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Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry (TOJQI)
Volume 12, Issue 3, June 2021:454- 483

Research Article

Horror Within and Without: Studying the Role of the Monstrous and the Grotesque in the Horror World-building of Dead Space Universe

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Abstract

The article endeavors to show how the elements of monstrosity and grotesquery can evoke horrors on both psychological and physical levels, and how the psychological and physical horrors function as not two separate phenomena but rather as mutually complementary forces where each keeps reinforcing the other. The study will analyze the two novels and four games from *Dead Space* franchise, namely *Dead Space: Martyr* (2010), and *Dead Space: Catalyst* (2012), both authored by Brian Evenson, and the *Dead Space* games trilogy (2008-13) along with *Dead Space: Extraction*, the supposed prequel to the first game of the series. For the purpose of the present analysis, the study shall employ a multi-theoretical perspective for analyzing the contribution of monstrous and grotesque elements towards crafting a universe of endless horrors. The study will also try to look at how video games and fictional works can work hand-in-hand to weave a shared universe of multi-layered, expanded, and distributed horror culture.

Keywords: *Horror; fiction; Dead Space; video games; monster; grotesque*

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Received Accepted

Introduction

The novels are actually intended to serve as the prequels to the game series. The action of the games is set in the 25th Century, post-apocalyptic and post-scarcity society, where mankind has already found ways to tap into an unlimited amount of resources thanks to its command over the ‘planetcracking’ technologies. It is with the dint of their technologies that humanity now seeks to expand throughout the galaxy by colonizing other planets and extracting resources from them. Even before the action in the games begins, Earth is described as having already undergone an extinction-level event due to the unbridled and unsustainable use of natural resources by the humans, and it is against “this disquieting sense of disorder” that the world-building proceeds in the games, although unlike in the traditional apocalyptic narratives, there is no hint of any “teleological design and cosmic meaning” (Rosen xviii) anywhere to be found in this world; rather the humanity with its renewed vigor and exuberance seeks to further thrive by enslaving and colonizing nature even more. By the time the action of the first game unfolds, humanity has already literally cracked open 34 different planets, and is about to begin its 35th extraction event. However, the worlds of the novel are clearly pre-apocalyptic, and broadly speaking, they depict the consequences of humanity’s first coming into contact with the mysterious alien objects called the Black and Red Marker in the first and second books respectively.

Douglas E. Winter famously stated, “horror is not a genre ... it is an emotion” (12). The study aims to show how horrors on psychological and physical levels can complement and reinforce each other as, while the textual depiction of horrors can give birth to suggestive psychological horrors, the horror encoded in the digital, informatic medium of the games can intensify the

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vividness of the physical horrors manifold. While in the novels, one may opine, psychological horrors are primary and the physical horrors are secondary constitutive elements in the world-building, in the games, the situation is reversed, and the world of novels and games complement and reinforce each other in a manner that is quite similar to what the psychological and physical horrors do. In the immersive and interactive world of the games, the player gets to repeat, relive and replay each moment of monstrosity and horror thus becoming him/herself a co-creator in the process of reinforcement of the horror and monstrosity.

Also, just as the monster thrives by violating various binary categories like living and dead, the lowly and the sublime, and man and animal, the world of the video games too not only annihilates the boundaries between the real and the virtual, but also blurs the division between the psychological and physical planes of horror, thereby opening up new modes for articulating the engagement with monstrous and the horrid in the hyperreal. Through the embodiment of horror in digitally mediated interactive media, we also see a normalization of the violence that otherwise has its roots in the deep and primitive impulses of our subconscious. From a Freudian perspective, the encoded expressions of castration anxiety manifesting through the images of visceral dismemberment, i.e. “Dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist . . . feet which dance by themselves” (“The Uncanny - Sigmund Freud - Comma Press”), are transformed into acts of “Dynamic Strategic Dismemberment” in the world of the games, where the players get to intelligently choose which limbs of the monsters they want to dismember. The video games seem to combine the Freudian castration complex with splatterpunk gross-out. Aalya Ahmad views the splatterpunk subgenre as one involving the “ascendancy of a central monster of the apocalyptic millennium and the globalized postcapitalist twenty-first century, the flesh-eating, hollowed-out, abjectly living-dead zombie, the embodiment of the masses with a body that splatters” (272). This

description fits the monsters in *Dead Space* universe quite well. As the video games have grown to become the “allegories for our contemporary life under the protocological network of continuous informatic control” (Galloway 106), the violence, horror, monstrous and grotesque portrayed in the media increasingly appear to become digitally mediated reflections of our deeply embedded “evolutionarily recurrent threats, and we are invited to share the perspective and emotional appraisals of protagonists who face imminent or potential danger from these monsters” (Clasen 47). Nietzsche's following words now seem to become ever more relevant in the present context: “He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster” (“Friedrich Nietzsche – Aphorism 146”).

The Horror Within

Scottish author Dr. Tom Christie rightly observes, “...although the cycle’s (*Dead Space*) claustrophobic environment and copious macabre gore (a highly effective melange of the Lovecraftian uncanny and Cronenbergian body horror) have won it many admirers amongst the critical community, perhaps the most remarkable innovation of the *Dead Space* games has been its ground-breaking depiction of dementia” (“The Dead Space Games”).

