped into imps and quasits (minor demons) or consumed by undead seeking to extend their longevity.

Hags in all media certainly embody misogynistic hostility toward female aging, and in *D&D*, they also reveal anxieties regarding the potential power of female reproduction—that women can single-handedly create children who become identical to them. Like many villainous or monstrous women characters, they are also deceptive. Each hag can magically alter her appearance in order to attract, manipulate, and deceive mortals. As unquestionably evil beings who revel in tragedy, hate goodness and beauty, and "take perverse joy in corrupting mortals," hags are fundamentally untrustworthy and dangerous (*MM*, 2014, p. 178). Although hags do not like each other, they still form covens, give gifts and share knowledge with one another, and abide by sacred codes of conduct with other hags (*MM*, 2014, p. 176). This "Dark Sorority" which grows with every parthenogenetic reproduction is framed within the *MM* as posing a deadly threat to the mortal warriors/player characters because *of course* the idea of a sisterhood, society, or coven of powerful women who can create identical reproductions of themselves would be considered dangerous within the patriarchal realm of *D&D*.

Ultimately, the hag is "wicked" because she is powerful. The hag's power is derived from her ability to transcend the archetype of mother and act also as seducer, strategist, soul dealer, and warrior. Hags are evil because they are mothers who act outside the regulations of the church or state. They are a key trope within the bestiary because they give a name to this dangerous and unregulated form of motherhood. By naming strong, intelligent, single mothers "hags" the bestiary produces a stigma around strength, intelligence, and independence. It positions hag as a negative, grotesque identity and even suggests that sex with hags might emasculate a man and transform him into a "larva," thereby even suggesting that hags even hold the power to shape and structure masculinity.

### *The Hag as Playable Database*

Understanding the mythic and psychoanalytical connotations of the hag tells only half the story. We contend that the *MM* is a blueprint for how the stereotypes detailed

above were quantified and transformed into a statistical style that has been popularized in digital game design. By analyzing how the ludic bestiary transforms bodies into numbers, this section shows how the connotations of a moral evil which the classic bestiary used to position women as abject has been superseded by the idea that monstrous bodies have nonnormative statistical values. Moral aberrance is equivocated with statistical aberrance in today's digital society where the ontological and mathematical power of classification structures works as an invisible stratum of social control (Bowker & Star, 2000).

Statistically, in the fifth edition of *MM*, the Night Hag, Sea Hag, and Green Hag defy ageist stereotypes with their often perfect strength statistics (18, 18, and 16 on a scale from 3 to 18), hardy constitutions (16 for all), and generally positive charisma scores (14, 16, and 13). The hag's above average charisma stands in contrast to the text which often categorizes them as "ugly" or "horrific." Many of their abilities like "Illusory Appearance," "Change Shape," and a generally high bonus to "deception" checks allow them shift form, thus reinforcing the sexist trope that women are deceptive. The hag is also described as possessing a high intelligence, although the Night Hag—who is listed as a demon as opposed to a corrupted fairy—possesses a far greater intelligence than her fairy kin.

The statistical values of hag's body in the *MM* suggest that her monstrous nature stems from the difference between her body and a statistically normative body that would possess statistical averages in each attribute closer to 10 or 11.<sup>3</sup> The hag's moral deviance (such as kidnapping men and transforming them into larvae) works in tandem with her superhuman intelligence, constitution, and charisma. The numbers teach players that she is monstrous at least in part because she is superhuman—creatures are monstrous because they have bodies with abilities beyond that of an average human. In the case of the hag, her statistics show how a strong, smart, and charming elderly woman is monstrous precisely because she defies normative understanding of a typical body's statistical measurements.

Greater questions loom regarding how the ludic bestiary encourages players and designers to reframe their understanding of morality. The ludic bestiary invites readers to view a monster's alignment (good, neutral, or evil) as one of many values that constitute its body. Even Christian morality as policed by the medieval bestiary is quantified in the ludic bestiary, since monstrosity is equated with the transgression of a "typical" quantified body. The traditional narrative tropes that frame the hag as evil and abject in mythology, folklore, fairy tales, and other media are translated into a clear set of values—superhuman strength, constitution, and charisma—which suggest to players that her body should horrify because it is different. The sense of horror that accompanies bodily difference is the new quantitative morality of the ludic bestiary. In other words, the ludic bestiary produces abject bodies by positioning nonnormative or nonconforming bodies as monstrous in comparison to a typical human norm that remains unwritten and invisible.

