Creature, Monster, Nameless, Created: Frankenstein transformed in role playing games

Introduction

Fred Botting describes the Introduction to Frankenstein as offering a glimpse of its own future: the aesthetic circumstances in which its filmic adaptations would be produced.

‘Fragmented,’ says Botting, ‘assembled from bits and pieces, the novel is like the monster itself, and like the unnatural, disproportionate monsters of gothic romances.’ In this respect, Frankenstein also resembles a collection of media which have picked the bones of gothic, of fantasy, of science fiction and of pulp in establishing their generic coordinates.

I am, of course, talking about games. Tabletop and, later, computerised role playing games have carried out transformative work on Victor Frankenstein and his creation for decades.

In doing so they’ve joined a tradition that was well underway when the second edition of Frankenstein entered publication: the novel saw fifteen direct theatrical adaptations in three years.

Since then, as Botting has it, Frankenstein has ‘exceeded any authorial control, becoming disseminated in popular culture and modern mythology as a byword for scientific overreaching and horror.’

The first game adaptation at which I’ll be looking is absolutely rooted in that idea: the second and third, I’d argue, go beyond it, engaging with and extending the moral core of Shelley’s novel in ways that no other medium can achieve.

First: the Flesh Golems of Dungeons and Dragons, including an iteration from the Ravenloft campaign setting which pays direct homage to Frankenstein.

Second: the Nameless One, protagonist of the D&D-based computer RPG Planescape: Torment, a more developed version of the Creature who becomes both the story’s protagonist and the player’s avatar.

Third: the playable characters of Promethean: the Created, a tabletop RPG which transforms that avatarsial experience into a group activity, with multiple origin stories and archetypes for Creature-like artificial beings available and an emphasis on character development.
Methodology

That concept of character development is the crux of the discussion here: it’s the aspect of *Frankenstein* to which RPGs have the most to offer.

‘Despite its historical basis’, writes Nick Groom, ‘the Gothic has always been a state of the art movement.’ Groom talks up modern architectural technology superceding structural medievalism, scientific developments as providing inspiration to generations of authors, and concludes that ‘the attraction the moving image had for the Gothic imagination… was part of the very activity of Gothic as a highly technologically aware style.’ He was using this to outline Gothic cinema, but the same claim holds true for games.

The technology of games - whether that’s the digital technology of computer games, or the imaginative ludotechnology of tabletop ‘pen and paper’ games - extends the Gothic into new realms of interactive complicity.

The great strength of games media is that, as players, we’re directly responsible for what our avatars do, and for how they behave, and often for establishing their moral compass, albeit in terms presented to us by the games’ designers. At the most basic, the RPG offers us our nasty, nice and neutral options; at the most advanced we’re determining the moral circumstances of the entire imagined world. In either case, it’s our finger on the button, our hand that rolls the die: whatever happens, we made it happen.

This capacity has a lot to offer for adaptations and transformations of a text like *Frankenstein*. Aija Ozolins describes the doppelgänger effect at the heart of Shelley’s novel, a motif of second selfhood which (for Ozolins) constitutes the chief source of the novel’s latent power.

Her analysis is classically Freudian and traditionally moral, highlighting the negative epithets Victor uses for his creation - devil, fiend, daemon, horror, wretch, monster, etcetera - and his thinking of the creature as ‘my own spirit let loose from the grave, and forced to destroy all that was dear to me’. The creation is explicitly associated with Victor’s baser nature, detached from his alleged higher instincts.

This analysis doesn’t quite ring true, not least because Victor’s vaulting ambition speaks to a flaw in his character that’s at best duplicated in his creation’s. Victor himself acknowledges that he, ‘not in deed but in effect, was the true murderer’, placing the questions of complicity at the heart of the novel’s moral structure.

