Reading Resident Evil-Code Veronica X

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a close "reading" of the computer game *Resident Evil-Code Veronica X*, in a practical attempt to argue for the application of reader response criticism to digital media.

KEYWORDS

reader response criticism, computer games, survival horror, reception aesthetics.

INTRODUCTION

Reading and interpretation have always been key themes in literary studies, either as related to the search for "the right" meaning of texts (hermeneutics), to the study of texts as containers of meaning (structuralism), or to the way that readers make sense of texts. This latter approach is what has been called *reader response criticism*, where critics are more interested in the *process* of reading texts than in the description of their intrinsic literary value[1]. For them, the recipient of a text is not passive but engaged in a demanding process, and the meaning of the text is dynamically created *in* the reading. This point of view has generated a wide range of not always complementary approaches[2], including a focus on phenomenological or high level semiotic descriptions (Ingarden, Iser, Eco), history of reading (Jauss) and communities of readers (Fish), individual psychological response (Holland), deconstruction's interest on reading, misreading, and the necessity and impossibility of reading (de Man), and postmodern emphasis on power, gender or race in relationship to reading. These literary trends have in turn influenced other areas, that have also developed an interest on reception, notably media studies with examples such as Bordwell's theory of film reception.

This paper will apply some of the, to our mind, more fruitful concepts of reader response criticism to the analysis of a computer game in order to find out if this approach can be useful for the study of digital media. Games are a particularly interesting digital object, as they make use of most of the qualities of the medium to their full advantage. They also have quite a long history as cultural forms, which means that they have acquired a well established community of users, that is, players, who can recognize genre conventions and have developed their competences in a way that no other digital form can hope to match.

The theoretical concepts will be introduced alongside the description of different aspects of the game, so that our focus will be practical and theoretical at the same time, and will hopefully allow us to draw some conclusions as to the development of a reader response-based analysis method for the study of digital works.

Reader response criticism has sometimes avoided any kind of empirical study due to the difficulty of reproducing readers' mental models. We argue that such an analysis can yield interesting results, both as pertains to our understanding of computer games as aesthetic objects, and to our view of the reader/user's role in digital media beyond the controversial property of interactivity, as it will be discussed in the conclusion.

READER RESPONSE IN DIGITAL THEORY

Before plunging into the reading of *Resident Evil*, it is relevant to mention that reader response criticism has influenced the work of several digital theorists, particularly in the field of hypertext. None of them use it as a main steering point, with the possible exception of Jane Douglas, but it is worthwhile to briefly examine their take on it as we can extract some useful lessons for our own practice. Early work on hypertext is very often focused on how readers make sense of the new form: will they get lost, will they look for an ending, etc., as for example in Douglas's "Are We Reading Yet? A Few Pointers of Reading Hypertext Narratives" [5].

Furthermore, theorists such as Bolter [3] and Landow [15] have used reception aesthetics as a way to legitimize the critical status of the new form, together with other post-structuralist ideas such as postmodernism and deconstructionism. Phenomenological theories of reading have been identified with a pretended "embodiment" of these theories brought about by hypertext, so that hypertext would be the physical manifestation of the mental processes required to make sense of texts. This view has later been criticized by Espen Aarseth [1] among others.

In his study of games and narratives [12], Jesper Juul also takes distance from hypertext theorists, reminding us that reception aesthetics-oriented descriptions of the reader cannot be directly applied to games:

> The player is active in his/her influence on the game world, and this is a conscious act, that he/she tries to get better at. The reader does not influence the text *as text*, but performs an interpretation/ actualisation that (it could be claimed) basically works according to sub-conscious principles. The reader seldom tries to get *better* at reading a specific text (…). (chap. 5)

The reason for this crucial difference between texts and games is that games need more than interpretation in order to be played. We will return to that later, but let us by now just remember that games and other digital works cannot be exactly equated with literature, and that there are some dangers in the literal application of theories that were born for an entirely different medium.

Inspirational examples of reader oriented criticism coming from the field of hypertext can be found, among others, both in the work of Anja Rau, author of a phd thesis on reading interactive literature [20], and in that of Jane Yellowlees Douglas, who has produced many close readings of hypertexts [6]. Douglas has also attempted a description of the "affective pleasures of reading

hypertext", considering what she calls the immersive[3] and engaging properties of interactive texts in relation to the idea of flow as described by Csikszentmihalyi [7]; this article raises interesting questions about schemas and affective experiences that we will take up later.

RESIDENT EVIL CODE: VERONICA X[4]

This is a computer game in the survival horror/adventure genre, which basically means that the player controls a character that has to get out of some closed place (like a mansion), solving puzzles and destroying a lot of horrific monsters along the way. This game belongs to the "Resident Evil" series of games[5]. The overarching plot stretches across all the games, and although they can be played independently, it is easier to understand what is going on if one knows the story, specially because most of the games contain a lot of complicated subplots that relate to open questions from earlier games, etc. creating a vast fictional universe that partly explain the remarkable success of the series.

The story in *Resident Evil Code: Veronica X* is about a young woman, Claire Redfield, who travels to Europe to find her brother, Chris. Both siblings are survivors of previous games and enemies of the evil "Umbrella Corporation", that experiments with biochemical virus that turn people into zombies and monsters. Claire is captured by the company and sent to a prison in a monster-infected island, from which she will have to escape. Along the game the player controls three characters and uncovers yet more dark secrets of the evil corporation.

