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Ambivalence and Recursion in *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*

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Konami's *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* (*SoTN*) (KCE Tokyo 1997) is a recursive game in several ways. The player, the main character, the story, all in some senses move back and forth. This paper seeks to understand how the patterns of recursion that permeate the game interact with each other in ways that illuminate and enrich the characterisation of the protagonist, Alucard, as ambivalent. The performances by the player and the character are derived from and constrained by a combination of the configuration of space and the character's changing capabilities. These performances are here approached as texts that are open to interpretation and can be read alongside themes otherwise elucidated in the game's back-story and cutscenes in which character and plot are developed. In *SoTN* there is a parallel between the game's thematic concern with ambivalence and the centrality of recursion in its performance.

Ambivalence describes the simultaneous feeling of both aversion for and attraction to a single thing. Recursion is the act of returning or running back over. It is the repetition of some event or journey with some variation. In the context of videogames this variation may take many forms, including changes of direction, difficulty, character capabilities, or player knowledge. Ambivalence and recursion are understood in this paper as close enough to offer an analogical possibility. Ambivalence is understood as a kind of psychological recursion where a character's attitude runs from one extreme to the other with respect to some object, concept or person. This finds a parallel in other kinds of more visible recursion that can involve the movements of a character or the structure of a work in terms of the arrangement of scenes, images, phrases or units of any kind.

This paper is not intended as an attempt to get at the real, deep or hidden meanings of the game. Nor is it a revelation of an association between ambivalence and recursion intended by the designers. Rather, it is intended as a speculative piece that might serve to think around the ways meaning can be generated and the limits of permissible interpretation in videogames. The principles I have attempted to follow in defining these limits of interpretation are ones of interest, plausibility and coherence. The first of these asks if a particular interpretation enriches the game in any significant way, or if is it merely puerile or trivial. The second asks whether the interpretation given to a particular association is legitimated by the place it holds in the work as a whole. Umberto Eco, for example, warns against the paranoic interpretation that deduces from 'a minimal relationship the maximal possibility' (Eco 1994, p.48). This paper is based on a reading of gameplay in terms of the contextualising story and characters. It may be argued that these two modes do not hold equal weight in the game, with the game leaning heavily toward gameplay and giving little thought to such things as character development. Is it, then, a legitimate or 'paranoic' strategy to make the link between the ambivalence in the story and

recursion in the gameplay? This is a question that will be developed over the course of the paper. The last principle, coherence, suggests that the interpretation ought to 'hang together' in some satisfying way. One of the challenges to coherence that will be encountered is the fact that *SoTN* is a Japanese game with a European setting that has different versions in the Japanese, North American and European markets.

Synopsis of *SoTN*

Before discussing this parallel between ambivalence and recursion, a brief synopsis of the game's plot would be helpful. Alucard, the half-human son of Dracula (note the recursive names), is a vampire with a conscience who has arisen from a self-induced slumber–itself designed to protect the human race from his own vampire instincts–to defend humanity against the imminent resurrection of the Count. The manual informs us that his mother, Lisa, was a 'good, kind-hearted soul who was mistakenly executed as a witch' (Konami 1997, p.12). In the course of the game we learn that with her dying breath she implored Alucard to live at peace with humanity.

Also roaming the castle are Richter Belmont and Maria Renard, both of whom appeared in the previous *Castlevania* game, *Dracula X*. Richter is a vampire hunter from the legendary Belmont clan who has been kidnapped and hypnotised by Dracula's high-priest Shaft and turned to evil to prevent him from disrupting the resurrection. Maria, distantly related to the Belmont family by blood and more closely by her sister's marriage to Richter, has entered Castlevania to find her missing brother-in-law. On first meeting Richter, Alucard believes him to be the master of the castle, until Maria informs him of a way of breaking the spell he is under. Alucard breaks the spell, at which point a second castle, an almost exact inverse of the first, appears. Alucard enters this inverted castle, and finds and defeats Dracula. Depending on the player's performance the game ends in one of four ways, but it is only in the *best* ending, triggered if the player explores both castles to completion before despatching Dracula, that the fruition of a romantic relationship between Alucard and Maria is implied.

SoTN locates its ambivalence primarily in Alucard. Here is the introduction we get to the protagonist in the rules section of the game's manual:

> You are Alucard. Raging through you is the hunger and bloodlust of your vampire father, and the gentle, empathetic compassion of your human mother. As you have tried to come to terms with that constant internal struggle, you have recognized an outer struggle as well—the need to destroy Castlevania and bury the demons both within the castle and within your soul (Konami 1997, p.14).

Alucard's ambivalence is clearly signalled here and fits very much within the gothic tradition of the ambivalent monster appalled by its own monstrosity seen elsewhere in Frankenstein's self-loathing monster, Jekyll's shame of Hyde, and, perhaps, Dracula's inability to look himself in the mirror. Further, this introduction explicitly draws a parallel between Castlevania—elsewhere in the manual described as a labyrinth (p.23)—and Alucard's soul, both containing demons to be vanquished.

In order to explore Alucard's ambivalence this paper will draw a parallel between the spatial configuration of the classical Minoan labyrinth and that of *SoTN*, both in terms of the structure of its narrative and of the castle itself. It is necessary to begin therefore with a brief discussion of the labyrinth, with particular emphasis on the idea of recursion, before applying this idea to the game.

Labyrinth

The difference between the terms *labyrinth* and *maze* is a matter of debate. While some separate the labyrinth from the maze, with the former being a classical, unicursal pattern consisting of a single path following a specific circuitous route and the latter, multicursal, kind springing up as late as the fifteenth century and marked by several crossing paths (Kern 2000), others argue that they are roughly synonymous, indicating a confusing path or series of paths (Matthews 1922; Doob 1990). Doob claims, for example, that before the Renaissance, when images of the multicursal labyrinth began to appear, the idea and image of the single path labyrinth encompassed simultaneously both types—the single winding path and the confusing network. Here, the unicursal pattern represents both the windings of the former and the errors of the latter and it is this combinatorial approach that I adopt in looking at *SoTN*.

