Something's Not Right: Monstrous Motherhood and Traumatic Survival in *Among the Sleep*

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Introduction: Defining the Gendered Labor of Motherhood and Mapping Monstrous Motherhood in *Among the Sleep*

Feminist scholars have consistently interrogated the historically fraught cultural contexts surrounding constructions of good and bad motherhood (i.e., O'Reilly; Roberts; Ruddick). A primary aspect of this context is the fact that these constructions of motherhood occur within the confines of patriarchy and patriarchal inscriptions of gendered familial labor, or what Adrienne Rich foundationally defines as "the power of the fathers" (57). Under patriarchy, the concepts of family, property, and ownership are inexorably linked, and Gerda Lerner explains that this "patriarchal family" (216) not only "mirrors the order in the state and educates its children to follow it, it also creates and constantly reinforces that order" (217). The mother, then, becomes a figure used to reinforce this order, and as Rich says, patriarchy needs "the mother to act as a conservative influence, imprinting future adults with patriarchal values" (61). As Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky point out, these gender norms become especially rigidly defined during the Victorian era, during which the "Victorian cult of 'true womanhood' defined women as pure, pious, domestic, and submissive" (7). Marilyn Francus argues that this ideology characterized "true" mothers as being "dutiful, religious, economical (but not parsimonious), modest, chaste, well behaved, charitable, and sensitive to the needs of others" (1), and this ideology celebrated women who upheld the ideology of the "true" mother and rendered monstrous those women who transgressed these norms.

However, the pure and pious social positioning of "true women" can be described as fragile indeed, for as Jane M. Ussher puts it, "[t]he pedestal is a precarious place to be: the woman positioned there has to remain perfect, in order to avoid falling into the position of monster incarnate" (3). Thus, when mothers fall from the "true" woman pedestal, they fall into the category of the "bad"

mother, a figure who often "serves as a scapegoat, a repository for social or physical ills that resist easy explanation or solution" (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 22). In short, the bad mother is utilized as a scapegoat because she is an effective means of distracting from the underlying and more complex problems that reside in social structures and cultural norms—because it is easier to blame the mother and leave it at that than to challenge and change the structures that are predicated on these restrictive normative definitions of womanhood and motherhood. Paula Caplan calls for "a thorough understanding of mother-blaming" (128) because it is only through the careful interrogation of mother-blaming and bad mothers that an understanding of the patriarchal structures underpinning these constructs can be attained.

One way that bad mothers are often narratively represented is through the construct of the *monstrous* mother. As Francus puts it, narratives that represent monstrous motherhood "repeatedly express the cultural fear of maternal agency and authority, which competes with and more often overturns patriarchal power" (170). The perceived monstrosity of the maternal body is often framed in ambivalent ways because this body is "deemed dangerous and defiled, the myth of the monstrous feminine made flesh, yet also a body which provokes adoration and desire, enthrallment with the mysteries within" (Ussher 1). In all these ways, the maternal body is coded as a space of duality—a space that is both dangerous and desired, sacred and corrupt. Yet, it is important to note, the representation of monstrous mothers in horror does not provide insight into female identity but rather sheds light on the manner in which such identity is patriarchally inscribed through the perpetuation of domestic ideologies. When considering such ideologies, Francus explains that, historically, domestic ideologies have not been "uniformly enacted" (5), and yet scholarship on such social phenomena often nonetheless relies on "the archetype of the middle-class domestic woman…as cultural shorthand" (5). As such, as Francus shows, it is important to ensure that scholarship on "the ideology and practice of female domesticity" not be read as "uniform and universal" because patriarchal constructions of family and motherhood can shift depending on intersecting systems of oppression based on experiences like race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability (6). Classifications and narratives of monstrous motherhood must then be read through a more nuanced lens.

