From the Demonic Tradition to Art-Evil in Digital Games: Monstrous Pleasures in *Lord of the Rings Online*

Frans Mäyrä

This chapter focuses on a demonic tradition that features in *Lord of the Rings Online* (*LOTRO*; Turbine, Midway & Codemasters, 2007–), and certain computer games preceding it. The specific aim in analysis is to discuss how certain demonically marked elements figure in this ludic tradition. The particular imagery and forms of play investigated here are traced back into the cultural history of occult imagery and demonic forces. My aim is to unravel how the demonic elements are embedded into the symbolic and gameplay dimensions of these games, and discuss the various meanings and interpretations they receive, both within the frame of play as well as scholarship. The general thrust of argument is dialectical: it is important to recognise the "aesthetic of evil" within the game culture, and to engage in discourse with it in multiple levels, in order to gain a deeper understanding about the actual functions this aesthetics and related game features serve. My aim is not to judge or celebrate games that figure demons, but rather try to understand why such games appear rather popular and why they can provide powerful experiences that appear to be open for multiple personal, social and cultural uses and significations. I will conclude with discussion of particular game mode, "Monster Play" in *LOTRO*, and point towards some further research questions opened up by the approach I have adopted here: a particular combination of symbolic and textual game analysis with the practices of analytical play – a style of ludic cultural psychology.

Introduction to the demonic

At least since the 1993 hit, *Doom* (id Software), demonic imagery and related themes have been in digital games at least as common as in many other forms of popular culture, such as heavy rock music or graphical novels. Demonic monsters have often been rather one-dimensionally associated with conflict, destruction and evil, but through related phenomena like demonic possession and dissociated or split subjectivity, the demonic figures and functions can also be subjected to extended analyses of textual polyphony (see e.g. my book *Demonic Texts and Textual Demons*, 1999). Taking a closer look at how the demonic elements operate within the contemporary contexts of digital games and online social play can, however, open up fresh perspectives on how the issue of control is involved with these demonic fantasies.

The cultural study of the demonic has traditionally focused on both a particular aesthetics as well as social and psychological functions that demons appear to be related with. The term 'demon' is derived from the ancient Hellenic word 'daimon', adopted in the Greek translations of the New Testament texts. The original archaic Greek sense of daimon was a "supernatural presence or entity, somewhere between a god (theos) and a hero" (Peters 1967, 33). The religious sensibilities of shamanistic

cultures did not always make strict divisions between good and evil spirits, as became common in Jewish apocalyptic texts (particularly around 200 BCE to 100 CE), and later in Christianity. It is thus important to make a distinction between the *demonic* as the (one-dimensionally) evil pole in a Christian dualistic world view, and the *daimonic* as an inherently non-dualistic concept. The "demons" of folk traditions around the world are mostly ambivalent characters: one can consult and even sometimes trade with them, and the phenomenon of demonic possession is well known both as an involuntary illness, as well as voluntary practice, used to derive knowledge from the invisible powers. (Forsyth 1987; Oesterreich 1921/1974.)

Anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) has paid attention to the ways that cultures set up boundaries that separate the domain of purity and order from that of impurity and chaos. There are various taboos related to phenomena that transgress this kind of symbolic boundaries, thereby threatening the social and cultural order at the very basis of society. The ambivalent mixture of horror and fascination associated with demonic monsters of various kinds can be traced back to similar kind of cultural psychological dynamics – an area that has also been extensively analysed by Julia Kristeva in her work on 'abject' (the threatening meaninglessness always lurking at the boundaries of identity; see Kristeva 1982). Philosopher Noël Carroll (1990) has written about this theme under the concept of 'art-horror', pointing out how the mixed feelings of fascination and repulsion raised by an undead monster like a vampire, for example, relate to it being perceived both as threatening and impure, but also simultaneously unreal or imaginary. The work of psychologist Michael J. Apter (2007) further extends this 'fascination with danger' to discuss how a particular 'protective frame' appears to surround phenomena that are enjoyed for their own sake (that is, like they would be game, or art). The 'monster theory' of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996) like the work of Julia Kristeva mentioned above both underline that the fear of monstrosity is really a 'kind of desire', and Cohen also analyses the 'deconstructive' roles of monsters for a culture: monsters mark the 'borders of the possible', question our tendency to think with easy binary opposites, and thereby reveal the processes used for separating 'Us' from 'Them'.

In contemporary computer games, as in the folk tales and art around the world, demons can be recognised from such outward signs as long sharp teeth, horns, hair, wings, scales or other animal traits combined with an otherwise human form. The inhumanity of demons can also be indicated by their immateriality, invisibility, of not casting a shadow, or some other supernatural attribute. The non-order that demons represent as the opponents of the right human order of things is thus not complete 'formlessness', but forms a distinctive 'demonic aesthetic' on its own. The malformed corporeality of demonic monsters challenges the image of the enculturated human, and forces us to witness its visual drama of half-animal, half-human hybridity. (Mäyrä 1999, 32–33.) The same borderline character of demons is also visible in their typical milieu: demons can be met in underground caverns, dark forests, graveyards, deserted temples and other places at the outskirts of civilised society, as well as at the uncertain borderlands between life and death, holiness and 'unholiness' . The destructive behaviour of demons we know from myth and popular culture positions them also at the borderlines between reason and insanity, human rationality and animalistic irrationality. Demons and the demonic forces are frighteningly positioned at the grey zone between human and nonhuman worlds. Put differently, the monstrosity of demons is a simultaneous signal of rejection and identification, making them open for

frightening and tempting explorations into the daimonic ambiguity of our existence. I suggest that this has certain specific relevance to the complex situation of a "monster player" of *LOTRO* and other games explored in this chapter.

