

Overcoming Fears: Balancing Sublime & Contained Monstrosity in

***Fleshwalk's* Creature Design**

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Abstract

This paper explores and summarizes the book *Player Vs. Monster: The Making and Breaking of Video Game Monstrosity*. Focus is placed on the design approaches of monstrosity in video games to provide the framework of sublime and contained monstrosity. The design of creatures in *Fleshwalk: An Experience* and how each decision communicates aspects of living with polycystic ovarian syndrome are discussed. Applying how Jaroslav Švelch defines sublime and contained monstrosity to the creature design in *Fleshwalk*, I argue where the balance of sublime and contained monstrosity lies. Ultimately, I conclude that there is a place for contained monstrosity in video games that is conducive to transformational narratives.

Keywords: game design, deep games, immersion, critical gaming, creature design, horror, Fleshwalk, monster theory.

Introduction

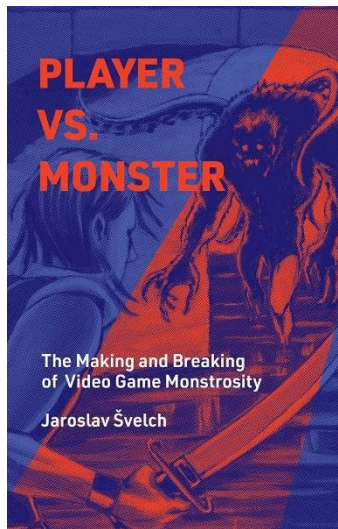
Fleshwalk: An Experience is an Avant-garde first person shooter set in the world of Karmabog, the marsh of repentance. Karmabog is digitally sculpted using a scan of the skin of my face. I employ this abstracted imagery of body horror to explore topics of expectation and self-forgiveness in the wake of illness. Players are invited to immerse themselves in this reclamation of negative experiences and experience a transformation from horror into belonging in oneself.

This project arose from my interest in games and their design as a means for self-expression. Larger conversations in contemporary popular discourse of games as art led into this exploration coupled with the diagnosis and treatment of polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS). PCOS is a syndrome that affects reproductive hormones and has a myriad of often debilitating symptoms, including acne prone skin, which is a topic largely “discussed” within *Fleshwalk*. Likewise, connection with poetry, especially that of Langston Hughes and his usage of subtle yet visceral imagery, and further game poems (Magnuson, 2023), inspired me to explore metaphor as communication of one’s experience and immersion by the player into said experience. How the designs of *Fleshwalk*’s creatures are used for such communication is further discussed in this paper.

Fleshwalk is a deeply personal project. It is a reclamation and reframing of moments of disempowerment. This project serves well as a tool for myself in this regard. It is also a bid for connection with others, or a “meeting of minds” (Rusch, 2019). Games are powerful tools for learning and community building (Laamarti et al., 2014) (Pedercini, 2014). Something I hope to achieve with *Fleshwalk* is to explore a distinct, yet adjacent, domain from measurable learning goals or comradery surrounding interest in gameplay experience – the design aims for

“psychological resonance,” and finds itself seated within the landscape of “deep” or “transformational” games (Rusch, 2019).

Fleshwalk is a game that is heavily driven from my perspective. Its subject matter is a metaphor for my experiences, many of which were, for lack of a better term, scary. Thus, it is a horror game. Featured within its world are an ensemble of creatures that are direct metaphors for different aspects of my experiences, whether representing symptoms of illness or otherwise.



1 Cover of *Player vs Monster*, © 2023 MIT Press, sourced from Amazon.com

In his book, *Player Vs. Monster: The Making and Breaking of Video Game Monstrosity*, Jaroslav Švelch analyzes monstrosity in video games, how it is different from classic or historic notions of monstrosity, and how the representation of monstrosity in video games has shaped our modern cultural interpretations of it.

According to his website, Švelch “is an assistant professor at Charles University, Prague” and “is currently researching history, theory, and reception of monsters in games” (Švelch, 2018a). Besides *Player Vs. Monster*, his most recent work is *Gaming the Iron Curtain: How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Computer Games* (MIT Press, 2018b); research on “amateur programmers in 1980s Czechoslovakia” who

“discovered games as a medium, using them not only for entertainment but also as a means of self-expression” (MIT Press, 2018b).

