Sega's *Comix Zone* and Miguel de Unamuno

On the Ontological Status of Fictional Characters

By Alberto Oya

Comix Zone (Sega Technical Institute, 1995) is a two-dimensional scrolling beat 'em up videogame released in 1995 for the Sega Mega Drive (known as Sega Genesis in North America). The concept, design and art direction of the videogame is credited to Peter Morawiec. Despite being well-received by both players and critics on its release and nowadays considered one of the most iconic videogames of the Sega Mega Drive, the truth is that *Comix Zone* did not enjoy huge popularity in its time, at least not as much as other beat 'em up videogames for the Sega Mega Drive such as *Golden Axe* (Sega, 1989) and *Streets of Rage* (Sega, 1991). This was not due to any inherent deficiency in the videogame but just because of its late release date. Though the Sega Mega Drive was still popular in 1995, players' attention at that time was almost exclusively focused on the upcoming generation of 32Bit home consoles and their capability of displaying three-dimensional polygonal graphics. Nonetheless, *Comix Zone* has some peculiarities which makes it even today an easily distinguishable videogame. These peculiarities are two, and as we will see they are interrelated. First, *Comix Zone* imitates the aesthetics and visual settings peculiar to comic books, the aim of which is to join the experience of playing a videogame with that of reading a comic; and second, *Comix Zone* is ultimately grounded on the philosophical claim that fictional characters are actually existing entities, distinct from, and even colliding with, their creator(s). This claim on the nature of fictional characters was seriously argued for, and put it into literary practice, by the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno (1864–1936).

Before proceeding further, it is worth mentioning that *Comix Zone* is still easily accessible to most players worldwide, even if they do not own a Sega Mega Drive. Besides the possibility of playing it on modern personal computers via emulation software, the videogame has been released for almost all the major home consoles since the early 2000's. Thus, *Comix Zone* is included in the following compilations: *Sega Mega Drive Collection* (Sega, 2006; known as *Sega Genesis Collection* in North America), for the

PlayStation 2 and the PlayStation Portable; *Sega Mega Drive Ultimate Collection* (Sega, 2009; known as *Sonic's Ultimate Genesis Collection* in North America), for the PlayStation 3 and the Xbox 360; and *Sega Mega Drive Classics* (Sega, 2018; known as *Sega Genesis Classics* in North America), for the PlayStation 4, the Xbox One and the Nintendo Switch. *Comix Zone* was also one of the forty-two built-in videogames included in the dedicated console Sega Mega Drive Mini (Sega Genesis Mini in North America), released worldwide in September 2019.

Regarding its gaming mechanics, *Comix Zone* follows the beat 'em up formula which was extremely popular in the late eighties and early nineties in both home consoles and arcades. Thus, its gaming mechanics primarily consists in moving the videogame playable character from right to left (and left to right) while punching and kicking all the enemies they come across (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Screenshots of *Comix Zone* (Sega Technical Institute, 1995).

Though sticking to the classic beat 'em up formula, *Comix Zone* presents two peculiarities in its gaming mechanics that succeed in enriching the gaming experience it offers. First, though it's not an open-world videogame, there are occasions when players can choose among different paths, resulting in different scenarios and enemies in each case (see Fig. 2). This clearly increases the replayability of the videogame, since if players want to discover all the screens of the videogame they must play it more than once while following different paths on each occasion. Second, while keeping the focus on hand-to-hand combat, *Comix Zone* also involves some minor puzzle tasks. These puzzles commonly consist in using switches, moving objects from one point to another, or using an item from the inventory (see Fig. 2). Admittedly, these puzzles are not very complex and they may sometimes become repetitive, but they do succeed in enriching the gaming experience by adding something more than just (virtually) kicking and punching enemies.

Fig. 2. Screenshots of *Comix Zone* (Sega Technical Institute, 1995).