The cultural psychology of borderline states and symbols is commonly discussed under the theories of 'liminality'. In addition to Mary Douglas, Victor Turner (1969) has been famous for studying this 'anti-structure'. Originating in the work of Arnold van Gennep (1909), the liminal state was identified as the threshold stage (*limen* is Latin for 'threshold') in classical ritual processes. In rites of separation, transition rites and in rites of incorporation alike, there is a potential for breaking of cultural and social order, or chaos. The liminal state exists between the established orders, after leaving behind the old one, before the new order has been fully settled. Victor Turner has written how the exceptional character of liminal anti-structure serves important functions for both communities and individuals. Not limited by the normal order of things, liminal phenomena hold both regenerative and creative potential. While our modern urban society does not organise and manage the lives of individuals as strongly as the tribal or more organic local traditional societies typically do, Turner points towards the separated role of art, the carnivalesque spectacles of sports, and such distinctively playful celebrations as Halloween to argue that there still exists some, albeit fragmentary 'liminoid potential' in our culture. Rather than the completely separated and sanctified states of liminal rites more typical to traditional societies, the liminoid states of modernity are temporary, negotiable and rather than some genuine social transformation, offer the participants temporary relief from the regular order of society (Turner 1982).

I will here extend this argument to the digital games, and claim that it is useful to study game play from a perspective informed by the analysis of demonic and liminal phenomena. However, it is important to note that approaching games from a cultural anthropological (liminal or liminoid) perspective does not mean to claim that games are totally separated into some symbolic or ritual reality of their own. Rather, the demonic play I discuss in this chapter is interesting precisely since it is transgressive, and therefore useful for observing the dialectics of 'bindings' and 'freedoms' at play. Playful demons and demonic play takes us to place beyond the boundaries of 'self' and 'non-self', 'us' and 'them' in a manner that will also question the possibility of any clear 'magic circle' around gameplay (cf. Pargman & Jakobsson 2008). At the end of this chapter I will identify various discourses that are used to frame demons and "evil play" in games, and thereby distinguish the negotiation and policing of boundaries taking place around *LOTRO* and similar games.

Playable demons

Even while my principal analysis in this chapter is focused on *LOTRO*, I will approach this particular game from a perspective informed by a broader cultural history of the demonic, as well as by providing a brief introduction into the history of user-controllable monster characters.

The monsters of science fiction and fantasy figure in ample numbers in classic video games, but they are mostly relegated to the role of computer controlled opponents, while it is the players task to clear the digital battlegrounds from the vermin. The highly popular Japanese arcade video game *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1978) is an

example, as are the early *Dungeons & Dragons* inspired computer role-playing adventures. In the text-based game known as ADVENT, or 'Colossal Cave Adventure' (Will Growther, Don Woods & al., 1975–) the underground domain included such fantasy elements as dwarves, elves and a troll, apparently inspired by J.R.R. Tolkien's literature (Dennis 2007). Later, in the 1980's, a typical computer role-playing game would commonly provide the player-character options that are also rooted in the Tolkienesque canon of 'good people': Humans, Elves, Halflings (Hobbits) are among those players can choose from. When set to play a scenario from a game like *Pool of Radiance* (Strategic Simulations, Inc. 1988), for example, the challenges focus on overcoming 'evil creatures' derived from *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* game system and the Forgotten Realms game world. Orcs, goblins and hobgoblins all needed to be vanquished at the first slum levels of the game.

A different kind of encounter with the demonic was provided by *Dungeon Keeper* (Bullfrog & Electronic Arts, 1997) and some other games that followed its example. In a move that could perhaps be described as Postmodern[1] or ironic, it turned the tables and set the players into the role of evil monsters rather than the classic RPG heroes. A genre hybrid, *Dungeon Keeper* and its sequel could rely on a history of computer and video games that already spanned over three decades. It was also designed to stir very particular kind of sensibilities, which soon becomes apparent for any player.

> *The valiant knight who had vainly tried to stop the advancement of my troops was slain and I kept looking for the next challenge. Floating over the imp-infested tunnels and underground halls of my expanding realm, I point out areas to excavate, activating new building processes. No rest for the evil. Warlocks keep complaining about the library being too small for their expanding spell investigations, and I am also running out of food for my troops. Time to build another hatchery, and a monsters' lair. Irritated, I slap one of my minor minions, then take it to my grasp and enjoy its squealing… (Author's play notes, August 8th, 2009.[2])*

The 3D graphics of *Dungeon Keeper II* (DK2; Bullfrog & Electronic Arts, 1999) reveal a world that is familiar from medieval fantasy games of previous decades. In terms of gameplay, it is mostly indebted to earlier 'god games' of Bullfrog, including *Populous* (1989) and *Powermonger* (1990). Real-time strategy, terrain construction and resource management are in this game combined with a first person view of the battles. Player can use a spell to 'possess' a creature of choice to leave the godly overall view, and immerse themselves within the reality of dungeon at the level of a single character.