One text that provides a particularly generative framework through which to interrogate the complexities of narrative constructions of monstrous motherhood

is the video game *Among the Sleep* (Krillbite Studios, 2014). In *Among the Sleep*, a first-person survival horror game, audiences play the character of a toddler, who has just turned two years old and who lives alone with her mother. The game opens with a birthday celebration of sorts, a celebration in the kitchen between the mother and child, in which the child's mother, putting the finishing touches on a birthday cake, says, "Mommy just has to make sure that the cake is perfect." This celebration is interrupted by a knock on the door, and when the mother leaves to answer the door, players can hear raised, tense voices. The mother returns with a present, which is later revealed to be a teddy bear (one, named Teddy, that talks and accompanies the child on the adventures that later ensue), and takes the child to bed. The child then wakes up in the middle of the night to the house in disarray, and the mother is nowhere to be found. The child and Teddy must embark on a quest for the mother, one that is conveyed in surrealist tones and through nightmare-scapes of broken-down playgrounds and craggy haunted houses.

This quest for the mother takes unexpected narrative and ludic turns, which results in *Among the Sleep* being a game that represents motherhood, monstrosity, and childhood trauma in complex and interconnected ways. What is more, *Among the Sleep*'s location in both the medium of video games and the genre of horror allow for the examination of the ways such maternal representations converse with those occurring across mediums and forms. Representations of *monstrous* motherhood, in particular, occur in a variety of texts and scholars have consistently interrogated the socio-cultural implications and underpinnings of representations of monstrosity (i.e., Almond; Calafell). Such representations are particularly ripe for feminist analyses of motherhood, gendered labor, and patriarchal family structures. As such, the analysis of *Among the Sleep*'s representations of monstrous motherhood allow for the extension of such feminist scholarship, for such an interrogation can work to unpack the ways representations of monstrous motherhood both perpetuate and complicate hegemonic constructions of maternal roles and labor. More than this, *Among the Sleep* is a productive case study through which to consider video game culture's assumptions regarding motherhood and maternal labor, assumptions that are manifested across video game narratives. This network of maternal representation occurs across video game genres, styles, and spaces, and these video game narratives reify the embodied cultural contexts in which they are located. As such, a feminist intervention into *Among the Sleep*'s representation of monstrous motherhood as a case study for video game culture allows for a better

understanding of how the representations embedded within video games reify embodied cultural contexts to center patriarchal constructs of power.

In light of all this, my goal here is to examine the construction of monstrous motherhood in the game *Among the Sleep*. Through the analysis of both the game's mechanics and its narrativity, this paper will reveal the manner in which *Among the Sleep* perpetuates patriarchal definitions of motherhood and (ultimately) womanhood. In doing so, this paper will problematize not only the ways gender and motherhood are constructed in the game but also the ways gender and gender roles are socially constructed in broader systems of representation. Ultimately, my project is to examine *Among the Sleep* in order to enact an intervention into representations of monstrous motherhood in video games because I hope to interrogate the ways video games as a medium reify and complicate narrative constructions of maternal monstrosity. In other words, my project is to demonstrate the use of feminist game studies praxis as an active means of intervening into both video game culture and the narrative reification of gendered labor, family structures, and parenting roles this culture produces.

Feminist Interventions: Complicating Video Game Narratives through Feminist Game Studies Praxis

The specifically *narrative* iteration of the monstrously constructed mother seems to occur especially frequently in the horror genre of film and literature (Clover; Creed), and such an exploration has extended into the realm of survival horror video games as well. Video games (like film and literature) tell stories, although, as Henry Jenkins posits, "[i]f some games tell stories, they are unlikely to tell them in the same ways that other media tell stories" (120). Interrogating the ways video games tell stories—and, in this case, ways they tell stories that depict monstrous mothers—can be helpful because, in the words of Janet Murray, "[t]he computer allows us to create objective correlatives for thinking about the many systems we participate in, observe, and imagine" (93). Murray argues that video games are a form of *simulation*, and these simulations of the life-systems in which we are embedded are thus "tools for thinking about the larger puzzles of our existence" (93). In other words, because video games simulate living systems, patterns, and existences, they allow players to actively participate in these simulated environments as well as in the representations they manipulate and the

stories they tell. As Adrienne Shaw posits, the examination of such representations in video games and the ways players actively engage with them is vital because "we must contextualize the sexism, racism, homophobia, and other biases of game culture within broader systems of oppression" (2). Such representations "are not unique to gaming" (2), so interrogating video game culture's location in broader systems of oppression can be a meaningful way of unpacking the conversation between video games and other mediums and forms.

