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Game Review

CREAKS (Puzzle)

Amanita Design, 2020

The last time I reviewed an Amanita Design game (SAMOROST 3, see JRFM 3/1, 2017), I was so enthusiastic that I asked the Amanita team to drop me a note when their next puzzle game was going to be released. And they did: in summer 2020, CREAKS was published and is available in a collector's edition and a standard edition for downloading the respective Steam keys at <https://amanita-design.net/games/creaks.html>. It is controlled by keyboard (or game controller, if available) using only the four cursor and three function keys. Various screen resolutions, including 4K (which indeed makes a difference in terms of focus and detail), are supported. The engine runs smoothly, and even on my 7-year-old notebook, the gameplay neither hangs nor stutters. Unlike SAMOROST 3, this game does not have a hint book included, which can be frustrating, because some of the puzzles are really challenging.

But now for the game itself.

Imagine you live happily in a slightly shabby, but charming and comfortable small house. Then, one day, strange creaking sounds can be heard, the light flickers, dims, and goes out, the bulb shatters, and a general feeling of discomfort startles you. Would you rather leave, sleep in a hotel, and then call a pest exterminator the next day, or would you try to find the source of these phenomena for yourself, sneaking into a hitherto unknown passage hidden behind a piece of wallpaper? I am not sure what I would do in real life, but in the game, I chose the latter option.

The passage is small, one needs to crawl through it on hands and knees, and the ground is shaking, damaging the passage. At last, a ladder leading down provides a way out – and this is where the game starts.¹ Arriving in

1 Ladders are not the only means of getting from one floor to another; in fact, elevators and cable cars are necessary to cope with the impressive distances.



Fig. 1: The mechanical watchdogs sleep in the upper corridors... How can they be lured onto the floorplates which trigger the lights? (CREAKS 2020).

a strange building (is it a huge and labyrinthic house? A castle? A manor?), which is located in a literal “underworld” (consisting of vast spaces and other houses, even windmills in the distance), I notice that I am not alone: bulldogs that look strangely mechanical are guarding neuralgic points, and the first challenge is to find a way to get around them.²

It turns out, fortunately, that they are rather nocturnal – they avoid light, and they have reason to do so, because they transmute into nightstands when light falls on them unexpectedly.³ Is it possible to control the lights in the dim corridors I need to pass through? Is it possible to lower a drawbridge or to pull up a grate blocking a passageway? Yes, it is – floor plates, cranks, or power switches on the wall are helpful, and it comes in handy that the guarding creatures are not exactly intellectuals. They can be lured onto floor plates that switch on lamps, which, in turn, freeze them there (fig. 1).

- 2 The course of the game involves so much walking, jumping, and climbing up and down that one completely loses a sense of the dimensions of the game the designers built. Only in scene 55, when the hero takes an elevator together with his/her companion to get up to the very top of the mansion, does one grasp the multiple levels.
- 3 It should be mentioned that coat hangers may have special qualities, too, that jellyfish may not swim only in water, and that goats may not be as peaceful as they look. Just saying.

Fig. 2: A puzzle in a puzzle:
the animated music box on
the wall tells a story and, if
properly solved, boosts a skill
(CREAKS 2020).



The bulldogs-turned-nightstands can then be used to reach ladders or to push them onto other floor panels. But beware, when moved out of the light, they turn back into their bulldog existence and tear the poor creature nearby (in this case, my character) to shreds.

It is rewarding not only to look out for these grim animals but also to watch the walls – from time to time, paintings on the wall contain valuable hints. Animated music boxes and small automata provide further information and skill boosts respectively (fig. 2).

It turns out that I am not the only “intelligent” being in these hallways. A distinguished-looking, well-dressed gentleman (or, rather, a gentle-bird) strolls through the corridors, obviously looking for something – and he is familiar both with the rooms and with the now run-down inventory. And he has some friends who help him, as it turns out, looking for a special book. These bird-like creatures seem to be the original inhabitants of this building and they are in constant danger of being destroyed: a giant monster is periodically attacking the building, tearing it down piece by piece, and the desperate attempts of the birds to fend it off seem to be in vain. Since this monster is also responsible for what the player has experienced as earthquakes (and the initial creaks and light bulb problems), it is self-evident that helping the gentle-bird and his avian entourage would be a good decision.

