

Interactive Spatial Disorder in *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*

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INTRODUCTION

Disorderly space in media — that is, space arranged in an overcomplicated or illogical layout — is used by works to disorient, confuse, or overwhelm the audience. In non-interactive works these emotions are felt empathetically by a passive audience, while in interactive works such as video games, they are felt directly by an active player-audience; non-interactivity means seeing someone else struggle with the space, while interactivity means struggling to navigate it yourself. Because of its interactivity and reactivity, disordered space in games can be broken into two categories: a ‘randomised’ disorder (for instance, *progen*) unique to interactive works where the environment is different for every player and play session, or a ‘chaotic’ disorder analogous to the type in non-interactive works where the environment offers the same deliberate mess to everyone. Although randomised disorder is unique to interactive works, chaotic disorder’s adaptation of non-interactive concepts makes it an effective showcase for how a shift between mediums can be used to emphasize or intensify emotional and thematic aspects of space by drawing the audience into them. By examining a foundational and enduring example of chaotic disorder in games, *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* (Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo, 1997), this work aims to uncover how this intensification process occurs.

Disorderly space in media originates primarily from the Gothic genre, as a result of its basis in Gothic architecture. Medieval Gothic architecture used spatial complexity as an expression of Christian faith and power, but maintenance of these buildings became expensive and unpopular over the course of the Renaissance, resulting in their collapsed forms becoming a symbol of the dark, forgotten past by the time of the Enlightenment²³⁴. Pioneering Gothicists Piranesi and Walpole built fiction from these spaces around these ideas, with the recurring theme that whatever awful entities moved into them in the absence of God must be escaped or confronted⁵⁶. *Symphony of the Night*, as an adaptation of *Dracula* (1897) and a Gothic game, inherits these ideas. There are four key elements of *Symphony of the Night* that create the chaotic disorder of its version of Castle Dracula: free navigation, intertwined character-spatial growth, grand scale, and a reactive map.



Castle Dracula as it appears in-game (Castlevania: Symphony of the Night)

Free navigation — non-linear movement — disorients players by forcing them to choose their own path. Using a maze or labyrinth structure with many sprawling paths and a single exit (in this case, Dracula's room, the end point of the game), it confuses players in a pleasurable manner, offering them a long-form puzzle to solve . Intertwined growth of the player character and space makes the exploratory process somewhat oneiric . Because the player lacks the full use of hero Alucard's exploration abilities (such as flight) until they have unlocked them by exploring the full castle, they feel distanced from both his body and the world, each new ability reducing the gap between the three of them like falling deeper into a lucid dream . These two forms of disorder are emphasized by the grand scale of the game: Castle Dracula is unpredictably huge, both in terms of room size and the number of areas. This enhances their fear and anticipation as they explore; the player can never be sure what or how much is behind a given door. Finally, the reactive map system — where rooms only appear on the map if the player has entered them — preserves the surprises of the space, provides a satisfying visual and numerical percentage indicator of their progress, and keeps them painfully aware of how much or little of the game is left to play. At the outset a low percentage completion intimidates the player with how much of the labyrinth is yet to be seen, while anyone who reaches the concluding areas of the game is likely to be enjoying the experience enough they don't want it to end; this gives the counter an unsettling quality whenever it's looked at throughout exploration. Working together, these elements ensure that the player will remain disoriented, confused, and overwhelmed for the duration of their stay in Castle

Dracula, reconstituting the traditional emotional elements of Gothic spatial disorder in an effective interactive form.

Interactive disorderly spaces are able to intensify emotional and thematic experiences adapted from non-interactive counterparts by providing us agency, embodiment, and the immediacy of ‘being there’. Mazelike, dreamlike, grand, doomed. Sometimes it isn’t enough to watch others enter these worlds. Sometimes we want to escape ourselves.

ENDNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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BIO

Madeleine Mackenzie is a PhD student at the University of Sydney whose work focuses on spatiality in games, particularly in terms of how spatial concepts from other media are adapted to allow for interactivity. Their abstract is taken from a case study for their thesis on the subject. As well as studying games academically, they are an award-winning game developer, having directed multiple visual novels (*Inverness Nights* (2017) and *Catacomb Prince* (2019)) with other yet-to-be-announced titles in the works.

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