Dracula Defanged: Empowering the Player in *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*

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Abstract

The Castlevania games are not designed to scare the player, but they resort to elements from horror literature and film, including references to Bram Stoker's novel and using characters from monster movies as level bosses. Horror conventions are used as cues to build the gameworld and to understand the game design, and how the player appropriates some of those conventions to empower herself in the process.

The article focuses on the figure of the vampire in *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*, and how the conventions set in previous media are integrated in the design of the game. Dracula has been divested of his vampiric powers; rather, he acquires typical videogame boss powers, launching fireballs and teleporting himself within the screen. The powers lost by Dracula as a videogame boss are picked up and amplified by the player character, the half-vampire Alucard. This shift is the result of a process started in other media. The powers of the vampire have now been appropriated by the player as a means to empower their interaction in the gameworld, making the vampire a desirable character to the player.

Author keywords

Vampires; close-reading; horror games; comparative media.

Introduction

Vampires are truly immortal—no matter how many times the Van Helsings of the world drive stakes through their hears, they always find a way to creep back into no-life and back on the written page, the silver screen or as computer bits. One of the most popular videogame series populated by vampires is Castlevania. *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* (Konami, 1997) deserves particular attention because it presents two different vampire figures: Dracula himself, as the villain of the game, and Alucard, the player character. These two vampire figures are not mere opposites, as their names may suggest; they are different vampire figures that have been inspired by horror fiction and film.

Although *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* uses imagery and motifs borrowed from genre fiction, it is not a horror videogame. The relative absence of horrifying elements in Symphony of the Night is a clear example of the weakening of the vampire figure in other media, which has lost its connotations as a symbol of our greatest fears. Vampires have become fascinating entities that the audience wishes to emulate, or at least become close to. The powers of the vampire have

become something desirable; controlling the vampire in a videogame is a way of empowering the player in the fictional world.

This article will address two basic aspects of the game and their relationship with genre fiction and horror film. First, it will explore why *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* is not a horror game. This question will be addressed both in terms of game mechanics, and in the context of other media, particularly genre fiction and horror films. The second issue is examining the role of the imagery and motifs borrowed from other media. As we will see, the different vampire figures, as well as the thematic and audiovisual elements that link this game to the horror genre, are at the service of empowering the player.

The Castlevania Saga

Castlevania: Symphony of the Night is the thirteenth game of the Castlevania videogame saga. This is one of the longest running videogame series in history; it started with *Vampire Killer* (Konami, 1986), for the MSX-2 home computer system. In the span of twenty-three years, Konami has produced twenty-six games in the series; the next one, *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow*, will be released in 2010.

The premise of the Castlevania games is rather trite: Dracula has risen from his grave, and has summoned an army of monsters to take over the world. In the games before Symphony of the Night, the player controlled character was usually a member of the Belmont family. Until 1997, the player character was normally human, and the weapon of choice was a whip, the Vampire Killer in the title of the original game. The Castlevania of the title refers to *Dracula's Castle*, the original title of the game in Japanese is Akumajô Dracula, translated as "Dracula's Satanic Castle" on the back of the cartridge of Vampire Killer.

The villain in all the games is Dracula himself, apparently based on the character created by Bram Stoker (1897), as we can glean from the references to the novel in *Castlevania: Bloodlines* (Konami, 1994). However, the Castlevania games do not intend to adapt Stoker's novel. The games borrow some elements not only from Stoker's novel, but also from a variety of horror genre fiction and films. The player has to fight zombies, walking armours, medusas, a relative of the Frankenstein monster, hunchbacks, and witches, to name but a few.