   One of the reasons video games are a productive inroad into such conversations is because of some of the defining characteristics of video games and video game culture—characteristics that games scholars have consistently examined (i.e., Banks; Frasca; Juul). From Ian Bogost's definition of video games as an "expressive medium" (vii) to Alexander Galloway's examination of games as "material action" (2), from Janet Murray's assertion that games are "a kind of abstract storytelling" (142) to Astrid Ensslin's suggestion that "the creative interface" (1) of video games results in the recombination and reinvention of game and story—what many game studies scholars (i.e. Domsch; Koster; Sicart; Zimmerman) seem to be working toward is a way of complicating both our understanding of what video games *are* as well as the ways we might begin to study them, and they do so by blurring the game/story divide. In the preface to her 2005 Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) talk, Janet Murray discusses the "advent of electronic games as a new entertainment and art form" and the ways that perspectives on this advent as "an event divorced from cultural history" have impacted the study of video games. Murray explains that such perspectives contend that the "proper study of games is therefore an analysis of this unique formalism and a comparative study of particular games for their formal qualities." In other words, many of those entrenched in the field of game studies, as Murray points out, believe that the "focus of such study should be on the rules of the game, not on the representational or mimetic elements" and are "opposed to and even offended by game criticism that makes connections between games and other cultural forms such as paintings, films, digital art, or storytelling." The discussion of games formalism that Murray provides in her DiGRA talk highlights one of the central conversations occurring within the field of game studies—one in which game studies scholars interrogate what is needed in the study of games. What Murray highlights in her examination of games formalism, here, is the ways that certain modes of study, certain modes of knowledge production, become privileged in game studies, the ways that this privileging

works to separate games from other mediums or modes of study, and the ways this separation results in the erasure and silencing of other disciplinary means of engagement. As such, Murray's comments allow for an inroad into the need for feminist game studies—that is, the need for a mode of games criticism that can work to dismantle the hegemonic knowledge production of game studies formalism and that can create a more inclusive disciplinary space for additional voices in the field.

Feminist scholars in game studies work to create such inclusive disciplinary spaces and blur and disrupt divides in scholarship by interrogating representation and embodiment in video game culture (i.e., Consalvo; Huntemann; Gray). Feminist game studies praxis also makes use of intersectional feminist thought (i.e., Collins; Crenshaw; Lykke; Matsuda; Nakamura) in order to engage with the broader systems of oppression in which video game culture is embedded. Adrienne Shaw argues that such scholarship is needed to contextualize the "oppressive behavior within mainstream gamer cultures" (3). Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea Russworm contend that game studies "would prove itself dangerously out of touch if it did not attend meaningfully to representation in this moment when representation identity, and their intertwined relationship in games and game culture have become (or, rather, have been revealed as) such high-stakes matters." Shaw argues for the contextualization of representational analysis because failing to do so by treating "representation in games as being just about games…fails to account for the ways in which violence against queers (homo- or bisexual or not), women (cisgendered or queer or not), and people of color (queer or not, cisgendered women or not) exists everywhere, in all media, and in all institutions of power" (3). Thus, the intersectional representational analysis of feminist game studies is needed in order to put video games and gaming culture in conversation with other mediums, forms, and spaces as a means of unsettling the network of oppression that marginalized groups and bodies systemically face in these spaces.

While the representational analysis of feminist game studies requires epistemological and methodological pluralism in order to disrupt video game culture's network of oppression, one methodological approach to such representational analysis is the implementation of a psychoanalytical framework. Feminist psychoanalysis, as a form of representational analysis, can allow for the examination of the ways video games reify and reinforce social systems based on gender inequality. In order to examine such systems, a feminist psychoanalytical

approach to video games should be applied to both game narratives *and* game mechanics in order to assess the ways video games visually and narratively represent these systems as well as the ways the game mechanics require players to actively participate in these systems as they play. By analyzing both game narratives and game mechanics from a feminist psychoanalytical perspective, psychoanalytical methodologies can interrogate video games in accordance with Murray's call to engage with games as simulations of the systems in which we live.