It is important to understand the classical, unicursal labyrinth not primarily as a structure or a representation but a performance or instructions for a performance. Plutarch's first century telling of the Theseus myth is the best known gathering of sources on the classical Minoan labyrinth. In it, he flanks the famous story of Theseus' escape from the labyrinth—the ingenious construction of the great engineer Daedalus—with mention of two dances. The first is Ariadne's *choros* (meaning both dance floor and dance); another construction (or choreography) of Daedalus. The second is the *geranos* – most likely derived from the root *ger* meaning 'to wind' (e.g., Kern 2000; Lawler 1946)—or crane dance, which Theseus and others perform on the isle of Delos on their way home to Athens. While Plutarch sees this dance as a celebration of Theseus' successful navigation of the labyrinth's tortuous path through a spatial retelling of the adventure, Kern convincingly argues that Plutarch has it backwards. The original labyrinth was not a structure, but a dance. Specifically, it was the winding dance choreographed by Daedalus for Ariadne (her *choros*) and set in the floor of the Minoan palace in the now standard labyrinth pattern as an *aide memoire* and subsequently performed on Delos, with the Minotaur story being a later embellishment of this original ritual (Kern p.44; also, Cook 1925; Frazer 1922).

This performance has often entertained contradictory meanings (Kern; Layard 1936). The centre, for example, has been seen both as womb and tomb (Borgeaud 1974, p.5). The entrance has been figured as bringing both the living into the world and the dead into the after-world (Kern, p.30). These significances charge movement through the labyrinth with paradoxical meanings. The centre as womb, as a place of safety, is attractive, but life flows from, not toward it. Therefore, as the maze-walker moves toward the centre s/he is physically drawn toward it but symbolically repulsed. As tomb, it is separated from life. Yet the single path, like life to death, leads ineluctably to it.
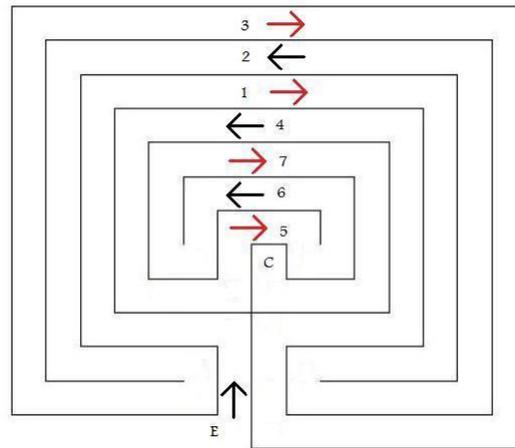
Figure 1: The classical labyrinth design, with its 7 paths and direction of travel toward the centre indicated.

The experience of moving through the unicursal labyrinth, as pictured in figure 1, is one of advance toward the centre and retreat toward the periphery. This advance and retreat occurs seven times. The first path leads the walker directly to a point diagonally adjacent to the centre. This path winds around to the second path, which is further toward the periphery. In turn, this path winds back around to the third. By this time the walker is at the edge of the labyrinth. Winding back again, the third path meets the fourth at a point directly next to the point of entrance. This constitutes the end of the first phase of outer paths, at which point the same pattern is repeated on the inner paths, with two exceptions: the paths are shorter and the directions are reversed. Fletcher (1983, p.334) sums up the experience of this movement:

> In the Cretan maze Theseus suffers a vertiginous loss of clarity as to what 'forward' means; to go 'forward', he must keep reversing his direction, that is, he must go backward. The tighter the arcs as he approaches the center, the more frequent will be this forced 'undoing' of the idea of forward motion. We might label this process 'the peril of reversing convolutions.

Put another way, the walker's relation to the centre and the periphery is, due to the specific pattern of the paths, recursive, with the oscillation between repulsion and attraction experienced almost simultaneously, and accelerating as the centre is approached.

Prologue

The mark of the recursive labyrinth is inscribed on *SoTN* from the battle between Richter and Dracula that serves as the game's prologue. This is a repeat of the end of a previous *Castlevania* title, the Japanese-only release *Akumajou Dracula X: Chi no Rondo* (Konami 1993) for the PC Engine[1], a game later adapted for the PSP and released in North America and Europe as *The Dracula X Chronicles* (Konami 2007). In 1995, between the release of *Chi no Rondo* and *SoTN*, an adaptation of *Chi no*

Rondo with the same story but different level designs appeared on the Super NES entitled *Dracula X* in North America, *Akumajou Dracula XX* in Japan and, in 1996, *Vampire's Kiss* in Europe (Konami 1995; 1996). It is *Chi no Rondo* that is referenced at the beginning of *SoTN*. At the time of the release of *SoTN*, Japanese fans – specifically PC Engine owners – would have been familiar with this scene. For European and American fans, for the most part, the story would have been familiar but the scene different. Even for those familiar with the PC Engine game the positioning of the scene at the start instead of the end of a game would have inscribed it with a completely different value. It would have been as a misremembered memory; a motif that we will encounter in the game itself at an important point in its plot. The player here must return to the previous game in order to access the new one; must, in other words, go back in order to go forward. This repetition with variation is, as we have seen, an essential idea in the labyrinth and a basic form of recursion.

As seen in figure 1, the labyrinth features an entrance, 7 winding paths and a centre. These can be seen to correspond to specific events in *SoTN*, as illustrated in figure 2. I am not, of course, suggesting that the structure of Castlevania is directly based on the labyrinth, but rather that the labyrinth gives us a way of theorising about the kind of recursive performance that the castle entails.
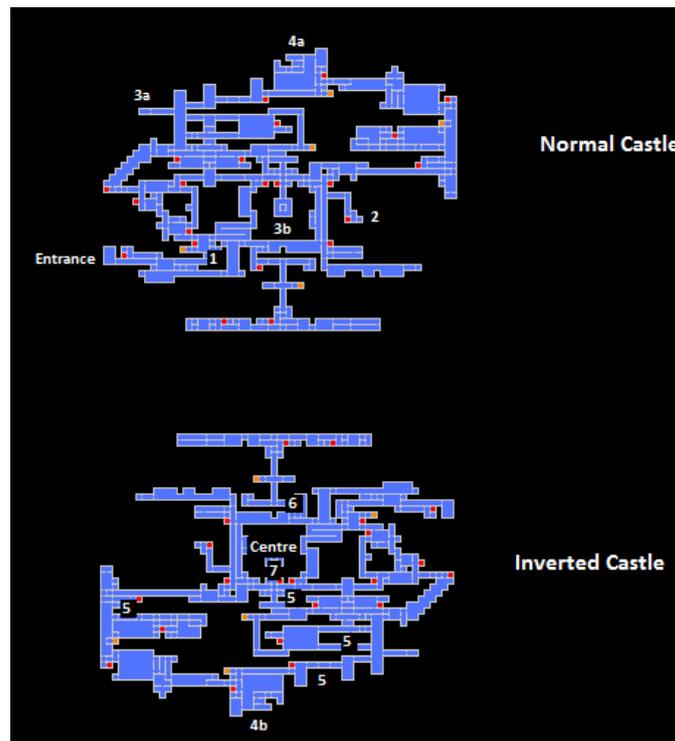

