Eclectic Religion:

The flattening of religious cultural heritage in videogames

Lars de Wildt^{a*} and S.D. Aupers^a

^a*Institute for Media Studies, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium*

*Parkstraat 45 - box 3603, lars.dewildt@kuleuven.be

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-6901-6903.

Lars de Wildt is Ph.D.-candidate and lecturer at KU Leuven's Institute for Media Studies, studying how videogames changed religion in a supposedly post-secular age; and how networked media changed conspiracy theories in a supposedly post-truth age. Lars was Visiting Scholar at Deakin University (Melbourne) and Université de Montréal; and has published work in *Information, Communication & Society*; the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*; *Games and Culture*; the *International Journal of Heritage Studies*; the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*; and others.

Stef Aupers is a cultural sociologist and works as Professor of Media Culture at the Institute for Media Studies, KU Leuven. His current work deals with different research projects on games and culture. Aupers has published in journals like *New Media & Society*, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, *Information, Communication & Society*, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *American Behavioral Scientist*, *Public Understanding of Science*, *Cultural Sociology*, and *European Journal of Communication*.

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Religious icons and representations increasingly appear, in the West, as cultural heritage rather than active subjects of religious practice. While churches become tourist landmarks rather than places of worship; religions' stories and characters – their intangible cultural heritage – survive as rich bases for popular media alongside their traditional use of mediating divinity. This paper studies one form of such popular media – Japanese videogames, using the *Final Fantasy* series as a case study – to ask: Which religions, folklores, cultures and their divinities are represented in videogames? (All of them, flattened non-hierarchically.) How are these divinities mediated in videogames? (Together, juxtaposed eclectically.) And what are the implications for including what are normally mutually exclusive mediations of divine worship into popular media together? (It re-introduces them to a practice common outside of Abrahamic, protestant conceptions of world religion, by freely combining cultural heritages and religious practices in what are called 'multiple religious belongings'). While these representations of eclectic religion may seem to trivialise traditions by making them interchangeable, it also manages to de-objectivate them and reveal their fictional, artefactual origin as cultural heritage, while leaving them intact as contemporary practices.

Keywords: eclectic religion; religious cultural heritage; videogames; multiple religious belongings; fictionalisation of the sacred; sacralisation of fiction

Figure 1. Ifrit on their throne in *Final Fantasy XV*, resembling traditional depictions of Lucifer in Hell, produced by Square Enix (2016), taken from in-game screenshot.

Introduction

Final Fantasy XV, the latest in a long-running series of Japanese Role-Playing games, opens ostensibly with a representation of Lucifer in Hell (Figure 1). Instead, it is revealed to be Ifrit, a long-running character based on the ‘infernal’ djinn of Arabic folklore. Later in the same game, players may seek Lakshmi; summon Bahamut; hear Christian choir music; encounter Leviathan, Shiva, Benu; and so on, alongside the 30-year old series’ own lore of Tonberries, Malboroës and Chocobos. For a Hindu goddess of wealth, a pre-Islamic Arabic dragon, Christian hymns, a Judaic sea monster, a Hindu Trinity god, and an Egyptian mythological bird to all appear alongside each other *and* among a repository of Japanese monsters: that is eclectic to say the least. These are traditions of cultural heritage that have been imbued with sacred meaning for millennia. More importantly, they have been mostly kept apart: the generations of people who have prayed to Lakshmi have historically seldom been the same people who have sung Christian hymns in Sunday Mass.

This paper focuses on religious cultural heritage specifically, although it will show that the lines between religion, mythology, folklore and contemporary fiction are difficult to delineate. At the same time, it shows cultural heritage to be a part of religion, as much as religion is a core part of cultural heritage. Any modern atheist or agnostic who ‘fights the good fight,’ ‘goes the extra mile’ or ‘rises and shines,’ engages with the religious cultural heritage of the King James Bible and its many common idioms. So too does a player of videogames engage in numerous combined traditions of religious cultural heritage, through games such as *Final Fantasy*, *God of War*, *Zelda* or *Assassin’s Creed* – and there are many of those players: about 2.5 billion of them engage in these products of Earth’s biggest cultural industry, out-earning the film and music industries combined (WePC 2019).

By performing a formalist analysis of the *Final Fantasy* series [*FF*] leading up to *Final Fantasy XV* [*FFXV*] as a case study for such videogames, this paper asks *which* religious cultural heritages are represented, *how* such religious cultural heritage is mediated in the context of a videogame, and *what* implications this has for the way in which these games treat the intangible heritage of religious belief, belonging and practice.

