

# Attraction & Repulsion: The Abject Player in *Pathologic 2* & *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33*

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## INTRODUCTION

Within feminist games research, Julia Kristeva's theory of the 'abject' (1982) has been used as a unique lens through which to explore the common intersection between the horrific and the feminine. Defined as neither a 'definable object' nor a 'correlative' subject (Kristeva, 1982, 1), the abject can be understood as a liminal concept in which the strict, symbolic order of all that is known and accepted collapses and warps. Confrontation with the abject, often through a direct encounter with beings and monsters that Barabara Creed defined as the 'monstrous-feminine' (1993), is understood as a necessary part of re-establishing the symbolic order that gives human existence its inherent meaning.

Within the context of video games, previous feminist scholars have explored how, unlike the more passive viewership of films, videogames offer a unique narrative opportunity to thrust an 'embodied, situated' player (Keogh, 2018, 9) into direct, tactile confrontation with the abject. This confrontation emerges either as monstrously feminine enemies that may be repelled in ludic combat order (Harkin, 2020; Spittle, 2011; Stang, 2018) or as an explicit embodiment of an abject player-avatar who the player becomes to carve out a new simulated order for themselves (Bloomquist, 2021). However, this focus purely on the abject's ludic representations has subsequently neglected the noticeably abject position that a player themselves must occupy when immersing themselves in play.

Drawing from Kristeva's abjection as a theoretical framework, this paper will investigate how, rather than banishing the representational abject through their engagement with gameplay, an abject player must instead banish *themselves*—their fears, their morals, their very identity—in order to embody an avatar in a virtual world. Such abject embodiment, phenomenologically described as 'straddl[ing] worlds' (Keogh, 2018, 12) in an 'amalgam cyborg' body (Keogh, 2018, 14), elicits a constant negotiation between the boundaries of the player's own self and their other, embodied self within the game. I further propose that this negotiation inevitably elicits a continual metatextual unease, whereby the player's interactions with a disempowering and frustrating game world continually draws their own abject, 'fragmented self' back to the forefront (Spittle, 2011, 318).

To best define how games writers and developer evoke this abject state of play, this paper will explore both Ice-Pick Lodge's horror role-playing game, *Pathologic 2* (2019) and Sandfall Interactive's turn-based role-playing game, *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* (2025). Adopting a 'close-playing' model of analysis (Paterson et al., 2019) whereby subjective played experiences are intermingled with theoretical frameworks, I define the player's abject state of play as facilitated by a constant push-and-pull of 'attraction and repulsion' to a game's world, narrative and ludic mechanics (Kristeva, 1982, 1). As such, the chosen case studies demonstrate the dual manner in which games manipulate a player into an abject state.

Though it ostensibly charms players with its visual and musical flair, *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* posits this very same charm as a mirage that leads players into an abject state of play. Set within a 'Canvas' that houses the soul of a man whose family squabble over the ruins in denial of his death in the outside world, the game's narrative continually juxtaposes the world's alluring aesthetic beauty with the violence that the player metatextually imposes on its characters through continuing their tortured existence. In continually immersing themselves into the game's world, the player themselves is framed as an abject invader into a beautiful, wonderful world that simultaneously wishes to be let go and laid to rest.

However, unlike *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33*'s deceptive immersion, *Pathologic 2* creates an abject state of play through repulsing the player from its world through continual ludic and narrative disempowerment. The narrative places the player within a seemingly backwater Russian town where they must cure a mysterious, seemingly otherworldly plague that has ripped through the streets. However, such a task is rendered almost impossible: combat is left intentionally janky; the player-character's perspective is made routinely 'unreliable' (Hope, 2024, 28); and non-player characters seem to only to 'ask profound questions and provide few answers' (Hope, 2024, 29). As such, the player's abject state of play emerges from their continual failed attempts to make sense of an otherwise senseless experience.

In alignment with prior feminist research into abjection, this paper offers insight into the transgressive modes of play that go beyond 'normative, dominant, technofetishist, and...masculinist' design (Keogh, 2018, 172). As the 'interactive presence of the player...complicates and broadens the storytelling potential of the medium' (Paterson et al., 2018, 17), there too must be a continued exploration and investment into the play styles and design ideologies that stand in opposition to the industry's still predominantly 'masculine values' of 'autonomy' and 'agency' (Keogh, 2018, 179).

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## BIO

Kate King-Smith is a writer, independent researcher and creative writing graduate from The University of Melbourne. Her research focuses on exploring and implementing feminist writing practices into narrative design, blending traditional literary theory with ludological approaches to narrative construction. She has written for independent games media and is currently working on develop an Australian Gothic survival horror game script, drawing on similar themes related to the body, memory and feminine experiences.