Meaningful Movement: The Labyrinth and 'Castlevania: Symphony of the Night'

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This paper presents the castle in Castlevania: Symphony of the Night as a structure that sets out a pattern of movement for the player-character that is similar to that experienced by the treader of a classical labyrinth. Specifically, this pattern is one of turning back on oneself and it always derives its meaning from the context in which it is performed. For example, the meaning of Theseus stalking the Cretan labyrinth in search of the Minotaur is different from the meaning of the Troia performed at the funeral games of Anchises in the Aeneid or of the dance of a medieval English turf maze treader. This is in spite of the fact that the actual pattern of movement is largely the same in all three cases. I argue here that the transfer of this pattern of movement to Symphony of the Night transforms its meaning once again. Couched in a conventional horror narrative that leans heavily on pop-Freudian motifs, the movement of the main character, the half-vampire Alucard, emerges as a text that writes his ambivalence in spatial terms. The architecture of game space, then, is understood as notes for a performance which derives its meaning in relation to some pre-scripted elements.

I begin with a description of the classical labyrinth and a brief review of the literature on its development in European history. I then move onto the game. Firstly, I justify my description of Castlevania as a labyrinth. This is necessary as the game does not on first sight appear labyrinthine. I defend my assertion on the grounds that while the castle does not look like a labyrinth, the pattern of movement it requires the player-character to engage in makes it feel like a labyrinth. I then move on to a formal analysis of the player-character's ritualistic movement through the castle in relation to the game's oedipal horror story. In this way the player-character's recursive movement is linked to the tale's themes of oedipal desire, self-control, repression and distortion of memory, and the death instinct. This analysis looks at the game at three levels. Firstly, it understands the game in terms of the Castlevania series, particularly in the way the game asks the player to revisit a previous Castlevania title. Secondly, it looks at the general labyrinthine pattern of movement within the game. Thirdly, it isolates specific episodes within this general pattern, analysing them both in terms of story and in terms of player movement, suggesting connections between the two.

The article puts forward the idea of two texts – one the spatial text and one the story – that sustain, enrich or spark off each other throughout the game. It serves as an example of how movement might be 'read' as spatial text. I close with an assertion that these two texts do not necessarily 'fit together' in other games as they do in Symphony of the Night and ask how we might understand this coherence in terms of artistic expression. This section focuses on the idea of intentionality and the difficulty of viewing videogames as 'authored' and coherent.

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