

The Psychological Abuse of Curse of Strahd

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While much has been looked at in terms of video games and their psychological effect on players,¹ little has been explored about the psychological implications of tabletop RPGs.² There have been few examinations of how tabletop RPGs use the unique features of their medium to work with trauma. For the purposes of this study, I will be analyzing the 5th edition *Dungeons and Dragons* module “Curse of Strahd”, which was released in 2016, in terms of how the game mechanics and narrative theme of the module reiterate key characteristics of psychological abuse, which the players are able to

1. Consider the ongoing debate about violent video games inciting violence as first noted by Anderson & Bushman in 2002. See Craig A. Anderson and Brad J. Bushman. “Effects of Violent Video Games on Aggressive Behavior, Aggressive Cognition, Aggressive Affect, Physiological Arousal, and Prosocial Behavior.” *Psychological Science*. 12.5. (2001). pp. 353 -59.
2. A few studies have looked at how tabletop RPGs can be effective in a therapeutic setting, allowing patients as players to work through their own psychological problems. See the clinical work of Dr. Wayne Blackmon or Dr. Raphael Boccamazzo. Wayne Blackmon. “Dungeons and dragons: The use of a fantasy game in the psychotherapeutic treatment of a young adult.” *American Journal of Psychotherapy*. 48.4. (1994). pp. 624-632 and Greg Tito. “Dr. Raffael Boccamazzo on D&D and Autism.” Audio blog post. DragonTalk. Wizards of the Coast. May 5, 2016.

witness and engage with throughout the campaign. The setting, narrative elements, and unusual game mechanics combine in a rich tapestry of horror that allow the player to experience the manifestations of trauma through play.³ While *Dungeons and Dragons* has previously been criticized for its lack of diversity and sensitivity to otherness,⁴ “Curse of Strahd” works to present trauma and its effects in a meaningful way that allows players to critically engage with and reflect upon trauma. Unlike the typical hack and slash dungeon crawls from the 1980s, “Curse of Strahd” focuses on the psychological implications of physical violence. I argue that “Curse of Strahd” is a site for witnessing and performing the psychology of trauma, and specifically the psychology of abuse.

In her foundational work on trauma studies, Cathy Caruth suggests that “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the very way that its unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on.”⁵ Trauma then is a cycle, a

3. In no way am I suggesting that playing this RPG, or any other game for that matter, is equivalent to being traumatized or abused in real life, nor do I mean to undermine or devalue the significance of that real life trauma. However, like the cooperative card game, *The Grizzled*, which allows players to explore the emotional and psychological sufferings of soldiers in a play-ful yet thought-ful homage, the “Curse of Strahd” provides a paradigm for trauma symptomatology to be explored and witnessed by the players, who then have the opportunity to choose to re-act and interact with the traumatic environment.
4. See Aaron Trammell’s articles on misogyny and cultural appropriation in *D&D*, or Stenros and Sihvonen’s work on the lack of LGBTQ representation in RPG source books. See Aaron Trammell. “Misogyny and the Female Body in *Dungeons and Dragons*.” In *Analog Game Studies: Volume 1*. Edited by Aaron Trammell, Evan Torner, and Emma Leigh Waldron. Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2016; Aaron Trammell. “How *Dungeons & Dragons* Appropriated the Orient.” *Analog Game Studies* 3.1 (2016); and Jaakko Stenros and Tanja Sihvonen. “Out of *Dungeons*: Representations of Queer Sexuality in RPG Source Books.” *Analog Game Studies* 2.5. (2015).
5. Cathy Caruth. *Unclaimed Experience: trauma, narrative, and history*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, p.4.