We can start our exploration of reader response related aspects by looking at the package of the game, and considering how it is presented for consumption, both in terms of visual appeal and in identifying the genre that the game belongs to. Figure 1 shows the European front cover of the game, very different from the American one, that presents half-bodied portraits of Claire and Chris and a picture of one of their enemies in the background. We could wonder if this is an attempt to adapt to the different markets, and if the real community of players (with their preferences and cultural background) has been taken into account by the publishing company. The American cover has a comic-book quality to it, both in the visual style and the positional connotations: the heroes and the super villain. On the other hand, the European cover tries to be more artistic: the close-up on Claire's face lets us see a zombie reflected on her blue eyes, the horror of his appearance contrasting strongly with the flawless beauty of her face. The motif of reflection in eyes appears again during the game, reminding us of the ancient literary fascination of *looking* at evil with innocent eyes. In this way, the cover ties in with one of the best established conventions of horror stories and films: the binary opposition between innocence (that will eventually be destroyed) and unjustified evil.

The player is thus placed in the role of the innocent, since Claire's eyes will be his eyes when playing the game[6]. When we watch a horror film, we can cover our eyes in the crucial horrific moment when the actor goes up the dark creaking stairs with the heavy door at the end; when we play this game, not only do we *have to* go up those stairs, but we are also forced to *look* all the time, no matter what horrors lie ahead, since a slip of attention might mean the death of our character. This kind of enforced voyeurism is one of the pleasures afforded by the horror genre that becomes intensified in games due to the need for constant attention and action. For Krzywinska [14] :

> the interactive dimension of horror games enables a more acute experience of losing control than

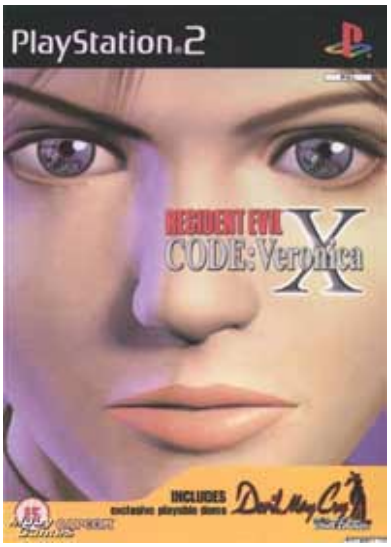

Figure 1: Front Cover

> that achieved by most horror films (…) because, at times, the player does have a sense of self-determination; when this is lost the sense of pre-determination is enhanced by the relative difference (p. 217).

She is referring to the cutscenes that sometimes take control away from the player, and later expands this idea to suggest that even the player´s free play is "determined by the game´s internal structure" (p. 220), so that interactivity doesn´t really present a problem to the horror genre premise of the recipient/reader giving up control. However, this is not a characteristic of horror games only, but of all linear games (by which we mean games with little or no emergent gameplay such as adventure games). The player would call up the more general schemas for linear games, that, independent of their theme or content are about exploring all available areas and picking up all available objects to solve the puzzles, with more or less combat depending on the particular game (a lot in the survival horror sub-genre).

The backcover of the game addresses the player directly as protagonist of the story described above, even though he will control the characters in a third person view: "Everything You Feared… And More! Experience the most terrifying chapter in survival horror as it transforms into the Playstation 2." There is a synopsis of the story, and then a list of features directed at attracting buyers; the most important being:

- Flesh eating zombies and horrific beasts haunt Claire's every move.
- Stunning environments – real time 3D allows for flickering lights and moving shadows.
- Learn the secrets of Umbrella Corporation's activities through incredible never-seen-before FMV cutscenes.
- Huge area to explore – bigger than all previous Resident Evil adventures.

These four features relate the story to the game, so that the player learns about the quality of the cutscenes (3), the fascinatingly realistic game world (3, 4), and the nature of the enemies, that will be many (1), with a hopefully efficient AI, since they are able to "haunt Claire's every move". The game is thus presented as a gripping story, a brilliant implementation of the latest technological advances, and a demanding game where exploration and combat will be the main activities. This description is actually faithful to reality, so that the role of the feature list is more descriptive than purely rhetoric, its function being to accurately depict what the player's experience will be like rather than to hype it (despite the enthusiastic adjectives). This can be explained if we consider that computer games vary immensely from one sub-genre to another, and distributors need to target their audience very specifically, because it is a rather conservative market. In other words, people won't buy the game unless they are sure beforehand that the experience will be to their liking. Product advertising and packaging, as well as game magazines and community websites act as extremely effective gatekeepers, so that we would say that the expectations of the gameplayer are much more fixed according to genres than those of the reader of novels, but we will return to this later in relationship to Eco's open and closed texts.

As for the actual physical experience, the game is played on a Sony *Playstation* 2, with a two-handed controller full of buttons, and equipped with *dual shock* technology that makes it vibrate at specific moments of the game. It can be completed in 20 hours without help from the "cheats" or walkthroughs, although I think it is realistic to expect to spend at least twice as much time with it. I tried to create a propitious environment by switching the lights off and disconnecting the phone when playing, and I can say that the immersion worked perfectly as the game was quite terrifying at times. This probably says more about me as a player than about the general experience of playing the game. Still, it might be worthwhile to investigate what kind of settings and attitudes are favoured by players of survival horror games, and if the experience is different on the consoles or the PC[7].