Figure 2: Above, the maps as they appear as overlays in the game, with turning points added. The numbers refer to turning points between the entrance in the normal castle and the centre in the inverted castle.

Labyrinth		Castlevania Events	
Entrance		Entrance to castle	Normal Castle
1	Outer paths	Alucard encounters Death for the first time	
2		Succubus episode – Alucard receives the gold ring	
3		Maria gives Alucard a) the silver ring and b) the holy glasses	
4	Central path	Alucard a) battles Richter and b) teleports to the inverted castle	
5	Inner paths	Alucard collects Dracula's relics	Inverted Castle
6		Alucard battles Death	
7		Alucard battles Shaft	
Centre	Centre	Alucard battles Dracula	

Entrance to the labyrinth/ Entrance to Castlevania

The labyrinth's entrance can be related to the image of Alucard speeding through the forest – not under the player's control – and entering Dracula's castle. This can be seen as the complement of the recursion in the prologue. While the prologue was a return for the player but not for the character, Alucard's homecoming is a return for the character but not the player, who is not in control of Alucard until the drawbridge shuts behind him. The reintroduction of Alucard to the franchise for the first time since his debut in *Castlevania III* (Konami 1989) is a return, but it is also recursive in a stronger sense in that it is the reversal of a journey. In the opening scroll we are told the following:

> Alucard, in order to purge the world of his own cursed blood line, had submerged his vampiric powers and entered into what was supposed to be an eternal slumber. But now, he is awake and aware of the evil once again at work in his homeland. (KCE Tokyo 1997)

It is clear from the above quoted passage that the physical act of returning home involves a reversal of Alucard's resolution to 'submerge[] his vampiric powers': an undoing of the psychological journey he took since *Castlevania III* and a return of his suppressed, evil side. It should be noted here that much of Alucard's ambivalence is already present in the *bishounen* or 'beautiful boy' character type he is drawn from. The most characteristic trait of this type, which has a long history in Japanese literature and art but a particularly visible presence in Japanese popular culture of the last forty years, is his androgyny, which can be considered a special case of ambivalence. In the game, the cutscenes tend to be short, with little expressive range and little opportunity for the development of nuanced character. These cutscenes adapt this ready-made character type, combining the androgyny of the *bishounen* and the vampires of Anne Rice's novels, with a briefly sketched family drama. The *bishounen* character type provides an anchor from which sexual, domestic and moral ambivalence can be suggested with minimal cutscenes. In terms of expression, the

use of this character type allows the cutscenes to punch above their weight; to resonate throughout the work in a way that belies the relatively short amount of time they take up in the game.

Before proceeding with the mapping of the labyrinth's turning points to those of *SoTN*, let us first outline a pattern of movement in which the player-character engages early in the game that is indicative of the general recursive, labyrinthine patterns that permeate *SoTN*. In the early part of the game the map only reveals parts of the castle that the player-character has already explored. Nonetheless, inaccessible parts of the castle are inferred through locked doors and platforms that are too high or far off to reach. After a short time we can buy a better map that reveals other sections of the castle. But it too is incomplete, containing tell-tale signs of hidden rooms and passages through gaps in borders and large, enticing blank spaces. In order to stop Dracula, Alucard must first reach these initially inaccessible and hidden places. This involves Alucard in several journeys from one end of the castle to the other and back.

One such typical journey occurs near the beginning of the game. This takes us, due to various locked doors and impassable gaps, from the alchemy laboratory in the lower left quadrant of the castle to the master librarian, seller of keys, in the upper right, and back. We encounter this kind of recursive movement throughout the game and these movements are executed alongside the recursions of the game's plot. The recursive movement outlined is by no means unique to *SoTN*. Many games involve this pattern as a core element of their gameplay. Most obviously, this gameplay pattern, in which a character must go back and forth through a maze which opens itself up as the character collects equipment and becomes more powerful, is present in the early *Metroid* games. However, I am not arguing here that the pattern is anything more than a videogame convention but rather that when this convention is seen in combination with the specific story and characters that we encounter in *SoTN* it takes on an expressive role that the convention does not necessarily have in other games.

1. Death

As we have seen, at the beginning of the first path the labyrinth sends the walker from near the centre on a route to the periphery. This occurs in *SoTN* at the first turning point: Alucard's confrontation with Death. After entering the castle and despatching a number of monsters easily with a powerful set of weapons including sword, shield, armour, cape and necklace, Alucard reaches a room where Death, figured as the skeletal grim reaper, implores him on Dracula's behalf to renounce his quest. When Alucard refuses, Death confiscates his weapons. Alucard is left considerably weaker and what formerly seemed a simple dash past a series of easily bested foes becomes a sequence of laborious trials, a peripety analogous to the labyrinth's forcing of the treader at this point from centre to periphery. Gradually, Alucard re-approaches a condition of strength equal to that in which he entered the castle as he collects weapons and armour of ever-increasing power.

Here, Alucard displays an ambivalent attitude to Death in that he neither fights him nor flees from him. This ambivalence is reinforced throughout the game in the

recursive game over/reload routine. Here, game over and death are associated, as they are in many videogames. But videogames can treat death in markedly different ways. When Mario (Nintendo, 1985) turns to the player, eyes wide open in surprise, hands and feet splayed, and drops off the front of the screen we might talk about losing a life or of Mario dying. But the game itself does not use the words life and death, preferring '1-up', 'game over' and 'continue'. In *SoTN*, contrastingly, death is openly identified as death. Unlike in *Super Mario Bros.*, where death is a metaphor for game over, in *SoTN* game over is a metaphor for death.