Castlevania: Symphony of the Night brings about a series of variations to the Castlevania formula. To begin with, Dracula is defeated by the player at the beginning of the game. The game recreates the final screen of *Akumajô Dracula X: Chi no Rondo* / translated as *Satanic Castle Dracula X Rondo of Blood* (Konami, 1993), the previous game of the series. The player controls Richter Belmont; after Dracula is defeated, a cut-scene informs the player that, four years later, Richter has disappeared, and Castlevania has risen again. Since the owner of the Vampire Killer has disappeared, the player takes control of Alucard, Dracula's son, who first appeared in *Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse* (Konami, 1989). The cut-scene explains what Alucard has been doing: "Alucard, in order to purge the world of his own cursed bloodline, has submerged his vampiric powers and entered into what was supposed to be an eternal slumber." He has woken up in order to fight the evil that the new rising of Castlevania has brought about.

The goal of the game now is to find Richter. When the player finally finds him, it turns out that he has gone mad, and has taken over Castlevania in order to revive Dracula again and be able to fight him. Richter is a vampire killer, and he wants a vampire to kill. Half-way through the game, the player finds out that Richter has taken over Castlevania. What appears to be the final battle between Alucard and Richter is a reversal of all the final battles in the previous games: the player controls the vampire fighting the human. If the player kills Richter, it is the end of the game. If the player acquires and equips an item, the Holy Glasses, a sphere will appear over Richter. That sphere is a device that controls him; by destroying it, rather than attacking Richter, the player reveals that it was all a plot of Shaft, the dark priest that revived Dracula in *Chi No Rondo*. What appeared to be the end of the game happens to be the literal turning point of the game. A copy of the castle appears in the sky, now upside down; Dracula has risen again and controls the castle from its innermost tower. The player must traverse the castle again, now with an inverted map.

Castlevania is not a horror series

Although the Castlevania games borrow many elements from horror fiction and film, they are not horror games themselves. These games are not scary in the way that survival horror games are, such as *Silent Hill 2* by the same publisher (Konami - Team Silent, 2001). *Silent Hill 2* presents an ominous environment: the environmental soundtrack creates suspense through sound design rather than music. The player of Silent Hill may also have difficulty seeing very far in the environment, either because it is foggy or very dark. This creates a sense of anticipation that can give the player a startle when an enemy appears. Enemies may appear less frequently, as a way to keep the player on her toes all throughout the game. The mechanics of *Silent Hill 2* as a horror game are based on keeping the player in tension, and on generating suspense as the player advances in the game.

The Castlevania game series, particularly their 2D games, are platform games, not horror gamesi. Their core mechanics are common to other platform games, such as Super Mario Bros (Nintendo, 1985): collecting items, jumping on platforms, avoiding and fighting enemies. The sheer abundance of enemies makes them lose their impact; zombies and walking skeletons spawn so often the player loses count of how many enemies she defeats. They are not cloaked in darkness or in fog; the player can tell where the enemies are and where they come from. The moments of suspense are brief, and usually right before fighting a mini-boss: the door of the room closes and the mini-boss prepares to attack. The soundtrack of the games also belies any notions that the Castlevania games may be horror videogames: different pop-rock melodies accompany the player across the different quarters of the castle.

The way in which the player character improves throughout the game in *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* resembles the mechanics of games like Metroid (Nintendo, 1986) or *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo, 1987). As the game advances, the player levels up the statistics of the character, from health and magic points to RPG-like properties such as strength, constitution or intelligence. The player picks up items that allow the player character to upgrade those properties. Through the game, the player picks up better armour and relics that let the player character transform into different shapes and learn new moves and attacks. Thus the player

character is constantly improving, reinforcing the impression that the player gets better at the game as the game advances. The player improves her performance in the game as the difficulty of the game increases.

Castlevania: Symphony of the Night is not a horror game in terms of game mechanics; there are further reasons why the player is not scared while playing it. Vampires in general, and Dracula in particular, have already lost their impact as fearsome figures in other media, and have acquired new connotations. *Symphony of the Night* exemplifies how this change also extends to the medium of the videogame.