Start the game: usability, learning curve, repertoire, model reader

This part brings together two concepts from the computer world: usability and learning curve, with two reader response concepts: the repertoire and model reader. The point is that they complement each other as none of them completely covers the grey area of how do players understand and learn how to play a game where action/gameplay and story come together in such an entangled way. The two first concepts are very material or mechanically oriented (can we play at all?), and the two last refer more to the identification of the appropriate genre schemas and the basic context of the story (can we understand at all?), which also plays a big part in games of this kind. These are not trivial concerns, because conventions are not so established in the digital world as they are in print, and every time we face a new game we have to learn to operate it at all levels, including the material one. This is of course made easier by the fact that computer games already have a comparatively good set of developed conventions according to the different genres. It is often the case that reviewers will complain about games that don´t respect the established conventions, for example about interfaces that try something new that doesn't work; these games are criticized for abandoning the well known trodden on paths, the computer game world version of *hybris*.

Usability has a role to play in the creation of digital works and the understanding of their reception, since "bad" or "low" usability can discourage users from accessing the work at all, thus making the aesthetic experience impossible, as critic Anja Rau notes in her review of "Those Waves of Girls" [21]. We could say that usability is a precondition for the aesthetic experience to begin. As Pagulayan [19] suggests for games, usability considerations are important in the design process, but there is a vital difference between productivity applications (the usual area where usability studies are conducted) and games, in that usually effectiveness is not the reason for playing them, and that *fun* is an elusive concept that usability cannot explain (p. 8).

A usability study of *Resident Evil Code: Veronica X* would probably alert the designers about the difficulty of the interface through which the player interacts with the game. This is not such a big problem in games as it is in other applications, such as a word processor, since there is a certain pleasure in learning to master a difficult interface and making the most out of it during gameplay. Still, the problems of the interface here can get on the way of the enjoyment of this game (see below), even though in a perverse way the game remains true to its predecessors in the *Resident Evil* series, as they all have been criticized for the same reasons.

In *Resident Evil Code: Veronica X*, the player must be able to interact with two interfaces: the generic or external interface, that is, the controller of the Playstation 2, and the game interface as it appears on screen. The controller has the buttons that allow the player to move, shoot, etc. He has to learn to operate it and know what each button is called (for example L1 or R2) in order to be able to map the game interface to it. The mapping of the controller to the actions that our character can take on screen presents specific problems as the controls are quite clumsy, for example you cannot walk and shoot at the same time, and they are not very intuitive for movement, as all reviewers of this game have complained about.

There are also problems with the in-game interface that allows the player to access the inventory, save games, and information storage areas. It is a quite confusing interface

as to what area is active each time, and it is specially difficult to learn how to pick and drop items for use.

Here is where the learning curve of the game presents more problems, in the usability aspects, as the conceptual aspects are easier to figure out, as we will see.

In reader response terms, we could say that the learning curve is the initial process by which the reader adapts his *repertoire* to what the text requires of him. We could also say that it is the process by which an individual reader becomes the *model reader* of the particular text. To my mind, these two concepts are based on the same idea that the text (or digital work) contains the "clues" that define who will be able to read and understand it. The model reader refers to the internal workings of the text (for example, the plot), and the literary repertoire to the text external connections (for example, the genre). This is a simplistic but attractive distinction, as it is not always easy to differentiate between the level of the model reader or that of the literary repertoire, as they are both very intertwined[8].

The *literary repertoire* is described by Iser [10] as "the familiar territory within the text" (p. 69), that is, the references to earlier works, social and historical norms, etc. that the reader needs to actualize in order to have full understanding of the text. This brings context into the discussion without opening the door to excessively subjective interpretations or psychological particularities: the reader can only actualize what is already in the text. It is a matter of competence, and it can affect both content (for example recognizing a quote) or form (being able to interpret the conventions of comic books).

In the case of *Resident Evil Code: Veronica X*, the repertoire contains:

> -knowledge of the survival horror genre in computer games- basic premises such as: kill all monsters, pick everything up because there are puzzles, there is a *boss*, that is, a specially difficult to kill monster at the end of each level or area[9]
> -knowledge of the B-series horror movies that inspired this kind of games-this in order to place the game in the right cultural context, but also to get useful tips for action, for example we all know that zombies move really slowly, so you can probably dodge them instead of fight them all the time (something that will prove particularly useful since it is easy to run out of ammunition)
> -knowledge of where to find cheats and walkthroughs as you can get stuck, which stops the game (although this means stretching the repertoire to include meta-elements too, but it could be argued that they are part of the experience of most players in the community)

The repertoire is activated by "clues" in the game, that will indicate that we are immersed in a survival horror game (with its relations to horror movies and games in general). The clues are already in the game package, as we have described above, but if we were to start playing the game without having seen it, we would still be able to summon the right repertoire soon enough, as we immediately have to face the creaking stairs, and we find ourselves in the first graveyard with zombies already 10 minutes into the game.