repetition in which a victim not only experiences an initial stressful event, but then must re-experience it in new forms, echoes of the original event. Literary trauma studies explores ways in which the narrative can evoke this feeling of repetitive traumatic memory through innovative uses of flashback, elision, or other rhetorical devices. In her study on how video games virtually allow players to experience trauma, Tobi Smethurst focuses on the role of player agency as a key to involving the players emotionally in complicity and guilt of the traumatic experience. Her detailed reading of how the narrative elements illustrate traumatic symptomatology provides a framework for my own exploration of “Curse of Strahd”, but whereas she focuses on the player’s emotional unsettlement while playing, my analysis focuses on the game components themselves. Moreover, it is my contention that “Curse of Strahd” specifically posits players into experiencing a specific kind of trauma: abuse. Few would disagree that abuse, whether physical, psychological or sexual, is a kind of traumatic event, one that disturbs and distresses its victim in unspeakable ways. Indeed, “abuse is about a dynamic of extremes, domination and submission,”⁶ an experience that can embed victims into a state of isolation and terror. In exploring how “Curse of Strahd” evokes elements of psychological abuse for the players to experience, it is important to establish: how the narrative elements reflect traumatic symptomatology; how the thematic underpinnings of the game further concretize the abuse that is depicted; and how the very mechanics of the game provide players with a space to experience the cycle of abuse and relive traumatic memory through repetition.

6. Michael Formica. “Understanding the Dynamics of Abusive Relationships.” *Psychology Today*. July 14, 2008.

Setting the Traumatic Stage

“Curse of Strahd”, the latest in a long line of revisions of the Gothic horror setting, eschews the typical sword and sorcery fantasy and instead revolves around a powerful vampire, Strahd von Zarovich. Strahd plagues the land of Barovia, a demi-plane cast away from its original universe upon the completion of his fatal pact with the Dark Powers. Through interactive roleplaying and randomization of key elements of the module, “Curse of Strahd” involves the players in not only witnessing, but experiencing trauma. The game forces players to face some subset of the many atrocities committed by or brought upon by Strahd. Players encounter the many victims of Strahd: a dead burgomaster and his adopted daughter, Ireena, who must flee Strahd’s vampiric attentions; a mad abbot who creates flesh golem brides for Strahd as an attempt to appease him; dead-eyed villagers who gather in churches at night to stay safe from roving wolves, Strahd’s spies; a dusk elf who stoned his own sister to save her from Strahd’s unwanted advances. The unique game mechanics present within reiterate and actualize the psychological trauma that is being role-played as players face the vampire, a Bluebeard archetypal figure, who is both a physical and psychological predator. What makes the adventure particularly unique is the card reading mechanic, the Tarokka Deck, which randomizes elements of the “Curse of Strahd” module. These cards are a tactile and functional component that allow for replayability, an unusual feature for an RPG campaign. Beyond this, though, they also mimic the characters’ psychology and allow the players to live and perform the psychological aspects of traumatic memory, of the abuse thematically woven into the narrative itself. The Tarokka Deck incorporates an inconsistency in the game play that reflects fragmented traumatic memory and reifies the inconsistency present within an abusive relationship.

As the players set foot in Barovia, having been magically transported there through one of several different “adventure hooks”⁷, they can immediately sense the change in the setting around them, signaled firstly by a strange fog. Key markers of trauma are “feelings of disembodiedness, isolation”⁸, a “sense of alienation and unreality”⁹ that overwhelm the individual. “Curse of Strahd” imbues its players with aspects



The Tarokka deck. Image by Rudy Jahchan @Flickr CC BY-NC-ND.

of traumatic experience through the very setting of the game; the location itself adds to the alienating quality of the adventure. Barovia is described as existing on a “demi-plane formed by Strahd’s consciousness” from which “no creature can leave without Strahd’s permission.”¹⁰ A deadly mist envelopes Barovia that overpowers players and forces them to move as Strahd sees fit. The fog as well as the “gray pall” and “deathly stillness”¹¹ of the land bespeak of the gestalt of psychological trauma. While serving to control the characters’ movement, the fog is at its core disorienting, both physically and mentally. Characters who try to travel in the fog

7. Chris Perkins. *Curse of Strahd*. Renton: Wizards of the Coast, 2016, p. 18.

8. Tobi Smethurst. “Playing Dead in Videogames: Trauma in *Limbo*.” *The Journal of Popular Culture*. 48.5. (2015), p. 823.