In the *Dead Space* universe, both in the novels and also in the games, the horror starts off within one’s mind before moving outwards to encompass everything physical. It is with the influence of the Markers that people within its radius of influence begin to feel such effects as hallucinations, paranoia, headaches, and dementia. Gradually the distinction between the real and the mental world is lost as the infected ones are presented with the imageries of the dead ones he once knew before being driven to commit homicidal acts on others, and finally on himself. The psychological horrors seem to emerge in the liminal space that exists between the Lacanian Real and Symbolic.

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The Real is the normal world of the humans not yet infected by the virus or the symbolic codes of the Marker while the Symbolic seems to be the world where Marker's symbols capture and corrupt the pattern of consciousness in human minds. The victim of the Marker's mind manipulation sees symbols written in blood and is driven to paint these very symbols with the blood of the ones he murders and sometimes is even driven to use his own blood to finish off the painting. These symbols are the genetic codes of the virus that infects individuals before turning them into physical monstrosities, i.e. the Necromorphs. In the first novel, i.e. *Dead Space: Martyr* (2010), we are given only glimpses into the nature of monstrosity that awaits us in the next novel or more expansively in the games. The novel builds up with the descriptions of several anomalies occurring both in the outer as well as the inner world as the characters come close to the field laboratory located at the Chicxulub crater where Michael Altman is conducting his researches. As we move on to the second chapter, characters are described as suffering from various physio-psychological problems such as severe headaches and hallucinatory visions, thereby making the stage ready for the arrival of something utterly and irredeemably monstrous. The book is full of descriptions of characters suffering from psychological horrors occurring in the form of hallucinations, visions, hearing strange voices and muttering strange sounds, etc. to name a few. The transgressive, category-violating, hybrid, and utterly grotesque nature of these monsters is first hinted at in the description of the fish-like creature that Chava happens to dream of on a beach. Chava, the young boy, at first cannot tell his dreams from reality, as in his half-asleep, half-awake state he keeps moving towards the grotesque humanoid figure. A voice keeps lingering in his head but the language of it is unknown, and in this dream-like state, he sees the creature that is "missing part of its face, the jaw," and staring at him "with eyes as blank and inhuman as the eyes of a fish" (Evenson, *Martyr* 17). This is the first hint about the onset of the grotesque and hybrid terror that

awaits the entire mankind. Chava later actually finds the monster, but on the advice of a *bruja*, burns the monster down only to discover that the witch herself died weeks earlier. Then, he also sees the visions of the ominous symbols painted in blood all over the walls of the witch's house. These symbols are the first step in connecting the horrors of the mind to the horrors outside. He also sees the witch killing herself by slitting her throat which is again somewhat reminiscent (in the sense that the first installment in the game series was already published two years before the publication of this novel, while the novel itself intends to be the prequel to the games) of the death scene in *Dead Space 2*, where a man suffering from delusions is seen slitting his throat with a knife and slumping himself against the wall.

In fact, the process of turning humans into Necromorphs begins with the Markers emitting electromagnetic signals and infecting the minds of the people with hallucinations, making them hear strange voices, accelerating dementia, and finally driving them insane with an uncontrollable homicidal rage. As the physical carriers, there are Infectors and Swarms both of which are described in the second novel and feature prominently throughout the video game series. Now, as the novel progresses, and as the effects of the prototypical Red Marker on the psyche of the characters continue to grow stronger than before, the "reports of scientists and soldiers beset by insomnia and hallucinations" also continue to rise (Evenson, *Martyr* 247). The novel contains several instances of people moving under the spell of these hallucinations and hurting or killing others (260), images of now-deceased near and dear ones of the living individuals coming to haunt the living ones as is seen in the case of Altman when he is contacted by her mother's phantasmagoria (263), and the images themselves changing to respond to the growing skepticism arising in the minds of the people who seem to have begun doubting the authenticity of these visions (265). Most people see only their dead and loved ones, while some in their attempts to find

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something even deeper in these images, unbeknownst to themselves, get drawn further into the labyrinths of psychological horror: “Only dead people, loved ones—the sort of people that you’d want to take seriously. Some people, like you, believe they’re hallucinations. Others...believe they’re something more” (Evenson, *Martyr* 266). Sometimes, these hallucinations are interpreted by the believers as signs affirming the Marker’s prophesized arrival.

In the game series, the psychological horror becomes even more vivid and consuming with the application of different forms of subtle suggestions, and visual tricks, and thus the psychological and physical worlds of horror appear to bleed into each other. In the various Chapters in *Dead Space 2*, we see recurrent images of Nicole’s face flashing in the screens or some blue face with dark eyes screaming in Nicole’s voice, or sometimes piercing through the static screech of the malfunctioning computers, we see recordings commenting on the sleeplessness and paranoia. At several points, Isaac even sees the video footage of Nicole’s act of suicide as the hallucinatory vision of a mist-enshrouded void in a rocky island with the Red Marker in some distance appears several times near the end of the game. Enrica Picarelli comments that tropes such as hallucinations, rising clouds of mist, delusions, and hearing of whispers — all contribute to “stage the categorical instability and ontological ambiguity associated with monstrosity” (274). The Marker’s signal seems to tap into what Freud terms as the “irrational ‘gut level’ fear” which in turn is rooted in our once-familiar but since repressed memories in the “undiscovered aspect of the self” (Badley 23). This repression of memories and emergence of horror from them is quite evident in one of the episodes of the game, where the image of Nicole is seen telling Clarke that he has so far only avoided confronting the memories of her lest they become unbearable for him: “And when you received my final transmission, you could not bear to watch the end, could you? You knew

what happened, but you went looking for me anyway. You knew deep down that all you would find was death” (*Dead Space 2*, Chapter 11).