Figure 1a: Demons with irony: the chicken farm inside a demonic stronghold, as seen from a "possessed" view-point. (*Dungeon Keeper 2*, Bullfrog & Electronic Arts, 1999.)

Figure 1b: A loading screen image from *Dungeon Keeper 2*.

Dungeon Keeper games provided a novel approach to handling monstrous and demonic elements in gameplay. Much of the charm of these dungeon games related to

the combination of horror fantasy aesthetics with a quirky sense of humour. Already the loading screen of *DK2* presents player with a combination of grotesque monsters, torture chamber tools – and cartoon-style chickens. Slapstick and gothic mix constantly in hilarious ways during the gameplay. The soft, menacing tone of 'the Mentor' (in-game guide and narrator) and the occult game elements decidedly play up the religious or supernatural feelings, evoking a distinctively Satanistic frame of reference. On the other hand, handling the daily upkeep of often mutually antagonistic monsters and demons of various kinds creates its own, rather mundane, level of comedy. Farming chickens in a stronghold of demonic forces is one among them. The game is constructed to evoke simultaneous signals of threat, and non-serious fun. The resulting player experience is thoroughly saturated with ambiguity. Similar kind of ambiguities will also surround the status of Monster Play in *LOTRO*, as we will later see.

In the demonic tradition, ambiguity is a key feature. Demonic figures, forces and phenomena are generally used in different cultures to point towards certain loaded areas, where some unresolved tensions are at play (see e.g. Elaine Pagels'[1996] analysis how the origin of Satan as an active personification of evil is motivated by the internal conflicts among the Jewish community). The demonic monster is an element of fantasy that is allowed to exhibit behaviours that we deny from ourselves, but which we are also somehow simultaneously attracted to. The concept 'daimon' is useful while investigating the roots of this ambiguity. Psychologists of daimonic, such as Rollo May (1991) and Stephen A. Diamond (1996) have interpreted ancient myths to argue for the joint origins of creative and destructive powers. A sense of control is one of the key issues: powerful emotional states like love, joy, arousal, as well as anger, rage and hatred present a challenge of control to the civilised self (the public persona we all are expected to maintain as members of the society). Yet, the researchers argue that any sort of genuine creativity needs to tap into the forces that relate to such problematic powers in order to be truly productive.

In *Dungeon Keeper* the pleasure of building a dungeon consists of a mixture of constructive and destructive gratifications. Some careful planning is required to set up the different kinds of rooms into an arrangement that is both defensible and productive – in the sense that it will start quickly attracting Bile Demons, Demon Spawn and other useful monsters. On the other hand, much of the game involves explosions, struggle and death that provide players with very different kinds of pleasures. The ambiguity of gameplay takes even openly sadomasochistic tones; starting from the game manual, some wanton violence is highly encouraged:

> Imps are wonderful, magical creatures, brought into being solely to do their evil master's bidding. They are the builders, tunnellers and wealth gatherers of your domain. They are so stiflingly obedient; you may find yourself slapping ten shades of Imp dung out of them, just for fun! But don't get carried away as they are essential for the smooth running of your Dungeon. (*Dungeon Keeper 2*, Game Manual, p. 11.)

The element of hurting and torturing artificial creatures is not restricted to *Dungeon Keeper*, but in 'god games' and other games of life simulation the sadistic impulse appears somewhat more prominent than in most other game genres. Even while visiting the fan pages of *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000), one can quickly find examples of

players coming up with highly innovative ways of killing their Sims (cf. Sihvonen 2009). The miniature world of god games presents the player with a theatre to experiment with the drama of life and death, and to play with the simulation of ultimate power, with no fear of consequence. One can also make here reference to Sherry Turkle's (1984: 13–38) theory about computers and their simulations as evocative objects: these phenomena are 'sort of intelligent', and 'sort of living' in their digital ways, yet the software program can always be closed and later restarted, underlining its transient and artificial character. Computers are thus ideal tools to think about the borderlines between life and death, humans and objects. Turkle relates in her book how she observed children becoming fascinated in crashing the computer, and then reviving it, again and again (ibid., 37). Like the demons of myths, today's digital creatures are used to explore and dramatise the borderlines between various fundamental categories that are commonly used to produce identity and order in our cultures and societies. Sadism towards the borderline creatures of digital games embodies the ambivalent gesture of control, ownership, rejection and appropriation – all at the same time.