Literature

This paper studies intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO 2003; Ahmad 2006; Vecco 2010), particularly focusing on those narrative and visual expressions of religious cultural heritage that are historically reproduced in mediated (e.g., textual, visual) representations. Specifically, the paper studies the appearance in videogames of three different but related forms of intangible cultural heritage: religious iconography, mythology or folklore, and modern/contemporary lore.

While the materials and method section below will go further into why videogames like *FF* are an important site of inquiry, this literature overview will first establish what we mean by cultural heritage and its relation to religion; why representation and mediation are at the core of religious practice; and how such traditions of representation have been divided into a ‘world faith paradigm,’ in which the dominant assumption in the West is that we pick one religious tradition to the exclusion of others.

Cultural heritage and religion

Much of what we regard as religious is caught up in the objects we use and the values we assign to them: religions’ crucifixes, robes and prayer beads, its divine depictions, its magnificent temples and mosques and churches and synagogues. Religion in many ways *is* heritage, especially in what remains of it in the Western world. Church attendance and active worship have been continuously in decline (e.g., Hooghe, Quintelier, and Reeskens 2006; Archbishops’ Council 2013; WIN/GIA 2015), and more so among young and educated people (Johnson 1997; Sherkat 2008; Pew 2018). At the same time, much of what is on UNESCO’s list of cultural heritage to be protected was made for religious functions and purposes. Over 35% of UNESCO’s cultural heritage list consists of temples, churches, monasteries, abbeys, mosques and so on (UNESCO 2019). In other words, we decreasingly believe in gods, belong to religious communities or practice their rituals; but we love their buildings so much that we spend money to make sure they are protected, just so we can visit them as tourists.

So, too, it is with religions’ intangible cultural heritage. Intangible cultural heritage, according to UNESCO’s 2003 convention to protect it, has been defined as ‘the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that

communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage' (UNESCO 2003, 2). This includes such religious heritage as the songs people sing in church, their divinities, dresses and dances, their rituals of marriage, birth, death or coming of age, and the stories they tell each other about themselves and their gods across generations.

As other scholars have noted, such religious cultural heritage survives even in 'postsecular' times (Habermas 2008), and particularly in the popular stories we tell in media and through media texts: the books that we read, the music we listen to, the television we watch and the games we play (e.g., Partridge 2004; Besecke 2005; Clark 2005; Aupers 2012). Christopher Partridge of the *Centre for the Study of Religion and Popular Culture* in Lancaster, argues that pop-cultural influences ranging from Hinduism imported by George Harrison or paganism in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, contributed to a Western religious (re-)enchantment (2004). Indeed, just as popular music of the 1970s introduced tropes from oriental spirituality, so did television in the late 1990s introduce a preoccupation with the mystery of religion, its icons and stories. Examples are hit series such as *Charmed*, *True Blood* or *Vampire Diaries*, but we may see a similar manifestation of what Partridge calls 'occulture' in the popular books and films of Dan Brown, or the *Assassin's Creed* videogames – the latter of which came out at the top of Dan Brown's rising popularity. Both engage in speculative fictions that suggest more is going on beneath the surface of our own societies' history, by using the mystery of the Catholic church to unearth all types of plots and conspiracies in Jerusalem, the Vatican and old French churches that reveal the magical, mysterious secrets of Opus Dei or the Templars.

Much has been written by academics pointing to such presence of religious heritage in videogames. Edited volumes (Detweiler 2010; Campbell and Grieve 2014),

methodological handbooks (Šisler, Radde-Antweiler and Zeiler 2017), dissertations (Perreault 2015; Steffen 2017), and a large number of journal articles extensively study and contextualise games' reliance on religious tropes. Sociologists, theologians and religious scholars identify religious representations in games, finding Judaism (Masso and Abrams 2014), Islam (Šisler 2008), Hinduism (e.g., Zeiler 2014; O'Donnell 2015; de Wildt et al. 2019) or 'god' (e.g., de Wildt et al. 2018; Bosman 2019). A large part of this research on religion in videogames, then, is occupied by the 'enthusiastic scholar' of media and religion. These are the enthusiastic theologians, religious scholars and sociologists of religion who find religious cultural heritage in the unexpected place of (secular) popular culture and ascribe an unquestioned significance to that presence of religion, without looking further at how this presence is produced or consumed. Their project is indexical: it points out a stronghold of religious presence in 21st century mainstream culture and too often rests on its laurels, as if to say "here is religion. We have found it. *Checkmate atheists*" – to paraphrase common internet parlance. This enthusiasm for pointing out religion is apparent, for instance, when sociologist of religion William Bainbridge plays *World of Warcraft* and, 'for many hundreds of hours, frequently encountering religious symbolism,' states that this 'newest secular technology returns us to the origins of religion' (2013, 1-3). Just as Partridge and Clark above point at a 'spiritual significance' of occurrences of religious symbolism in *Buffy* and *The Matrix* (Partridge 2004; Clark 2005), theologian Frank Bosman delivers more than one book-length catalogue of Christianity's appearance in videogames (2018; 2019), going so far as to call videogames *loci theologici*, i.e.:

'a *locus theologicus*, in my view at least, involves a cultural object – like for example a song, film or dance performance – in which God reveals Himself to us as Creator, Savior and Whole-Maker and in which this divine revelational act is reflected on in one way or another [...] videogames [are such] *loci theologici*, as

‘finding places’ of faith and theology, of reflection and criticism about the hidden God of our Western world’ (2019, 251-52).

This all may well be so, and the enthusiastic scholar of religion has a right (perhaps a duty) to find religion. Certainly, if such indexical projects establish one thing, it is that there is a lot of religious cultural heritage to point to.

Representation and Mediation of Religion

Yet there is a problem when such academic projects are mostly indexical. By pointing out the presence of religious cultural heritage, religion comes to stand in as merely representation. However, cultural heritage, as established, always consists of more than just representation, but also the practices, knowledge, objects and spaces associated with communities and groups whose shared heritage binds them (Unesco 2003; Ahmad 2006; Vecco 2010).

The theoretical tradition of ‘material religion’ is one specific anthropological/sociological approach to religion that highlights this importance of ‘things,’ such as objects, rituals and media (Meyer and Houtman 2012; see also Chidester 2000; Arweck and Keenan 2006; Houtman and Meyer 2012; Meyer 2012). This “material turn” in studying religion recognises that religious objects are to religious individuals and communities not just representations but that they are fundamentally mediations of divine experience. Such mediations can be quite literal:

‘Take for example the Catholic icon: though carved from wood, painted, and set up – thus obviously ‘human made’ – to the believing beholder (and possibly its maker) it appears as an embodiment of a sacred presence that can be experienced by contemplative gaze, prayer, or a kiss. In this perspective, the transcendental is not a selfrevealing entity, but, on the contrary, always ‘affected’ or ‘formed’ by mediation processes, in that media and practices of mediation invoke the transcendental via particular sensational forms.’ (Meyer 2006, 13-14)

Indeed, Meyer and others argue that such mediations have always been central to religious practice (2006; see also Morgan 1999; de Vries and Weber 2001; Stolorow 2005).

In our contemporary times, not much changes except for the choice of media. Bollywood films give Hindu communities the same kind of sensational experience of the sacred that Mel Gibson's *the Passion of the Christ* did for many Catholics and Pentecostals alike (Morgan 2004; Dwyer 2006; Klaver 2012). Similarly, television is seen by many Pentecostals as the most appropriate medium to spread faith (Hackett 1998; Birman 2001; De Witte 2003), royal portraits are central to Thai Buddhist practices (Morris 2000), and the list goes on in the case of pictures (Morgan 1993; Meyer 2010), lithographs (Pinney 2004), and let's not forget: holy books such as the Bible and Qur'an.

These are not just representations: *the Passion of the Christ* literally and embodiedly (materially) mediates the sensation of the sacred divine. What a study of religious cultural heritage thus needs to do in an object, is to look beyond the indexical ("here is a religious icon in a game") and connect the icon, deity or ritual (etc.) that is represented back to its religious function. By focusing on rituals, objects and the functions and practices of religion, 'material religion' rejects a 'modern Protestant bias' that 'the private interior of individual subjectivity is the proper location for modern religiosity' which views religion as belief in a superior being governed by sets of rules (Meyer and Houtman 2012; Pels 2012; Wharton 2014). Instead, materialist conceptions of religion focus on the outward objects, rituals and depictions that mediate religiosity, in other words on the *cultural heritage* of religion. Looking beyond the indexicality of representation, we must ask what mediating function has the cultural object inherited,

and how does its appearance in a videogame change it – e.g., when Leviathan is presented next to Shiva.

World Faith paradigm

A second problem arises. How can Leviathan exist next to Shiva? If the first problem is looking at how religious cultural heritage mediates a sacred experience, the second problem is that the functions inherited by these icons are contradictory – Leviathan as a prophetic sea monster from the Book of Job (and others), and Shiva as The Destroyer (or Transformer) of worlds. Both may be feared, surely, but can they exist together?