The original Black and the recreated Red Markers all can be said to belong to what Csicsery-Ronay dubs as the technoscientific grotesque since as the monstrous, alien artifacts they represent the “grotesque projections of our own evolution as hypertrophic tool users” (90). In fact, it is the humans themselves who with their immense command over science and technology have applied the ‘Plant-cracking’ terraforming technologies to transform barren and uninhabited planets into habitable ones and in the process, have provoked nature in unleashing the hidden scourge in the form of these deadly microorganisms. Citing the words of Adam Trexler, we may state that the Markers and the infection they unleash represent the “nature’s horror... displaced onto human beings as a justification for escalating violence” (44). The Brethren Moons, the makers of the Red Marker oversee their plan of spreading the infection across the farthest corners of the universe so that it can transform more and more planets and their biomasses into Necromorphs thereby paving the path for the final Convergence Event. Thus, we may also state that these Markers and their makers belong to the class of monstrous ‘hyperobjects’ like the black holes in our universe, “that are massively distributed in time and space relative to human”, and are “hyper in relation to some other entity, whether they are directly manufactured by humans or not” (Morton 1).

The effects of the aberration that the Marker-induced field causes to occur in people’s minds have been described vividly in the book. In fact, the emotions of fear and the creation of unnatural illusions go hand-in-hand together as the generation of each further complements the generation and strengthening of the other, thus trapping the subject in an endless web of self-replicating horrors. As Lovecraft states, “...fear is our deepest and strongest emotion, and the one which best lends itself to the creation of nature-defying illusions” (“Notes on Writing Weird Fiction’ by H.

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P. Lovecraft”). The Part One of *Dead Space: Martyr* shows a man named Charles Hammond going insane as a result of coming within the radius of the Marker’s influence in the Chicxulub crater, kills a man, and even kills himself out of a sudden burst of homicidal frenzy. Altman, working on the gravitational anomaly in the crater, also gradually begins to feel its evil effects although he is depicted as mostly immune to its influence. At one point, even Altman sees in his hallucinations the figure of his companion Ada, the anthropologist in his team, and thus concludes that Ada must have died since the Marker projects only imageries of deceased individuals. This is the type of psychological monstrosity that the alien artifact perpetrates on the minds of its hapless victims. In Part Two of the novel, we find a pilot named Hennessy killing his co-pilot named Dantec despite the latter’s being much bigger and sturdier than him, and this too is committed under the influence of the Marker’s pulse-induced homicidal hysteria. The Marker gives people visions of their long-dead near and dear ones, as can be seen in the case of Hennessy when it presents before him the image of his dead brother and when Dantec proceeds to cut the Marker, the Marker shows Hennessy how his brother is dying a gory death, thus prompting Hennessy to attack and kill Dantec. He then proceeds to paint these symbols all over the walls first with Dantec’s blood and then his own till he dies of excessive blood loss. In the first game of the series, i.e. *Dead Space* (2008), the player finds lots of these symbols painted all over the walls of the abandoned, Planet Cracker-class ship called the *USG-Ishimura*, and the civilian space station called Titan Station also known as The Sprawl. Isaac Clarke, the playable protagonist of the entire game series starts going mad when he first comes across these symbols and even hears voices whispering in his head before full-blown dementia besets him. In Chapter 4 of the first game, we see the phantom-like figure of “The Vanishing Man” appearing and beckoning Clarke to the violent Necromorphs called the Slashers. The Vanishing Man in many ways seems to anticipate the

“Shadow Man” which we will come across in the second novel. Isaac, throughout the game, hears voices urging him to make them "whole again". The chanting “Isaac, Make us Whole Again” continues to reverberate throughout the game and the *Dead Space* universe. The figure of the Shadow Man or Vanishing Man in *Dead Space* universe reminds one of Poe’s figure of the Shadow in his eponymous short story: “And the shadow answered, “I am SHADOW, and my dwelling is near to the Catacombs of Ptolemais, and hard by those dim plains of Helusion which border upon the foul Charonian canal” (“Poe: Shadow: A Parable”). The Shadow, in Poe’s story, was death embodied, and here too it is no different.