A more natural sciences approach to the mixed, constructive and destructive practices of a player adopting the role of a demon master would be to see it in terms of 'effectance' – motivation to experience competence and effect of action. In 1959 Robert W. White suggested that such human motives as exploration, curiosity, manipulation and mastery should be combined within the single concept of effectance. Christoph Klimmt and Tilo Hartman (2005, 138) have pointed out that the visceral enjoyment we as players receive from the immediate response of game world to our actions should be considered as an important factor for explaining why we are drawn to in-game actions. The effectance or other more social-psychological notions of individual enjoyment received through empowerment nevertheless fail to address the particular attractions that relate to demonic elements in games. The actions carried out in the role of demon lord are not just any actions – some of them are actions loaded in our culture with the forbidden and tempting aura of being 'evil'. Yet, since the 'killing' and 'torturing' happening in the digital caverns of *Dungeon Keeper*, as well as in *LOTRO* in a certain areas and play modes, are after all happening in a digital simulation framed with fictional markers, they should not be equated with sadistic acts carried out in the real world. Following Noël Carroll's approach in differentiating real feelings of horror from the 'art-horror', I propose that we need the concept of 'art-evil': this would entail actions that are carried out within the fictional frame of a game, and which involve simulated acts that are commonly considered morally wrong, particularly of intentionally causing other beings harm, pain or death. It should be immediately noted that art-evil is a much broader concept than the demonic elements I am focusing here, and a full discussion would involve thorough discussions of 'griefing' other players (that is, the deliberate teasing or abusing behaviours in online games) and other 'transgressive' play styles.

Play on the dark side

> *Entering Azeroth, the in-game realm within the World of Warcraft [WoW; Blizzard Entertainment, 2004–], I take my first steps as my newly created undead character. 'Chtonicon' is a warlock, a living dead magic user, greenish rotten flesh loosely sticking to his bare bones. Looking at the open graves, I make my way out of the graveyard. Deathknell, my starting area is a*

decrepit village, its dark and crumbling houses mirroring the variously decaying and grotesque shapes of its inhabitants. In an abandoned church my undead mentors give me the first assignments; these involve killing some 'mindless' zombies and skeletons that appear to be the enemy of us, the Forsaken, the rebels who have escaped from the undead armies of the Lich King. Learning my new skills, I find out that I can rejuvenate myself by eating some corpses' flesh. Simultaneously repelled and fascinated I continue experimenting. Soon Chtonicon is strong enough to learn a new spell. I decide to learn more Demonology and select 'Summon Imp'. Activating the spell brings a small devil to my service, dancing in a little cloud of green and yellow magic fire, its horns and tail waving. Its name is Abarin. Returning to battle, I find out that the little imp defends me quite skilfully with its bolts of fire. We appear to be a pretty formidable team together already. Smiling, I decide to explore further the career as a warlock. (Author's play notes, November 6th, 2009.)

Figure 2: Demonic with a touch of grotesque: Chtonicon, an undead warlock, and his imp Abarin, scanning for a target. (*World of Warcraft*, Blizzard Entertainment, 2004–.)

There are game scholars who would argue that the look of my undead warlock character has nothing essential to offer, in terms of analysing *World of Warcraft* "as a game". For example, Espen Aarseth (2003) has claimed that even if certain "film theorists" have focused in their analysis to the exaggerated feminine dimensions of Lara Croft's body, he himself does not even see Lara's body while playing *Tomb Raider*, but rather "through it and past it". Somewhat in a similar vein, David Myers (2010) has argued that at the proper (expert) level of gameplay, such attributes or culturally sensitive references become irrelevant to the aesthetics of play (which he calls 'anti-aesthetic', due to its formal rather than sensuous emphasis). In this line of thought, all the grotesque details, corpse eating and demonology references would be just superficial coating, which will become irrelevant at the more advanced stages of play.

I agree that the experienced player is more likely to make the choice of such factors as character race and class on the basis of their gameplay consequences than a novice.

Warlock is a rather powerful character class, but it has also weaknesses and can be rather complex class to play. As a class, it is one of rather average popularity among the *WoW* players. According to the Warcraft Census statistics, at the time of writing, of all the 5.4 million tracked game characters, 8 % (436,047) were warlocks. In comparison, Death Knight (the most popular class at the time) constituted 16 % (855,719) of the registered characters.[3] Among the various *WoW* races, the most traditionally "beautiful" races of humans and elves appear to be the most popular player choices, whereas the undeads rank as the most popular among the traditional *WoW* "monster races" (orcs, tauren, trolls, and undead).[4] It has been claimed that the beginner players ('newbies') tend to select characters among the pretty night-elves or other Alliance races, which on its part has an effect on the more experienced players tending towards Horde characters, to avoid the crowds (Ducheneaut et al. 2006, 302–304 – the introduction of Blood Elves to the Horde side in the Burning Crusade expansion might be an attempt to create more balance in this respect). There are also analyses that explore the multiple motivations and functions of 'dress up play' in virtual worlds, which are also relevant in this context (Fron et al. 2007). My aim, however, is not to provide any comprehensive analysis of MMORPG player motivations or behaviours. My argument here rather is that making the choice to play a character that specialises in demonic spells and rituals is a different kind of choice than to choose to play a holy warrior-priest (*WoW* paladin), for example, and that this choice provides a certain kind of meaningful perspective to the entire game.