The Vampire as Mobile Signifier

The figure of the vampire is in a constant state of re-shaping through time and through media. The vampire is a 'mobile signifier' (Bennet and Woollacott, 1987: 42), which changes its meaning and connotations as authors and audiences change throughout space and time, as well as through diverse media. The vampire, as Brooker (2000) puts it, is a figure "whose meanings long ago escaped the anchorage of whatever 'original' text brought them into being, and whose identity is no longer inseparably tied to an individual author […] but exists somewhere above and between a multiplicity of varied and often contradictory incarnations, both old and recent, across a range of cultural forms from computer games to novels" (9). There is a popular concept of the figure, characterized by a set of common features: a blood-sucking, undead entity that attacks the living. Every incarnation of the vampire will include particular variations of this general model. This process generates different figures of the vampire in the process.

Castlevania: Symphony of the Night presents two different vampire archetypes, which have resulted from the transformations of the figure through time and media. On the one hand, there is Dracula, inspired both by Stoker's novel and its cinematic incarnations. On the other, there is Alucard, controlled by the player, which seems to bring together the androgynous aesthetic of Japanese 美少年 (bishōnen, which translates as "beautiful boy") with Anne Rice's tradition of vampires. Both archetypes fight each other at the end of the game, in a battle where the old stock vampire comes face to face with the modern glamorous vampire.

The Satanic Lord

Frayling (1978: 64) identifies the archetype of the Satanic Lord as an old stock aristocrat who embodies the medieval past and haunts the English bourgeois society circles from the early 19th century. The Satanic Lord is found in Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897); both embody the worst fears of the Victorian era. The Satanic Lord belongs to an aristocracy that is losing its influence and power, as a new socioeconomic order replaces the old regime of the past. He has magic and unearthly powers; he is a dangerous being in the era of rationality and science, not only because he is lethal, but also because of his sexual attractiveness. Dracula seduces his victims so they yield to him—the moment of the bite is also portrayed as a pleasurable and ecstatic event, though painful, for the victim.

Dracula represents the Other in Victorian England of the 19th century, as Antonio Ballesteros points out (2000: 132). Dracula is easily identified as a foreigner in England, he stands for the unknown and the past. He poses a threat to the social order, since he seduces women, and prevents them from becoming dutiful Victorian wives. When Dracula transforms one of the female characters, Lucy, he defeats her suitors and her fiancée, since he is the one who eventually wins her. The vampire in Stoker's novel is both a source of fear and admiration, since women yield to him uncontested.

Dracula is mostly visually absent from most of the novel, which makes his chase more thrilling. There is only one detailed description of what his face looks like in the novel. His presence is felt, but not seen; his representation is fragmented and scattered through the pages, and from the point of view of different characters. The vampire hunters in the novel desperately pursue him, and his lack of visibility makes the hunt more difficult.

The adaptations of Dracula on film bestow Dracula with an image, since the audience had to see the vampire on the screen, an image that both impresses and scares the audience. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), one of the first cinematic adaptations of Stoker's novel, is the first evidence of how cinema transforms the vampire. Count Orlok is a monster, his eerie profile moves almost mechanically on the screen as a way to indicate he is not quite of this world. *Nosferatu* introduces a new weakness for the vampire—he can be killed by sunlight if a maiden makes him forget about the first cry of the cockerel. Orlok, as a child of film, is destroyed by sunlight, as the image on the silver screen would also disappear if sunlight broke into the movie theatre. Gelder (1994) explains the death of this new cinematic vampire in metaphorical terms: "Nosferatu's destruction, caught in Ellen's bedroom by the sun's rays, amounts to a kind of overexposure: the film itself helps to destroy the creature it has created" (97). Orlok has become an icon in film history and a recognizable image in his own right. However, the audience may find it hard to understand why someone looking like him would be able to become part of any respectable society circle; Orlok is obviously a monster who lacks the irresistible attraction that made Dracula so powerful.

Figure. 1: The vampire in film, portrayed by Max Schreck in Nosferatu (left) and Béla Lugosi in Dracula (right).