In the game, Site 12 Marker is the one that starts off the infection in the civilian space station called The Sprawl, and when the infection begins, we see lots of children seeing visions of their dead relatives as a result of the Marker’s signal. Another character named Nickolas Kuttner is depicted to be seeing the death of his daughter again and again by touching a piece of the Marker. However, all these happen in the first stage of mental aberration. In the second stage, the infected ones begin attacking and even killing others, and in the third, they often kill themselves and get transformed into the Necromorph thus transitioning from the realm of psychological horrors to the physical. In the game *Dead Space: Extraction*, various characters often find the Marker Symbols in the doors, rooms, dark environments, or ventilation systems in the spaceship. In Chapter 1 of this game, one Sam Caldwell hallucinates so severely that he thinks all his fellow miners have turned into monsters. In *Dead Space 2*, in the “dementia land”, we see Clarke killing himself by shooting a javelin in his head every time he comes close to the image of her dead girlfriend Nicole. The gory moment can be replayed and repeated time and again thus intensifying and normalizing the psychological horror in the process. No matter how many Necromorphs Clarke kills or how many obstacles he overcomes, before this psychological horror, our hero feels most vulnerable and

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invariably succumbs. This is why Joshi seems to remark, "...horror can be conveyed with infinitely greater force and impact by a careful analysis of the psychology of terror" (98). Nicole's image haunts Clarke throughout the game series. In *Dead Space 2*, Daina describes how the Marker creates a self-replicating and self-sustaining field around it in a person's mind so that once the Marker is destroyed the person dies too. This detail is important for understanding the reason behind the atrocious murders that characters in the Dead Space universe often commit under the Markers' influence.

The second novel *Dead Space: Catalyst* (2012) also employs the effects of psychological horrors through its masterly handling of hallucinations, hysteria, abrupt behavioral changes, the inability of reasoning, and finally, an onset of full-fledged dementia. We can say that the novel starts out in the psychological plane, and takes off in the second half to enter into the physical world of the grotesque monstrosity. The engagement with hallucinations and delusional states of minds has always been a powerful trope in the fictional world of the horror. In Wilkie Collins' short story "The Dream-Woman", we see a man named Isaac Scatchard constantly hallucinates that a woman is attacking him in his bed. However, no such incident ever takes place till the man marries a woman named Rebecca Murdock, and she attempts to stab him with a knife, thus bringing his nightmarish hallucination to fruition. Here, in the *Dead Space* too, characters first see horrible nightmares or hallucinate severely and then proceed to execute the visions of the massacres in their real life. In another work, titled *The Witch of Prague*, a novel by Francis Marion Crawford, we see the protagonist Israel Kafka suffering from a hallucination induced by his beloved witch Unorna, and while he is under the spell of one such vivid hallucination, Israel is made to experience the tortures inflicted on one Simon Abesles, a 17th Century Jew. The gruesome descriptions of the torture and its vivid details often parallel the vivid hallucinations that we

frequently encounter in the *Dead Space* saga. In M. R. James' short story "The Recluse", an unnamed traveler sees the soulless body, as if under an induced hallucination, of one Mr. Bloom: "It was a flawless facsimile... but it was not a real face and head. It was a hallucination. How induced is quite another matter. No spirit of life, no livingness... It was merely a mask, a life-like mask" (James 26). Now, the plot in *Catalyst* develops around the story of two brothers, Istvan and Jensi Sato, living in the Mariner Valley. Istvan has been always troubled with mental problems, and keeps seeing strange things, hears alien voices, and lapses occasionally into fits of derangement. Istvan's psychological problems are never clearly named, but can be seen to be bearing some close resemblances to the obsessive-compulsive disorder and paranoid schizophrenia. It is because of the already existing mental problems, that he seems to be chosen by the Marker as the ideal prey for spreading the infectious insanity, although the novel never makes it clear. The novel describes the Marker's influence on Istvan's brainwaves thus: "...the Marker seemed more responsive to his brain waves and perhaps was even adapting to them. Having Istvan near the Marker was not good for it. It was sharpening the signal, making it more intense. It was perhaps no coincidence that dementia had increased: the signal had risen" (Evenson, *Catalyst* 250). Istvan begins to see the signs and shapes which in the *Dead Space* universe point towards the Marker's growing influence. Istvan gets insane and attempts to kill his mother before being intervened by Jensi. Istvan says that he is being ordered by a "Shadow Man" to kill his mother and admits that he can no longer control his homicidal impulses. In fact, in the *Dead Space* games, it is with this figure of the "Vanishing Man" that the protagonist Isaac Clarke's problem of dementia begins. In the first game of the series, the Vanishing Man appears to be the hallucination of Clarke's co-pilot Corporal Chen who was previously killed by one of the Necromorphs. This hallucination that affects Clarke in the game is the first of a series of several

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deadly hallucinations, and a final onset of full-fledged dementia that will haunt Clarke throughout the *Dead Space 2*, as well as in the *Dead Space 3*. In *Dead Space 3*, when Clarke is exposed to the Brethren Moons, the space-faring Necromorphs, and the supposed creators of the Markers, the insanity effects reach a new high. The novel *Dead Space: Catalyst*, however, is totally devoid of any reference to the universe of the game and does not also bear any connection to the events of the previous novel, rather it impresses one as the story of a guy trying to look after his highly psychotic elder brother. At various levels, the engagement with the psychological horrors seems more grasping in both these novels, rather than the description of the actual, physical encounters. Towards the very end, when after a horrid encounter with the Necromorphs in the penal colony of a planet named Aspera, we see all other characters die horribly with only Jensi left alive. Here another instance of extreme hallucination unfolds before us when Jensi is seen pointing his gun to a Necromorph, but unable to tell if he is really pointing it at the monster or in his own mouth.

The Monstrous Religion

Stephen T. Asma remarks that, “The monster is more than an odious creature of the imagination; it is a kind of *cultural category*, employed in domains as diverse as *religion*, biology, literature, and politics” (13).