My approach has some similarities with the argument put forward by Ragnhild Tronstad (2008) who has studied the connection between capacity and appearance in *WoW*. She has pointed out that the "appearance" of a game character includes everything we (as other players) can perceive about it: not only the look of its animated figure, but also more symbolic labels as name, gender, level, and guild affiliation. Capacity involves everything the character is able to do in the game, and generally both game designers and players have a tendency to aim towards coherence: it is more aesthetically pleasing if the actions and appearances go together in game, rather than there being some obvious mismatch or incongruence. Tronstad differentiates between different degrees of character identification, ranging from emotional contagion to embodied empathy, narrative empathy and perspective taking (each with lessening degrees of emotional involvement, respectively). The crucial difference is between the gamers who use their game character as a tool to interact with the game world, and the role-playing gamers who try to maintain a coherent, independent identity of their character as something separate and distinctive from themselves. Despite the differences, all players need to find a way to relate to their characters – considering both its appearance and capacities.

In terms of purely technical game mechanics there is no difference if my pet in the game is a sweet little poodle, or a horned demon. Yet, in terms of the overall game experience the difference exists, or that is my claim. It is finally impossible to completely differentiate the appearance of a game act from its capacity, or effect within the game rule system. It appears that certain habituation happens during extended play, and the visual style or cultural references easily gain a secondary role as compared to those dictated by the achievement oriented game system. Tronstad (2008) argues that role-players who try to actively keep to such narrative or imaginative mindset while playing *WoW*, need to maintain a second, player created rule-system layer on top of the basic rules supported by the game software.

Maintaining deep immersion or 'game flow' while simultaneously handling the other layers of the game is very challenging. Yet, it is also almost impossible to completely separate the impact of character's appearance and cultural references from its functioning in the gameplay – it is hard to convincingly role-play a mighty wizard, if the selected character is in fact a level 4 Tauren warrior with hardly any spells, like Tronstad puts it (ibid., 260). Thus, it can be argued that players of a game like *WoW* are also not able to ignore completely the demonic imagery and phenomena when they are present in game play. For example, Drain Life and Drain Mana style spells have been among some of the key abilities of warlocks, important in PvE (player vs. environment) and PvP (player vs. player) alike. The demonic associations of such spells are not necessarily something that all players actively contemplate, but they nevertheless contribute to the overall experience of what it means to play a warlock. To put it differently, the gameplay aesthetics of *WoW* has an indisputable demonic element, like *LOTRO*.

The visible monstrosity of undead warlock characters, as well as their parasitic and deadly (thus traditionally 'evil') gameplay characteristics makes them the most obviously demonic class accessible in *WoW* as far as player characters are considered, but the game design makes rich and versatile use of the demonic tradition also elsewhere. The entire cosmology of *WoW* is based on the structure of conflict, the historical one between the infernal forces of Burning Legion and the inhabitants of Azeroth, the major political one between Horde and Alliance inside Azeroth, and the local ones between player characters and the innumerable opponents waiting in quests and raid instances. It could be said that the monstrosity and discord associated with the demonic tradition form a fundamental element in entire *WoW* game design, making it also an interesting case from the perspective of 'daimonic' as a particular mix of creative and destructive impulses. *WoW* provides a mean for players to immerse with (simulated) acts of moral ambiguity, clearly marked with the traditional hybrid and conflicting aesthetics of the demonic, structured therefore as a contemporary 'liminoid space'.

Ambiguities of the Monster Play

> *Having reached level 10, I get a notice that Monster Play is now available for me. This far, I have played with a human Captain, who has done his best to stop the evil forces while they attacked Archet, a village near Bree. Now everything is about to change. Log out, and then re-entering: Monster Play. After a couple of choices, my new form of play begins. My player character is now radically different; an intelligent, giant spider, one of those gathered to the service of the Dark Lord, moving carefully around with its thin legs, while I test my new abilities. The monstrous beast is much more powerful than the human form I had just left behind. It is level 60, and can fight very advanced adversaries as an equal. I can also now use my long legs, spider web and poison sting to attack and debilitate my enemies. In a group mode, there are even more powerful abilities such as the "Wight's Rot" warband manoeuvre, which can be used both to damage the target, and transfer power by draining it from the enemy. (Author's play notes, December 7th, 2009.)*

Lord of the Rings Online (*LOTRO*; Turbine, 2007) is unique as compared to other MMORPGs on the basis of its transmedial story world's breadth and depth: J.R.R.

Tolkien's writings on Middle-earth are extensive and tightly connected with various pre-existing mythical traditions as well as with the results from decades of linguistic studies. The philosophical and religious roots of Tolkien's creation have been extensively studied. Verlyn Flieger, one of the key Tolkien scholars has said that the reason for reading Tolkien is not only for entertainment, but 'for a deeper understanding of the ambiguities of good and evil and of ethical and moral dilemmas of a world constantly embroiled in wars with itself' (Flieger 2002, viii). Being ingrained in this legacy, *LOTRO* is also participating in this drama of moral and ethical ambiguities, but as a game in a distinctively different manner.