One such system that feminist psychoanalysis attends to in particularly generative ways is the system of the family and the ways patriarchal family structures reproduce heteronormative gender roles and gendered labor. To return to the concept of motherhood, feminist psychoanalysis allows for an understanding of the ways these patriarchal systems of familial and domestic power construct hegemonic definitions of good and bad mothering and especially interrogates the ways mother-blaming and scapegoating function (Stone). One of the psychological concepts that lends shape to the impact of the bad mother as scapegoat is that of abjection (i.e., Batti; Chanter; Monahan), a concept developed by Julia Kristeva (*Powers of Horror*). Imogen Tyler explains that Kristeva "develops the concept of the abject to describe and account for temporal and spatial disruptions within the life of the subject and in particular those moments when the subject experiences a frightening loss of distinction between themselves and objects/others" (79). Tyler also defines abjection as "a concept that describes the violent exclusionary forces operating within modern states: forces that strip people of their human dignity and reproduce them as dehumanized waste, the dregs and refuse of social life" (87). More than this, as Andrew Hock-soon Ng points out, Kristeva's theory of the abject designates "the maternal as the locus of abjection. This is primarily because the maternal confounds (b)orders by externalizing the internal, typified especially by child-bearing and menstruation" (11). This confounding of borders results in the idea that "Kristeva's abject body is fundamentally experiencing a loss, or a deconstruction, of reality. What replaces it is the Void, the origin of the monster" (11). Thus, maternal abjection (or the abject mother) means that "there are only two alternatives for the feminine other: she can either subscribe to the patriarchal order and repress her subjectivity, or challenge the order and risk being deemed transgressive, and marginalised" (12). In short, the psychological concept of the abject mother as a figure who transgresses and is cast out of the Symbolic order of the dominant (in this case,

patriarchal) ideology is a helpful framework through which to consider the ways mother-blaming and scapegoating function. That is, mothers are blamed for various social and physical woes, they are thus deemed transgressive and abject, and they are then cast out of the Symbolic order. The scapegoated mother, the bad mother, is thus an abject figure, and this understanding of maternal abjection provides an inroad into an understanding, too, of the ways this abjection constructs the bad mother as a *monstrous* one.

As such, I will incorporate feminist psychoanalytical representational analysis in my examination of *Among the Sleep* in order to demonstrate one of the ways feminist game studies research can be enacted. My hope is that, in doing so, this project will show that feminist game studies work interrogates the complexity of intersecting systems in order to actively dismantle patriarchal ones through the application of feminist praxis to the field of game studies. In this way, as Alex Layne and Samantha Blackmon put it, feminist game studies scholars have an active role in the ways games are constructed because "[a]s we play, read, interact, discuss, rant, narrate, research, and fictionalize, we change the narrative of the game…By becoming part of the discourse of gaming, feminist reads will be central to how everyone experiences the games themselves." Feminist reads work as interventions into video game culture in order to make gaming spaces more inclusive by actively seeking to dismantle hegemonic thought in these spaces and by actively seeking to be "cognizant of the ideologies encoded into video games" (Shaw 226). In short, my efforts to engage with *Among the Sleep*'s representations of motherhood in this project function as a means of demonstrating how feminist praxis can be implemented in order to disrupt hegemonic modes of representation in video game culture.

Banshees and Trench Coats: Interrogating Maternal Monstrosity in *Among the Sleep*

Among the Sleep is a game ripe for feminist theorizing because of the ways (to make use of Shaw's phrasing) ideologies regarding motherhood are encoded into the game. That is, *Among the Sleep* requires the application of feminist game studies analysis because of the ways the game's representations of motherhood— the true mother, the bad mother, the abject mother, the monstrous mother—are all bound up together and are all made central to the narrative and ludic stakes of the game. As mentioned previously, the protagonist of the game and the character

players inhabit is an unnamed toddler; the only other characters seen throughout the game are the child's newly gifted teddy bear named Teddy (an anthropomorphic character who speaks to the child throughout the game), the child's father (who is heard, but not seen, at the end of the game and whose role I will turn to later), and, centrally, the child's mother. For most of *Among the Sleep*, the mother seems to be framed as the prototypical "good" or "true" mother (albeit a single one). For instance, she is depicted as the kind of mother who bakes birthday cakes, sings lullabies, and kisses her child good night. Such depictions work to frame the mother as one who adheres to the norms of true motherhood. Her good mothering also seems to be predicated on the norms of white middle-class culture (she is a white woman living in a well-apportioned two-story home), and as Ladd-Taylor and Umansky point out, good motherhood is almost always conveyed as being "specific to middle-class culture" (8). When the child wakes in the middle of the night to find that the mother is gone, the sudden disappearance of this good mother renders her a helpless victim, one who needs to be saved at all costs.