In the post-apocalyptic, virus-ravaged world of the novels and especially the games, no present signifier can be connected to the signifieds of the past to construct a paradigm with which one can imbue the events of the world with a definite meaning. In the world of *Dead Space*, following Jameson’s words, we may say that ‘the past as ‘referent’ finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether’ (18). However, the desire of humans to find certain religious symbols that can help one to ground his/her complex and chaotic experiences on some meaningful basis leads to the

founding of a new religion even in a monstrous time. The Unitology is itself an aberration of the traditional religions of the pre-infection past. The Unitology believes in the redemptive power of the Black Marker to transform and transcend the materialistic, time-bound, earthly existence of human beings after their death. It envisages an afterlife, not in the form of a traditional Heaven, but a place where the intelligent designers or the Maker/s of the artifact will help the believers to be reunified once and for all through the process of Convergence. The word “God” most often collectively refers to the creator/s of the Black Marker which as we will come to know from the games, are the gigantic, space-faring, predatorial Necromorphs possessing immense telekinetic powers. These are named Brethren Moons. However, the path to this promised re-gathering or redemption goes through the torturous process of monstrous embodiment in the form of the Necromorphs. However, the ardent advocates and zealous followers of the Unitology doctrine do not view these Necromorphic aberrations as an impediment, rather only a temporary but necessary ordeal which a believer is expected to undergo before being rewarded with an infinitely blissful, post-Convergence afterlife. The Church of Unitology exemplifies the pure monstrosity supplanting and superseding the traditional religious institutions in the spiritual vacuum that inevitably appears in a post-apocalyptic world. The Church intends to eliminate all the unbelievers or skeptics, as we see in the first book, Craig Markoff and Stevens murder even Michael Altman, “the reluctant prophet” for refusing to be fully indoctrinated into the belief system. In the games, the Unitology finds its chief enemy in the form of the unbeliever Isaac Clarke whom they need to either indoctrinate or murder in order to redeem their soul. The codes on the Marker, which are but codes of recombinant DNA strain of the virus, are revered as holy by the followers of the Unitology, and Clarke is often seen as a fit organic vector who can be used to spread the infection further. The portrayal of Unitology shows how an extremist, fundamentalist belief system can

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masquerade as a religion and spread like an infection among the credulous ones. The parallel drawn between the Necromorphic infection spreading via the Marker-generated microorganism, and the Unitology spreading its aberrant ideas via its Churches and Scholars is unmissable.

The concept of the Convergence is one of the cornerstones in the Unitology belief system where following the death of one's body, it is believed, the souls will be united not with a God or even transcended to a Heaven, rather will merge together into one giant Necromorphic reincarnation upon meeting the makers of the Marker, i.e. the Brethren Moons. In the *Dead Space 3* game, we get to know more about the monstrousness of this cosmic horror called the Brethren Moons where it is mentioned that for every species that have managed to fully transform into Necromorphs, a new Moon has been created. This is the monstrosity incarnate on a cosmic proportion and seems the most grotesque rendering of the Teilhardian Omega Point event of Convergence, where Teilhard foresees the entire mankind to be eventually converging into one singular, post-mortal entity through a rapturous cosmic transformation. The notion of 'cosmic horror', though "closely associated with Lovecraft" (65), here our usage of the term to describe the monstrous nature of Necromorphs will be more in line with the definition provided by George M. Gould. According to Gould, "...the appalling shudder at the dread contemplation of infinity, which may be called cosmic horror, is more than can be endured" (786). In fact, Ralickas even attempts to tie the 'cosmic horror' to the notion of Kristevan abjection in his study of Lovecraft's fictions. This seems to be quite true in the case of the Necromorphs too, who in their various forms of monstrous embodiments also incorporate both the cosmic terror as well as the pure abjection. Ralickas remarks, "'Cosmic horror' therefore unveils to the subject that it is simultaneously abject and abjected by the same universe in whose center it was erroneously placed by the efforts of humanism" (391). An 'abject', following Kristeva's definition is an indefinable entity, "what

disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). Necromorphs clearly are both abject, as well as cosmic terror.

In *Dead Space 3* game, we finally come to realize that the Brethren Moons are more like the evil, immortal gods of the *Dead Space* universe when these say to Clarke, “You can kill the prophet, but you can’t kill the god! Your chance to warn the Earth has come and gone. We are coming. We are hungry. We are here” (“Chapter 3: Perdition”).

Now coming back to the novel, i.e. *Dead Space: Martyr*, we see that it is in Chapter Five of the book, titled ‘Collapse’, that the religious zeal around the Marker begins to be reaching a crescendo, as the scientists who work with Altman seem to be all taken in by the dark, enchanting power of the Marker. Altman realizes that “There was a palpable shift in how people approached the Marker, even if Markoff had refused the believers’ demands. Indeed, he was surprised at how many people in the facility seemed to feel an almost religious awe for the Marker. Something was changing, shifting...” (Evenson, *Martyr* 283). This is the beginning of the cult of Unitology which will become a truly widespread belief system in the *Dead Space* universe centered on the supposed omnipotence of the Marker and its maker/s. In Part Six, the researchers seem completely convinced of the supernatural abilities of the Marker, and many have even begun to worship it overtly for getting blessed with an everlasting afterlife. Both the novels tap into the readers’ suspense by means of posing indirect references to the already established *Dead Space* timeline in its games.

