

Grappling with the  
lords of darkness

# LIKE A BOSS

BY NORA NAHID KHAN

**O**f all the emotions a game boss can elicit in players, the primary, and most deep-seated, is disgust. Depending on the boss, our loathing can be felt alongside rage, adrenaline thrill, fear, or pity. Some bosses are serial rapists; others aspire to give birth to gods; others want to bleed your brain from the inside. Utterly monstrous bosses incite, all at once, moral revulsion, bodily terror, and mental paralysis.

Where to find such obscene game bosses? They are often in games that knit socio-political and ethical obscenities into the fabric of their worlds. These games offer a menagerie of characters with backstories of broken origins, or transformation from a normal human into a being less than, apart from, or peripheral to human. Take a relatively minor boss: Nine-Toes, the deranged Bandit Lord of *Borderlands*.

When I first leap into Nine-Toes' circular cave, he is shirtless, his face hidden in a spiked gas mask. Drawing his arms to his sides, he cries out, "I'll rip your arm off and beat your baby with it!" "*Also, he has three balls,*" we are informed in a seedy subtitle, which should be read in low, intimate tones. I'm pressed, whether I like it or not, to meditate on Nine-Toes' groin, and all the fruitful possibilities his "three balls" might provide. This is what

James Wood terms the "paradox of expectation and denial." I seek out more information about Nine-Toes, only to be flatly denied. My questions about him are unanswerable: How did he acquire such an asset? Is there nuclear fallout on Pandora? Are there eugenic experiments? (What about his obscene six-pack? How does he, in fact, acquire it? Military sit-ups? Does he kick-box?)

Nine-Toes is grotesque, outlandish, and foul. Yet, he's aggressively real. The details of his backstory—spare, light, but grisly—are perfectly in step with life in the post-apocalyptic wasteland of Pandora. This is a planet of vague origins and vaguer memories—and we, appropriately, encounter a mildly insane, blind boss with acute memory loss, who is possibly a cannibal: In the add-on, *Mad Moxxi's Underdome Riot*, Nine-Toes informs the player, "I ate my mother."

Moreover, all of Nine-Toes' bizarre, disturbing, seemingly arbitrary character details create a thick atmosphere for his kill. Arbitrary details create the illusion of the real, which Wood, in a discursion on Gustave Flaubert, has described in depth. Convincing fictions are both "artificial and real"; perfect "artifice lies in the *selection* of detail." We're directed to a character's physicality, as with the way Flaubert inserts an apparently useless barometer in a scene of "A Simple Heart":

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