Returning to life usually entails a movement back several rooms from where the death occurred. The player must then direct Alucard back to the point of death, retracing the steps recently taken, to repeat the traumatic battle with the previously victorious monster. This is done repeatedly until the event is mastered, that is until the monster is defeated. But, this mastery complete, Alucard must move on to stronger monsters, that is, toward many more deaths, which will need to be repeated and mastered again and again. This relationship between life and death is a particularly labyrinthine theme. Greene (2001, p.438), for example, has identified the labyrinthine dances of the 16th-century French court as an enactment of 'the persistence of life in the presence of death'. This routine of continuous return to the scene of death is present in many games but takes on a particular significance in *SoTN* firstly because of the meaning that life and death carry in the game's story and secondly because of the formal features of the save-reload routine.

Both the vampire-hunting Belmont family and Dracula are immortal, but the source of their immortality differs, with the Belmonts' legitimate immortality contrasting with Dracula's illegitimate immortality, guaranteed by his aberrant nature and the devotion of misguided or deranged occultist devotees. The Belmont family, then, gains immortality through procreation that is socially legitimated by the family name whereas Dracula gains immortality through the dark arts, represented in *SoTN* by his high-priest Shaft.

Each time Alucard dies he is performing his human, mortal side; rejecting, in a manner of speaking, this non-legitimate form of immortality and thus rejecting Dracula. But this rejection is mocked by the game over screen and invalidated by the nature of the save-reload routine. When Alucard dies at the hands of the castle's monsters we do not get Mario's casual departure and immediate return to the last checkpoint; we get a full production. His body is thrown back in a slow-motion spiral, spraying blood in all directions before disintegrating vampire-fashion. There is a slow screen wipe to reveal a picture comprising a monster's skeleton and a half-buried crucifix on a chain in the foreground. In the background is Dracula's mist-enshrouded castle surrounded by bats and lit by a full red moon. Over this a deep voice intones, 'Game over', words which are printed in Gothic font on top of the picture. Printed below, in the same font, is the intriguing invitation, 'Let us go out tonight for pleasure. The night is still young' (KCE Tokyo 1997).

The silhouetted castle in the background, as well as being a conventional sign for Dracula, clearly removes the player from the game space. The abandoned crucifix, which is one of Alucard's weapons in the game, represents the failure of the vampire-hunter. But why the dead monster? The reason we are seeing this screen is because we *failed* to kill a monster. Is this dead monster then representative of Alucard

himself and his own monstrosity, his own 'cursed blood' (KCE Tokyo 1997)? This squares with the invitation, which seems to be addressed to both the player and the character. It is an exhortation to try again, but it is phrased not in conventional videogame language ("Continue?"), nor the duty-bound language of the vampire-hunter, but the sensual language of the vampire. That is, it talks to Alucard the vampire rather than Alucard the human. In dying, Alucard embraces mortality but is met with his immortality.

After a short interval we are returned to the title screen and must press start, select a file from the memory—a far more laborious and self-conscious reload routine than that of any of the previous *Castlevania* titles—and begin again at the last save point. Each save point is a room containing a large red and yellow dodecahedron that beats like a heart while slowly rotating. On saving, this heart-like object spins more rapidly before exploding and reforming as a coffin bearing the image of a cross which encases Alucard for a moment before disappearing completely, saving a memory file and refreshing Alucard's health. Alucard's ability to rest in a coffin (vampire, and associated with his father Dracula) imprinted with a cross (human, and, as we shall see, associated with his mother Lisa) clearly signals his ambivalence, as does his ability to wield a crucifix, carry holy water and so on. So too does the transformation of the dodecahedron heart (life) into the coffin (death) in order to preserve life.

2. The Succubus/Lisa

As is clear from the manual, Alucard's moral ambivalence is derived from the Manichean conflict between the 'kind-hearted' Lisa and the 'dark and evil' Dracula (Konami 1997, p.12). We have already drawn on this conflict between Alucard's good, human, maternal side and his evil, vampire, paternal side in relation to death and immortality, but the source of this conflict is most fully explored a short time after Alucard's first meeting with Death, in the *Nightmare* episode in which he battles the Succubus.

This episode occurs during the first half of the game in an area that looks like a save room in all points except colour, it being purple instead of red. On accessing the save point in this area, Alucard, instead of resting in a coffin, enters a nightmare. In this nightmare, Alucard sees his mother hanging on a cross at the moment of her crucifixion. The dream departs from Alucard's memory of the event when his mother, with her dying breath, enjoins him not to forgive humankind but to avenge her death. Alucard then recognises this image of his mother as the Succubus, whom he slays. In so doing Alucard's memory of Lisa's last words reverts to the original, which he quotes to Dracula at the end of the game: 'She said do not hate humans. If you cannot live with them, then at least do them no harm. For theirs is already a hard lot' (KCE Tokyo 1997). Once Alucard wakes from the nightmare back into the room, it yields a gold ring which, together with a silver ring later received from Maria, gives Alucard access through the clock room to the centre of the castle.

How we interpret this scene depends very much on how we characterise the game. This is a Japanese game, with a European setting, and with translated, localised versions in North America and Europe. The setting brings to the fore potent images and themes that may have more relevance to European and American players than

they do to the Japanese designers who created the game or to Japanese players, for whom such images may signify nothing more than a vague occidentalism. Many of these images that have the trappings of 18th century Europe are clearly playing off ideas with a particular currency in Japanese popular culture and are somehow drained of the significance they would have in a European context. When they are re-introduced to a European audience are they rehabilitated or do they retain—and ought we in our interpretation of them restrict ourselves to—the overtones they have in the context of the game's production? For example, in this Japanese vampire game does the cross still suggest the crucifix or has it become completely drained of its relationship to a specific piece of Christian iconography?

In order to think around this problem let us offer two interpretations of this succubus scene. The first brings to the fore the religious overtones of the imagery employed. The second interprets the imagery in terms of Japanese history and popular culture.