As we can see, the repertoire refers mainly to knowledge about the game world and other related fiction genres, and it helps describe how the game *functions as an object.* It is a bit the equivalent of the usability barrier that we talked about before: if the right repertoire is not summoned, the game cannot be appropriately enjoyed. For example, if we wrongly summon the repertoire of "love story" to try to explain that a soldier helps Claire out of her cell in the first scene, we will concentrate on the fact that he is wounded, and waste all our time either staying in the cell with him, or trying to find some medicine to cure him (which will not happen until we have done many other things in the game). We will also be devastated when he dies later in the game.

This is not to say that players cannot purposefully subvert playing and understanding, and summon the wrong repertoires on purpose, for example playing the game

Figure 2: Inventory

as a zombie friend in the schema[10] "liberation of the oppressed". This might be fun, but we wouldn´t get very far, and it is certainly a kind of play totally unintended by the designers. Another important point is that the summoning of the repertoires need not be conscious, and that a player can perform well within genre conventions, without being able to be aware of and clearly isolate the individual clues and repertoire definitions.

It would be interesting to attempt a definition of game genres according to identification of repertoires, and in relation to how they organize their "clues". Without being able to perform within the preconditions of the literary repertoire (external) and the understanding of the textual strategies of the model reader both about form and content (internal), the text/game cannot be comprehended and enjoyed. But how does the model reader work?

Eco's definition of *model reader* is "a textually established set of felicity conditions to be met in order to have a macrospeech act (such as a text) fully actualized".

([8] p. 11). Authors have to make sure that their texts are communicative, by either using the same codes that they think their possible readers share, or by creating the competence of this model reader along the text, or, most likely, by a combination of the two.

The Model User for *Resident Evil Code: Veronica X* needs to:

> -learn to move inside the game-world- with the difficult controls: walking, running, jumping, dragging, shooting, etc. How is our knowledge of real space mapped onto virtual space, and what are the particular characteristics of this virtual space.
> -learn to use objects of various kinds- know what weapons are best for killing what monster, pick up

Figure 3: The cell

> all ammunition and curative herbs, pick up other objects as you might use them for puzzles (this is not very subtle as basically anything that appears has to be picked up)
> -remember the information and clues you find about your enemies, as it will be crucial to understanding their characters and solve puzzles (for example, there is a great deal of documents which contain solution to puzzles such as a password needed to operate a computer, or a map of the island; if we don´t take time to carefully examine the documents, we won´t be able to progress in the game)

Describing *Resident Evil*'s Model User reveals that even though it is based on action and gameplay (what competences are necessary to succeed in the game), it is very related to the correct interpretation of the game world. You could theoretically play the game without registering any of the information about the Ashfords (the Umbrella Corporation founding family), except for the fact that you need it to solve some of the puzzles and to have a feeling of being involved in a story and not just in a first-person shooter[11]. How the story evolves and how it is entwined with the gameplay is something for the next section.

Gaps and adjustement of expectations

For reader response criticism, the act of reading is vital for the transformation of the literary text from artifact into aesthetic object. Wolfgang Iser [10] tries to explain how this happens through his theory of the "filling in the gaps"[12], *leerstellen* in German. In a few words, it describes what happens when a reader starts from what the text says and figures out what it doesn't say. For example, if the text mentions that two new characters who meet in an elevator and exchange hateful glances, the reader will wonder what is the reason behind it: maybe they know each other already and have had a fight, maybe they are ex-lovers, maybe they are fans of opposing football teams… As readers we will probably try to confirm our hypotheses as we read, our interaction with the text a constitutive activity prompted by these blanks (p. 169)[13].

As mentioned in the introduction, several digital theorists have found the idea of gaps quite attractive, but they have used it erroneously, as Aarseth [1] explains. He warns us that the "openings" in cybertexts (for example the necessary decision to click one link or another, or the need for solving a particular puzzle in an adventure game) are not gaps in Iser's sense. They are not opening the text for our imagination to complete it, but are in fact filters "in which only the "correct" response lets the user proceed through the text". He calls these "keyholes", and distinguishes between those that advance the "strategic position of the player, and those than don't" (p. 111).

In the following pages, Aarseth [1]. proposes an alternative way of looking at how the reader interacts with the text with his concepts of intrigue, intriguee and intrigant (p. 112-114), that explain the relationship between the player, his avatar or main character and the plot of which they are "victims" in the sense that the player's activities can activate several possible outcomes of the plot. The main difference between a narrative plot and an ergodic one is that:

> the bewildered reader of a narrative can safely assume that the events that are already encountered, however mystifying, will make sense in the end (if the plot is to make sense at all); whereas the player of an adventure game (…) is not guaranteed that the events thus far are at all relevant to the solution of the game. (p. 112)

We could think that game players might feel tempted to "suspend" their interpretive, filling-in-the-gap, abilities for this reason, because it already seems like quite a lot of effort to concentrate on gameplay and try to solve the puzzles or get rid of your enemies. But this is not the case. Not only do we interpret plots in games in the same way as we do when they appear in other media, but we also have to deal with how to get to what Aarseth calls, the solution of the game, by solving gameplay "problems". A useful distinction might be between story that informs the gameplay (feels as meaningful), and story that doesn't (feels superfluous), *Resident Evil* is quite good at not having superfluous story, something that can unfortunately not be said of all games.