## From Morality to Misogyny

In this article, we have endeavored to show how Gygax's vision of monstrosity fits into a historical tradition of representing the other through mediated symbolic representation. Many elements in *D&D*, including its central gameplay component of expecting players to slaughter feminized monsters, were translated into digital games.<sup>4</sup> This process of remediation captured and upheld the discursive and numerical control that *D&D*'s *MM* exercised over the imagined other. We have focused on the female or feminized other in this article, but Gygax's understanding of monstrosity includes any identity, subject position, or body that is different from that of the assumed ideal straight, White, and male player. In his introduction to the first *MM*, Gygax (1978) explains,

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. (p. 5, emphasis in original)

In its direct and instant association between difference (or even just the unknown) and wickedness, this definition is clearly xenophobic. It sets all bodies apart from those of the player and defines them as abject, always already monstrous, as well as placing them along a specific moral axis—the wicked and horrible. "Wicked," derived from the Old English "wicca," evokes the historical persecution of women as witches. We have endeavored in this article to show that Gygax's use of this term is neither haphazard nor coincidental, as women are depicted deliberately and routinely in the *MM* as vicious, deceitful, and wicked. Morality in the *MM*, and in bestiaries more broadly, is an alarming tangle of xenophobia—namely racism—and misogyny. While this article has focused on analyzing monstrosity through the lens of gender, future work on the *MM* must address its racism. Some work on this topic has already been done, though most of it is nonacademic (such as Sanders, 2008; Sumner, 2008; Raggi, 2009; Van Dyke, 2008), with Young (2016), Clements (2015), and Garcia (2017) as notable exceptions.

In addition, the *MM* adds statistics to the narratives and images which were common in the classic bestiary. The inclusion of statistics in the *MM* allowed storytellers to rapidly customize monsters from a template in response to player demands.<sup>5</sup> Outside the game table, the informatization of the monster allowed for the rapid production of monstrous templates within fan communities. Because it was easy to craft monsters by grafting and modifying the statistics of those in the original *MM*, monsters proliferated in fan-centred columns like *White Dwarf*'s "The Fiend Factory" and *Dragon Magazine*'s "Creature Feature." Despite the potential for a radically new ethic of design to emerge in these fan-led efforts, TSR Hobbies was careful to curate the "official" release of these monsters in what they called the

*Fiend Folio*. Importantly, the formula which combines monstrosity and statistics is what we term the ludic bestiary, an invisible algorithmic structure and common submenu found also in popular digital role-playing games like the *God of War* series, *The Witcher* series, and several games in the *Final Fantasy* series, among others.

This article has analyzed the way women have been portrayed in the *MM*, and its findings have been depressingly predictable. In both the original 1977 edition and the newest fifth edition, *MM* (2014), we have found that women are represented through tropes of monstrous motherhood, deception, violence, and an insidious sexuality. Although Gary Gygax was surely influenced by the cultural zeitgeist of the 1970s, fraught with Cold War anxieties about espionage and deception, a jet-set era curiosity around all things exotic (Adinolfi, 2008), and a hippie-inspired celebration of the female form as simultaneously maternal and sexual, we must be careful not to pathologize and see all monstrosity in games today as stemming simply from his overactive imagination. Instead, these cultural influences conspire to normalize the clearly misogynist depictions of women in the *MM*. In this way, the *MM* works as an apparatus of abjection, which itself normalizes our culture of misogyny by explaining over and over, in matter-of-fact naturalistic descriptions complete with tables, pictures, and statistics, that women are monsters and the female body is horrifying.

The *MM* offers designers and players a template for how numbers might be used to convey moral values, thereby underpinning the Christian patriarchal morality of the bestiary with seemingly “scientific” numerical values. In gameplay modeled after *D&D* (that found in most role-playing games), the monster is essential (and so centralized) while also being presented as abject, horrifying, and dangerous. However, gameplay that requires the normative player to slaughter the nonnormative monster (and therefore perform the cathartic reenactment of patriarchal violence that is the purpose of much Western mythology) is a convention. Once we recognize it as a convention, we can choose to do something different. Instead of remediating a vision of monstrosity which is embedded in patriarchal mythology, misogynistic ideology, and clichéd popular tradition, game designers could instead envision monstrosity. Could the ludic bestiary become an instrument of inclusivity? Could we imagine monstrosity that celebrates difference instead of marginalizing it? Could we move away from a hypermasculine and xenophobic vision of the human “hero” and orient ourselves toward a new understanding and appreciation of the (post-human, trans-human, nonhuman, or fully human) monster?