Tod Browning's version of Dracula (1930) revealed a different take on the character. Lugosi embodied the icon of the aristocratic vampire, because of his looks and his disquieting theatrical performance. He plays an elegant, eerie count, who moves and speaks slowly and seductively and has a strong foreign accent. He is dark haired, dark eyed, constructing an image of Otherness

to the Anglo-Saxon standard. His outfit is an aristocratic cape, along with a contemporary black tuxedo. Dracula's hypnotic powers are particularly stressed on through his body language and his eyes, which appear to glow in certain close-ups. Dracula's sex appeal is also highlighted, so that the audience can see why Dracula can subjugate women so easily. Lugosi's performance tries to reach out to the audience, to let them feel the influence of the Count on them. While it was difficult to feel attracted by Orlok, Lugosi plays a vampire who is all charm. Browning's version of Dracula starts a process of glamorisation of the vampire when he becomes visible. His magic powers must be conspicuous, thus his looks must be appealing right from the start.

Dracula also acquires a voice, and not only because of sound cinema. While the protagonists are attending an opera performance, and after the first introduction of the Count to Mina and Lucy, they talk about Dracula's castle, which is in a ruinous state. Dracula expresses his longing for death: "To die, to be really dead, that must be glorious. […] There are far worse things awaiting man than death." He misses his lost mortality, and reveals that there is a sliver of humanity left in him.

Lugosi's Dracula has become a recognizable icon in its own right; his cape and tuxedo have been reproduced in many later incarnations of the character, such as Christopher Lee's performance in the Hammer films, such as *Dracula* (1958) or *Dracula: Prince of Darkness* (1966). As Ballesteros (2000) points out, whereas the literary vampire loses momentum in the middle of the 20th century, he arises as a filmic figure, to the point that he is one of the most recognizable icons of film history (p. 213). By the 1970s, the constant replaying of the figure has worn out the filmic vampire. It has been recreated so many times that it has lost its impact. The old-stock vampire does not scare audiences any more, nor does it have the mesmerizing effect it used to have; he is now reduced to parodic re-enactments, such as Love at First Bite (1979), the cartoon *Count Duckula* (1988-93) or the Count Chocula cereals still sold in North America.

Count Dracula has become a worn-out signifier by having been appealed to too often, becoming more of a stock character than an archetype. An archetype is "a symbol, theme, setting, or character-type that recurs in different times and places in myth, literature, folklore, dreams, and rituals so frequently or prominently as to suggest […] that it embodies some essential element of 'universal' human experience." (Baldick, 1990: 16), that is, the meaning of the character (in this case) is as important as its representation. Dracula as an icon, however, becomes a dominant signifier over a weakened signified, a stock character: "a stereotyped character easily recognized by readers or audiences from recurrent appearances in literary or folk traditions, usually within a specific genre […]." (211). As a stereotype, he has been simplified, and lost most of his connotations for general audiences—in short, he is not as scary as he used to be.

Dracula is The Boss

The Satanic Lord, turned into an icon by film, becomes Digital Dracula in the Castlevania series. Dracula becomes the Boss of the game, that is, the most powerful villain of the game, and the last one the player must defeat. The character seems inspired by Stoker's novel and the sources the author used—he is identified as "Dracula Vlad Tepes" in the manual of Symphony of the Night; he is dressed like Bela Lugosi, covered in a black cape, wearing his aristocratic medals.

Dracula is the main villain in most Castlevania games; the player is made aware of it in the manual of the game or in a cut-scene (e.g. the opening of Akumajô Dracula X: Chi no Rondo). As we saw earlier, in Symphony of the Night, he is defeated at the beginning of the game, and the player does not realize that Dracula is again the last boss until half-way through the game. The game reprises the visual absence that characterized Dracula in Stoker's novel, since he also appears at the beginning and the end of a complete play-through of the game.