If we take the opening of *Resident Evil Code Veronica X* (after the scrolling text-narrator introduction summarizing previous games), we watch a breathtaking cutscene where Claire Redfield is chased by Umbrella Corporation guards (helicopter included) as she was infiltrating it to try to

find out what might have become of her brother Chris. In some spectacular actions scenes, she gets rids of her pursuers a couple of times, but is finally captured and taken to an unknown location by helicopter. The cutscene ends with a guard knocking her on the head with his rifle as they reach their destination. The game starts when she wakes up in a cell; we can hear noises of battle going on outside, and we take control of the character as the lights go off.

To somebody who knows nothing about the *Resident Evil* Universe (Claire and Chris's characters are introduced in previous games) , the gaps to be filled are many (who is the woman exactly, who are the guards, why has she been put on the cell), but the initial cutscene could very well be the beginning of an action film; as viewers are quite used to an *in media res* start where the explanations come later and at this point are secondary to the spectacular action. The well known schema of "action movie" is called upon by some of the usual clues: solitary hero fighting in disadvantage, danger, explosions, chases, weapons, pretty girl who can fight, brutal enemies. If it indeed was a movie we would sit back and enjoy the succession of "clues" (each a mini-schema whose repetition is pleasurable in this kind of cultural product). But since it is a game, and we wake up in the cell, we need to take action and concentrate on small things that wouldn't matter in a film (or book), such as finding a lighter in our inventory and using it so that we can see something.

Once the game starts, we work at two levels: that of the plot, where Iser's gaps are applicable, and that of the game, where the problems we encounter have to be solved, not interpreted. Our mind is busy with the plot level and the action level at the same time. The first one, that we experience on the fly, can be narrated afterwards (it is *tellable*[14]) and makes sense as a story (complete with character motivation and feelings); the second is about solving action problems, and if it was to be narrated it would correspond to what we know as walkthroughs. To illustrate this, let us continue with the example of the beginning of the game when we wake up in the cell.

PLOT LEVEL

Slowly, someone clutching his stomach shambles into the room and stands outside Claire's cell door. Claire uses her lighter to see who it is, and is surprised to see the face of the man who took her prisoner in Paris.

The man unlocks her cell and opens the door. As Claire hesitantly steps outside her cell, he slumps into a nearby chair and pulls an empty bottle of medicine out of his pocket. He throws it against the floor in frustration. Not looking up, he tells Claire that the place is finished. They've been attacked by what he thinks is a "special forces team". Claire's free to leave the prison grounds, but he warns her that she has no chance of getting off the island.

Before leaving the cellblock, Claire picks up a knife, and notes that the man needs hemostatic medicine. A manifest on the desk tells her that the man's name is Rodrigo Juan Raval, and that he's a member of Umbrella's medical division. It's raining gently when Claire gets outside.[15]

The gaps here open and close as they do in any narrative: who is the guy? (open); Umbrella guard who captured me (close); why is he opening the door? maybe he will kill me, maybe he is a spy (open); he opens because the base is under attack and wants to give me a chance (close); do I believe him? (open) do I have a chance? (open) who is attacking us? (open)… We could continue, but it is enough to see that the player actively works with gaps in games like this. And at the same time that the story grows and readjusts in our minds, we have to act:

ACTION LEVEL

CELLBLOCK ROOM- We are in a cellblock. Start off by going to your item screen. Go to the LIGHTER you see and use "Select" with the action button. This will prompt a cut-scene. After the cut-scene, go back into the cellblock and grab the ever important GREEN HERB. In the small corner of the room, grab the HANDGUN BULLETS. On the desk near the unconscious jailer is a COMBAT KNIFE. Once you have all the items, you may exit the room.

Figure 4: Claire is out of bullets

!!ALERT!!-Rodrigo is injured. You will need to find him HEMOSTATIC MEDICINE, which can be found in about an hour through the game. If you do not, you will miss out on some useful items.

CELLBLOCK HALLWAY-Run across the typewriter and grab the INK RIBBON from the desk. Do not save the game, though. Grab the box of HANDGUN BULLETS on the ground also. Run across the hallway, and un-equip the LIGHTER in your item screen, and equip the COMBAT KNIFE instead. Climb the stairs.[16]

This walkthrough gives a little too much away by letting us know about Rodrigo so early instead of letting the players wonder, but often walkthroughs are full of spoilers, and ideally players should only use them when totally stuck. As we can see, the walkthrough is full of things we *need to do* in order to get out of the cell and to the graveyard, but these things are not worth telling in the narration of the plot we had before (in the same way that what the guard says is not worth telling in the walkthrough, that merely states "this will prompt a cut-scene")

When we say that both levels are "active" in our minds at the same time, we don't mean that they are as clearly

separated as here. This is an abstraction necessary for this analysis, but in fact the act of playing is more than a sum of the two, since actual gameplay is full of doubts, ineffective movement, reloads, maybe deaths, etc. This superfluous material is also part of playing, in a way it constitutes the act of playing. It is both informed by what we as players think that we have to do, our filling in-the-plot-gaps, and our playing ability (for example with the controllers in order to move, shoot, etc.).