This question is central to what Paul Hedges calls the ‘world faith paradigm’ of religion. This dominant paradigm, according to Hedges holds that ‘religions are understood to be bounded territories of belonging’ to one of a list of institutionalised, separate ‘world religions’ such as Islam or Zoroastrianism which are ‘clearly separated and demarcated,’ and belonging to them ‘is understood to be primarily about believing in a set of principles’ (Hedges 2017, 53). Much like material religion scholars, Hedges questions a dominant ‘Western Protestant bias’ that understands religion exclusively in modern, Western terms as institutionalised and clearly demarcated (mutually exclusive) tradition of rules and beliefs (ibid.; see also Smith 1962; Fitzgerald 2000; Masuzawa 2005). In other words: that to believe in Leviathan means that Shiva does not exist, and vice versa.

The ‘world faith paradigm’ (Hedges 2017) in which religions are considered mutually exclusive, then, is typically a modern and Western construction suggesting that belonging to multiple traditions is a thing of the past – only applicable to Ancient Greek, Roman, Babylonian and other travellers taking gods from foreign lands and incorporating them into their own tradition (e.g., Weber 1922; Noegel 2010). This, however, is a problematic perspective. As various scholars including Hedges have

observed, ‘multiple religious belonging’ is alive and well. People still combine various traditions ‘without any particular tradition being completely embraced, or perhaps even without an awareness of the traditional origins of those beliefs, values and practices’ (van der Braak and Kalsky 2017), especially in China and other parts of Asia (Cornille 2010; Oostveen 2017). That this is a European (or more properly Abrahamic) idea underlines that the mutual exclusivity of the World Religion Paradigm is not just a historical, but also a cultural-geographical exception. Indeed, institutionalised religion as a concept seems rooted in European and Middle-Eastern cultures. It is a staple in world religious studies that the concept of religion is applied and imported to other parts of the world from a European colonialist template (e.g., Fitzgerald 2000; King and Hedges 2014). Even Shinto, the ‘indigenous religion’ of Japan is essentially a highly syncretic tradition grounded in animistic ideas, Buddhism, Taoist notions, Confucianist worldviews and Christian beliefs and traditions (Fiadotau 2017; Navarro Remesal 2017). It is frequently argued that Shinto only retroactively came to conform to the Western ‘world religion paradigm’ by codifying and institutionalizing Japan’s disparate ritual practices and beliefs (e.g., Pilgrim and Ellwood 1985; Josephson 2012), in what Jason Ānanda Josephson describes as the post-war ‘invention of religion in Japan’ (2012). Japanese religion remains, in practice, exemplary for a more “flat,” non-hierarchical and syncretistic perspective. Indeed, religion is represented in Japanese popular culture as inherently playful – transgressing boundaries between the sacred and the profane; manga heroes and religious saints and, ultimately, combining elements from different religious traditions (Occhi 2012; Hutchinson 2019; cf. Walter 2014).

Materials and Methods

It is for these reasons that *FF* as a Japanese game series, serves as a fitting case study. In *FF*, more than elsewhere, we find a juxtaposition of different religious traditions, icons

and rituals. If, indeed, religious belief, function and practice are primarily mediated activities rather than representations; and if a protestant bias has focused too much on the former (belief) due to a eurocentric and historically specific concept of religion; then we need to look at religious cultural heritage as a mediation, and preferably in a non-Western context. As such we ask

- *which* (religious) cultural heritage is mediated?
- More theoretically, *how* is such religious cultural heritage mediated in the context of a videogame? And
- *what* implications does this have for the way these games treat the intangible heritage of religious belief, belonging and practice?

Specifically operationalised as a case study: which religious cultural heritage does *Final Fantasy* use, how does it do so, and *what implications* does this have for how it treats religious traditions as cultural heritages mediating faith in the divine?

To study this, we take a ‘game-immanent approach’ to studying the game (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014; Heidbrink, Knoll and Wysocki 2015), meaning we focus on the game itself rather than its players – research into which, elsewhere, should be taken as complementary to each other (Aupers, Schaap and de Wildt 2018). The specific case of *FF* was selected for two reasons. First, an extensive discourse analysis of 100 forum-threads on five different gaming forums selected the *FF* series as coming up most in public discussions on religion among gamers – the relevant process and analysis are detailed in a publication by the authors available elsewhere (de Wildt and Aupers 2019). The conclusion was that the game (more than any other series) prompts players to talk about religion, and that such games’ fantastical or historically distant settings allow players to identify with religious positions other

than their own (de Wildt and Aupers 2018). Second, *FF* is exemplary of what we are trying to study: as noted above, it is a non-Western game produced in Japan that typically combines lore from nearly all parts of the world (Occhi 2012; Hutchinson 2019). Furthermore, *FF* is one of the longest running series and has become indicative of a genre (the JRPG, or Japanese Role-Playing Game). To be clear, other examples abound (e.g., *Shin Megami Tensei* [cf. Salvador 2015], *Xenogears/-saga/-blade*), including Western games that similarly combine different religious traditions (*Assassin's Creed* [de Wildt 2019], *SMITE* [e.g., Heidbrink, Knoll and Wysocki 2015], *God of War* [e.g., Conway 2019]); but *FF* as a case study provides us with a particularly rich and influential example.