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**


The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.



## ORCID iD

Sarah Stang  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7295-5880>

## Notes

1. A typical game of *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) takes place around a table with one player taking the role of the moderator and the others playing a variety of fantasy archetypes. The game is performative because players role-play their characters, often play-acting lines of dialogue as if spoken in real time by the characters.
2. For more on the connection between “gamer” identity and misogynistic and exclusionary practices, see Shaw (2011) and Alexander (2014).
3. Ten and 11 are the average scores generated for nonplayer character (NPC) statistics. NPC statistics are derived by rolling 3 six-sided dice for each attribute and adding them together. Although player characters in fifth edition *D&D* roll 4 six-sided dice and drop the lowest value when generating their statistics, their above average attributes are seen as heroic as opposed to monstrous.
4. Given the limited scope of this article, we have only discussed the hag figure; however, the abject monstrous-feminine is a common trope in several role-playing games, which also classify them in their in-game bestiaries. As mentioned, some examples are the *God of War* series and *The Witcher* series. For more detail on the specific female monsters in these games and their connection to misogynistic tropes of female monstrosity, see Stang (2018).
5. This template-like format is similar to Hardt’s (1999) concept of “Toyotatism” where “the productive decision actually comes after and in reaction to the market decision” (p. 93).

## References

- Adinolfi, F. (2008). *Mondo exotica: Sounds, visions, obsessions of the cocktail generation* (K. Pinkus, Trans.). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Alexander, L. (2014, August 28). ‘Gamers’ don’t have to be your audience. ‘Gamers’ are over. *Gamasutra*. Retrieved from [https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/224400/Gamers\\_dont\\_have\\_to\\_be\\_your\\_audience\\_Gamers\\_are\\_over.php](https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/224400/Gamers_dont_have_to_be_your_audience_Gamers_are_over.php)
- Anonymous. (n.d.). Print run estimates. *Acaem*. Retrieved from <https://www.aceum.com/library/printrun.html>
- Blume, B. (1975). TSR—Why we do what we do. *The Strategic Review*, 1, 1.
- Bowker, G., & Star, S. L. (2000). *Sorting things out: Classification and its consequences*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Caputi, J. (2004). *Goddesses and monsters: Women, myth, power, and popular culture*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Clements, P. J. (2015). *Roll to save vs. prejudice: The phenomenology of race in Dungeons & Dragons* (Master’s thesis). Bowling Green State University. Retrieved from [http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc\\_num=bgisu1448050814](http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=bgisu1448050814)

- Creed, B. (1986). Horror and the monstrous-feminine: An imaginary abjection. *Screen*, 27, 44–70.
- Creed, B. (1993). *The monstrous-feminine: Film, feminism, psychoanalysis*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Darwin, C. (1859). *The origin of species*. London: John Murray.
- Davis, L. K., & Santos, C. (2010). *The monster imagined: Humanity's recreation of monsters and monstrosity*. Oxford, England: Inter-Disciplinary Press.
- Dijkstra, B. (1986). *Idols of perversity: Fantasies of feminine evil in Fin-de-Siècle culture*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Eisenstein, E. (2013). *The printing revolution in early modern Europe*. London, England: Cambridge University Scholars Group.
- Foucault, M. (1984). *The Foucault reader* (P. Rabinow, Trans.). New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Garcia, A. (2017). Privilege, power, and *Dungeons & Dragons*: How systems shape racial and gender identities in tabletop role-playing games. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 24, 232–246.
- Graham, E. L. (2002). *Representations of the post/human: Monsters, aliens, and others in popular culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Grosz, E. (1996). Animal sex: Libido as desire and death. In E. Grosz & E. Probyn (Eds.), *Sexy bodies: The strange carnalities of feminism* (pp. 278–299). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gygax, G. (1978). *Monster manual*. Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Hobbies.
- Gygax, G., & Arneson, D. (1974). *Dungeons & Dragons*. Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Hobbies.
- Halberstam, J. (1995). *Skin shows: Gothic horror and the technology of monsters*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hardt, M. (1999). Affective labor. *Boundary*, 2, 89–100.
- Harrington, E. (2018). *Women, monstrosity and horror film: Gynaehorror*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hassing, D. (2000). *The mark of the beast: The medieval bestiary in art, life, and literature*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Horsley, R. A. (1979). Who were the witches? The social roles of the accused in the European witch trials. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 9, 689–715.
- Huet, H. M. (1993). *Monstrous imagination*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Inderwildi, A. (2018, February 21). What medieval bestiaries tell us about Monster Hunter World. *Eurogamer*. Retrieved from <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-02-21-what-medieval-bestiaries-tell-us-about-monster-hunter-world>
- Kearney, R. (2002). *Strangers, gods and monsters: Interpreting otherness*. London, England: Routledge.
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection* (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- MacCallum-Stewart, E., Stenros, J., & Björk, S. (2018). The impact of role-playing games on culture. In J. Zagal & S. Deterding (Eds.), *Role-playing game studies: Transmedia foundations* (pp. 172–187). New York, NY: Routledge.