The ways the anthropomorphized teddy bear, Teddy, refers to the mother throughout the game underscores her victimhood. When the toddler wakes up in the middle of the night, having unceremoniously tumbled out of an inexplicably overturned crib, she finds Teddy locked inside the washing machine; when she frees Teddy from this prison, he immediately says, "Something's not right, we need to find your mother." The player's objective is based entirely on this mindset—on the need to find the victimized mother who needs our help. Throughout the game, Teddy makes comments like "This place creeps me out. I hope your mother is okay," and "Your mother…She must be so worried about you. But don't be afraid. You and me, we'll work this all out—together. I know we will." Such utterances perpetuate the damsel-in-distress lens through which players view the mother; she will remain a helpless victim, a good mother worrying about her child until players (with the aid of Teddy) are able to find and save her. The entire framework and rule system of *Among the Sleep* is thus predicated on this representation of and reliance on the normative trope of the good, true mother. Teddy's role, in constantly remarking on the need for the child to find the mother, reinforces the damsel-in-distress lens of the game, which means that Teddy's role also reinforces the normative, patriarchal representations of good motherhood that are highlighted through this framework; this framework of good motherhood is also what deems the mother *worthy* of being saved, which

thereby provides players with a patriarchally-constructed justification for moving forward and engaging with *Among the Sleep*'s rule system. However, this framework also underscores the mother's *absence*—she needs to be saved because she is *not here*—thereby rendering the maternal body a site of loss, a Void, a space of *abjection*, which creates the unsettling feeling that all is not as it seems in this game.

Indeed, when players do find the mother at the end of the game, they come to realize that all is assuredly *not* as it seems, and the mother is not necessarily the helpless victim that she was initially made out to be. Rather, the mother is revealed to be an abusive alcoholic who has been the perpetrator of the violence that the toddler has endured throughout the game. At the end of the game, players see the mother, in a series of fragmented and surreal memories, drink from a bottle and slur, "Please, go somewhere else. I'll just…Just one more." During this series, the mother also stands ominously and monolithically over the child as she asserts, "He will not take you from me." In these moments, the mother's representation shifts—from that of the good mother to the bad mother. She is no longer the good mother who bakes cakes, doles out kisses, and sings lullabies; instead, she is revealed to be the bad mother who drinks too much and abuses her child. The mother's alcoholism and her abuse of the child function as representational shifts—they provide a narrative twist for the game's resolution. Because this is a *horror* game, this ending that relies on depictions of violent, bad motherhood is meant to horrify players. Because bad motherhood here is horrifying, it is also represented in monstrous ways. This monstrous representation of motherhood brings to mind Barbara Creed's famous discussion of the idea of "woman as monster" through her examination of the *monstrous-feminine*, a term that "emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of [woman's] monstrosity" (3), especially in relation to "mothering and reproductive functions" (7). Creed explains that representations of maternal monstrosity are especially prevalent in the horror genre—something that is true as well for *Among the Sleep*. To be sure, the game's mother embodies the monstrous-feminine; she is a mother and a woman, yes, but one to be feared and one who instills horror. What makes the mother monstrous *is* her alcoholism, for her alcoholism is what causes her to act abusively toward her child. The mother's abusive alcoholism is what renders her the embodiment of the monstrous-feminine.

The game's depiction of this maternal monstrosity is reified and made tangible by the two monstrous figures that pursue the child throughout the game.