The Horror Without

Plato, in the Book IX of *The Republic* asks us to model the monstrous thus: “Then do you now model the form of a multitudinous, many-headed monster, having a ring of heads of all manner of beasts, tame and wild, which he is able to generate and metamorphose at will” (“The Republic by

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Plato: Chapter 9 - The Literature Page”). Milton’s description of hell in *Paradise Lost* Book II seems to provide a fitting introduction to the monstrosity and horrors in the *Dead Space* universe:

“A Universe of death...

Where all life dies, death lives, and Nature breeds,

Perverse, all monstrous, all prodigious things,

Abominable, inutterable, and worse

Than Fables yet have feign’d, or fear conceiv’d,

Gorgons and *Hydras*, and *Chimeras* dire” (2.622–28).

While the psychological horrors have, quite undoubtedly, contributed towards the atmosphere-building and sustaining of suspense in the inner world of the characters, it is with the franchise’s depiction of actual, physical violence, that it really stands out as one of the most visceral, gruesome and grotesque representations of monstrosity and horror in the 21st century. While most of the physical portrayals of monstrous and grotesque involve the descriptions of Necromorph creatures in some form or the other, the world of the psychological horror is built upon the Markers and their induced hallucinations and dementia in the minds of the characters.

The very first chapter of the first novel *Dead Space: Martyr* (2010) starts off with the description of a gruesome attack by a monstrous creature on a hapless man, the details of which we are never given until at a very later time. The novel describes how “the grotesque creature” which is twice the size of a normal human being and possessing “spiky, chitinous arms” attacks the man, shakes him violently in the air, bites off his head before finally tearing asunder his lifeless body (Evenson, *Martyr* 13-14). This is one of the various ways in which the Necromorphs mutilate and

kill humans throughout the *Dead Space* universe. In the same chapter, the boy Chava, after hallucinating for some time, when finally sees the creature he fails to understand whether it is the corpse of a drowned man or a large fish. Thus the barriers between the animalistic body and their human counterparts begin to erode from the very beginning which will be obliterated with the arrival of the truly grotesque aberrations called the Necromorphs. These creatures are often made of the conjoined parts of the human body and also incorporate features of other animals like dogs. Necromorphs are, as such “disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration” (Cohen, 10). The Necromorphs, made of multiple human corpses like the Brutes, Guardians, Tripods, and Tormentors, with all their protrusions, sprouts, appendages, and mutations growing on their host corpses’ twisted and broken body put a strain on even the seemingly infinite human capacity for conceiving the monstrous and transgressive.

The unnamed virus that gets unleashed by the Marker is referred to as simply ‘microorganism’ that infects anything that breathes to further spread the infection and thus mutate the sentient beings into those monstrous aberrations. Chava immediately realizes that there is something seriously wrong with the fish-like humanoid creature: “...he knew he was wrong. That *it* was wrong” (Evenson, *Martyr* 17). This is why Stephen T. Asma observes that “One aspect of the monster concept seems to be the breakdown of intelligibility” (10). Alissa Burger similarly states that “monsters themselves remain beyond reason and understanding” (89).

In the universe of the games, the Necromorphs assume the proportion of a true ‘cosmic terror’ before which the space-faring, planet-colonizing, and literally 'planet-cracking' force of the almost posthuman human civilization seem to succumb quite helplessly. So, we may say, that as the

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monstrous ‘hyperobjects’ (Morton 1), the Markers not only create monsters by infecting and transmuting the cadavers but also by releasing the inner monsters out of men themselves.

In the novel *Dead Space: Martyr*, the monsters first clearly make their presence felt in Part Six, fittingly named ‘Hell Unleashed’. Here, the scientist named Grote Guthe, feeling tortured under the unbearable strain of these Marker-induced hallucinations and headaches decides to inject in his arms the genetically modified fluid made by combining the DNA strain encoded in the Black Marker. This transforms him into a Necromorph, and in Chapter 59, we get the first vivid description of this monstrous incarnation: “...a creature assembled from not just one corpse but several. It looked like a spider, but with the scythelike appendages of the other creatures serving as legs, seven of them in all. The body proper consisted of overlapped and buckled torsos awkwardly melding with one another. Two heads dangled weakly at one end, as if ready to drop off” (Evenson, *Martyr* 345-346). Using Noel Carroll’s words, we may say the Necromorphs “are putrid or moldering things, or they hail from oozing places, or they are made of dead or rotting flesh, or chemical waste, or are associated with vermin, disease, or crawling things. They are not only quite dangerous but they also make one’s skin creep. Characters regard them not only with fear but with loathing, with a combination of terror and disgust” (23). Mathias Clasen has opined that these hybrid, grotesque “horror monsters that are supernormal embellishments of dangerous animals—giant snakes and spiders, huge predators, malevolent humans or human-like characters” are actually expressions of our phobia objects (53). In fact, any entity that does away with the notion of organic integrity in that it is either composed of several body parts or can regenerate new limbs post dismemberment seems to arouse the feeling of horror as well as disgust: “The image of a being composed out of parts, any single one of which might be replaced or simply removed, has had an evocative place in horror fiction and film” (Wilson 246). This is also the principle behind

the Bakhtinian grotesque in which the grotesque body “discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits... This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body” (26). The “ever unfinished, ever creating” bodies find their most grotesque and monstrous portrayals in the ‘Regenerator’ type Necromorphs like the Hunters, and the Ubermorphs, among which the latter was created by a Unitologist scientist in *Dead Space 3*. These monsters, by virtue of their possession of limitless biomass, can regenerate their lost or dismembered limbs within seconds.