If the Creature, or the Monster, or whatever Victor calls it, is his own self one step removed, then it lacks agency; it’s doing nothing Victor wouldn’t, if removed from the mores and processes that govern him. Give the Creation agency and moral responsibility for his own actions, however, and we move into a more interesting moral territory.
According to Maria Mahoney, the doppelgänger effect resolves when one confronts and recognises the dark aspect of one’s personality in order to transform it by an act of conscious choice. ‘Freedom comes not in eliminating the Shadow, but in recognising him in yourself.’

Victor’s attempt to flee and then to kill constitutes a rejection of this conscious choice - the ‘agency’ I’ve mentioned a couple of times already - places him on shaky moral ground compared to the Creation, who seizes that moral agency from the moment he’s aware that he has the capacity to do so. He tries to make himself useful.

That’s the capacity afforded to player characters in role playing games - provided that the games’ authors and developers can restrain themselves from restricting it for the sake of imposing their own moral frameworks. PCs get to seize the moral moment.

Of course, providing any sort of story - a narrative hook to attract and maintain player interest beyond play for play’s sake and establishing a moral quandary - demands a certain amount of authorial imposition. Striking and sustaining that balance is the sign of a good developer. In today’s context, it’s also the sign of an effective transformation of Frankenstein - to wit, one which maintains the moral significance of its inspiration but also makes the most of playability.

So. That’s what we’re looking out for. We’re going to start with an example of how not to do it.
The Creature and the Monster: *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*

I've mentioned cinema already, and it's the cinematic Frankenstein that first made the jump into RPG territories. Shelley's Creature was collapsed down into a mere Monster, a simplistic rendering that owes more to the snarling Karloff than the eloquent figure of the novel.

The Flesh Golem of *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* (AD&D) has the characteristic square-head-and-stitches look of the cinematic Frankenstein's Monster. Described as semi-intelligent, able to follow simple commands from its master, and prone to fits of berserk rage when provoked, this superficial interpretation of the Monster is characterised by smashing through furnishings and bludgeoning you senseless for bothering it. I would also like to draw out that the golem is animated by an elemental spirit: it is not considered an artificial or reanimated human personality at all.

It's a transformation that removes moral depth from the original: a superficial iteration based on an already simplified version. From here, the only way is up.

*Ravenloft*, originally published in 1990, is a campaign setting for AD&D which explicitly draws on Gothic tropes and sources. Within that mandate, it partially rehabilitates the Frankenstein Creature from the lowly status to which other settings consign it.

I say 'partially' because we're still dealing with a superficial pastiche. Allow me to introduce Doctor Victor Mordenheim: scientist and surgeon, grey-haired and mad-eyed, and - as the material is honest enough to admit - ‘Ravenloft’s Doctor Frankenstein, loosely based on the character from Mary Shelley’s classic Gothic novel’.

Mordenheim’s crime, in a game where magically induced resurrections and reanimations are a matter of course, available to the most Lawful Good of law-abiding do-gooders, is atheistic rationalism. Like Victor Frankenstein, he ‘was dabbling in the work of gods, and the gods, in turn, dabbled in him’, but it is explicitly stated that he is punished out of divine spite, and that his future efforts are divinely mandated to fail.

His creation, Adam Mordenheim, is by far the more powerful of the two, and is ‘the true lord of Lamordia’, the cursed domain in which both of them are trapped by supernatural means. Adam lives as a reclusive wild man, but ‘he wants to be human. He is bitter and frustrated, and when the frustration builds, it gives way to violence and evil’.

Although he has elements in common with the primitive Flesh Golems - including the special rules for electrical attacks, a nod to the galvanistic principle of the novel - *Ravenloft’s* authors are at pains to point out that he ‘resembles neither a flesh golem nor a lumbering dolt with neck bolts.’
In point of fact, ‘he is extremely nimble, swift and clever, using the terrain to superb advantage. He is a creature accustomed to living at the edge of another man’s world, and thus is willing to retreat if danger is present, allowing the land and its shadows to conceal him’.

It’s a step up from the Karloffian imitation of stock D&D, back towards the pursuing threat of the novel, but this detail and depth doesn’t go anywhere.