9. Kathleen Costello-Sullivan. “‘My Memory Gropes in Search of Details’: Memory, Narrative, and ‘Founding Traumas’ in John Banville’s *The Sea*.” *Irish University Review*. 46.2. (2016). pp. 345.

10. Perkins, p. 23.

11. Perkins, p. 23.

become lost and ultimately return unwittingly to Barovia, a thematic consequence, and gain a level of exhaustion, a ludologic consequence. If they continue to gain levels of exhaustion, ignoring their own health in order to try to escape, the players will ultimately perish in the mists.

Barovian NPCs are visually portrayed in the book in washed-out greys and purples, hues that suggest “emotional numbing.”¹² They are viewed as living in a “culture of fear” in which they are ever plagued by “the Devil Strahd,” who periodically preys and feeds upon them.¹³ Throughout the realm, there is a fierce sense of isolation as characters, both player characters and non-player characters alike, are trapped within the demi-plane, seemingly permanently. In this sense, all the characters, including Strahd himself, can be viewed as “sufferers of trauma” who “are often described as being trapped in limbo,”¹⁴ forcibly removed from their normal existence.

Moreover, a lack of sunshine, while a key thematic plot point for the vampire’s survival, also serves to reiterate the melancholic backdrop and disorient the players’ innate sense of time. A significant consequence of trauma is an altering of the victim’s perception of time; “ordinary linearity and unity of our experience of time” is disrupted by trauma.¹⁵ Without sunshine as a key time-tracking element, players are forced to rely upon other means to signal the passage of time within Barovia. Further adding to that disorientation is the knowledge that the players have been abandoned from anything familiar or real. Some characters may even begin to question the very reality they live in as they witness their own

12. Smethurst, p. 822.

13. Perkins, p. 24.

14. Smethurst, p. 822.

15. Robert Stolorow. “Trauma Destroys Time.” *Psychology Today*. October 21, 2015.

bodies dead before them, hanging from a gallows or sprawled out in the woods eaten at by wolves: manipulative illusions of the ever-pressing fog – a deceit of Strahd. This alienating effect, based upon the physical environment as well as the psychological manifestations, traumatizes characters, and gives players insight into the traumatic nature of Strahd.

The non-linear nature of the adventure also emphasizes the chaotic, traumatizing nature of Strahd and the land of Barovia. Like most sandbox modules, player characters may wander into areas they are ill-prepared for and risk death. Characters may feel overwhelmed by the open world before them in which they must make a clear path for themselves through trial and error exploring, traveling that may lead players to their early and unfortunate demise. Indeed, as noted on many RPG forums, “Curse of Strahd” is viewed as a particularly deadly module, but here death reflects the paradigm of trauma symptomatology. The ludology of death and resurrection is altered in “Curse of Strahd” as a means of reiterating the traumatic quality of the Gothic setting for the player characters.¹⁶ If a player character dies, her soul is trapped within the mist; souls cannot pass on to an afterlife if it dies in Barovia. Even death then cannot allow characters to escape the oppressive realm. Should a player character die and be resurrected after being dead at least a day, the character “gains a random form of indefinite madness brought on by the realization that

16. That is to say, the game mechanic of how a player character might be resurrected is different in “Curse of Strahd” than it is from the ordinary game rules as set out in the core rules. If a player character drops to 0 hit points, she must succeed on three death saving throws or else permanently die. There are resurrection and revivify spells available that may save a PC from such a fate. In the core rule set, these spells do not have negative consequences to the resurrected character. “Curse of Strahd” alters this as a way to reiterate the consequences of experiencing trauma.

its spirit is trapped in Barovia.”¹⁷¹⁸ The indefinite madness table and the realization that player characters’ souls are trapped reiterate the “randomness and meaninglessness of [...] death,” another symptom of trauma,¹⁹ particularly as this madness attribute is determined randomly by the roll of a d100. The madness thematically reiterates the horror narrative, but also forces the player to adhere ludologically to a restricting condition, one that, upon each iteration of the role play of the attribute, causes the player to relive and re-experience her traumatic event. The character’s death then is marked on the mind, and the character sheet, of the player.