The game requires players to hide from these monstrous antagonists in order to prevent the child protagonist from being captured and injured. The first monster, a banshee-like figure clad in a torn and dirty nightgown, drinks from a bucket and shrieks as she chases after the child; what is more, if the banshee finds the child, she grabs her and violently shakes her. The second monster is a disembodied trench coat with glowing eyes that attacks the child every time the child knocks over a glass bottle. Both these monsters—through the banshee's constant drinking and the trench coat's sudden appearance at the sound of breaking glass—represent the mother's alcohol-induced violence. Such representations underscore the monstrosity of the mother's alcoholism, abusiveness, and bad motherhood. Such representations also render the mother abject in that these monsters represent the dehumanized nature of her violent transgressions; that is, the monstrous mother, here, is an *abject* one (one cast out of the Symbolic order) because her alcoholism manifests as the abuse of her child, and such behavior is unacceptable, appalling, and horrific. Here, the mother is abject because she is ultimately reduced to her alcoholism; her abusive alcoholism negates all other qualities of good mothering she exhibits at the beginning of the game because her unforgivable abusiveness diminishes all other acts. The mother's abusive alcoholism is the distillation of her monstrosity, and her immediate, unredeemable fall from grace is what renders her abject. She cannot be redeemed because she abuses her child and so she is cast out of the Symbolic order. The child, too, experiences her mother's abjection; as a witness to and victim of the mother's abject monstrosity, the child endures the trauma of her mother's abuse, and the shock of the traumatic experience results in a loss of reality for the child. This loss results in the symbolic collapse of the two distinct worlds the child inhabits—the real world and the dream world—into one surreal landscape, the hybridized, nightmarish gameworld populated by banshees and trench coats. As such, these monsters' representation of abject motherhood highlights the monstrosity of the abusive, alcoholic mother, as well as the trauma such monstrous motherhood can inflict on a child.

Because the game's protagonist is a baby and not an adult—that is, because the violence endured throughout the game is enacted on a child's body—the mother's bad mothering is especially abhorrent. Teddy, in fact, says, "I've never seen anything like it. A child shouldn't have to go through this." Such protestations underscore the fact that the mother's abusive actions are carried out against the especially vulnerable and fragile body of a two-year old, and this traumatic vulnerability renders the mother's monstrous violence especially

horrific and grotesque. As a result, the mother is no longer the helpless victim—
the child is. This shift then renders the child protagonist the victim of the mother's
monstrosity. This shift also seems to represent a slight shift in *Among the Sleep*'s
location in the survival horror game genre; as Irene Chien explains, "As the
'survival' tag suggests, an aggressive agency is involved in these games: the
emphasis is not on the traumatizing dimensions of fear and violence, but on the
hero's perseverance—and sheer brutality—in the face of relentless enemies and
seemingly overwhelming odds." The perseverance of the child protagonist in
Among the Sleep is indeed emphasized; however, because the protagonist in this
game is a child and because the monster is her mother—and not, for instance, a
horde of zombies to be slain—the traumatizing nature that the fear and violence
enacted by the monstrous mother is also centralized. The violently traumatic
mother/child relationship is the horror that the child must survive in this game.

   However, it should also be said that the relationship between the mother and
child in *Among the Sleep* is more complicated than that. Even though the game
informs players that the mother has been acting violently toward the child for
some time, the child, nonetheless, desires to seek her out and reunite with her.
This idea of *returning*—returning to a relationship with the mother—seems
especially relevant when thinking about the objectives laid out in the game. In
order to find the mother, players are directed to navigate their way through a
surreal nightmare-scape in order to collect "memories" of the mother, which take
the shape of several objects, including the pendant of the necklace she wears, a
stuffed pink elephant, a story book, and the music box she plays for the child
before bed; upon locating the first memory (the pendant), Teddy posits, "Maybe,
if we can find more memories like this, it might bring us to her!" The quest for
such positively framed memories—pretty pendants and plush stuffed animals—
reveals the fact that the child longs for the mother, but for a version of her mother
that is founded on all the good memories she has of her. Such longing is even
manifested in the game's environment, for in order to get to the next location, in
order to get to the next memory, and in order to get one step closer to being
reunited with the mother, the child must enter and slide through a tube in order to
be transported—a tube that brings to mind the idea and imagery of the womb.

   This womb-like imagery further reifies the abject nature of the monstrous-
feminine in the game because the womb, as the site of reproduction, is thus the
site of woman's generative power, and such womanly power is something that
patriarchy seeks to control and constrain; patriarchy deems this reproductive

power fearful as a justification for seeking to control it, and so the generative power of the womb is constructed as monstrous. The power of the womb is thus the abject power of the monstrous-feminine, and the womb-like landscape of *Among the Sleep* makes tangible and visible the monstrous-feminine qualities of the abject mother. Because the child uses this tube to slide from memory to memory, regaining knowledge of her traumatic encounters with her mother, the symbolic act of sliding through the tube represents the child's return to her memory, something that results in the child's need to confront her traumatic past in order to move forward in the game. By confronting her traumatic past, the child must confront the terror of abjection, the terror of her mother—as represented by the abject tube-as-womb that the child must slide through in order to confront such things—and the space of the tube thus represents the traumatic journey the child faces in confronting abjection.

