

Castlevania: Nocturne is a revolutionary epic that does the franchise's best games justice

Netflix's first *Castlevania* animated series excelled by balancing its quiet, beautifully performed moments of human drama with explosive and artful action set pieces dazzling enough to evoke the feeling of playing Konami's classic side-scroller for the first time. Despite the first show's strengths, its regular issues with pacing and effectively cultivating characters from season to season made the idea of Netflix keeping the vampiric daddy issues ball rolling with *Castlevania: Nocturne* – a new spinoff series from executive producer Clive Bradley and co-directors Sam Deats and Adam Deats – a dubious one.

Nocturne both looks and feels a lot like its predecessor in terms of its focus on a tortured scion waging war against machiavellian, bloodsucking ghouls who fancy themselves undead gods who walk among mortal livestock. But while *Nocturne* could have easily settled and coasted on classic *Castlevania* vibes, the new show steps its game up considerably by using the franchise's iconic lore to challenge your understanding of what it truly means to fight for freedom, equality, and fraternity.

Set in the late 18th century during the thick of the French Revolution, *Castlevania: Nocturne* picks up hundreds of years after the events of Netflix's first *Castlevania* series as demon slayer Richter Belmont (Edward Bluemel) makes his way to

France in search of vengeance and vampires. Like his distant holy whip-wielding ancestor Trevor, Richter's innate talents for magic make him perfectly suited for getting into the family business, and being raised by his formidable warrior mother Julia (Sophie Skelton) instills in him a profound sense of pride in the work they do.

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Narratively, *Nocturne's* focus on another brooding Belmont and its depiction of late-18th-century France as a country overrun by literally vampiric aristocrats drunk on the promise of a new messiah make the new series feel true to the essence of *Castlevania*. What makes *Nocturne's* deep dive into this alternate history a worthwhile watch, though, is the way it presents France not just as a crumbling monarchy in the throes of a heroic social uprising but also as a colonial nation whose pivot to democracy at home can't be divorced from its history of committing unfathomable atrocities abroad.

Nocturne reworks a number of *Castlevania's* classic supporting characters like Maria – who fights using reimagined versions of the Four Sacred Beasts – and empathic singer Edouard (Sydney James Harcourt) to brilliant effect. But out of all the show's old but new faces, ferroknetic Vodoun practitioner Annette (Thuso Mbedu) stands out because of how strongly the show introduces her as a woman whose Haitian identity is what makes her able to understand the situation over in France with an exacting kind of clarity.

It's through Annette and the show's exploration of Afro Caribbean syncretism that *Nocturne* expands the boundaries of *Castlevania's* magical mythology, which is touched on heavily throughout the season's eight episodes. Small nods to the video games and gnarly beheadings abound, particularly in the

Powerhouse Animation-produced show's bigger hyperkinetic brawls between its heroes and hordes of horrific creatures.

But in all the bloodshed, *Nocturne* still finds the time to make its characters (and by extension, you) think about what it means to slaughter technically innocent people for a genuinely noble cause. That beat isn't entirely original, and *Nocturne's* mindful about leaning on it too hard as it begins to weave Annette and Edouard's stories together with Richter and Maria's in France. Still, it creates a resonance between the show's action and the concepts it's tackling that makes the season as a whole work beautifully.