

“HE GOT TA HAVE HIS SUPPER!”:
THE CULTURE OF THE DEEP SOUTH IN *RESIDENT EVIL VII: BIOHAZARD*

Caitlin Dougherty
Department of Anthropology
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By the time its intro sequence ends fades from the lingering image of a run-down plantation home with a backlit figure standing menacingly in the window, the premise—and the plight—of Capcom’s *Resident Evil VII: Biohazard* has already been revealed (Fig. 1). The latest title in a well-known, two decades-old horror video game franchise, *Resident Evil VII* had to rise to the daunting challenge of subverting long-time fans’ expectations to once again craft a game that would genuinely frighten and entertain players. In this installment, Capcom decided to hearken back to the franchise’s roots by creating a first-person survival horror experience. Familiar with it only through cinema and pop culture at large, the developers of *Resident Evil VII* chose the southern gothic genre as their main source and, unfortunately, their only informant. Relying upon accounts of life in the American south provided by exploitation horror films of the 1970s and upon the deep-seated stereotypes about the appearance and behavior of people living in the deep south, the developers at Capcom effectively reinscribed the image of the backwards, old-fashioned, crazy hick into the “next-gen” corpus and the popular imaginary.

When it came time to choose the location for *Resident Evil VII*, the game’s art director, Toshihiko Tsuda, and his team picked Louisiana because they appreciated the “southern gothic movie feel” and its compatibility with their first-person survival horror concept.¹ The visual assets were developed on-location in rural Louisiana in order to attain the “atmosphere” the developers desired; however, the area they plumbed for inspiration “wasn’t that rural,” and research involving the area’s inhabitants, if it did happen, was not significant enough to merit mention by any of the Capcom representatives in interviews about the game’s development.² This indifference toward researching the people being represented by the Baker family, the murderous clan of cinema Cajuns who act as the main antagonists throughout most of the game, would appear to be at odds with the centrality of the aforementioned family both to the game’s plot and to its advertising. Closer analysis of the game’s most striking scene at the Baker family dinner table and its penchant for passé props show that Capcom was not concerned about representing the culture of the deep south so much as it was determined to put its own spin on tired tropes of the southern gothic genre.

The protagonist, Ethan, makes his first stop in the Baker guest house, where he encounters his zombified wife Mia as well as some items not typically associated with households existing in the year 2017. He can find a VHS tape and play it using a VCR and CRT TV set-up which looks to be at least thirty years old (Fig. 2). As Ethan explores, the player can choose to interact with various polaroids strewn about the dilapidated house. Later, as he is intending to leave the house,

¹ Resident Evil, “Making Of Part Two: Welcome to the Family!”, 2017.

² Ibid.

he is contacted by Zoë, a renegade member of the Baker family, through a rotary dial phone.³ These anachronisms, so improbably outdated as to be comical, reinforce the perception of rural southerners as existing in another, older time, untouched by modernity. The player, and Ethan himself, can exist in the plantation house with the Bakers, but Capcom goes to great lengths to engineer an allochronic distance between them such that it appears the Bakers, confusingly, occupy another point of time entirely. While the player and Ethan hail from a world of smartphones, laptops, and LED screens, the Bakers are living in the 1980s, even when the aforementioned technology is accessible to—and readily used by—the majority of Americans. These relics of the analog era might lend themselves to the creation of an unsettling atmosphere, but they are detrimental in that they bolster the illusion of a south frozen in time, isolated spatially and temporally from the modern world. This serves to only to “manufacture a fiction” of the deep south which both utilizes and adds to the familiar, essentialist imagery within the popular imaginary (Starn 2011, 180).

If the menagerie of outdated technology was not enough evidence of Capcom’s misrepresentation of the culture of the deep south, its now-infamous dinner table scene certainly is (Fig. 3). The perspective and arrangement of this scene appear to be lifted from the famous dinner table scene in Tobe Hooper’s *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974): Jack Baker, the head of the family, sits opposite the protagonist, flanked by his son Lucas on the left and his wife Marguerite on the right (O’Brien 2017, Benson 2017). *Resident Evil VII* makes use of the idea of a cannibalistic, hideous family of southerners tormenting their unfortunate Yankee guests. When characterizing the Bakers, Capcom drew inspiration from such southern exploitation films as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), which employ the “assorted cultural myths” pertaining to the south, like cannibalism and “backwardness” (Pinkowitz 2016, 116).

Ethan is implored by his captors to eat their home cooked meal—various innards of their human victims—at an intimate, candle-lit dinner. Lucas throws a plate at Ethan, and his disrespect towards their guest is quickly corrected by his father, who cuts off his hand. Jack then fully stands up, clad in a ragged button-down shirt, plain pants, and work boots, calling to mind the stereotype of “a mad [man] in bib overalls” (116). He approaches Ethan, saying, “That boy’s got ta eat! He got ta have his supper!”⁴ The famed “southern hospitality” is on display here, taken to extremes to highlight the otherness of the Bakers in comparison to their guest and the player. Jack attempts to force-feed Ethan and the latter’s refusal to comply deeply offends Marguerite, who screams, “I made that for him!”⁵ Again the stereotypical southern cultural norms pertaining to dining, hospitality, and respect are exploited to paint the Bakers as maniacal hillbillies, the expected inhabitants of a rural home in the deep south—at least according to the popular culture Capcom developers consumed.

³ Strangely, this phone functions, even while the Bakers have been presumed dead for three years and thus unable to pay their landline or electric bills.

⁴ *Resident Evil VII: Biohazard*, Capcom, 2017.

⁵ *Ibid.*

In producing *Resident Evil VII*, Capcom took advantage of many familiar decades-old stereotypes about the inhabitants of the deep south in order to create something frightening to players. The portrayal of the main antagonists as predictably crazy and behind-the-times saved Capcom time in building their horror game's world; using the manufactured characters and settings of the deep south horror and slasher genres meant that no research need be done on actual residents of the American south, and that the events of the majority of the game could be temporally and historically unmoored. The outmoded technology which litters the game's houses suggests that the protagonist's harried exploration of the Baker estate could just as easily have taken place in the late 1970s, when its themes' influencers were novel—almost a half-century away from its purported present-day setting. The game's core concept of a hillbilly cannibal clan is strongly tied to the historical representation of the “isolated” south as having a propensity for immoral and abnormal acts—like eating Yankee visitors. The overdone southern affect which dictates the looks, speech, and actions of the Baker family points to an obsession on the part of Capcom, and popular culture at large, with what is seen as the ever-worsening moral depravity and alterity of the south, and consequently its ongoing potential for horror plots.

Figures



Fig. 1. *Still from intro sequence.* January 2017.

Source: Capcom/PCGamesN.

<https://www.pcgamesn.com/resident-evil-vii/resident-evil-7-is-not-a-reboot>



Fig. 2. *Guest House Living Room.* January 2017.

Source: Capcom/Playstation.

https://store.playstation.com/#!/en-us/games/resident-evil-7-biohazard/cid=UP0102-CUSA03962_00-BH70000000000001.



Fig. 3. *Baker Family Dinner*. January 2017. (From left to right: Lucas, Jack, Marguerite).

Source: Capcom/STEAM.

http://store.steampowered.com/app/418370/RESIDENT_EVIL_7_biohazard__BIOHAZARD_7_resident_evil/.

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