If we adopt the first approach, we note the strange manner of Lisa's execution. Crucifixion was not used as a form of punishment in Medieval or Renaissance Europe (Grossman 1998, p.64), and so her crucifixion is jarring. We would expect her to be burned at the stake. The fact that she is crucified seems to refer to Christ's crucifixion, and her appeal to Alucard to live at peace with humanity in spite of her death at their hands has resonances of Luke 23:34: 'Forgive them father for they know not what they do'. These associations – her philosophy, her final words, and the method of her execution – establish Lisa as a Christian figure in antithesis to Dracula.

However, if we approach the game as a part of Japanese culture we might reach different conclusions. Crucifixion was practiced in Edo Japan, and the game may be drawing on this tradition, but the practice here was probably suggested by the cult of Christianity introduced by Jesuits in the late 16th and early 17th centuries (Moore 1968, p.145). In this sense the crucifixion image has only an indirect reference to Christ, and what is more important is the visceral nature of the method of execution (and, perhaps, the fact that it is easier to represent crucifixion than immolation in the two-dimensional scenes of the game).

Perhaps a more influential source of Lisa's character is the Japanese tradition of female martyrdom that Ian Buruma (1984, p.18) has identified as 'the eternal mother'. Buruma suggests that the long-suffering mother who willingly gives up her life for her family is a persistent type in Japanese culture. He suggests that typically the 'eternal mother' gives up her life magnanimously but leaves her son racked with guilt at the way in which he treated her when she was alive. Buruma contrasts this 'eternal mother' with an equally pervasive Japanese figure of femininity, the demon woman, and this image of Lisa/Succubus seems to bring these two types together.

In choosing between these interpretations—the European and the Japanese—we must think about the version of the game we are playing. There are clear attempts in the localisation and translation of the game to lean toward western glossings of the game's images, particularly in religious terms. Richter's exchange with Dracula in the prologue is in the Japanese version a debate concerning justice in which Dracula claims that justice is decided by power, whereas Richter claims it is by mercy. Religion (宗教) is not mentioned in the Japanese version of the game. Faith (信仰) is

mentioned by Dracula, and belief (信念) by Richter, but these words do not have specifically religious connotations.[2] For Dracula faith is a symptom of human greed, whereas Richter is describing the shared set of beliefs that bring people together. In the English version, however, Dracula explicitly styles himself as a religious figure. Responding to Richter's claim that he 'steal[s] men's souls' (KCE Tokyo 1997), Dracula counters, 'Perhaps the same could be said of all religions' . Richter himself casts Dracula as a pseudo-religious figure, if only to reject the legitimacy of this characterisation, saying 'Mankind ill needs a savior such as you'. In the penultimate cutscene of the game we again get the introduction of religious ideas into the localised version of the game. In both versions Dracula, on being defeated by his son, comes to understand his defeat to be a result of the loss of his true love, Lisa. The English version, however, couches this in specifically Christian terms, with Dracula quoting the bible: '"For what profit is it to a man if he gains the world, and loses his own soul?" Matthew 16:26 I believe.'

By charging the translations with religious language the localised game could be said to access the religious significance of some of the images in the game, including Lisa's cross. However, it is not necessary to adopt this religious reading. Whichever of these interpretations we adopt, this nightmare fleshes out the dramatic father-mother-son relationship that was introduced in the manual and is central to the game's narrative. We have now met each of the players in this drama, though the mother remains tantalisingly absent from the game. From this point we are aware that Alucard is aligned with his mother, a human being who preaches forgiveness of human foibles, against his father, a vampire who will entreat Alucard to join him in their destruction. The Freudian overtones of the plot which involves a son returning home to kill his all-powerful father and on the way having a nightmare in which he puts to the sword his succubus-demon-mother are unavoidable. This is, however, a Freudianism that comes to us through the horror genre rather than the annals of psychoanalysis. The strange manner of his mother's recurrence—as succubus—marks her as an object of illicit sexual desire. Alucard's violent reaction to his discovery of the image's demonic nature may be read as his recognition, and perhaps symbolic fulfilment, of this desire.

The Succubus, then, represents two returns: that of the repressed oedipal desire and also of a memory that has been corrupted. In the first case the Succubus is a figure for the return of the repressed. In the second it is more complex. Here it is figured as the force, again within Alucard, responsible for changing Lisa's last words. Pursuing further the Freudian reading that presents itself here we might speculate that Alucard's nightmare distorts Lisa's final words in order to reconcile the tension of the conflicting world-views of the father and of the mother. Freud sees the resolution of the Oedipus complex in the identification of the son with the father and the establishment of the super-ego (Freud 1960, pp. 22-36). For the unfortunate Alucard, however, the father is antithetical to civilisation and is therefore part of what must be repressed. It is only through identification with the mother—through the internalisation of her Christian ideal—that Alucard may enter civilisation. But this is logically impossible. To progress through the game Alucard must gather to him the supernatural legacies passed on to him by his father such as the power to transform into animals, to command spirits, and to cast spells. But in so doing Alucard contravenes Lisa's injunction toward mercy. Also, by the very action of killing the constantly reanimating monsters (repressing the constantly returning repressed)

Alucard's own vampire powers grow stronger. Therefore the more he leans toward the legitimate side of this binary, the more the repressed side asserts itself.

The paradox facing Alucard, then, is that in order to obey Lisa's final words, he must disobey them. By changing these words, and thus reconciling the mother to the father's moral system, Alucard attempts to resolve this logical paradox; to settle his ambivalence. But his resistance to this change, figured by his killing of the Succubus, keeps the paradox intact.

3. Maria

The awkwardness of the scenes between Alucard and Maria, though perhaps due to poor script and acting, and significant of Alucard's sexual reticence or ambiguity, is also associated with his ambivalent attitude toward the two kinds of immortality that the game sets up. If Dracula's spokesman Death offers Alucard a life without end through occult means, Maria offers Alucard a life without end by situating him, through marriage, within the Belmont family line.