THE FIRST TIME I PLAYED IT

I walk around the cell in darkness, takes some time to find

Figure 5: The graveyard 3 minutes later! No RIP

lighter and learn how to operate it. I watch the cutscene, have no idea what the guy is talking about, (f they have been attacked shouldn't the attackers be on my side? Why does he say I have no chance?) Maybe it is a trap, am not sure I should trust him but have no option. He doesn't talk anymore even though I try to click on him and approach him. (I don't see the herb they recommend to take in the walkthrough). I get out, I explore the room outside and find the bullets, read the document about Rodrigo and find the knife. I also explore a lot of things with no result (try to open cupboard and get closer to the table for drawers, but it doesn't work) Since I know the game is about zombies and that the guy belongs to the evil corporation, I am not sure he won't turn into a zombie at any minute and kill me, so I stab him repeatedly to finish him off before leaving the cell. This has required equipping the knife instead of the lighter, something that needs several tries before I realize how you do it.

I am in the corridor, it is hard to control the character's movements and it takes forever to get out of the cell, move around, and go past corners. I find the ink ribbon and save the game (thus losing the first ink ribbon). I walk very slowly because I expect an attack any time, but nothing happens, I see the stairs but they are scary, so I go back to the cell. The guy is not moving, I am now thinking that maybe I shouldn't have killed him, I want to shake him but the controls don't allow for that. Maybe I should put him in the cell to make sure he doesn't jump on me later, but I cannot move him. I want to search him to see if he has a gun but it can't be done. I walk out again and decide to go up the stairs, although it will probably be full of zombies and I still don't have a gun. When I start on the stairs there is a mini cutscene with pounding heartbeat and creaking door. Spooky, I want to go back but can't control the character now. I am on the graveyard, the sound of the rain is soothing although I know something horrible will happen very soon.

Actual gameplay is full of trial and error actions, specially at the beginning of the game when we are not familiar with the interface or the story. The description of what I tried to do (moving the body), or why I thought I should kill the guy (too many movies with undead coming back to haunt you) is not more stupid than what actually has to be done in order to continue the game, as they are actions that fit into the framework of the story. The model user will eventually fill the gaps in the right way and find the right actions to perform (alone or with help of a walkthrough).

Iser describes the process of reading as a movement where the reader constantly readjusts his expectations, that can refer to plot, genre, form, or even world-knowledge. This movement is explained through the *structure of theme and horizon* that "constitutes the vital link between text and reader, because it actively involves the reader in the process of synthesizing an assembly of constantly shifting viewpoints, which not only modify one another but also influence past and future syntheses" (p. 97).

The gameplay itself does not force a lot of readjusting of expectations, since it doesn't take very long to figure out that it is better to save the ammunition for the big "bosses" and either dodge the zombies or use the knife against them, even though that implies getting close to them and risking being bitten, but there is often no other solution, which makes the experience all the more horrifying. Generally, bigger monsters are more difficult to kill, and the game sticks to the script implicit in the genre: a lot of areas to uncover full of monsters. The only variations are in the nature of the different monsters, and the fact that the player needs the training killing minor enemies when the time to face the bosses come.

However, *Resident Evil Code: Veronica X* also has its share of blanks to be filled. As I said before, not filling them doesn't prevent you from playing the game (until you get stuck in the puzzles), but it prevents you from understanding the story, which is what the whole *Resident Evil* series is about. When the game starts, you don't know where you are exactly, who has attacked the base, how to get out of the island or if your brother is alive or dead (he will appear later to rescue you). While there is no doubt that the evil Umbrella Corporation must be behind everything and that a virus is responsible for the zombies and the rest of the monsters, the player doesn't know the story of the Ashfords, which is the central plot of this game. He gradually finds information about the Ashford brother and sister, grandchildren of one of the founders of Umbrella. The player learns that the sister died some time before and the brother had to control the military facility and laboratory in the island. Later the player gets hints that the sister is alive, but advancing in the game he discovers that it is actually Alfred, the brother, dressing up as her and playing both roles. Later still, the player finds out that the real sister is not dead but cryogenized incubating one more virus… It is a twisted plot with a lot of subplots (what happened to the butler, will Steve and

Claire fall in love, how can Wesker be alive, etc.) that try to keep the reader's expectations up so that when the killing of monsters becomes routine, there is the story to look forward to. At the end of the game, winning means escaping from the (second) Umbrella base, but also solving the mystery of the Ashfords and learning the truth about the rest of the questions in the sub-stories.

A concrete example of how the plot movements influence gameplay is the dragonfly sub-plot. At some point during the player´s exploration of the mansion, he will come across a video of his two enemies as children killing a dragonfly by pulling its wings off and putting it on top of an anthill to be devoured. Later in the game you will find a jewel dragonfly that you can turn into a key to open a secret door by pulling its wings off as you saw them do in the video. This is a good example of a puzzle that is actually based on the plot and therefore feels meaningful, an improvement from some adventure games, where too many puzzles feel pointless and unrelated to the plot.

Horror games as closed texts

Unlike "high literature", games such as this don't aim at breaking our interpretive schemata, or, in Iser's terms, don't push our horizon of expectations too much. Surprises are usually at the level of plot and not at the level of the schemata. Umberto Eco calls this kind of texts closed[17] [8]. Closed texts carefully time their effects (like suspense) taking the reader by the hand. The genre of adventure games (and survival horror as a subgenre) allows for the same kind of orchestration and use of effects, so that designers can play with player's expectation and anticipation in interesting ways, which redeems the unavoidable tedious parts where you just walk around ineffectively.