The inclusion of multilinear paths and minor puzzle tasks is not, however, what distinguishes *Comix Zone* from other videogames. The videogame distinguishes itself for its visual settings. Being one of the latest releases for the console, its designers managed to take clever advantage of previous accumulated experience and push the hardware of the Mega Drive to its limits. The videogame runs fluidly, all scenarios and characters are carefully drawn, and the animations of both the playable character and the enemies are smooth. The videogame looked enticing at the time, and (I add) it is still representative today of what is expected from a two-dimensional beat 'em up videogame. However, it is not its level of graphic detail that makes *Comix Zone* an iconic videogame for the Mega Drive, since there are other videogames for this console which have the same level of graphic detail (if not more) —*e.g.*, *Earth Worm Jim* (Shiny Entertainment, 1994), *Toy Story* (Traveller's Tales, 1995), *Vectorman* (Blue Sky Software, 1995), and *Sonic 3D* (Traveller's Tales, 1996). Rather, what distinguishes *Comix Zone* is that it succeeds in imitating the aesthetics and visual settings peculiar to comic books.

Though videogames based on superheroes and comic book characters having been present since the early beginnings of the videogame industry, *Comix Zone* was the first videogame to have the clever idea of attempting to join the experience of playing a videogame with that of reading a comic. Thus, all the characters of the videogame express themselves using word balloons and onomatopoeias (see Fig. 3). The playable character literally jumps from vignette to vignette (see Fig. 3). Players can also break the walls of the scenario and use the paper to make a paper plane to throw at the enemies (see Fig. 3). Moreover, on some occasions players will in-game see the hand of the author of the comic actually drawing an enemy in real-time (see Fig. 3). Similarly, if the playable character is defeated, players will see the hand of the author of the comic crossing him out (see Fig. 3). None of these elements were present in other videogames of the time, not even those that were already being released for the technically superior 32Bits home consoles such as the Atari Jaguar and the 3DO.

Fig. 3. Screenshots of *Comix Zone* (Sega Technical Institute, 1995).

The comic book aesthetics is not just an exclusively visual add-on, but is actually embedded in the very gaming experience and its storyline. In *Comix Zone* players take the role of Sketch Turner, a comic writer. Late at night, while working on his own comic, one of the comic book characters he has created comes to life (see Fig. 4). This character, named Mortus, wants to kill Sketch, his creator, to become totally free. Mortus traps Sketch in his own comic book, so Sketch is now just a fictional character. There, Sketch meets the female character of General Alissa Cyan, who is willing to help him in defeating Mortus. From thereon, players become immersed in a beat 'em up gaming experience, jumping from vignette to vignette while kicking and punching the enemies they come across. Some of the enemies happen to be the fictional characters that Sketch himself created when writing the comic book, while others have been created by Mortus, who is now presented as the actual creator of the comic book (see Fig. 4). In the last stage of the videogame, Mortus kidnaps Alissa. The videogame has two endings depending on

whether players manage to defeat Mortus with enough time left over to also save Alissa. If players manage to save her, she will join Sketch in the real world and start a loving relation with him (see Fig. 4). If not, Sketch will come back to the real world alone, with the videogame enticing players to replay the videogame in search of a better ending ("Sketch succeeded, Mortus is dead… but so is Alissa. His comic book destroyed, this is hardly an outcome worth celebrating. Will Sketch unleash the evil once again to re-live his adventure in the hope of a better ending?").

Fig. 4. Screenshots of *Comix Zone* (Sega Technical Institute, 1995).

The story is presented in two very short cinematic scenes of less than thirty seconds each, one at the beginning of the videogame and one after finishing it. However, and thanks to following comic book aesthetics and the use of word balloons, the story is also presented in-game (see Fig. 5). Thus, the videogame is clear in showing that the playable character is fully aware of being trapped in the comic book he himself had been writing in, and that

the fictional characters of the comic book are just as real as their creators, to the point that they are not even under their control. This is why Sketch says things like "This is how you treat your creator?" The videogame is also clear in in-game showing that Mortus, the fictional character created by Sketch, is now the creator of the comic book. This is why the hands of Mortus appear drawing new enemies and why there are vignettes that Sketch does not recognize.