- MacCormack, P. (2012). The queer ethics of monstrosity. In J. S. Picart & J. E. Browning (Eds.), *Speaking of monsters: A teratological anthology* (pp. 255–265). Palgrave Macmillan.
- McCulloch, F. (1962). *Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries*. Durham: University of North Carolina Press.
- Perkins, C. (2014). *Monster manual* (5th ed.). Wizards of the Coast.
- Raggi, J. (2009, January 15). *D&D and racism. Lamentations of the Flame Princess* [Blog]. Retrieved from <http://lotfp.blogspot.com/2009/01/d-and-racism.html>
- Rearick, A. (2004). Why is the only good orc a dead orc? The dark face of racism examined in Tolkien's world. *Modern Fiction Studies*, 50, 861–874.
- Sanders, G. (2008, December 1). *D&D and race, how problematic? Better Living through Empiricism* [Blog]. Retrieved from <http://gregsanders.typepad.com/blog/2008/12/race-and-dnd-how-problematic.html>
- Santos, C. (2017). *Unbecoming female monsters: Witches, vampires, and virgins*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Shaw, A. (2011). Do you identify as a gamer? Gender, race, sexuality, and gamer identity. *New Media & Society*, 14, 28–44.
- Stang, S. (2018). Shrieking, biting, and licking: The monstrous-feminine and abject female monsters in video games. *Press Start*, 4, 18–34. Retrieved from <https://www.press-start.gla.ac.uk/index.php/press-start/article/view/85>
- Sumner, S. (2008, April 25). Is Faerun ready for its first orc president? *Something Awful*. Retrieved from <http://www.somethingawful.com/news/president-maverick-racist/2/>
- Svelch, J. (2013). Monsters by the numbers: Controlling monstrosity in video games. In M. Levina & D.-M. T. Bui (Eds.), *Monster culture in the 21st century: A reader* (pp. 193–208). New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Van Dyke, C. (2008, November 18). Race in *D&D* [Blog]. Retrieved from <http://raceindnd.wordpress.com/2008/11/18/nerd-nite-presentation-november-18th-2008/>
- Wood, R. (2003). *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan . . . and beyond*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. (Original work published 1986)
- Young, H. (2016). *Race and popular fantasy literature: Habits of whiteness*. New York, NY: Routledge.

## Author Biographies

**Sarah Stang** is a PhD candidate in the Communication and Culture Joint Program at York University in Toronto, Ontario. Her research focuses on questions of representation and identity politics in digital games and game cultures. She approaches the study of digital games and other media from an interdisciplinary, intersectional feminist perspective. Her published work has focused on game adaptations, gender representation, fatherhood and familial bonds, representations of madness, and the monstrous-feminine in digital games. Her current research explores the symbolic connection between monstrosity and marginalized bodies in digital games, tabletop role-playing games, and science fiction and fantasy media.

---

**Aaron Trammell** is an assistant professor of informatics at UC, Irvine. He graduated from the Rutgers University School of Communication and Information in 2015 and spent a year at the Annenberg School of Communication at USC as a postdoctoral researcher. His research is focused on revealing historical connections between games, play, and grassroots community. He is interested in how political and social ideology is integrated in the practice of game design and how these perspectives are negotiated within the imaginations of players. He is the Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Analog Game Studies* and the Multimedia Editor of *Sounding Out!*