Having a fundamentally dualistic setting, *LOTRO* is built on the conflict between the "Free Peoples" (Men, Hobbits, Elves, Dwarfs), and servants of the Dark Lord, Sauron. Whereas the two factions in *WoW* – Horde and Alliance – are explicitly described to exist in more relativistic sense "beyond good and evil", the warring factions in *LOTRO* clearly embody and symbolise the battle between good and evil. As many players of *LOTRO* also appear to be Tolkien fans and know about *The Lord of the Rings* in its book and movie versions, the back-story is not quite as irrelevant for *LOTRO* as for some other games. The Catholic and Platonic subtext is also built into the symbolism of light and darkness, beauty and monstrosity that contributes to the design of milieu, characters as well as the game mechanics in *LOTRO*.

Tolkienesque themes focus around dynamic opposites, and it is this dynamics of conflict that have contributed much to the tradition of fantasy gaming from its very beginning. Tolkien's Orcs and Trolls provide useful generic opponents to player characters in many kinds of fantasy-themed games. On the other hand, the cultural frame of contemporary fantasy is more open towards the Otherness (other races, other ways of living and thinking) than the classic dualistic world view Tolkien still largely relied on. For example, since the 1970s it has become more common for fantasy literature to be narrated from the perspective of a monster, rather than through the eyes of their human prey. The evolution of vampire literature is a visible proof of that – as is obvious from Anne Rice's The Vampire Chronicles novel series, and more recently from popularity of True Blood and Twilight novels, television series and films. The development has been discussed by several scholars, and one important aspect is rooted in how vampires can be interpreted as empowering subjects of identification for marginalised young people, sexual minorities and other suppressed groups alike (Auerbach 1995; Mäyrä 1999, 188). As the cultural sensibilities in contemporary, late modernity have been influenced by issues related to globalization and multiculturalism, it has become easier to see the different moral and ethical systems in relative, rather than absolute terms (for a discussion of this, see e.g. Bauman 1993). The gameplay choices available in *LOTRO,* and particularly the Monster Play option can be seen in this kind of framework, balanced between the dualistic (Christian Catholic or Neoplatonic) frames of the original Tolkien mythos, and more relativistic Postmodern frames.

The gameplay of *LOTRO* has a strong narrative emphasis, which has an effect on how the evil and monstrous elements are positioned. The early introductory parts of the game involve various quests and plot structures that are designed to immerse the player with the lives of the free people, to offer training in various game skills, and to provide dramatic or emotional motivation for the larger conflict between good and evil that builds up as the War of the Ring is about to break out. For example, the

closing events scripted for my human character's introductory sequence were focused on an attack on Archet, a Bree-land village, whose occupants I had by now learned to know rather well. Witnessing the villagers die and much of the village go up in flames as the servants of Dark Lord attacked, provided a particular kind of emotional priming and background for the Monster Play, which opened up soon after that. The questionable moral implications of partnering with the monsters had thus been clearly pointed out to me early on, the death and suffering of villagers providing also some emotional context for the art-evil of *LOTRO*. The situation of entering Monster Play mode in *LOTRO* is thus framed differently from the situation in *WoW*, for example, where Undead player characters, or the option of learning and practicing demonology as a warlock are valid, value-neutral player options from the very beginning of the game.

Figure 3: Demonic with a monstrous body: Crithgil, a monster player character of Spider Weaver type (*Lord of the Rings Online*, Turbine, Midway & Codemasters, 2007–.)

Monster Play is a particular mode of gameplay where a *LOTRO* player has the option to leave behind his or her regular player character and enter the particular PvMP ('Player versus Monster Player) area of Ettenmoors, selecting one of the available 'monster' character types: Orc Reaver, Spider Weaver, Uruk Blackarrow, Uruk Warleader, Warg Stalker, or Orc Defiler – all high-level 'evil' characters at the service of the Dark Lord.[5] (The option to enter Ettenmoors with a regular Free People game character to fight the "monster players" is also open at higher experience levels.) As the game manual puts it:

> You will be transported to the Ettenmoors and find that you have joined the evil forces of Sauron. You will commit atrocities in the name of your unholy master and will be hunted unmercifully by the Free Peoples of Middle-earth. Monster play is not for the faint of heart. (*Lord of the Rings Online: Mines of Moria, Game Manual*, p. 53.)

Role-playing (or just: playing) evil characters has been at the focus of a long-standing debate. Is engaging in the simulated acts of evil somehow morally wrong, dubious, or harmful, or is the reality of game completely isolated from the reality of players?

Julian Dibbell's famous article "A Rape in Cyberspace" (1993) illustrates the conflicting attitudes towards in-game actions nicely: when the interpretative frames radically conflict, another person's playful acts of sadistic humour can mean real aggression and trauma to another. The 'reality' of virtual realities nevertheless remains a debated issue. The ethics of fiction in itself has been the source of a similar debate, and in most cases the analysis in this area points towards the benefits of imaginatively engaging with characters, even if the related situations and activities would resonate with 'evil'. For example, Colin McGinn has written in his *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction* (2002, 174–175) that our "ethical knowledge is aesthetically mediated", meaning that reading about fictional moral and ethical conflicts can 'sharpen and clarify moral questions, encouraging a dialectic between the reader's own experience and the trials of the characters he or she is reading about'. Recently Miguel Sicart has put forward a similar argument regarding computer games: even while games can be used to simulate unethical practices, the player herself is a moral agent who has an obligation to "develop herself as an ethical being while preserving the pleasures and balances of the game experience" (2009, 17).