Resident Evil Code: Veronica X makes full use of the well-defined fear-inducing style conventions of horror movies: the subtle but disquieting music, the sounds of steps, the moans of the zombies… The cut-scenes have cinematographic quality, and during the game the player loses control of her character once in a while in order to allow for surprise effect scenes that are often quite terrifying. For example, in a scene, the player is examining some barracks with the sound of a zombie outside a window; when the character passes a certain point the window breaks and the zombie bursts in grabbing the player in a horrible way. Even though he is not hard to kill, the effect of the surprise attack stays with the player for some time. There are many of such scenes, that allow the creators of the game to have control of the camera and use the focus and style resources that they want (and not those dictated by player movement). While some players might be annoyed by the temporary loss of control, the effect is quite strong and allows the designers to tell their story. It is easy to tolerate since these cutscenes are rather short, and often require the player to wait with his fingers poised over the buttons, as they can end any second and then immediate reaction is needed. This mini cutscenes allow the designers not only to tell their story, but also to time suspense in the right pace. Another interesting question would be here how the emotions of the player change in the alternate states of control and spectatorship.

Games offer a different range of emotions than stories. While we can have emotional interaction through identification with Claire, for example, players also develop emotions related to their performance in the game, such as frustration if they keep on being killed, exhilaration if they defeat a dangerous adversary, etc. The rest of the emotions, such as fear, can be compared to the ones felt in representation-based works such as a movie or a novel. The difference between the two kinds of emotions would need to be explored in depth before we could use it for an analysis of this kind.

CONCLUSIONS

We hope to have demonstrated that a close reading of a computer game is not only possible, but it also yields interesting insights about how the game functions as a cultural object. We are aware that the analysis presented here is very determined by the genre to which *Resident Evil-Code Veronica X* belongs; but this was in any case unavoidable if we wanted to make sense of the game within its own terms. Different digital genres will require an adaptation of the concepts here used, but it is our belief that they are flexible enough to be extensively applicable.

Figure 6: The twins and their insects terrarium

The interactivity bug

One might ask why a reader response approach is necessary when most literature about digital media tries to deal with the "user" of the digital work of art in one way or another. I would like to argue that even though the user or player is taken into account, it is never a central concern in the same way as we have presented it here, not even in the works specifically dealing with interactivity.

For many, interactivity is the most intrinsic property of digital media[18]. Both Aarseth [1] and Manovich [16] reject the term interactivity as too broad to be useful. For Manovich, talking about interactivity in relationship to modern user interfaces is a tautology (p. 55) as users *have to* interact with the computer in order to access it. I tend to agree with this view, not because I cannot find anything of value in the various definitions of interactivity, but because much of the discussion around the concept centers on how the user's actions change the "nature" of the work, emphasizing elements like number of choices, their complexity, or if they have short or long term effects. There is also an ideological implication in this kind of discussions, as digital works with a "high" or "true" interactivity would be more desirable. It is usually

about assigning value to the number of actions that the user can perform, but not about distinguishing between the different actions: both navigating in three dimensional space and "talking" to a bot would be forms of interaction. In other words, everything that a user can do in computer environments is one form or another of interaction, independent of the enormous difference between the mental processes that allow us to cognitively frame each situation (navigable space or conversation with a bot),

Figure 7: The Dragonfly about to be devoured

and then act within it according to necessity. The only similarity between the different kinds of interaction is that they all happen in a computer screen and by means of the keyboard and mouse as input device. This is an extremely mechanical perspective that doesn't take into account the differences between the competences and mental models necessary to deal with each of the situations, or the mechanisms that allow the texts or games to function as cultural objects. In the words of game researcher R.J.

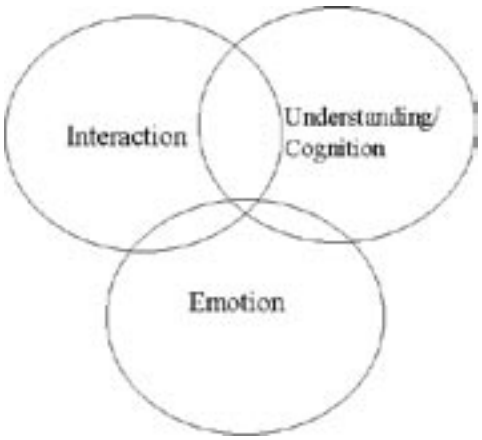

Figure 8: Reader Response criticism components

Pagulayan [19]:

> Thinking of interactivity as a wholly unique phenomenon to games can interfere with effective game design if it causes the designer to think about actions and sequences rather than empathizing with the way that their user will be thinking and feeling as they progress through the game. In most cases, it is not enough to merely keep the player busy at pressing buttons. The designer has to think about the causes and consequences of the player's actions, because that is where the player's attention will be focused. Games give you the opportunity for increased identification, distraction, and physical action. But the most important part of interactivity is not clicking a mouse or moving a joystick. The task of the game designer is to empathize with the viewer and carefully construct an experience that causes them to think clever thoughts and feel profound emotions. (p. 12)

Even though he is talking about games, his critique of interaction as a concept is valid for the digital world in general, as he reminds us that what is interesting is not how many buttons do you have to push how often and what in turn happens on screen. The "mechanic" approach has to be integrated within a framework that describes the process of reception of the digital work, including interpretation, that has been unfairly ruled out of the discussion probably because it is too close to the print world for comfort.