The traditional associations of vampirism with epidemics are lost to the Castlevania games. Dracula remains in the deepest core of his castle, but he is biding his time to spread his influence out in the world; his magic is enclosed within the walls of his abode. The Count threatens to take over the world – the most trite villain menace – but it is not clear how or when the conquest will take place. Castlevania's Dracula evidences how the character has been stripped off of his traditional connotations, and become an icon. He could be Dracula, the Mummy, or any other arch-villain for that matter. The symbolic aspects of the aristocratic vampire have disappeared; the Satanic Lord is a stock horror character.

Digital Dracula's powers are different from those we traditionally associate with his novel or film counterparts. He does not transform into a bat, a wolf or mist or mesmerises his victims, as Stoker's Count does. When the player character enters the room, both at the beginning and the end, Dracula lurks in his throne – he is too classy to sleep a coffin. He does not bite or suck blood, he avoids contact with our hero, and throws fireballs, summons fire spirits and thunder whenever he opens his cape. Dracula's powers are transformed into objects the player can visualize, in order to dodge them and be able to counter-attack.

When the player encounters Dracula at the beginning of Symphony of the Night, he beams himself from one side of the room to another, appearing and disappearing from the room during the fight, so that the player does not know where he will attack from next. Half-way through the battle, he becomes a huge monster, with goat horns, dark skin and bat wings (this is the closest he gets to looking like a bat in the game). Dracula now spits fire and attacks Richter by trying to smash him. In the final battle, when Alucard finally confronts him, his throne is embedded in a monstrous creature that seems to shelter him. Dracula becomes a conglomerate of monsters: he becomes a tiny figure surrounded by a succubus, a skeleton, a monster fish and three monstrous heads (which resemble H.R. Giger's designs for the movie *Alien*). The monster has gigantic bat wings and two giant claws that threaten to trap and crush the player. Instead of fireballs, this compounded monster strikes with lightning bolts.

Figure. 2: Dracula's transformation at the beginning of Symphony of the Night (left), and his final appearance sitting on his monstrous throne (right).

Fighting Dracula follows a stock videogame routine of hits and misses and of summoning powers. Battling Dracula is not very different from fighting Bowser, the boss in Super Mario Bros. Dracula's weaknesses have also disappeared—he has to be hit many times to be defeated, there is no deathblow equivalent to a stake through the heart. This is the videogame way of portraying the climactic last battle with the vampire, as we find it in Stoker's novel, or in films such as the ones produced by Hammer in the 1950s and 1960s. However, here death by ritual is ruled out, and substituted by boss battle conventions from platform games. Dracula has been divested of his traditional powers and weaknesses when turned into a stereotypical videogame villain.

Glamorous Vampires

The other vampire in Symphony of the Night is Dracula's son, Alucard, the player character. Like the boss of the game, Alucard has his origins in literature, although they are not as clearly expressed. While the figure of the Satanic Lord has become a worn out signifier, there is a new archetype that arises from the fascination with the vampire. Alucard, the player character of Castlevania: Symphony of the Night, is derived from an archetype that we will call the Glamorous Vampire.

The Satanic Lord has become a stock character, but that does not mean that it is the end of the vampire. The vampire myth has been revitalised in literature during the mid-1970s, thanks to Anne Rice and her novel *Interview with the Vampire* (1977). Rice's vampires are very powerful—they can read minds, have superhuman strength and agility, they can even fly. The Vampire Lestat (1985) opens with Lestat describing himself:

"I am the vampire Lestat. I'm immortal. More or less. The light of the sun, the sustained heat of an intense fire—these things might destroy me. But then again, they might not" (3).

Lestat relishes his powers, while his weaknesses have been minimized. Note how only sunlight can really kill him—no stakes or garlic or crosses can hurt him. He is a vampire with an image – he does have a reflection in the mirror – and can therefore only be killed by the same element

that finished off the first visual vampire. He claims an image, to lure the reader into his powers. This is how Lestat's description continues:

"I'm six feet tall, which was fairly impressive in the 1780s when I was a young mortal man. It's not bad now. I have thick blond hair, not quite shoulder length, and rather curly, which appears white under fluorescent light. My eyes are gray, but they absorb the colors blue or violet easily from surfaces around them. And I have a fairly short narrow nose, and a mouth that is well shaped but just a little too big for my face. It can look very mean, or extremely generous, my mouth. It always looks sensual. My vampire nature reveals itself in extremely white and highly reflective skin that has to be powdered down for cameras of any kind. […] And the only consistent indication that I am not human is my fingernails. It's the same with all the vampires. Our fingernails look like glass. And some people notice that when they don't notice anything else" (3).