It is easy to find views which equate player's character preferences with their real life personality: the choice of selecting to play an 'evil' character – according to this claim – makes it more likely that they have some personality issues in real life, too. The alternative argument is also common: an adult player is able to make the distinction between the fiction of game and reality (or should be), and the character choices are being made solely on grounds of their in-game capacity and gameplay consequences, not because of game-external moral frameworks. The concepts of 'good' and 'evil' also gain different kinds of meanings in simulated game worlds than in everyday realities.[6] The 'moral education' argument of McGinn, Sicart and others is also related to such latter views where the in-game moral universe is perceived to exist at some, more or less reflective distance from our daily moral concerns. It should also be noted that children's ability and early development to discern and conceptualise fiction in media has been a subject of research in media semiotics and television studies for several decades already (see Hodge & Tripp 1987).

While I was writing this chapter, I did some participant observation in *LOTRO*, and also conducted a small-scale online interview on how *LOTRO* players felt about Monster Play in the game (a small diverse sample with nine respondents). In the practices and responses I observed, no any fundamental distinctions were made between 'Creep' (monster) and 'Freep' (Free People) characters in themselves. The key issues revolved around whether the game itself was fun, and the key criticism voiced by the player community was that Monster Play was implemented in such an unbalanced manner that it made gameplay suffer in the long term. Yet, many players also emphasised how welcome addition Monster Play was for *LOTRO*, since it significantly expanded the range of available gameplay options. 'Sometimes it's just fun to be on the dark side for a while, playing as an orc, warg, spider is fun', as one of the interviewed players put it, continuing:

> It's nice to have such a diversity available, and play what you want, no matter what your mood is. I create my alts [secondary game characters] to play a total different style, to see more content (other races, ...) and it makes me understand my main better if I know how other classes f[u]nction. (A *LOTRO* player informant, 12 November, 2009.)

One could claim that the demonic elements and acts of art-evil are part of the game aesthetics in *LOTRO*, like they are in many other digital games. The boundary between evil acts as conducted in game world, and the motivations of a player directing her character to act this way, appears somewhat problematic and open for different interpretations. Such lack of clear-cut divisions fits well within the wider cultural logic of the demonic tradition, making the demonic figures and 'forbidden acts' carried out by them within the game fascinating and tempting in a particular way. Without any player access, the dark forces of Sauron would remain much more simple and straightforward adversaries, lacking the complexity and unexpectedness that real player involvement brings with it.

The art-evil component of gameplay – the ability to play monstrous and fictionally evil characters – is by now a well-established element within the digital game cultures. Yet, there also still appears room in media and discussion elsewhere for various moral panics to spawn that make use of some sensationalist aspect of computer or video games or another. While in the 1980s it was still rather common to hear particularly certain conservative religious groups attacking role-playing games on the grounds of their supposedly occult or Satanist influences to young people, the more recent widely publicised concerns are focused on video game violence, sexuality, or combination of both, as in the case of *GTA III* controversy (which is discussed well in Garrelts 2006). What nevertheless remains is that the liminal spaces of gameplay appear to evoke concerns due to the 'dangerous ambiguity' of their ontology and due to the uncomfortably dual or hybrid subjectivity the player–character relationship appears to construct. The hybridity of technological self or subjectivity in itself has been discussed for example in cyborg theory (Haraway 1991), but not much in the field of game studies, apart from Bob Rehak to whom I will refer more later.

Lessons from Demonic Play and Playful Demons

Observing how the players practice Monster Play in the Ettenmoors area can teach us something about the operation of demonic tradition in digital games. There is an aspect in creep team-play that is reminiscent of similar games of strategy and coordination, like *Counter-Strike*, where the teams just look like generic terrorists or counter-terrorist fighters rather than monsters or people from a fantasy mythos. Fighting for the control of the various keeps in Ettenmoors is a variety of the 'Capture the Flag' game mode, famous from *Quake* mods and *Team Fortress* style of first-person shooter action. There is often internal camaraderie among the monster players that makes participation feel a bit more like a team sport rather than a mortal conflict between forces of good and evil. The implicit and explicit rules of conduct treat actual grief play (asocial exploits, excessive harassment of other players) in similar ways as in other games. If something, *LOTRO* community is even more clearly against 'evil play' in the form of griefing than some other MMO games (most notably the space battle game *EVE Online* where various grief play tactics are much more tolerated). Nevertheless, the darkly ominous aesthetics of playing in the service of the Dark Lord permeates Monster Play with its own distinctive style and feel. Particularly the attempts to role-play the evil monster characters will infuse the in-game interactions also with certain aggression and hostility that can also put off some players. Some of my interviewed *LOTRO* players did not like Player vs. Player conflict at all and thus

also preferred to stay out from the Monster Play area. Several also commented that the clear separation of PvP/PvMP from the regular PvE play was an important feature for them in *LOTRO*. There is a touch of aggression in Monster Play that makes it appear somewhat an alien element in the friendly and co-operative exploration of Tolkien-inspired quests that the main *LOTRO* game is all about.