Like many, if not all, RPG modules, “Curse of Strahd” incorporates tables in order to help a Dungeon Master easily create random encounters for the players. For “Curse of Strahd”, however, these random encounters are not utilized in order for PCs to have opportunities for gaining experience points by verbing X nouns (e.g. killing twenty zombies; finding three gems). Unlike many modules, this particular one recommends leveling up based on milestone leveling rather than gaining experience points for defeating enemies. Instead, these random encounters function mainly to keep the anxiety level of player characters high. Player characters are encouraged to be hyper-vigilant to any potential dangers in the realm as a way to keep the players immersed in the Gothic nature of the narrative. As media scholar Maral Tajerian points out, “games that raise the player’s anxiety actually sensitize them to danger” (her emphasis). The random encounters of “Curse of Strahd” then “sensitize” players to danger and “creates an environment in which some of the

17. Perkins, p. 24.

18. Some madness attributes might include: hallucinations, hypersensitivity to danger, mental impairment ala drunkenness, etc.

19. Smethurst, p. 823.

symptoms of trauma, such as hypervigilance and oversensitivity to certain stimuli associated with the traumatic event, can be virtually experienced.”²⁰ The mechanics of the adventure reinforce and reflect the experience of trauma for the players to engage with.

Strahd as Bluebeard: The Repetition of Trauma

The original module, “I6: Ravenloft”,²¹ was published in 1983 by game designers Tracy and Laura Hickman. The vampire Strahd von Zarovich was designed by this husband and wife team specifically to reinforce the cautionary tale against abusive relationships, a theme that early vampire literature, such as John Polidori’s “The Vampyre”, strove to convey. In an interview on the official *Dungeons & Dragons* podcast, *Dragon Talk*, Tracy Hickman commented on how he wanted to create a “cautionary and tragic tale” about “what a vampire actually is”: a predator.²² Insistent on showcasing the monster for who he is, rather than glamorizing him (à la the *Twilight* series) or exoticizing him, the Hickmans modeled Strahd on the Bluebeard archetype, a murderer and abuser of women. Moreover, in discussing their initial development of Strahd, they wanted their vampire to be consistent with the Polidorian vampire – that is: a Lord Byron-esque character, a “gentleman vampire”.²³ “He doesn’t like women,” Hickman explains as he describes the original vampiric model, “he preys on them.”²⁴

20. Smethurst, p. 822.

21. Tracy Hickman and Laura Hickman. *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons 16 Ravenloft*. Lake Geneva: TSR, 1983.

22. Greg Tito. “Chris Perkins and Tracy Hickman on Curse of Strahd.” Audio blog post. *Dragon Talk*. Wizards of the Coast. January 21, 2016.

23. Tito.

24. Tito.



“Ravenloft – The Living Wall, 1991 by Frank Kelly Freas” Image by Tom Simpson
CC BY-NC-ND.

From the expanded background information provided in “Curse of Strahd” we discover that Strahd himself is a complicated figure: a brilliant military leader who fought off enemies to preserve his familial lands; a distant son who erected a castle and named it for his mother, who died before she could see it; a cold man who fell in love with a woman, Tatyana, only to have her prefer his own brother, Sergei, who was younger and protected from the atrocities of war; a murderer and a necromancer, a vampire who is ensnared by his own villainy. On the day of Tatyana and Sergei’s wedding, Strahd struck out and killed his brother, and tried to woo Tatyana. In response, she threw herself from the walls of Castle Ravenloft in order to escape the rapacious vampire. Since the vampire’s murdering rampage, Barovia has been cast away and Strahd has been enfeathered to his curse, his own self-perpetuated and self-propagated trauma by