Lestat evidences how the influence of cinema has reverted to literature. The vampire is now depicting himself, so that the reader can see him—he manipulates the medium that portrays him to lure the reader towards him. The glamorisation that Lugosi started becomes the main feature of this fin-de-siècle vampire. Lestat is beautiful, sexy, and lethally attractive. He also represents a different standard of Otherness—instead of the black-eyed, black haired film vampire, Lestat's features represent Other because they are uncanny in the Freudian sense (i.e. familiar but strange)—icy blonde, light coloured eyes that change shade, glass-like nails. His looks are unnatural, but not monstrous—he is exotic and attractive because of his difference, and we are drawn towards him. And he even lets himself be photographed, turning his image into a boon.

The different relationship of the vampire with the medium that represents him also evinces different characterizations of the vampire. Dracula haunted the present, but refused to be part of it, and he avoided being represented in its media. The glamorous vampire partakes of the modern age by using the media to represent himself. Lestat uses first person narrative, and is a media sensation when he becomes a rock star. Lestat, in writing his own story and letting himself be a mediated subject, achieves the immediacy Dracula could not have.

The re-vamped vampire of Anne Rice's novels – glamorous, powerful and strong, but keeping pace with the new times, without losing his aristocratic mien – is increasing his popularity. Two recent book series, Charlaine Harris' Southern Vampire Mysteries (starting with *Dead Until Dark,* 2001) and Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series (2005), both have glamorous vampires as their protagonists. These vampires are beautiful and powerful like Anne Rice's, who seduce the human female narrators. Instead of taking over the narration, they let their lovers tell their stories. These new glamorous vampires also seem to keep a lot more of their humanity—they are able to love mortal women, they can feel love, and care for a human. They are dangerous companions, but they're also mighty and irrevocably attracted to these female mortals. The reader sees the new vampires through the eyes of the women who have fallen in love with them.

The glamorous vampire has become an archetype different from the Satanic Lord; he is still innovative enough to keep its appeal and fascination on audiences. This archetype results from the process of Satanic Lord becoming a visual entity and is within the same tradition. The glamorous vampire emerges as a reaction to the stagnation of the vampire representation. Both

models are now distinct and different, and will be confronted in *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*.

All these examples of the glamorous archetype show how the vampire as a mobile signifier has shifted from being the fearsome Other, who perverts the social order, to the Other who is irresistible and admirable in his might.

Empowering the Player

The figure of the glamorous vampire becomes incarnated in Alucard, the other digital vampire in *Symphony of the Night*. He is the player character, and the main element at the service of empowering the player. The manual of the game depicts him as a glamorised, stylish, androgynous vampire. Lestat's description above seems to be the model for Alucard's looks—an uncanny attractive vampire. This is how the manual describes Alucard:

"The offspring of an unnatural union between Count Dracula and a human woman, Alucard possesses inhuman strength and dark magical powers. His weapon of choice is a sword, and he uses a variety of them to serve his needs. He is an adept shapeshifter, commonly using the forms of wolf, bat, and mist to confuse and terrify his opponents. Alucard also relies heavily on ancient relics and magical items to perform elaborate magical attacks."

Figure. 3: Alucard follows the Glamorous Vampire model (illustration from the Symphony of the Night manual).

Alucard's powers and charms are obvious—his animation is smooth and tremendously elegant for a sprite, leaving a soft trail after every movement. At the very beginning of the game, he is equipped with magical objects that make him really powerful. Death takes these attributes away after the first few rooms into the castle, so that the player's first quest is recovering these magical items, and find others that will make him even more powerful.