In fact, the very term “dead space” has been used in the *Dead Space* universe to denote a particular area around the Marker where the effects of the Marker-induced strain remains suppressed, which if not contained, can spread to infect the entire mankind and if still unchecked, can finally culminate in an event dubbed as The Convergence. The Convergence event is a true ‘cosmic terror’ as it spreads and affects an entire planet and its biosphere to transform all of it into an assemblage of the Necromorphs. For the followers of Unitologists, this process of Convergence is of particular religious significance since it implies becoming one with the Maker, or the Creator/s of the Black Marker. We will delve deeper into the discussion of Unitology and its vision of Convergence in the section titled ‘The Monstrous Religion’.

Now the novel is not so full of gruesome death scenes and violent confrontations with the Necromorphs, as is the case with the games. However, in certain episodes, there are blood-curdling descriptions that mimic the uncannily high level of grotesquery depicted in the action of the games themselves. When Fields’ head is chopped off in an elevator, a type of Necromorph called strangler is described as trying to enter into the corpse of Field: “He watched it prod his stomach and then one end of it narrowed to a point and it stabbed through the skin” (Evenson, *Martyr* 351). The strangler looks very similar to the Leapers that appear throughout the *Dead Space* series. They possess extremely sharp fangs, and also scythe-shaped tails composed of the intestines and legs of

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those people they kill. Towards the end of the novel, Altman is killed by a Necromorph that is the result of the transformation of a man named Krax. The type of Necromorph he is transformed into is later named as Krax, and they are part of the Brute category of Necromorphs. In the *Dead Space* games, the Brutes are the huge humanoid Necromorphs who are made of the corpses of several human beings and most of their front part is just the grotesque, hulking body made of plates from the bones of the people it has consumed. Brutes, along with the Tripods and the Graverobbers are some of the examples of the humanoid monsters made from the assemblage of multiple human corpses. Necromorphic transformations in the form of Lurkers embody aberrant incarnations taking place in the seemingly pure and innocent human beings like the infants. These monsters, thus, not only violate the otherwise sacrosanct barrier between the human and the non-human, but also between the living and the dead. As the complex integrity of the self-contained human body is dissolved, the monsters also seem to defile the pattern “which is more significant and less probable as the organism becomes, so to speak, more fully an organism” (Wiener 95). The Pure Necromorph tissue can not only grow by consuming more and more necrotic flesh but upon entering the human bloodstream is also capable of transforming the living tissues into necrotic tissues. Also, the Necromorphs seem to embody in the most viscerally and graphically way conceivable, Kristeva’s ‘abject’, that centers around the concepts of blood, body fluid, excrements, and corpses. The Necromorphs embody Kristeva’s ‘abject’ since, as the characters die a bodily death in terms of their loss of a normal, human bodily embodiment, they also in the process, give birth to something new, i.e. the hideous Necromorph. It seems like a most monstrous illustration of Kristeva’s process of becoming the abject: “...in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death, During that course in which ‘I’ become, I give birth to myself amidst the violence of sobs, of vomit” (3). An abject and one of the most hideous forms of Necromorphs depicted in

the games is the Guardians, that form as a result of a fusion between the human body and The Corruption, which in turn is nothing but a mass of encrusted Necromorph tissue. The Guardians are also nothing but tangles of entrails anchored to a wall with the help of several tentacle-like appendages, while a scythe-tipped tentacle burst out from their thorax with which they strike their victims dead. Also, they vomit mutated embryonic spawn or Pods from their orifice. Now, the first novel ends with the description of the Krax Necromorph, and with Altman reflecting on the differences between the living and the dead, and how monstrous the corpses can become once the infection from the deadly bacteria spreads: “He could see, here and there, reminders that it had once been human, a foot that had been stretched and split and now projected from the joint of the creature’s chitinous gigantic arm. Fingerlike tentacles throbbed over its face. And there, in the middle of its pulsating abdomen, was a large callus that looked like Krax’s screaming face” (Evenson, *Martyr* 411). Upon finally arriving at the ending of the novel, we realize that it is this episode where Altman is seen facing the monster in a circular area with which the book actually began, where too we see a monster ripping a man into pieces.