After moving through a number of levels (somewhere around level 45), it becomes obvious that the monster is a seemingly undefeatable giant multi-headed dog, apparently a relative of the mythological Cerberus of ancient Greece (fig. 3).



Fig. 3: At a glance: the monster, one of the birds, and his brass-headed helper (CREAKS 2020).

Yet this creature does not guard the entrance to the underworld but instead attacks the mansion of the birds, for reasons that do not become completely clear. The journey goes up and down and many more challenging puzzles are to be solved before the book can finally be recovered. With the support of one of the birds and one of their technicians (a brass-head, literally), a magic light can be recovered from a floral cavern (fig. 4). But wait, light turns the dangerous creatures into furniture – so how about we confront the Cerberus with the magic light? It turns out that this is not as easy as expected, but finally, after being swallowed by the monster like Jonah by the whale, my character opens the lantern and hit by the light beams, the monster shatters – no, not into pieces, but into furniture.

In a long final video sequence, the now friendly mechanical dogs, coat hangers, goats etc. reconcile and celebrate with music and dancing (fig. 5). The underworld is saved – and I (my character) can climb back up the ladder and crawl back through the tunnel into my room, which is now bathed in bright daylight.

The game has been highly praised for its creative artwork, and rightfully so. “It’s almost like a Hieronymus Bosch painting, where I feel like I could look at the artwork forever and still notice new things.”⁴ The soundtrack and music are remarkable too: the score is linked to the progress one makes in

4 AppUnwrapper 2020.



Fig. 4: Now for somewhere completely different: using flowers as means of transportation is not as odd as expected (CREAKS 2020).



Fig. 5: Music and dancing create unanimity: the final sequence of the game (CREAKS 2020).

solving the local riddles in a room, and listening closely proves to be helpful in situations where the visual information seems to be insufficient. Communication amongst the non-player characters (and also between the birds and the player) is completely non-verbal apart from the options menu or the very few hints for which key to press in order to activate an automaton or use a crank. This is a technique for which the Amanita games are well

known. Apparently, it took eight years from idea to finished game⁵ – to me the result was worth every day.

Just as in SAMOROST 3, the message one can draw from this game is that creativity, empathy, and charity can overcome the strongest challenges, and that reconciliation is possible even with feared foes. Yet one remaining antagonist has to be destroyed before it destroys the community; there is no possibility of getting around annihilating it. This echoes Girard's concept of religious sacrifice as the rightful, justified act of violence in a ritualized context, where the victim is constructed as the root of all evil – the scapegoat – so that the violence can discharge against it, thus ensuring the survival of the community.⁶

But what is more: the game is, in a nutshell, the paradigm of “the hero's journey” according to Joseph Campbell.⁷ Campbell describes a hesitating hero who is summoned to save a society whose life-granting balance is severely disturbed; and the hero – after learning special skills and receiving magic items – is able to fight first the antagonist's crew and then the antagonist itself. Having restored the balance, the hero can go back to the everyday – the cycle is finished, and yet returns to the beginning. And this is what this game presents to the player.

The Amanita crew have managed to create a game that is in several respects fascinating, not only for its artistic quality but also for the message they managed to weave into the details of the game. From the very beginning, the uncanny feeling that is purposely created in the labyrinth of walkways, stairs, elevators, and funiculars is interwoven with small sparks of light. Light is the essential ingredient of change for the better, both figuratively and literally. Thus, CREAKS can be read as a mythological story about courage, trust, and hope, about the eternal fight of good against evil, of darkness against light, and about the overwhelming power of benevolence which is capable of including, and bringing relief to, those who at first glance do not merit it. And thus, although by no means a religious game, CREAKS is a story that provides one with clues to the transcendent.

5 Sigl 2020.

6 Girard 1977.

7 Campbell 1973.

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