We believe that the advantages of an approach based on reader response criticism lie in the fact that it is built upon multiple points of view, going beyond the mechanic approach of those who concentrate exclusively on describing interactivity, and offering an integrated framework that brings other elements into the picture, like interpretation and emotion (or affect). This could be an illustration of the factors that are taken into account in a reader response-based analysis of a digital work:

All three areas are connected and cannot be understood separately. The ideas sketched while looking at *Resident Evil* are useful to integrate these three aspects, as any of the proposed concepts (for example the "filling in the gaps"), involves understanding, interaction and emotion[19].

Apart from the ideas related to applying reader response criticism to digital media, we have identified other interesting questions for future work in the area, such as the nature of emotions and pleasure in computer games, and their status as popular culture products, which we hope to address in future investigations.

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THE GAME

1. *Resident Evil Code: Veronica X*. (for Playstation2) Capcom 2001

NOTES

[1] The interest for the reading process could also be understood as a reaction against the school of New Criticism and their dismissal of the reader with their “affective fallacy” theory.
[2] For a good introduction to the various theories within reader oriented criticism, see Jefferson/Robey [11] (chap. 5), or Freund [9].
[3] Immersion, as described by Janet Murray in her *Hamlet on the Holodeck* [18] together with the idea of agency, is also very related to reception in that it deals with the kinds of pleasures that readers/users encounter in digital texts.
[4] The version analysed here is the one for Playstation 2, there are slight differences across consoles.
[5] The series is produced by Capcom, and it started in 1996 with the original game for Playstation, that has been remade for the Nintendo GameCube in 2002. In between there have been Resident Evil 2, Resident Evil 3: Nemesis, Resident Evil: Survivor, Resident Evil Code Veronica, Resident Evil Zero, and some others, all base on more or less the same premises that I explain here. The Resident Evil series has a huge player following and has even inspired a series of novels by S.D. Perry (four in all to our knowledge) and a film directed by Paul Anderson in 2002. *Resident Evil Code: Veronica X*’s plot is probably the most sophisticated and interesting (as plot, that is).
[6] Tanya Krzywinska [14] comments on the complexities of the gaze in horror films in relationship to games in her article “Hands-On-Horror” (p. 215). For her, the connection between player and avatar is diminished when the game uses a 3rd person view such as in *Resident Evil*, but I rather think that the focalization of the player has few consequences in this direction, and is rather a decision about gameplay: it is significantly easier to perform in battle (specially against more than one enemy) with a 3rd person view. In games where the player can choose the point of view (for example EverQuest), players prefer the 3rd person for combat as it lets you see exactly where you are, how far from your enemies, etc.
[7] I would venture a guess here: the computer screen is smaller and our position (sitting close to it and above it, operating mouse and keyboard) probably gives us more of a sensation of being in control than when operating a console, in which we would typically sit further away, facing a larger screen and interacting via a longer cable. The television screen is also a familiar scenario for horror films, so that a terror atmosphere might be created more naturally.
[8] The confusion between the repertoire and the ideal reader (inspired in Ingarden´s implicit reader) has been one of the most criticized points in Iser´s theory. For us, they can be considered to be referring to the same thing with a slightly different focus.
[9] For a study of the horror game genre, see Krzywinska [14], who focuses upon explaining the manichean (good vs. evil) moral structure behind this kind of games and the “interaction between choice and determinism” (p. 222).
[10] A rather interesting introduction about schema theory as

applied to the analysis of narrative has been made by David S. Miall [17]. He criticizes the shortcomings of this approach and proposes to expand it considering affect to explain the creation of complex schemata.

[11] Actually, if you complete the game you will unlock another game: the mini-battle game, which lets you play a first person shooter in the same scenario using the different characters.

[12] He criticized and took over Roman Ingarden's theory of the "spots of indeterminacy" as a starting point for his own work.

[13] Although it is not exactly the focus of this paper, it is worth mentioning an interesting piece of work by David Kampmann, a student at Copenhagen's University, that made a study of *Counterstrike* using Iser's theory of *leerstellen* interpreted in a wide way as the community of users produces the surrounding story outside the game. The paper is titled "Medieret realitet og kollektiv fiktionalisering. En receptionsaesthetik tilgang til *Counter-Strike*".

[14] In Marie Laure Ryan's sense [22].

[15] This text has been written by Dan Birlew and Thomas Wilde, it is a 135 pages document (a thesis it seems) titled "A detailed plot analysis of the Resident Evil Videogame Series", where the authors turn the games into stories. It is available at http://db.gamefaqs.com/console/psx/file/resident_evil_plot.txt

[16] This walkthrough by CVXFREAK can be found at http://db.gamefaqs.com/console/dreamcast/file/resident_evil_code_veronica_complete.txt

[17] As opposed to "open" texts, texts would correspond to popular literature, in the line of what Barthes calls readerly texts (as oposed to writerly) [2]. We do not intend to make any judgement with these terms, and are aware that this ideas have been challenged from the field of cultural studies. For us, the distinction is interesting because it can help us understand what kind of pleasures we can derive from a game of this kind.

[18] For a thorough discussion of this concept see Klastrup [13].

[19] The importance of emotion when dealing with cognition cannot be underestimated, see for example Miall in relation to affect and understanding [17].