The two characters are presented in isolation, rather than in the metaphysical and personal opposition of *Frankenstein* proper. They’re done with each other. Adam isn’t going after his creator, and Mordenheim has moved on to attempting a resurrection for the local Elizabeth Lavenza substitute.

Neither of them can gain anything from accepting the other, as Mahoney suggested was essential to complete the moral narrative. There is no resolution to their situation bar Player Characters coming along and doing at least one of them in, for reasons largely left up to the non-logic of early RPGs. It’s a static, leaden pastiche of *Frankenstein* that assumes homage is interesting for its own sake.
The Nameless: Bioware’s *Planescape: Torment*

D&D can do so much better than this, and by the end of the 1990s it would do so with *Planescape: Torment*, a single player computer RPG set in and around the implausible city of Sigil.

*Planescape: Torment* places you in the role of the Nameless One: an immortal, quasi-undead figure with no clear recollection of his past, whose memories and ambitions are expressed through modifications of his apparently indestructible, clearly reconstructed body.

In one of the genre’s finest slow-burn openings, the Nameless One literally wakes up on a slab, in a sort of industrialised re-animator’s laboratory. In the early stages, he’s chiefly interacting with mindless zombies and other undead whose bodies contain parts of his (and thus, through magical means, parts of his absent memory). All of this serves to differentiate him from the handful of living people he encounters, but also to separate him from the mere undead.

He belongs in neither of their worlds; he has a degree of agency above and beyond a mere Creation. In a past life, he asked a hag to make him immortal so he had time to atone for his terrible crimes. Her magic resurrects him every time he dies, but robs him of his memories, and has - spoiler warning - also created the game’s antagonist. The Transcendent One is the Nameless One’s mortality, separated and decanted into its own discrete person. Since he enjoys being alive, and has no intention of being decanted back into the Nameless One’s body, the Transcendent One has remained one step ahead of his creator, erasing clues and killing informants who might lead the Nameless One to the truth.

Morally speaking, the Nameless is a blank slate. He starts off as True Neutral: a being who simply exists in the world. Player choice during the game shifts his morality to and fro on the classic D&D alignment grid, which frames ethics between a kind of idealised Anglo-American ‘good’ and ‘evil’ in one direction, and a societal or cosmological sense of ‘law’ and ‘chaos’ in the other, with ‘neutrality’ existing between the ideological extremes.

My Nameless One ended up Neutral Good; a genial bruiser willing to help anyone who said they needed helping, disinterested in the technicalities of order and disorder. That’s a consequence of my preferred playstyle - I don’t like to cheat myself out of opportunities for adventure by being rude to someone who may have a quest I can do.

It’s also created a moral perspective on the later events, and it puts me in a particular relationship with the Transcendent One, who’s killing his way through Sigil out of pure self-interest. My Nameless is the man who made a monster: a well-meaning Victor who happens to resemble the Creation. Yours might be quite different.
You could argue that the Nameless One represents a kind of Promethean over-reaching worthy of Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein, and I wouldn’t exactly disagree. Although the actual legwork of ‘creating’ him wasn’t his own, the choice certainly was. He’s a reasonably intelligent man who has inadvertently created a new form of life out of his own ambition.

He’s also, however, a hollow figure who’s discovering himself and his place in the world; a physically repulsive near-carcass who, depending on how you choose to play him, can be driven to extremes of violence by his frustration, or pursue a course of moral goodness, service to the society through which he moves, making an effort to belong.

In one person, the Nameless One embodies both popular uses and understandings of the name ‘Frankenstein’, collapsing the doppelgänger effect into a single figure to boot.

He is both the creator and the creation, seeking to reconcile himself with the past self who created his present, and the severed aspect of him who defines his future.

Morally and narratively, he’s the most complex transformation of Frankenstein that gaming has produced to date: quite fitting for a game that sought to challenge traditional role-playing game conventions at every point.