Fig. 5. Screenshots of *Comix Zone* (Sega Technical Institute, 1995).

It is evident, therefore, that *Comix Zone* is grounded on the claim that fictional characters are as real as their creator(s) —even to the point that they may collide with them. Now, I want to point out that the way fictional characters are conceived in *Comix Zone* had already been seriously defended, on philosophical grounds, by the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno (1864–1936).

In the prologue included in his *Tres novelas ejemplares y un prólogo* (Unamuno, 1920) [*Three Exemplary Novels and a Prologue*], Unamuno argued that despite being created by a concrete person(s) of "*carne y hueso*" ("flesh and bone") at a concrete time, fictional characters have their own singularity which escapes even the control and will of their creator(s). Fictional characters are as real as any concrete person of "*carne y hueso*", not just in the sense that they have their own singularity independent of that of their creator(s), but also because, according to Unamuno, they can engage in actual, genuine personal relations with the concrete person of "*carne y hueso*" who becomes immersed in the fiction. According to Unamuno, then, fictional characters are not just humanly created abstract artifacts, but are persons in the full sense of the term, even if they are abstract entities in the sense that they are neither spatially nor temporarily located.[1]

Unamuno did not just argue for this way of conceiving fictional characters on theoretical grounds. He actually put it into practice in most of his literary works. Aside from in his first novel *Paz en la guerra* (Unamuno 1897b) [*Peace in War* (Unamuno 1897a)], written in his youth, we find Unamuno's fictional characters, and Unamuno himself in his capacity as narrator, attempting to immerse the readers in the story by making direct appeals to them. This is especially the case in his novel *Niebla* (Unamuno 1914b) [*Mist* (Unamuno 1914a)], which appeared one year after his major philosophical work *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida en los hombres y en los pueblos* (Unamuno 1913b) [*The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations* (Unamuno 1913a)] was first published. After suffering an unrequited love and being unable to find meaning in his existence, Augusto Pérez, the novel's main character, decides to end his own life. Augusto, however, is aware of Unamuno's recently published *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida en los hombres y en los pueblos* and, surprising the reader, he decides to go to Salamanca to visit Unamuno to have a philosophical discussion with him before commiting suicide:

"The upheaval in Augusto's soul finally ended in an awful calm. He had decided to kill himself. He wanted to put an end to that self, which had been the source of all his trouble. But before carrying out his decision, it occurred to him, just as it occurs to the shipwrecked man to grasp at the flimsiest plank, to discuss the whole thing with me, the author of this story. At that time, Augusto had read an essay of mine, in which I had made a passing reference to suicide and this, along with some other things of mine he had read, had apparently made such an impression on him, that he did not want to leave this world without making my acquaintance and conversing with me for a while. And so he came to Salamanca, where I have been living for over twenty years, to call on me." (Unamuno 1914a, pp. 216–217 [Unamuno 1914b, p. 665]).

From thereon, the distinction between fiction and reality becomes blurred. Unamuno himself becomes a fictional character, although he refuses to forgo his role as creator of Augusto and to consider himself as a fictional entity. The two characters then have a short argument about their reality, accusing each other of being an "*ente de ficción*" ("fictional being") (*cf.*, Unamuno 1914a, pp. 216–227 [Unamuno 1914b, pp. 665–670]). The outcome is that Augusto backtracks on his decision to commit suicide, but the character of Unamuno, annoyed by Augusto's arrogance in desiring to end his existence, an existence that according to the character of Unamuno is owned only by his creator, decides to make Augusto die whether he wants to or not. It is then that the distinction between fiction and reality disappears entirely and even the reader becomes immersed in the story:

"So you won't let me be myself, emerge from the mist, live, live, live at last, see myself, touch, listen, feel, hurt, be myself! So you won't have it? You want me to die a fictional being! I am to die as a creature of fiction? Very well, my lord creator, Don Miguel de Unamuno, you will die too! You, too! And you'll return to the nothingness from which you came! God will cease to dream you! You will die, yes, you will die, even though you don't want to. You will die, and so will all those who read my story, every one, every single one, without a single exception! Fictional beings, too, creatures of fiction like myself! They will all die, each and every one! It is I, Augusto Pérez, who tells you all this, a creature of fiction like all of you are, who is as 'nivolistic' as all of you." (Unamuno 1914a, p. 226 [Unamuno 1914b, p. 670]).[2]

The similitudes between *Comix Zone* and Unamuno's novels in how they conceive of fictional characters are evident. In both cases, fictional characters are conceived of as real, actually existing abstract entities, created at a concrete time by a concrete person, but which once created become independent of their creator(s) in the sense of them having their own singularity, completely independent of and even colliding, as in the case of Augusto Pérez in *Niebla* and Mortus in *Comix Zone*, with that of their creator(s). Moreover, fictional characters are not just humanly created cultural abstract artifacts, but are persons in the full sense of the term, inasmuch as they are capable of engaging in genuine personal relationships with the concrete individual who becomes immersed in the fiction in which they play a part —which is clearly evinced in *Comix Zone* by Alissa Cyan deciding to join Sketch Turner in the flesh and blood world.

Comix Zone may easily serve to encourage players to post-play reflect on what philosophers usually label as the debate on the ontological status of fictional characters —which in plain English is tantamount to the question of what kind of entities (if any) fictional characters are. My comments here are indirectly in this direction. However, let me emphasize that *Comix Zone* is not an interactive philosophical treatise, the ultimate aim of which is to move players to serious and deep philosophical reflection. Rather, it is just an entertaining gaming experience. And actually, this is what makes the videogame interesting: its ability to embed a philosophical thesis while keeping the focus on the fast hand-to-hand combat purely entertaining gaming experience expected (and desired) from a beat 'em up videogame.

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List of Videogames Cited —listed in alphabetical order with the developer studio in brackets, followed by the first release date irrespective of country and gaming platform

Comix Zone (Sega Technical Institute, 1995)

Earth Worm Jim (Shiny Entertainment, 1994)

Golden Axe (Sega, 1989)

Sega Mega Drive Classics (Sega, 2018; Known as *Sega Genesis Classics* in North America)

Sega Mega Drive Collection (Sega, 2006; known as *Sega Genesis Collection* in North America)

Sega Mega Drive Ultimate Collection (Sega, 2009; known as *Sonic's Ultimate Genesis Collection* in North America)

Sonic 3D (Traveller's Tales, 1996)

Streets of Rage (Sega, 1991)

Toy Story (Traveller's Tales, 1995)

Vectorman (Blue Sky Software, 1995)

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Notes

[1] For a more detailed account of Unamuno's position in this regard, see A. Oya. 2022. "Unamuno on the Ontological Status of God and Other Fictional Characters", *Teorema.*

[2] I have slightly modified Kerrigan's translation of the last two sentences of this quote. Kerrigan's translation here, though correct in its meaning, fails to capture the force of Unamuno's text in making the reader immersed in the (fictional) dialogue between Augusto Pérez and the character of Unamuno. This is so mainly because Kerrigan does

not succeed in clearly preserving the Spanish distinction between "*tú*" (second-person singular) and "*vosotros*" (second-person plural) —it is fair to say, however, that this is a difficult task, since they are both usually translated in English as "you". In the original Spanish text, this excerpt reads as follows: "¡Entes de ficción como yo; lo mismo que yo! Se morirán todos, todos, todos. Os lo digo yo, Augusto Pérez, ente ficticio como vosotros, *nivolesco* lo mismo que vosotros" (Unamuno 1914b, p. 670). Kerrigan translated it as follows: "They are all fictional beings, too, creatures of fiction like myself! They will all die, each and every one! It is I, Augusto Pérez, who tells you this. I, Augusto Pérez, a creature of fiction like yourselves, who are as 'nivolistic' as you." (Unamuno 1914a, p. 226).