Even though the child longs to be reunited with her mother due to these positively-rendered memories, the environment of and other characters in the game seem to constantly work to help the child come to terms with her trauma and thus the fact that these memories might not be entirely reliable. Much of what Teddy says, for example, seems to be able to be read in multiple ways and seems to point to the potentially dangerous side of the mother. Early on in the game, when the child has just met Teddy (and before the mother goes missing), the baby and Teddy play together in her bedroom and explore a closet in the room; while in the darkened closet, Teddy says, "I think something's coming," immediately after which the mother opens the closet door, saying jovially, "You've got to stop hiding from mommy." Such an instance provides a moment of foreshadowing that ominously heralds the bad mother players see by the end of the game—something is coming, and it is the coming knowledge of the mother's transgressions. There is a similar duality in the mother's statement as well; "You've got to stop hiding from mommy" might also signal the onset of such knowledge, in that the child must stop rejecting (or hiding from) the truth of her trauma in order to begin the journey toward understanding and recovery. Such dual meaning is also pervasive in one of Teddy's statements referenced earlier: "Something's not right, we need to find your mother." While, on the surface, this statement may seem to signal that the mother is the victim of whatever it is that is not right, such a statement could also mean that the something that is not right *is* the mother. The duality of meaning, here, harkens back to some of the concepts discussed earlier regarding the manifestations of the monstrous mother in horror texts; these manifestations

are typically ambiguous and represent the maternal body as a space of duality—in other words, the monstrous mother is an ambiguous figure who is both a helpless victim and a powerful monster, a figure who is both sought after and rejected.

This is why the game's resolution is so important to note. At the very end of the game, the child finds her mother slumped on the kitchen floor next to an empty wine bottle and clutching Teddy (whose arm has been ripped off). When the child tries to take Teddy back, the mother pushes her away, shouting, "Stay away from me." The mother then begins to cry and mutters, "I'm sorry. I never meant to. It's too much." At this moment, players have the option to have the child comfort her mother by stroking her hair, which complicates the ways the mother is constructed; she is not a victim, she is not a monster—she is, ambiguously, both at the same time. Her maternal body is a space of ambiguity. However, this ambiguous maternal figure is one from which the child protagonist is ultimately retrieved, for after comforting the (piteously monstrous) mother, the child hears a knock at the front door. The door opens to a blinding whiteness, and players hear a man's voice say, "Hi there, little one! Come here. You'll be safe with me. Did you like your gift? What happened to his arm? Don't worry, we'll fix him up." This man would appear to be the child's father, who comes to save the child from the drunken abuse of the mother. He is someone with whom the child will be safe and someone who has the ability to fix things. In this way, the father is constructed as a savior in that he is the child's salvation from *Among the Sleep*'s monstrous motherhood. The game's motherhood then becomes constructed in opposition to its fatherhood.

Conclusion: The Cultural Significance of Monstrous Motherhood in Video Games

Among the Sleep's construction of motherhood as being in opposition with fatherhood is something that requires particularly careful consideration, for this representation of oppositionality reveals the game's assumptions about gender and parenting roles. The game's monstrous motherhood lends itself to the representation of traumatic renderings of abusive, alcoholic parents as well as representations of the acknowledgment and processing of childhood trauma experienced as a result of monstrous parenting. The surreal landscapes of the gameworld serves to underscore this traumatic memory and provide spaces in which such traumatic memory might be processed. Of course, monstrosity is not

the sole purview of mothers alone, and so *Among the Sleep* uses its representation of monstrous motherhood as a way to narratively convey the immense risk children face at the hands of abusive parents; the monsters in the game (that is, the banshee and the trench coat) are then utilized as stand-ins for the horror that results when violence is enacted against the exceedingly vulnerable bodies and psyches of children. The game's surreality, its horrific, dark, and nightmarish world, reifies this horror, violence, and trauma, and the rule system of the game makes it so that players passively explore the world, collecting memories as they go, only able to run and hide from the monsters in the game. This passivity is underscored by the father's role as savior and the fact that the father saves the toddler at the end of the game—that is, the child does not make the decision to leave the monstrous mother behind but has these choices made for her—by the father. In this way, the person given agency at the end of the game is not the child-protagonist (and not the monstrous, abject mother) but the *father*. Thus, the game's resolution underscores its patriarchal lens, for the father-as-salvation conclusion reifies the centering of patriarchy as a guiding, normalizing force for the toddler; that is, it recenters patriarchy as law.