The player character is a half-vampire whose vampiric powers come from items that can be found through the game. He can acquire a relic to transform himself into a bat, a wolf and mist, which are shapes directly taken from Stoker's Dracula—the powers that the Digital Dracula has lost are thus transferred to the digital glamorous vampire. The description of Alucard focuses on all the actions he can perform—none of the Belmonts in the saga can obtain as many weapons as he can, and he is the first Castlevania hero who can pick up relics that bestow a wide range of magical powers.

The game includes RPG mechanics to improve the powers of the vampire. In order to manage all the items and magical powers, the player goes to the stats and inventory screens. There are also counters for strength, constitution, intelligence and luck that increase as the game advances and Alucard acquires experience. Early in the game, Alucard is certainly at a disadvantage right after all his magical attributes have been taken away. It may take several attempts to defeat the first couple of bosses. However, as the player character levels up, the game gets easier very fast—the feeling of exhilaration and empowerment is precipitated by the abundance of items and relics. Some items used in the right combination can be terribly powerful, allowing the player to defeat minibosses in a matter of seconds. In general, the game tends to get relatively easier as the player advances, increasing the feeling of empowerment.

If the Satanic Lord archetype loses most of its features and connotations when he turns into a videogame villain, vampiric powers turn out to be an invaluable source to enhance player agency. Videogames allow the player to explore what it is to be a vampire through interaction; it is going a step beyond the Vampire Chronicles of Anne Rice and the rest of the glamorous vampires in literature. The digital glamorous vampire does control the medium, but hands over control to the player, and lets her wield the powers of the vampire. The Other becomes part of the player as she takes over, but the vampire still belongs to a different environment, the fictional world of the game. The player controls and learns from her mistakes, while the character remains unchanged. While controlling Richter, the player only has a whip, which pales against the arsenal of weapons and charms that Alucard can obtain. However, biting is still not included in the actions that the vampire can perform. In fact, it was not amongst the features of Dracula as a boss either. Being a vampire in Castlevania is not about sucking blood, but enjoying the superhuman abilities of the vampire.

Once the game is completed, the player unlocks a new mode, where she can control Richter as the player character. The story of the game is left out of the playthrough if the player chooses Richter, and the boss of the game is Shaft instead of Dracula. Richter cannot level up as he gains more experience, nor pick up relics to acquire magic powers, nor obtain as many health points as Alucard. The mechanics of the game change, and the player can start over with new rules. If we play as Richter, there are places he cannot gain access to, so the player must find new ways to traverse the space. For instance, there are grates that only Alucard can go through as he turns into mist. Richter is thus a new challenge, encourages replay, and also increases the challenge by limiting what the player can do. The vampire player character remains more rewarding—he has more powers, can get to more places in the castle, and is associated with a story that is revealed as the player traverses the castle.

The same shift that happened in the genre fiction, from the absent Other to first-person glamorous protagonist, is paralleled in *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*. The difference is that in the game both figures coexist. The Satanic Lord is not replaced; rather, the game represents the symbolic triumph of the glamorous vampire over Dracula. Thus, the changes in the archetype have eventually resulted in a different figure that coexists and becomes the opponent to its original model.

Genre Fiction Sets the Rules

There are other elements borrowed from genre fiction that are at the service of empowering the player. The references to genre fiction in Symphony of the Night help the player to understand the fictional world of the game and create expectations about how the world works.

The figure of Dracula is associated with a series of connotations, which are appropriated to account for the looks of the game. The castle itself is the main manifestation of the imagery associated with Dracula. Castlevania is populated by bats and a variety of monsters and ghosts; there are dungeons and caves, a clock tower, a ballroom, and a library. The action happens at night; notably, a full moon always shines in the sky. The configuration of the castle invites us to explore it in depth—as Alucard, we have to go back and forth through the rooms, the movement through the game is not linear anymore, but rather labyrinthine.