However: it is a computer RPG. It's innately a structured, authorial project that lends itself to this kind of almost visionary approach. A tabletop RPG like Ravenloft is a troupe activity: it offers potentiality to a group of players and it's up to them to make the most of it. To capture and develop moral complexity there requires a slightly different approach.
As with *Ravenloft*, *Promethean: the Created* cites Frankenstein’s Monster among its inspirations, which also include Pygmalion, the Golem of Prague and the legend of Osiris. All of these sources lend their name to a character archetype, so you may well be literally playing ‘a Frankenstein’. The very title of *Promethean: the Created*, of course, calls to mind the subtitle of Shelley’s novel, with its themes of attempting the scientifically and morally unthinkable, stealing the forbidden knowledge of fire from the gods.

However, the game is concerned less with the Modern Prometheus than with the after-effects of his work: the Created. Players of *Promethean* take on the roles of ‘monsters created from the corpses of dead humans, reanimated through various means, be it mad science or shamanistic rituals… their one true goal: to become mortal and gain a soul.’

In the meantime, they are burdened by a supernatural effect called Disquiet: a game mechanic which ensures ‘all normal humans who encounter the characters will slowly grow to hate, fear and despise them’, becoming more and more intense in their feelings over time. Effectively, the Disquiet is meant to ensure the characters experience the isolation which shapes the Creature’s character.

However, *Promethean* is distinguished from its peers and sources by troupe play. It is a co-operative multiplayer game in which there are multiple Created, and the expectation is that they will productively interact. To function, the game relies on a sense of found-family kinship among the disparate characters its players create, and amongst the players themselves.

It’s similar to the kind of radically domestic postmodern gothic posited by William Hughes. Hughes describes a genre which regards the ordinary, mortal, heterosexual, reproductive ‘family’ as an anachronism; a Gothic which posits radical alternatives along self-selecting lines, including the shapeshifting werewolf encampments and secretive urban vampire clans on which the World of Darkness games are based.

*Promethean* stands out among these, and among *Frankenstein* transformations, because it represents a radical step away from its specific inspiration. The Creature, in *Frankenstein*, is defined by his loneliness, his outcast status, the revulsion which which he is greeted by everyone who sees his face.

Arguably, to give the Creature a peer group is to fatally undermine the ‘personal horror’ which he experiences, despite ‘personal horror’ being the aesthetic goal of the game. However, the Created - like the original from whose mould they’re cast, and like all the troupses of supernatural beings in the World of Darkness - are stuck with each other. Their Disquiet permanently exiles
them from human communities and consigns them to a facsimile community composed exclusively of their own kind - unless they successfully transcend their condition.

‘The greater family’ of species and society, as Hughes writes, ‘is now irrelevant’, failing to integrate the playable Created within conventional human models of domestic living, and separating them from a society within which they continue to exist. Overcoming this division puts them outside the game’s remit. They become merely human, and unplayable. To complete their development is, in game terms, to cease existing. To me, that’s pretty damn horrific.
Conclusion

As Botting and Spooner (2015) have it, 'Monsters are cast out from human society or made monstrous by their inhumane norms and practices.' The monstrous protagonist comes to realise that something about them - whether their 'normal' day to day existence, or the event which made them what they are - has rendered them an essentially abject figure, a permanent outsider. All of these games at least recognise this essential truth, although only two of them manage to deploy it on any meaningful level.

Planescape and Promethean succeed where Ravenloft fails because they reframe the Creature as protagonist. They locate the player's 'readerly' perspective within a created entity who is in search of identity, purpose, and sense of the world. This avatar is confronted with an evolving moral education, and the player is personally responsible for what - if anything - they get out of it.

By creating complicity in the role of the Creature, Planescape: Torment and Promethean: the Created directly engage players in the process of growth, development and discovery which the Creature undergoes. These games offer an opportunity to confront and embrace the dark side of the avatar-protagonist's nature, completing the moral journey which ultimately destroys Victor Frankenstein and drives his Creation into exile.

That's the power games media have to reframe and re-present their sources, drawing the reader/player into their moral world on a personal level - and that, I hope, explains why I've been allowed to discuss them here today. Thank you.
Bibliography


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