This recentering of patriarchy also demonstrates the low stakes patriarchy sets for fatherly success. That is, all the father needs to do for the game to represent him as savior is give his child the gift of a teddy bear and appear at the front door at the end of the game. There is no indication, however, that the father participates in any other caregiving duties or supports the mother or his child in any substantive way. Indeed, there is no evidence that the father has any tangible or meaningful relationship with the child other than his brief appearance at the end of the game. Instead, the focal point through which players make meaning regarding the child's traumatic upbringing is the mother, a focal point that is patriarchal in construction in that it shifts the blame from the larger structure of patriarchy to the body of the mother, a shifting that thus retains patriarchy's centering as law. Further, patriarchy's centering as law means that the mother not only bears the onus of responsibility for blame but also bears the onus of responsibility for the child's parenting and caregiving. The father—the seemingly *absent* father—does not bear such a burden and so receives none of the blame. This is, to return to Adrienne Rich's phrasing, the power of the father; this is the law of patriarchy. The power of the father is the power of the dominant Symbolic order. It is the power of setting the rules of the system it seeks to control, and one of the ways that patriarchal rule is perpetuated is by shifting blame—that is,

shifting the blame *from* the patriarchal system that seeks to control and constrain and shifting the blame instead *onto* mothers who are overwhelmed by and unable to conform to such constraints. This mother-blaming results in the abject positioning of the monstrous mother, and this abjection is used as a way to obscure the ultimate social structure and Symbolic order that creates such problems; in other words, abjection is used to obscure the problems of patriarchy by placing the blame on the mother. In doing so, the power of the father goes on, untouched and unchallenged, in *Among the Sleep*.

Feminist game studies research, however, challenges such simulations and reproductions of power in its efforts to interrogate the ways bodies and selves are transmitted via the medium of games and the ways that games can work to reify cultural assumptions made about such bodies. This idea of the reification of embodied cultural contexts demonstrates the ways the representations embedded within video games shed light on the industry's cultural assumptions regarding motherhood, fatherhood, family structures, and the gendered labor associated with such roles. To be sure, the video game industry's relationship with motherhood is a particularly fraught one (Hepler), and the industry relies on gendered assumptions regarding labor (Cross). The industry's biases against and assumptions about mothers are built into the products game developers produce— namely, of course, the video games themselves. That is to say, the industry's patriarchal ideologies regarding maternal bodies and gendered parenting labor are structurally built into the narratives of video games, thereby impacting the ways mothers are represented in games. These representations thus perpetuate and reify some of the same assumptions regarding gendered labor that the gaming industry structures its culture around. As such, it is productive to interrogate such representations as emblematic of the culture of the gaming industry in order to more fully grapple with, as Elissa Shevinsky puts it, gaming's "gender problem" (9). In doing so, feminist game studies can better understand what it is up against, how to disrupt it, and how we might build feminist games instead.

This is where feminist game studies becomes helpful as a field that explores the complexity of representation in video games. Feminist game studies scholars have an active role in the ways games are constructed, and thus the representational analysis of feminist game studies allows researchers to participate in, problematize, and intervene in video game culture in ways that engage more thoughtfully with issues such as those examined here—that is, representations of monstrosity, parenting, and trauma in games. This examination

of monstrous motherhood in *Among the Sleep* has been meant to serve as a demonstration of the fact that feminist game studies is needed to dismantle and disrupt not only the problems of representation that occur within video game narratives but also the structures of power within the gaming industry. Feminist game studies is needed because it provides the intersectional strategies required to dismantle the hegemonic knowledge production that occurs in the field of game studies. In other words, feminist game studies is needed because it allows for the imagining of new possibilities for representation and new models of existence and futurity in game studies, in video game culture, and in the gaming community.

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