The structural recursion seen in the arrangement of scenes between Alucard and Maria mirrors this dilemma. Of the game's fifteen cutscenes, five are meetings between Alucard and Maria. These mould their relationship in a recursive pattern hinging around Alucard's first meeting with Richter. The first three scenes attempt to establish a sexual charge between the pair, with Maria flirting in a way that undermines Alucard's veneer of chivalric aloofness with teasing jibes like 'As friendly as ever, I see,' and 'Impressive, you're very strong' (KCE Tokyo 1997).

The next two cutscenes between the pair occur after Alucard has discovered, or so he thinks, Richter to be the master of the castle. These cutscenes lack the flirtatious tone of the previous three. Learning of Richter's turn to evil, Maria is in no mood for romance. In the first of these scenes Maria accuses Alucard of being mistaken about Richter, but in the second she apologises and asks for his help, imploring, 'you are the only one I can count on.' Maria has regressed here from the feisty, independent vampire hunter of their first three meetings to a far meeker type, relying on Alucard's assistance. Bested by Maria's verbal sallies in the first three cutscenes, Alucard now occupies a dominant position in the relationship. In the Sega Saturn version of the game, this reversal is emphasised with Alucard physically defeating Maria at this point to prove his ability to face Richter. Once Maria gives Alucard the holy glasses which will enable him to defeat the power controlling Richter, she reverts to the passive and ultimately abandoned Ariadne, the giver of the clue of thread, to Alucard's active, heroic Theseus. From this point, her vampire hunting power is reduced to words, when Alucard advises her, ''Tis best that you pray for the soul of your friend'.

As already mentioned, Maria functions as the prize that Alucard wins for attaining the best ending. But, as a prize, what does she represent? Primarily, she is, as suggested, a means of Alucard entering civilisation through an alliance with the Belmont family, and in this she is a legitimate object of sexual desire that stands in contrast to the illegitimate Lisa/Succubus. Maria corresponds to Lisa in several ways. Superficially, both are fair. More importantly, their personalities are similar. By

entering Castlevania Maria demonstrates Lisa's willingness to sacrifice herself; in refusing to condemn the apparently fallen Richter, she re-enacts Lisa's forgiveness. But perhaps the most intriguing parallel between the two is buried in the game's sound files in what seems to be a removed cutscene (whether it is present in the original Japanese game I do not know) most probably triggered by some event in the battle between Richter and Alucard. This is the dialogue as transcribed at the Castlevania Dungeon website (2011):

> Maria: Wait! Don't hurt Richter anymore!

> Richter: Ma.. Maria?

> Maria: Richter!

> Richter: You saved me!

> Male voice (perhaps Shaft?): If not for you, I would have lost this fool.

> Female Demon (Maria?): EEYAAAHH! Uh! Hahaha! Four Demons I hold you to your oath. Defend your master who commands you!

> Female Demon: Oh! Such power in such a little girl. Hahahaha!

> Female Demon: EEYAAAHHH! It won't end like this! You should be destroyed along with this castle. Hahaha!

> Alucard: It's over, but the sacrifice was great. Maria, Richter... I did not wish for you to die. Such is the fate of mortals. I'm certain that some dark force was behind Maria's transformation, but it doesn't matter now.

If we accept this dialogue as a part, if a well-hidden part, of the text the parallels between the Succubus/Lisa and the demon/Maria are clear, both being based in a clash of the 'demon woman' and the 'eternal mother' as described by Buruma (1984). But while in the first hybrid it is Lisa who is absent from the game, in the second it is, as the game is presented, the demon that is absent. Maria represents here not just a repetition of the demonic mother but also the possibility of the demonic side being successfully repressed, being consigned to the unconsciousness of the game's unused sound files. This casts the best ending, in which Alucard wins Maria, in a new light. Alucard does not just get the girl; he aligns himself with a person who has reconciled in herself—or at least successfully repressed—the ambivalence that also haunts him.

We have now identified three themes of ambivalence with respect to Alucard, and these are the themes that are underlined in the various forms of recursion that pervade the game. His core ambivalence is the oedipal dilemma or, to use put it another way, the family drama that I have described in relation to the *Nightmare* episode and this can be understood as the irreconcilable tension between the father and the mother. Spawning from this central tension is Alucard's ambivalent attitude toward Death, representative of an illicit, occult immortality and his ambivalent attitude toward Maria, representative of a sanctioned, genealogical immortality.

4. Richter

Having received the holy glasses from Maria, Alucard faces Richter in the throne room, familiar from the battle between Richter and Dracula that closed the last game and opened the present one. Players who reach this room without having fully explored the castle may see this as the final battle: the labyrinth's centre. If this is the case, Alucard faces Richter, the supposed master of the castle, and defeats him. This brings about the destruction of the castle, a cutscene, and the credit list. It is perfectly possible that a player may accept this as the ending of the game. If Richter is killed at this point then the paradox that binds Alucard seems to be resolved. Alucard apparently makes good on Lisa's final words, thus upholding the moral system of the mother without destroying and thereby becoming Dracula. The Oedipus complex resolved satisfactorily, Alucard may enter civilisation. This situation triggers two possible cutscenes, but in neither does Alucard explicitly state either his intention to return to his hibernation or enter civilisation. This is an anticlimactic ending in other senses too. Dracula is not encountered; Richter's turn to evil is not explained; Maria's presence in the castle is made to seem redundant. This anticlimax leaves doubt in the player's mind and suspicion that the paradox has not been resolved but side-stepped.

The only way for a player to avoid mistaking this for the game's ending is to get the full story, and this is done by exploring the castle completely. Whether the impetus to bypass this false ending lies in the determination to resolve the story in an aesthetically satisfying way—that is to tie up all the loose narrative ends – or in the player's desire to fully explore the castle—to get 100%—is a moot point and probably depends a great deal on an individual's playing styles and relative attention to character and story. For my own part, I feel a slight pang of guilt that I despatched Richter without a second thought. Only subsequently, on returning to the game to explore the rooms I had missed, did I discover my mistake. This is clearly an example of recursion performed by the player; the player driven to return to the ostensibly beaten game to settle the niggling feeling that Castlevania had not yet given up all its secrets.