In the second novel, *Dead Space: Catalyst*, the seeds of the actual encounters with these monstrous, grotesque aberrations called Necromorphs are sown when Jensi discovers that in the penal colony of the barren planet several of the prisoners are going insane as a result of the Red Marker’s influence, and there is some kind secret operation going on around the Marker: “...more of them were probably in the process of beating themselves to death. More corpses. More souls opening themselves to Convergence” (Evenson, *Catalyst* 226). In the Dead Space universe, the purpose of the Black Markers is to hijack the minds of the living individuals and drive them towards creating more Red Markers thus facilitating in spreading the infection among living beings and also further accelerating the transmutation of more corpses into Necromorphs. All of this will lead to the

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Convergence Event which is only hinted at in the novel but explored in full details only in the games. When Henri, first Jenji's friend and later a security guard in one of the planets, witnesses the hybrid monstrosity of one of the Necromorphs, it is described thus: "At first glance, it seemed to Henry like he was watching a man's back, the spine clear and pronounced, but there was no head. No, it couldn't be a man, he told himself, he was experiencing some odd sort of perspectival shift, was seeing things wrong. And there were no arms, either, but rather strange flaps of skin, wings almost. And then he saw that yes, they were wings, and the creature took off" (Evenson, *Catalyst* 275). The creature is a humanoid Necromorph with the back of a human being but a wing-like structure made of flaps of skin. Henry realizes "why he had first thought it was a human's back: it was because whatever the creature was now, it had once been human. It was formed out of one of the corpses in the hole" (Evenson, *Catalyst* 276). The Necromorph that Henry describes here is the Infector, whose sole aim is to spread the infection more rapidly among the sentient beings. It is made of the broken and twisted torso of the host human body and in place of the head, feelers erupt while bat-like wings grow from the flesh between the limbs. It also has a stinger made from the bones and flesh of the host body which it uses to inject an infectious fluid into the skulls of its victims while it envelops them with its wings. The novel describes some of these Infector monsters and their act of infecting the corpses in vivid details. At one point, one such bat-like Infector swoops forward and wraps the head and shoulders of one convict before darting its stinger-like proboscis straight through the man's forehead. "The man collapsed, dead, but the creature was still on him, the proboscis obscenely pumping something into the man's head" (Evenson, *Catalyst* 277). The "obscene" embrace, penetration of the skull, and the act of injecting the infectious fluid are a clear and vivid demonstration of the power of the monstrous to rupture the barrier between the sacred and the profane; and the living the dead. This is how the grotesque

operates to dissolve and annihilate all man-made binary constructs. The effects of the infection that the bat-like Infector spreads in the body of its victim have been described vividly: “The body itself, already shivering by the time the creature left it, started to transform. Bones and muscles twisted and broke and inverted. Bones pushed out through flesh and changed, thinning, becoming something else. The whole body became something else, something other—became just like the creature with scimitar-like arms that he had just seen crawl its way up out of the hole” (Evenson, *Catalyst* 277). Although the novel never calls these Necromorphs by names but recalling he details from the games and taking the cue from their descriptions in the novel, we can figure out the type of Necromorph the novel is trying to describe. It is as if the language itself is rendered incapable of properly naming the monsters. It brings to our mind Lovecraft’s description of the essentially indescribable quality of a pure monster: “The Thing cannot be described—there is no language for such abysses of shrieking and immemorial lunacy, such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order” (74). The Slashers are a very common kind of Necromorph in the Dead Space games. Besides possessing those blade-like protrusions that form two specialized arms with which they slash their victims to pieces, they also possess razor-sharp teeth with which they can bite off the heads of their victims. Before describing the transformation of the corpse into Slasher, the novel also describes the transformation of a corpse into an Infector thus: “The head twisted and opened up. The jaw dropped downward and pushed deep into the body. The legs broke and the skin of the chest stretched and fused between them in a kind of sheet. Soon what had once looked human looked more like a flesh-colored bat. And then the creature, groaning, no longer human, began to crawl. A moment later, it tested its wings” (Evenson, *Catalyst* 266). As the fight with the Necromorphs continues, we see that Jensi, Istvan, and Henry are joined by two female doctors named Anna Tilton and Callie Dexter, both armed with special plasma rifles. In one of the

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descriptions of Dexter, we are further given glimpses into the grotesque nature of the monsters. The monster, even though was once a human once transformed into a being so horribly disfigured and grotesque, that no semblance to its original human appearance now remains to be seen. Dexter sees and feels, “Whatever the thing was now, it had once been human, but she could see little human response left in it, little to suggest it still had a connection to its human side. Even its movement seemed almost programmed, a repetition of certain patterns along a search for living bodies” (Evenson, *Catalyst* 272). It is not only that a Necromorph, once born ceases to resemble a human in any recognizable way, but it also refuses to be placed under the category of either living or the dead. Dexter, too, fails to decide whether to treat the monster as a living or dead: “Was it really alive? It was moving, yes, but it didn’t seem to be breathing. If it was alive, it was not alive in the way that it had been before, back when it had been human” (Evenson, *Catalyst* 272-73). Jaroslav Švelch comments that Necromorphs indeed “provoke the emotions of “disgust” or “awe,” because they are both alive and dead and they are both one and many. They represent a fantastic, non-existent biology” (194). Towards the end of the novel, as the human members get embroiled in the fight against the Necromorphs, Henry is killed, and Jensi shoots Istvan in the chest before shooting himself dead to prevent any further spread of the infection.

Conclusion

The study has undertaken the task of explication of the monstrous and grotesque elements in the Dead Space franchise. It aims to show how the combined efforts in the form of fictional representation of the monstrous and grotesque in written words and digital media can go hand-in-hand in creating an atmosphere of sustained and expansive world-building centered on the horror. In this process of world-building, the psychological and physical forms of horror seem to complement and reinforce each other. Also, as the monstrous and the abject continue annihilating

all binaries between living and the dead, sublime and lowly, existent and non-existent, and man and animal, the gamification of the horror culture further dissolves the distinction between the real and the virtual.

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