To conclude the above discussion, various discourses that surround the demonic gameplay elements can be identified, and these can be grouped together in terms of the moral stance they display towards the demonic in games:

(1) playing of a game with monstrous-demonic elements is an evil, or potentially harmful act to the real persons who undertake to do it (*moralistic, religious, medical and media effects arguments*);

(2) demonic figures and in-game acts are useful as they mark gameplay as a liminoid space: they stimulate the imagination of players and provide clear signals for the fantastic distance the fictional reality of these games have from the everyday lives of players (*cultural psychological arguments*);

(3) the demonic is just a superficial embellishment or surface ornament added to the digital play where it has no real value or significance, usually attached to games because of a need to attract attention or to create useful shock value that might attract certain kinds of young customers (*game and marketing critical arguments*).

Not surprisingly, my own view is that the second line of approach is the most interesting one. The first argument about the harmful effects or the moral wrongness is not paying enough attention to the imaginative distance the in-game realms and actions hold for game players, and also ignoring the signals of their status as ludic fantasy. On the other hand, the third argument about the insignificance of the demonic in games takes the distance between gameplay and the symbolism too far. As I have argued elsewhere (Mäyrä 2008, 18–19), digital games come to being both as certain kind of ludic performances, and as certain kind of digital interactive media, where these actions are embedded and contextualised. Ignoring either aspect would mean turning a blind eye towards an entire area of games' signification system – either forgetting the games' *semiosis* (meaning-making through symbolism and representation), or their *ludosis* (meaning-making through playful action).

As an interesting point of comparison, Bob Rehak (2003) has approached games and game characters (avatars) from a psychoanalytic perspective, and pointed out that engaging in play activities through the extension of a game character means effectively merging the dual perspectives of spectatorship and participation. Rather than mirroring our own physical appearance, game characters are useful as they map our experience of *control*: we enjoy our sense of achievement and manipulation in games' alternative realities. This enjoyment is interesting and meaningful because of its liminal character – it is not entirely clear whether a particular action is my act (as the player), or an act of the "other one", the fictional character on the screen. Rehak concludes:

> If our unity is itself a misrecognition, then the video game, for all its chaotic cartoonishness, may constitute a small square of contemplative space: a

laboratory, quiet and orderly by comparison with the complexity of the real world, in which we toy with subjectivity, play with being. (Ibid., 123.)

The examples discussed in this chapter, ranging from the crudely pixelated demons of *Doom*, to the demonic minions doing the players' will in *Dungeon Keeper*, to the player-driven monsters in *WoW* and *LOTRO*, carry with them also much humour (thus keeping with the long tradition of grotesque in art; see Kayser 1981). The refusal to follow the ideal cultural narratives of heroism and the moral right allows players of these games to step into a toy-world version of Bakhtinian carnival where parody, inversion and dark humour provide opportunities for exploration into the limits and hidden sides of civilized subjectivity. In her analysis of 'demon power girls' in *Primal* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* games, Tanya Krzywinska (2004) has pointed out how the ambiguously hybrid and demonic female characters of these games allow the gamers to play with more complex understanding of power and agency than is possible in more traditional action entertainment. Demonic games are in this respect like the carnival Mikhail Bakhtin writes about in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 'Carnival celebrates the shift itself, the very process of replaceability, and not the precise item that is replaced. Carnival is, so to speak, functional and not substantive.' (1984, 125) The fact that it is possible to have fun, and experience some complex form of ambivalent freedom while playing a demonic game character, draining the life from another player's avatar, is a proof enough of this, while the observation also points towards need of further research and methodological experimentation to probe the multifaceted relationship between a player and a game. We can nevertheless here conclude that dealing with the digital demons appears to be open for "meaningful play" – an activity that is drawn towards the liberating and playful explorations of our cultural self and complex subjectivity.

Notes

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[1] The concept of 'Postmodern' is here used to denote the characteristic of being 'playfully self-reflexive', cf. Giddens 1991; Bauman 1992.

[2] The excerpts are taken from the author's play diary, which was undertaken to provide more nuanced documentation of the actions, thoughts and feelings which each analysed game evoked while being played analytically. All notes were written immediately after relatively short play sessions to capture the flow of experience as directly was as possible, while also playing attention to trying to communicate through prose the feelings and thought processes that activated during gameplay. More extensive play and replay provided more perspective while making the actual analyses, but the short play notes are here used to provide illustrations indicative of what the early stages of gameplay would typically provide in each game example.

[3] 'Warcraft Census', online: http://www.warcraftrealms.com/census.php (accessed 6 November, 2009).

[4] 'Warcraft Census', ibid. Historical comparative data of this provided by Nick Yee, Daedalus Project (28 June, 2005), online: http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001365.php (accessed 6 November, 2009).

[5] The monster characters were level 50 in the original (Shadows of Angmar) game version, then upgraded to level 60 in the Mines of Moria expansion, then to level 65 in the Siege of Mirkwood expansion. The free people player characters' level cap was also raised accordingly.

[6] The responses posted to Edward Castronova's blog note titled "The Horde is Evil" are one good example of a discussion featuring all these views (*Terra Nova*, December 24, 2005; http://terranova.blogs.com/terra_nova/2005/12/the_horde_is_ev.html).

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