Prior to synthesizing his research on monstrosity into this book, he wrote articles on the monster AI in *Alien: Isolation* and the politics of “ludic” monsters. These blog posts are part of a larger body of research titled “Games and Transgressive Aesthetics” which “explores controversial game content theoretically and through qualitative empirical studies that stress how such content is experienced by players while playing games” (*About the GTA Project – Games and Transgressive Aesthetics*, 2019). Other researchers exploring similar themes of monstrosity in video games include Darshana Jayemanne of Abertay University, Sarah Stang of Brock University, and Dr. Stephanie Jennings of Michigan State University (Švelch, 2019).

Player Vs. Monster is broken down into four chapters. The first chapter, *Taming the Monster*, discusses the basics of monster theory and defines the difference between “sublime” and “contained” monstrosity; two ways monsters are represented in stories. The chapter maps the timeline of how video games developed the approach of contained monstrosity (Švelch 2023, pgs. 6, 9-36). The second chapter, *Player vs. Environment*, further investigates the timeline of monstrosity in video games and posits that the appearance of monsters as a common enemy type began when games shifted from the player vs player model to player vs environment in the 1970s (2023, pgs. 6, 37-69). The third chapter, *The Art of the Monstrous*, discusses the design of monsters, from antiquity through the medieval period to the claymation creations of 20th century film, and how these influenced modern conventions in video game design. The discussion includes examples from mainstream video games and showcases how the design of monsters is shaped around player vs. environment gameplay and technological affordances (2023, pgs. 7, 72-

102). The final chapter, *New Haunts*, explores the subversion of contained monstrosity and which games achieve more of a sublime approach and why (2023, pgs. 7, 103-138).

This paper will focus on Švelch's main thesis from his book, "sublime" vs "contained" monstrosity. I will analyze the design decisions I made for the monsters within *Fleshwalk* through this framework. Pulling sources and evidence from *Player Vs. Monster*, I will explain how and why sublime and contained monstrosity are utilized in my creature design. Through this, I argue that while I not only strive for the sublime in my design and want to subvert more problematic cultural assumptions common in video games, the contained nature of monstrosity in video games is actually supportive of the narrative in and messaging that I want to resonate with players from *Fleshwalk*.

Sublime and Contained Monstrosity

Švelch begins his book relaying a conundrum he finds unique to monstrosity in video games: "...monsters...seem dangerous but [they] are, by and large, designed to be beaten" (2023, pg. 5). Video games and their designers position the player in direct conflict with monsters, unlike other media that simply positions the human engager as a spectator (2023, pg. 4). This book then is meant to serve as a discussion around this form of "medium specific" conflict that is partially caused by the "computational and rule-based nature of video games" (2023, pg. 4).

When allowing someone who is engaging with a piece of media to cross the threshold of spectator into participant, video games must then have creatures that are "designed to be confronted and defeated" (2023, pg. 5). Švelch denotes this representation of monstrosity as

“contained;” video game monsters begin to “embody a computational and commodified otherness” (2023, pgs. 5-6).

In his 1996 publication *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen organized contributions of writing on monsters and their place in culture(s). Monsters are frequently the subject of horror fiction – usually the antagonists – and authors within *Monster Theory* explore them as “symbolic expressions of cultural unease that pervade a society and shape its collective behavior” (Cohen et al., 1996). Cohen is referenced in *Player Vs. Monster* to provide background for what Švelch describes as “sublime monstrosity:” “the monster signifies something other than itself,” and is “a construct and a projection” (Svelch, 2023, pgs. 10-11) (Cohen et al., 1996). Expanding on Stephen Asma’s “sublime thesis” in Gothic literature and the Kantian understanding of the sublime, he quotes Julia Kristeva’s “theory of abjection.” Sublime monstrosity is the “abject” vs the human as the subject; the abject indicating that “horror arises when we are confronted with suppressed parts of ourselves, both physical and psychological” (Kristeva, 1982) (Svelch, 2023, pg. 12).

Within each of the chapters, Švelch uses several games as examples of how “monsters invaded video games” and, “in turn, affected our notions of monstrosity and otherness” (2023, pg. 3). Below is a graphic of my interpretation of some of the games mentioned throughout the book and where they would be placed on a “scale” between sublime and contained monstrosity. Interpretation of placement is based on the text as well as my own experiences playing or watching gameplay of these titles. This graphic is meant to act as a small guide for readers to get

them aligned with how monstrosity may operate in other games outside of *Fleshwalk* and not a definitive understanding of how Švelch or the designers of each title view it.