Most of these borrowed elements have lost their symbolic meaning. For instance, the holy book (the game does not mention the Bible directly), the cross and holy water do not stand for religious belief defeating Satanic powers. Rather, their value is translated through the mechanics into some of the most powerful weapons in the game, which are used to attack any enemy, from medusa heads to walking skeletons. What matters is that they are elements taken from the common referent to the world of Dracula, and this direct relationship translates in higher efficiency of the weapon. They enhance the player's agency by becoming items that provide extra powers to the player character. However, they are not mandatory to complete the game — there are also other weapons that have a similar function, though they may be less powerful.

Other empowering elements borrowed from horror fiction and film are the different characters in the game. There is a hierarchy of enemies that get in the way of the player. The most common type of enemies are generic horror figures: zombies, walking skeletons, werewolves and witches, to name but a few. These enemies are the least powerful and the easiest to defeat. The mini-bosses, on the other hand, are tougher enemies, and they have proper names rather than generic ones. This is the category that includes Olrox (a not-so distant relative of Nosferatu's Count Orlok), a flying monster called Ctulhu (sic), The Creature (which looks very much like the cinematic incarnations of Frankenstein) and the mummy of *Akmodan II*. The mini-bosses usually appear at the end of each major area of the game, and the room where they appear is locked once the player enters, so there is no alternative but to fight the monster. Defeating the miniboss usually gives the player an important item that will help her complete the game.

The more specific references to genre fiction mark these enemies as more powerful, in the same way that closer references to actual vampire lore would mark the most powerful items in the game.

Disturbing Bosses

Although *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* is not a horror game, it is true that a couple of mini-bosses are rather disturbing and nightmarish. The first one is Legion (Granfalloon in the English version), a giant ball made up of naked bodies. The ball is larger than the screen, and the bodies fall off it as a throng that can overwhelm Alucard. The player defeats Legion by hitting the ball repeatedly, making more bodies fall off. The name of Legion comes from the Bible: "And he asked him, 'What is thy name?' And he answered saying, 'My name is Legion, for we are many'" (Mark 5:9). The English translation into Granfalloon is a reference to Kurt Vonnegut's Cat's Cradle, "a proud and meaningless association of human beings."

Figure. 4: Alucard fights Legion / Granfalloon. Note the bodies falling off the mass and thronging forward.

Another disturbing boss is Beelzebub, the Lord of the Flies, which is another Biblical reference (see Mark 3:22). Beelzebub is a rotting corpse that the player must literally hack in pieces. This boss is also larger than the screen, and the player must jump around to hit every limb to make it fall. The corpse does not move around the screen, it is the giant flies it attracts that attack the player. The visual depiction of both Legion and Beelzebub is memorable and disturbing, mainly because of how the human body becomes a mass in the first case and a decaying object in the second. These bosses are the closest *Symphony of the Night* gets to being actually horrifying.

Conclusion

Castlevania: Symphony of the Night is a milestone in the Castlevania saga, and to this day considered one of the best games in the series. Although it is not the first time that the player

controls Alucard, it is the first time that he becomes the main character. The appeal of Alucard and his powers is not exhausted yet—*Symphony of the Night* has been re-released for current generation platforms. Subsequent games have also included characters with vampire powers similar to Alucard's, such as *Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow* (Konami, 2003) and Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow (Konami, 2005), also inherited from Dracula.

The vampire lore that the games are inspired by, from Bram Stoker's novel to Anne Rice, is not meant to scare the player because it is not frightening anymore. The archetype of the Satanic Lord has lost its horrifying connotations, and become a stock character, whereas the Glamorous Vampire is not supposed to horrify the audience, but rather fascinate and seduce them. *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* confronts the two vampire archetypes reflecting the trends set out by other media. Vampires do not stand for our worst fears anymore, but have become the dangerous seductive Other.

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[i] *Castlevania: Judgment* (Konami/Eighting, 2008) is the only exception in the series, since it is a fighting game.