seeing Tatyana reincarnated into new women over the centuries. Thus, like Bluebeard, the key to Strahd is the repetition of the act, the recapitulation of the atrocity. Just as Bluebeard continues to woo and marry women before slaughtering them and keeping their bodies as tokens, memorabilia to relive and remember their flaws, so too does Strahd collect his victims over the years in the inescapable realm of Barovia. Thematically there are numerous tragic and traumatic events that occur in the narrative backgrounds of many of the non-player characters. This was strategically and intentionally crafted by Chris Perkins, game designer for *Wizards of the Coast* and lead designer for this module, as a means of highlighting the widespread effect of Strahd's violence on his land and his people so that increasingly as players continue their way through the region, they begin to realize their own fate may ultimately turn so bleak and dire: they too may become hopeless and lifeless, another gruesome and pathetic trophy in Strahd's cabinet of horrors.

The adventure begins to eschew the standard RPG premise that all players are robust heroes who will ultimately defeat the great evil that stands before them or else die trying in a TPK, or total party kill. For as we know, death is not an escape for Barovians and has not been an escape for Strahd either. As the title of the revised campaign suggests, the curse belongs to Strahd; he suffers from and is controlled by it and he too can never find a release. Just as the characters spring with hope for an escape only to be let down, Strahd too feels this same kind of emotional overhaul. As Chris Perkins states: "Every time someone new comes into the realm, there's the hope that they might change [things] and then the despair that follows inevitably that no, they really can't. This guy [Strahd] is too badly ruined."²⁵ The

25. Tito.

campaign reinforces the idea that Strahd cannot be changed. Like an abusive partner, like Bluebeard himself, no amount of love or effort will “make him better”; there is no fixing Strahd. His own traumatic memory cannot be processed or worked through, only witnessed and played through by the player characters in the adventure.

Ultimately, Strahd continues to try to replay and revise his own tragedy. Throughout the “Curse of Strahd” adventure Strahd endeavors to recreate (and re-invent) his relationship with Tatyana by pursuing women who seem to be embodiments of Tatyana’s soul, her reincarnation. He is ““condemned to a repetition of the same set of pathological symptoms”²⁶ as he attempts to achieve the unattainable, to re-live and retroactively bring back to life the one person he has ever (supposedly) loved. Thus he perpetuates the cycle of trauma and abuse on strangers, on NPCs, on victims who can never live up to Tatyana, the paragon of Strahd’s desire. As Gildersleeve suggests, fragments of traumatic memory continue to “interrupt[...] the present”²⁷ in a performance of the past, as Strahd’s doomed obsession echoes through the centuries within the story and is repeated with each run-through of the module by different parties.

The Fortunes of Ravenloft

Throughout the module *Curse of Strahd* we see instances of “the unknown past interrupting the present,”²⁸ a symptom of trauma. In order to most effectively create an immersive experience for players, the *Curse of Strahd*’s ludology mirrors and informs its own narrative.

26. Jessica Gildersleeve. “The Spectre and the Stage: Reading and Ethics at the Intersection of Psychoanalysis, the neo-Victorian, and the Gothic.” *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies*. 18.3. (2013). p. 105.

27. Gildersleeve, p. 105.

28. Gildersleeve, p.105.

Just as Strahd continues to repeat his trauma, so too do the game mechanics endeavor to reproduce this experience for the players. Included in the adventure, both physically and thematically, is the Tarokka Deck: a tarot-like set of cards that Madam Eva, an elderly Vistani NPC, uses to tell the player-characters their fortunes. She prophetically foretells key elements to the adventure: the location of crucial artifacts (the Tome of Strahd, the Holy Symbol of Ravenkind, and the Sun Sword) that will help the party destroy Strahd; the identity of a powerful ally; and even the location of Strahd himself within the labyrinthian Castle Ravenloft. While these randomizations may seem minor, they provide for a renewed and refreshed playing experience each time a party may enter Barovia. Even though “two different gaming sessions result in two distinct narrative lines”²⁹ in any campaign, these changes in fundamental aspects of the adventure point players to new places within the expanded game world. With these internal, arbitrary elements shifting within the game, there are numerous permutations within the single adventure. So replayability here does not constitute a complete *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* mental wipe of the players’ knowledge of the module, but rather a re-creation of the initial scene – a do-over, a *Groundhog Day* in which characters learn and try a new approach – with the caveat that some of the components may be altered.