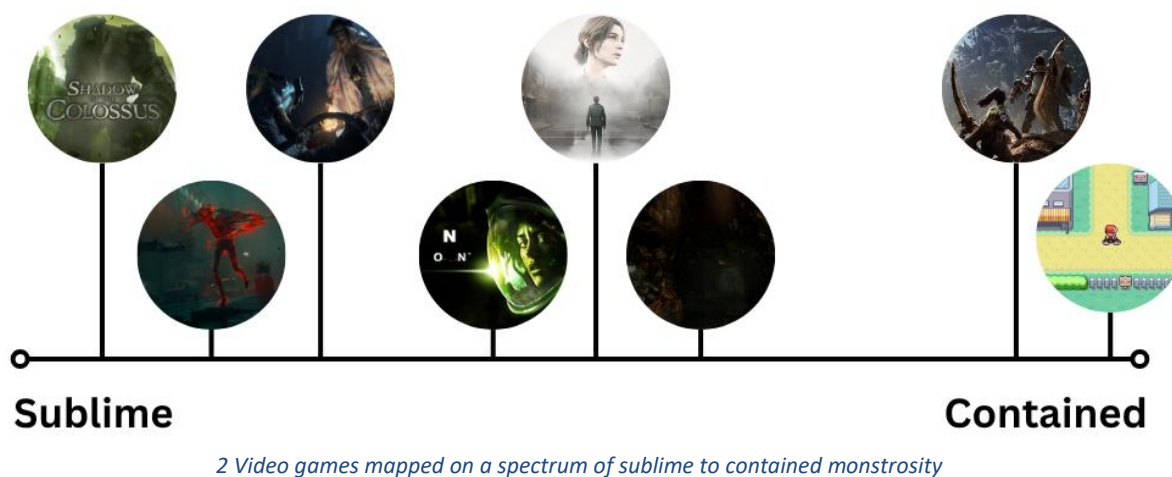


Figure 2. Games (Left to right):

1. *Shadow of the Colossus*
2. *Control*
3. *Bloodborne*
4. *Alien: Isolation*
5. *Silent Hill 2*
6. *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*
7. *Monster Hunter* (franchise)
8. *Pokémon* (franchise)

Through this reading, we ultimately learn that sublime monstrosity in video games is hard to achieve. There are places where the sublime shines through, like when creatures act in swarms to disorient the player, the game flow is disrupted, monsters are indexically represented (like the 8-bit sprites of the past), and boss battles. Contained monstrosity, on the other hand, is the main form of monstrosity found in video games. When creatures are contained, they are designed to be knowable, objectified, and beatable, despite how mysterious or horrifying they may appear. Sublime and contained are not necessarily opposed, though, and exist more on a spectrum. With

this understanding, we can begin to consider the decisions that went into the design of the creatures of *Fleshwalk*.

Creatures & Their Design

The player will encounter three main creature types throughout the world: Zloko, Vignettes, and Tooth Mites. Each comes with their own movement and attack styles. Likewise, each represents different symptoms, experiences, and/or mindsets that were detrimental, unhelpful, or otherwise unpleasant. The narrative culminates in a final boss battle with the last creature, Vizsoth. Like the other creatures of Karmabog, Vizsoth too is designed as metaphor. When discussing creature design, I consider not just visual form and aesthetics, but also naming, metaphorical representations, and movements and interactions within the game space.

Zloko

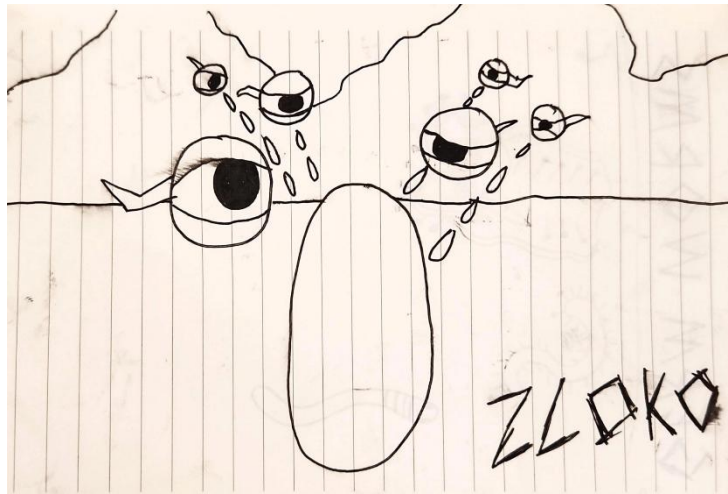
Zloko are one of the first enemies the player will encounter. The name “Zloko” is a shortening and romanization of the term “Zle oko,” borrowed from the concept of the evil eye as denoted in West Slavic languages (with slight spelling variations between them). Vision is a recurring theme in *Fleshwalk*'s storytelling. It manifests in two forms: a discomfiting judgmental gaze laid upon oneself by others and the physical impairment of sight