The disillusionment of Richter signals a significant turning point in the game. In the oedipal drama I have sketched out it represents a central moment and it also gives rise to a major reversal in the game. As I have argued, the more Alucard represses his vampiric side the more it asserts itself. When faced with Richter an unthinking player (me, on my first play-through) will kill him straight away. A more scrupulous player—or one with greater faith in Richter or humanity in general—may waver, returning to explore the rest of the castle to make sure that Richter is really to blame. This is a moral choice between Alucard's two sides: the father's callous misanthropy against the mother's mercy. But this is not framed as a choice of equal alternatives. Once Alucard has entered the throne room the player must either kill Richter or die.[3] But it is only in dying—a repetition of Lisa's Christ-like/eternal mother self-sacrifice— that the player might further explore the castle in order to consciously find the full story on Richter before facing him again. This retreat *in extremis* would signal Alucard's continued resistance to his identification with his father but simultaneously propels him toward its full manifestation by compelling him to destroy Dracula. Again we see the labyrinthine motif of moving in one direction only to move in the other—to repress only to bring about the return of the repressed.

5. The inverted castle

Once Richter recovers, Alucard sends him and Maria outside Castlevania and enters a teleport to the second, inverted castle. This inverted castle is structurally the same as the castle through which Alucard has just passed except it is now upside down and it contains a host of different, more powerful monsters. Alucard must now explore this version of the castle to completion—repeat his journey in reverse— before killing first Shaft and then Dracula. This inversion has turned what seemed like the endpoint—the throne room has hosted the final battle in numerous *Castlevania* games—into the midpoint. In this sense it is like the fourth path of the labyrinth which is both as close to the centre as possible and only about halfway through. It is the beginning of the second phase of winding paths. In this phase, though, the windings are tighter and the sense of approaching the centre is greater.

So it is in *SoTN*. The inverted castle is a repetition of the normal castle but with a difference. The story is clearer, and there are fewer cutscenes. Exploration is swifter due to the player's familiarity with the castle. Alucard is stronger, with a complete set of weapons and items to help him and, though the monsters have become stronger too, Alucard generally moves about the castle with greater ease like, one might say, he—or the player—owns the place, corresponding perhaps to the removal of the usurper Richter and restoration of Alucard's birthright. Alucard is becoming master of the castle and dangerously close to becoming Dracula.

The recursive nature of this second half of the game is guaranteed by two factors. The first has already been mentioned; that is the requirement to explore the entire castle in order to get the best ending. The second involves the conditions Alucard must meet before challenging Dracula. In order to access the room at the centre of the castle in which Dracula is to be resurrected, Alucard must first retrieve five relics that are metonymically related to Dracula – his rib, heart, tooth, eye and ring. Unlike in *Castlevania II* (Konami 1987), where a similar list of items is needed to resurrect Dracula, here they merely open the gateway to the resurrection chamber through the clock room. In other words, the relics in the second half of the game correspond, in function, to the gold and silver rings in the first half of the game.

While the brace of rings was associated with Lisa and Maria, the collection of relics is associated with Dracula. The rings and the relics, then, serve to balance each other, across both halves of the game and across both halves of Alucard's nature. While the rings signified an acceptance of his mortal side but simultaneously led to a strengthening of his vampire side, the relics signify an acceptance of his vampire side that is necessary for its ultimate rejection. The gathering of these relics, then, parallels Alucard's growing vampiric powers; both represent an acceptance, indeed an active seeking out and appropriation of that which he wishes to destroy.

6. The return of Death

One of the relics Alucard must collect at this stage is attained after a battle with Death, and this represents the next turning point in the game. As with all of the turning points, this is also a returning point. As with all returning, it is repetition with a difference. Death returns, as he promised to do in the first half of the game, and once

again asks Alucard to desist, in a phrase that echoes his previous exhortation to 'cease your attack,' but this time adding an appeal to the authority of Dracula: 'In the name of your Father [*sic*], cease this foolishness' (KCE Tokyo 1997). This adaptation of the first line of the Christian Trinitarian formula ('In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost') puts Dracula at the head of a metaphysical system involving the monsters and ghouls of Castlevania that is an alternative to Christianity, the system that exists legitimately outside Castlevania as it is represented in the human characters of Lisa, Richter and Maria. When Alucard refuses to give up his quest 'while there is breath in [his] body,' Death responds with the threat: 'Then for the Master, I'll feast on your soul this night,' re-emphasising Dracula's authority and his own submission to that authority.

Clearly, in the above interpretation of Death's appeal we have returned to a Christian scanning of the game. Again, we are relying on the translation of Death's exhortation to establish Dracula's regime in terms of the Trinitarian. The Japanese text has '父君のため' for 'in the name of your Father'. This should translate as something like 'for the sake of your father', and we therefore do not get a coincidence with the Japanese version of the Trinitarian, which would be something like '父の御名によって.'[4] Of course, this is added to the fact that in Japan the Trinitarian does not have the same cultural currency as 'In the name of the Father' does in the west.

What matters here is not so much the question of whether we imbue the game's images with the meanings suggested by the setting (18th century Transylvania), or the context of production (20th century Japan) but rather whether we are interpreting the original Japanese game or the localised western version. By comparing the Japanese and the English texts it is clear that the localised version is leaning toward a Christian reading, particularly with the capitalisation of the word 'Father', in a way that cannot be justified if we see the Japanese game as the legitimate text. This alters the game, though it does not fundamentally alter the interpretation offered here. In the localised version, we get the contrast between Alucard's two sides and between Dracula and Lisa in terms of a Christian metaphysics. In the Japanese version we still have the same contrasts, but they do not have the same religious overtones.

Victory in this second encounter with Death is necessarily an ambiguous event, given the game's particular signification of mortality. While the character of Death represents mortality in one sense—the Grim Reaper as widely recognised personification of death—in another sense he represents the promise of immortality; the illegitimate immortality of Dracula. Therefore, does Alucard's defeat of Death represent a victory *of* mortality—in its rejection of Dracula's overtures—or does it represent a victory *over* mortality—as it does, for example, in countless medieval stories about mortals' attempts to trick the Grim Reaper? The answer is, I think, both. The game holds these two meanings in tension with each other, again representative of Alucard's bind.