In the original “I6 Ravenloft” adventure, Strahd’s own goal was a random element, emphasizing his own chaotic nature: not even he knew precisely what he ultimately wanted to achieve until the adventure began. Ultimately in the revised version of “Curse of Strahd” the vampire’s goal becomes statically focused on three things,

29. Margaret Carter. "I, Strahd: Narrative Voice and Variations on a Non-Player Character in TSR's 'Ravenloft' Universe." *The Fantastic Vampire: Studies in the Children of the Night*. Edited by James Craig Holte. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002, pp. 89.

the main goal being to win Ireena Kolyana, who he believes to be another host for Tatyana's soul. This revision limits his own randomness, but forces him to focus on the repetitive cycle of abuse, the principal element that situates him within the Bluebeard archetype, thus further condemning players to this traumatic cycle.

In looking at the Tarokka Deck mechanic in both the Ravenloft adventure and the "Curse of Strahd", the effect of the ludology is a bit different though the mechanic itself is functionally the same. The randomization of elements in "Ravenloft" was designed specifically to provide "built in replay value."³⁰ Afterall, "Ravenloft" is only 32 pages long. By modern standards this is what we might call a one-shot adventure as it could have been played in a single sitting of several hours rather than many multiple-hour sessions that a typical full-length campaign requires. In comparison, at 256 pages "Curse of Strahd" is anything but a one-shot. So while the cards themselves are a holdover from the original "Ravenloft" module, they must work differently given the larger world and greatly extended play time. While they can provide players with the opportunity to replay the entire adventure, this is less likely to happen as an extended campaign as opposed to a one-shot experience. Potentially the hold-over of this game mechanic was done for nostalgic purposes; as Chris Perkins reminds us, if all the *D&D* nerds out there (myself included) ranked their favorite modules, "Ravenloft" would likely be near the top of the list.³¹ But as nostalgic as it may be, the cards themselves serve a more significant purpose: they reify both the theme and Gothic

30. Dan Casey. "The Top 10 Dungeons and Dragons Modules." *Nerdist*. October 17, 2013. <http://nerdist.com/the-top-10-dungeons-dragons-modules/>

31. On a recent Nerdist.com top ten list, "Ravenloft" was listed at #8 and on an enworld list, it was ranked number 1.

atmosphere, and reiterate the randomness and ubiquity of Strahd's violence.



Fan art of Ravenloft. Image by slopesmg @deviantart CC BY.

Players of “Strahd”, through their characters, witness and perform the psychology of trauma, and specifically of abuse. Abusive relationships are “driven by insecurity, fear that feeds that insecurity and an expectation of inconsistency, both real and perceived” (Formica). Not only does the narrative of “Curse of Strahd” illustrate this condition, the ludology of the module manifests it: players going into “Strahd”, even having played it before, have an expectation of inconsistency for the land, the people, and Strahd himself. Indeed, Strahd himself is an option for a random encounter in Castle Ravenloft (and was in the original gameplay as well), emphasizing his presence as an ever uncertainty, forever random and tyrannically abusive in his inconsistency. His presence is further randomized as his final location

in Castle Ravenloft is ultimately produced by the arbitrary draw of the Tarokka Deck. Strahd is ubiquitous and ephemeral, appearing and lashing out at characters for he sees no other option, a characteristic of abuse (Formica). He is stuck and he knows it. He will never successfully escape the tragedy of his own making; and the players too must experience this through repeated trial. Each session for the players is an exercise in unfolding and unpacking Strahd's trauma as the players witness and perform their own. Like the psychotherapeutic process, this experience progresses over multiple game sessions. The expanded world has done more than showcase the extent of Strahd's corruption; it mires the player-characters into the fog and into the mind of Strahd and the Tarokka Deck provides them with a key to process through the trauma in different ways with each new play through.