3 Concept art of the Zloko, created by Kristen Marcinek

due to light sensitivity and tunnel vision. Zloko represent the feeling of being peered at during your most vulnerable. Her gaze is unrelenting.

Zloko are floating eyeball enemies that shoot teardrops in the player's direction. Her form is rather simple; an eyeball surrounded by an eyelid with a nerve floating freely behind. When the player is within a certain distance from a Zloko in her line of sight, she will engage the



4 Zloko sketch, created by Kristen Marcinek

player. This first begins with following the direction that the player moves. If the Zloko is then within a certain range of the player, she will begin to shoot teardrops in their direction. Zloko can deaggro when outside of a certain range, but they will still continue to follow the player's position until returning into that range. Zloko only cease shooting when killed or Forgiven, which is a mechanic that the player can utilize on all enemies that will be discussed later. Zloko, alongside the rest of the enemies, cry out in sorrow when defeated.

Vignette

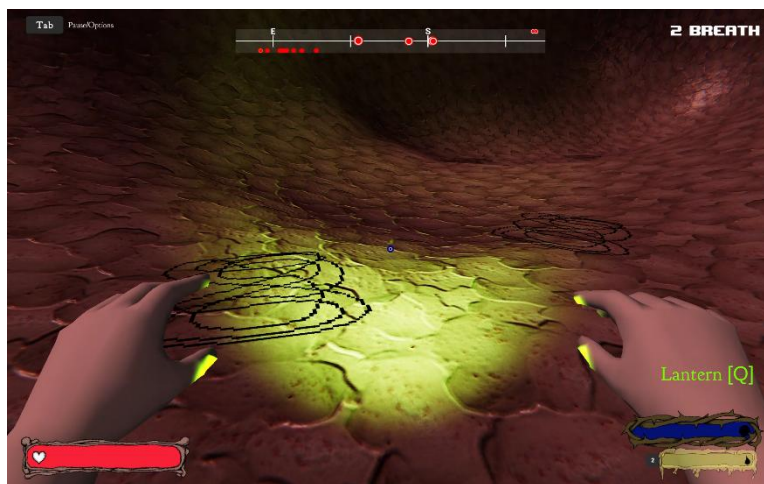
Vignettes are the second enemy players encounter during their journey in Karmabog. The name "Vignette" comes from my experience with how tunnel vision manifested in my field of sight; almost like a vignette cast over the sides of a picture.

Portrayed as small, dark, pixelated scribbles on the ground, a Vignette is a creature of shadows. She lies close to the ground and hidden within Karmabog's dark cave systems. When made aware of the player's presence, a Vignette will follow the player and does damage by colliding with them. Upon collision, the Vignette will also cause the screen to darken until she is either killed, kills the player, or is no longer in contact with the player. If the player survives the encounter and is no longer colliding with the Vignette, the screen will slowly brighten back to its original state. She is cast away by the player through brightening her surroundings with the Lantern (a collectible item mapped to the Q key).



5 Concept art of the Vignette, created by Kristen Marcinek

The look and function of the Vignettes in game are representative of the second form of how vision manifested for me: physical impairment. Her scribble sprite is a visual representation of the feeling of brain fog; the fuzziness felt inside morphed into a creature. Making her small, close to the ground, and living within a dark cave system is representative of how swiftly yet quietly health issues can creep up on oneself. The



6 Screenshot of a Vignette in game with the player using the Lantern

effect collision with her has on the player's screen also mimics the real-life sensation of tunnel vision and how debilitating and distracting it can be.

Tooth Mite

Tooth Mites are one of the later enemies that the player encounters in *Fleshwalk*.