7. Shaft

The next major battle that Alucard must fight is against the high-priest Shaft, the occultist responsible for the imminent resurrection of Dracula. This is the second time we have encountered Shaft in the game, appearing earlier as the force controlling Richter in the throne room battle, revealed only once Alucard disillusions Richter. It is the fourth time he has appeared in the series, though, having been a character in *Chi No Rondo*. In this earlier game, Shaft appears twice, the second time as a ghost. In *SoTN* on both occasions we encounter his translucent, ghostly form. He is, therefore, a character who has accepted Dracula's version of immortality, constantly returning in spite of the combined efforts of Richter and Alucard. Shaft is not only the recipient of this unsanctioned immortality but also its instrument, being the means by which Dracula is able to return from the grave before his requisite hundred year sleep.

The second time we meet Shaft in *SoTN* he greets Alucard by saying, 'You have done well in making it this far. I would expect nothing less from the son of our Master' (KCE Tokyo 1997). This not only interpellates Alucard as his father's son, thus undermining Alucard's rejection of Dracula, it also ascribes the success of his quest to Alucard's vampire side, pointing up the psychological conflict that I am suggesting is at the heart of Alucard's ambivalence throughout the game. The word 'our', including Alucard in Shaft's subservience, also implies the mastery of Dracula over Alucard in the son's indebtedness to the father for the powers that make his victory possible.

An obvious antithetical correspondence is displayed between Lisa, the eternal mother, and Shaft, in his own understanding of his death as a form of martyrdom, with his dying words demonstrating a willingness to sacrifice himself for the greater goal:

> Bu ... But my goal is achieved ... Count Dracula is come to purify this corrupt world with the searing flames of chaos. (KCE Tokyo 1997)

But a more poignant antithetical relationship is established between Shaft and Maria. Primarily this is due to the fact that Shaft's last stand occurs in the inverted version of the room in which Maria gave Alucard the holy glasses. Maria, as noted, represents for Alucard, through procreation, a means of becoming a Belmont and situating himself within a legitimate form of immortality through an authorised line of descent. Shaft, like Maria, is an instrument guaranteeing immortality, but the immortality he offers is of the occult, the unsanctioned kind. Repeating a recursive pattern well-established by this point in the game, Alucard's victory over Shaft does not settle this dilemma but merely intensifies its urgency, leading directly into the final battle with Dracula.

Centre: Dracula

The path in the labyrinth leads Theseus, regardless of its windings and regardless of the direction in which he is moving at a given time, always toward its centre. Similarly, Alucard's journey, both physical and psychological, is always ultimately pointed toward the destruction of Dracula and the rejection of his overtures. His

ambivalence is situated in his need to sometimes move away from this ultimate goal in order to attain it. As I have tried to show, this turning back and forth is both a physical feature of the castle and a psychological feature of the situation or of the story for both Alucard and for the player. In Fletcher's description of the labyrinth's recursive pattern as indicative of a psychological confusion for Theseus, the final paths of the labyrinth, involving as they do more tightly arranged turns and returns, correspond to an intensity of ambivalence (Fletcher 1983). So it is with the final battle between Alucard and Dracula, which occurs immediately after Alucard's defiance of the Castlevania order as represented by Shaft.

Alucard's battle with Dracula at the centre of the castle is the final repetition of the game. As with other examples throughout the game, this repetition gains its meaning through the difference it establishes between itself and its original. Having, at the game's opening, defeated Dracula as the human Richter, the player must now, at its close, face him as the vampire Alucard. This movement for the player from human to vampire is a parallel of the gradual and resisted growth we have seen of Alucard's own repressed vampiric side, representative of his identification with his father. This identification is, naturally, at its height in this final battle.

Before battling Dracula, Alucard—in the English language version of the game—reverses the corruption of the Trinitarian formula as previously stated by Death, saying 'In the name of my Mother [*sic*], I will defeat you again' (KCE Tokyo 1997).[5] The names of the Father and of the Mother in this scene and the earlier battle with Death clearly stand for the two sides of Alucard's nature and Alucard's reversal here is therefore a rejection of Dracula. But this reversal is not a simple restoration. In one sense, Alucard does restore the Trinitarian formula's Christian significance by associating it with the merciful, sacrificial Lisa, but in another he removes it from church doctrine by replacing a male with a female God. Because of the sins of the Father Alucard is unable to recuperate the original formulation, significant of his inability to enter patriarchal civilisation. This shifting of the formula around an absent original that can never be legitimately stated is an apt metaphor, then, for Alucard's own back and forth movement. Alucard's battle cry, followed as it is by the most complete display of his vampiric powers in the game, is perhaps the most succinct image of recursion and ambivalence in *SoTN*, calling on the contrary demands of the Mother and of the Father almost simultaneously.

Alucard's victory over Dracula does not resolve the paradox that was brought about by the specific circumstances of this oedipal drama. We can see this in the aftermath of Dracula's defeat. Unlike Theseus, who emerges as King from the opening he entered as child, Alucard is denied this transformative moment. His inability to resolve his ambivalence prevents him from entering civilisation and in the cutscene for this ending he categorically renounces society, stating, 'The blood that runs in my veins is cursed. Twould be best for this world if I were to disappear for ever' (KCE Tokyo 1997). The best ending leaves open the possibility of Alucard's entrance to civilisation through marriage to Maria and an alliance with the Belmont family, but this is by no means guaranteed, and at the game's conclusion Alucard remains caught in the windings of the labyrinth, unable to reconcile its contrary demands.

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Notes

[1]   The PC Engine is the Japanese version of the TurboGrafx-16 Entertainment SuperSystem.

[2]   For all translations I am indebted to Tae Tsutsui.

[3]   I presume here that the player first encounters Richter in the throne room before the castle has been fully explored. It is possible that the player enters the throne room having fully explored the castle and thus aware of Richter's possession and equipped to save him but given the relative ease of reaching the throne room compared with exploring the castle fully it is far more likely that this is not the case.

[4]   The full Trinitarian in Japanese is '父と子と聖霊の御名によって'.

[5]   The same question of translation applies here as before. The Japanese version has '母の名にかけて' – and 'in the name of my mother' is a more direct translation of this; but again it is different from the 'Japanese Trinitarian' mainly because it does not contain the honorific 御, which would roughly relate to the capitalisation of the word in English.