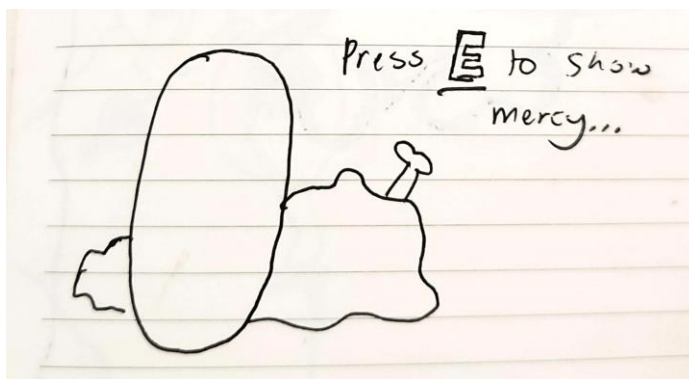
Visualized as crawling molars, Tooth Mites try to ram into the player to deal melee damage. The name is representative of their physicality as well as being designed to crawl on the terrain and swarm in groups much like insects do.

Dreams of teeth falling out are fairly common. In a 2012 survey, 39% of respondents confirmed they had experienced “teeth dreams” at least once (Rozen & Soffer-Dudek, 2018). They are also something that I experience. Interpretations of the meanings of dreams are customary to psychoanalytic literature from the likes of Freud and Jung (see Freud, 1900/1995 and Jung & R F C Hull, 1962/2002). Psychoanalysis and its pundits are often cited in discourse about speculative fiction, media, and games, with Freudian analysis being employed by Kristeva and Jungian analysis discussed by Phelps and Rusch (Kristeva, 1982) (Rusch & Phelps, 2020). Likewise, PCOS is linked to having similar risk factors as periodontal disease and a correlation of increasing the likelihood of periodontal disease (Rathi & Amit Reche, 2023). Teeth dreams are cited as having both a psychological component (akin to the interpretations of Freud and Jung) and as a response to the physical sensation of teeth irritation (Rozen & Soffer-Dudek, 2018). Including the Tooth Mites as a creature in *Fleshwalk's* world was an act of artistically representing my personal interpretation of themes of teeth in my dreams, both somatically and psychologically.

Viszoth

Viszoth is the main boss of Fleshwalk. She is a large fleshy creature with tendrils that attack the player. The name “Viszoth” is a portmanteau of “visage,” a term for face, and Shoggoth, a cosmic, *even sublime*, creature from Lovecraft’s Cthulhu mythos (see Lovecraft, 1936).

She has multiple modes of attack, including whipping the player with her tendrils, ground slams, and projectiles. There is a pattern to her attacks and movements. Though the difficulty of her battle might seem high in the beginning, her patterns are knowable and rhythmic.



7 Early concept art for the boss battle

The player may find that the Forgiveness mechanic (which will be discussed at length later) does not work on her. As the character fights and depletes her health, Viszoth’s form morphs from a sublime flesh monster to human-like. As she gets weaker and weaker, the player is met with the silhouette of a woman and a final choice: show her mercy, or continue the battle? Her battle is meant to make the player confront what traversing through Karmabog was really about; are the creatures here truly

horrifying? What or who defines that? If the player decides to show her mercy, they join the now human silhouette in a loving embrace, and the view fades to white.



8 Screenshot of a prototype build of the battle with Viszoth

Designing for the Sublime & Reframing Containment

Now that the framework for what constitutes as sublime and contained in video games as well as my design philosophy for each of the creatures of Karmabog are defined, we can begin to discuss the balance of sublime and contained monstrosity in *Fleshwalk*.

Each of the creatures act as a metaphor. There is a sublime quality to see unexplained creatures in this world and trying to figure out what they are and why they belong here. Daniel Vella, quoted in *Player Vs. Monster*, argues that there is a “ludic sublime” quality to the beginning of a game; the game is potentially a mystery and designers can preserve this by “withholding or obfuscating information” (Vella, 2015) (Svelch, 2023, pg. 122). Likewise, the artwork of creatures in *Fleshwalk* is not photorealistic or striving for a sense of realism. Like *Undertale*, this stylized representation “grant[s]...strange, elusive qualities” to the creatures

(Svelch, 2023, pg. 118). I designed the creatures in such a way that they are fully of this fantasy world, and while there is a pointed message I want players to eventually come to through the gameplay and aesthetics, there is something mystifying about the art direction and their meanings “even if it may be deciphered along the way” (Svelch, 2023, pg. 122).

The Tooth Mites and Vignettes movement AIs are coded to sneak up on the player and swarm. As aforementioned, this is to reflect how swiftly yet quietly health issues can creep up on oneself until they are overwhelming. Svelch claims that a swarm can be a form of “computational sublime.” When “network logic takes over” in the form of a swarm, mob, or contagion, this is a threat to the “integrity of the human ego” and thus disorienting, a quality of the sublime (Galloway & Thacker, 2007) (Svelch, 2023, pg. 126). The Tooth Mites and Vignettes are meant to disorient and overwhelm the player, and this aspect taps into the sublime.

Another way I introduce notions of the sublime in *Fleshwalk* is the abilities the player possesses to interact with the world. Alongside traditional first-person shooter “weapons” and controls, I added the mechanic of “Forgiveness.” The Forgive ability is mapped to the middle mouse button, a button commonly mapped to a melee attack or a backstab, as a subversion of what a melee attack truly entails. Functioning very similar to a backstab in gameplay, the player approaches an enemy in close proximity and presses the middle mouse button. Instead of killing the enemy, though, the enemy is put into a Forgiven state. In the backend, the Forgiven state deaggros the enemy entirely and regenerates some of the player’s health. A forgiven enemy can no longer damage the player or be damaged herself. Adding this mechanic for me represents forgiving others for their judgements, allowing myself to not uphold standards placed upon me, and slowing down when my body or mind needs it. It also has the metatextual function of questioning how much power do context and framing have in what makes a mechanic violent.

Svelch notes that player vs. environment gameplay is dominated by the mindset of “the ontology of the enemy,” a Cold War-era “approach to otherness...in which antagonism is the defining feature of existence” for video game enemies (2023, pg. 29). A mechanic where the player can forgive enemy, washing away the relationship of subject and object, removing antagonism from the scenario, is in direct opposition to the ontology of the enemy and questions pre-existing norms in gameplay. Because of this, Forgiveness allows for a reframing of interactions with creatures that is initially unexpected by the player which introduces another condition of the sublime. This mechanic positions *Fleshwalk* with other titles that have similar approaches, including *Shin Megami Tensei*, where players can negotiate with its demons, and the aforementioned *Undertale*, which gives players dialogue choices and actions that can spare its monsters instead of killing them (Svelch, 2023, pgs. 117-118).

When considering contained monstrosity, one may find it easy to lean into the negative connotations surrounding objectification. Even as a plaything, there is a feeling of dissatisfaction with monsters existing in such a way expressed by Svelch. Objectification has real harms, even in an abstracted or fantasy form, but there is a place to frame contained monstrosity not just as commodification and exploitation but instead as a state of observation, intimacy, and understanding. Through this lens, a new purpose for such storytelling arises. There are frequent assertions made that a monster becomes contained when it is known. Therapeutic approaches like in-vivo exposure therapy, Exposure and Response Prevention, Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy, and narrative therapy require patients to face their fears, trust themselves, and tell their stories on their own terms. This requires intimate knowledge of one’s psyche and place in the world that may be reflected in the knowledge gained from interacting with the contained monstrous. When a monster is able to be understood, the

resonance of this understanding can be turned inward and reflected upon. Svelch himself even states that “the cultural value of monstrosity derives from the fact that it holds up a mirror to humanity and questions our knowledge of the world around us” (2023, pg. 141). With *Fleshwalk*, I design for players to take the next step from questioning into reflection and resonance. The containment of Karmabog’s creatures is not a weakness; the understanding and mastery of the gameplay patterns the player will come to can be applicable to the understanding I want everyone to have of themselves.

Conclusion

In this paper, I explored and summarized the book *Player Vs. Monster: The Making and Breaking of Video Game Monstrosity*. I focus particularly on the design approaches of monstrosity in video games to provide the framework of sublime and contained monstrosity. I introduced the design decisions I made in my project, *Fleshwalk: An Experience*, and how each decision communicates aspects of living with polycystic ovarian syndrome. I applied how Svelch defines sublime and contained monstrosity to my creature design to argue that *Fleshwalk* balances both sublime and contained monstrosity. Ultimately, I believe that there is a place for contained monstrosity in video games that is aware of the exploitative nature of containment but aims to focus on ways it can actually be conducive to a transformational narrative like in *Fleshwalk*.

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