In this context, videogames in general are treated as procedural, ergodic and encyclopedic artefacts, with a specific focus on the virtual worlds in which cultural heritage (tangible and intangible) is incorporated. Such virtual worlds are elsewhere theorised as rich 'gameenvironments' (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014; Šisler, Radde-Antweiler and Zeiler 2017). By *procedural* we mean that games, much like rituals (Wagner 2012), consists of sets of rules with a rhetoric (Bogost 2004); by *ergodic* we mean that players navigate these rules through non-trivial efforts such as choices and strategical decisions, in ways that books and most other media do not afford (Aarseth 1997). Most importantly, by calling games '*encyclopedic*' (Murray 1997), we mean that these gameworlds draw on a large database of possible situations, surroundings, characters and monsters, that are required to fill sprawling, freely traversable worlds (over 2000 km² by current estimates [Nelva 2015]), demanded by the market's standard for long playtimes (53 hours to complete on average (HowLongToBeat.com 2019), and made possible by modern computing and large hard disks – currently 155 gigabytes for the PC version, largely due to its huge selection of

deities, monsters, surroundings and other animated cultural heritage. By comparison: the *Lord of the Rings* books take a combined 26 hours to read, and the movie trilogy on BluRay can be downloaded at about 12 gigabytes. The *FF* series itself consists of 15 main iterations, 32 spin-off titles and 6 films since its inception in 1987. The series is made in Japan by the Square Corporation, now Square Enix, and was originally based on *Dungeons & Dragons* (Huber 2009; Parish 2013), itself an amalgam of religious, folkloric and fantasy traditions.

The data used in this article consist of the entries in the *FF* series and the material around it such as manuals and other paratexts. In our analysis we will employ as much as possible a formalist, game-immanent approach: meaning that we will highlight the formal audio-visual, ludic, narrative and other content of the game and its paratexts that is available to everyone who plays the games and are as little as possible dependent on personal experience. Notwithstanding this ambition to provide a value-free analysis, we are of course aware of the Western frame of reference that inevitably informs our analysis and interpretation. That does not mean that it is only or even primarily meaningful in a Japanese cultural context: it is a Japanese game that takes (and appropriates) much of its source material from European traditions, and most of its players – most recently about five million out of *FFXV*'s first six million sales (Duwell 2017; Sherman 2017) – come to the game from outside of Japan. Ultimately, Western scholars studying a Japanese games in a Western context, are entangled in a situation of 'double (or, in this case, even triple) hermeneutics' so typical for the humanities and social sciences (Giddens 1984).

FF games are fundamentally set in a-historical, a-specific non-places. The first *FF* in 1987 was still influenced by *Dungeons & Dragons*, leading its designer Akitoshi Kawazu to state 'there are certain [design choices] when it comes to a *Dungeons &*

Dragons type of environment, a western role-playing experience [...] Up until that point, Japanese RPGs were ignoring all of that' (Parish 2013, n.p.). Hence it was initially set in a typical Western fantastical, medievalist setting; while the first game also already included futuristic designs (such as the hardest enemy being a robotic 'Warmech'). The *FF* games are so unhinged from a specific place and time that there is additionally a fundamental separation between the times and places of each sequential game: with some exceptions, each new *FF* has its own spatiotemporal setting. Every instalment mixes futuristic, medieval, high-fantasy, cyberpunk and/or steampunk aesthetics. *FFXV* for instance, takes place in a feudal world featuring high-fantasy castles, while its rival region has a magically realist Venetian style; and the surrounding world is a contemporary 'Americana' in which the protagonists drive around in a 2006 Audi R8 – which can be futuristically converted into a flying car toward the game's end. At the same time the games are shot through with Japanese and other Eastern aesthetics while taking in these disparate occidental influences. Two recurring characters, Biggs and Wedge, although never the same person but performing the same functions, pop up in *FFXV* with cockney accents, but dressed as World War 2 and WW1 German soldiers, respectively (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Recurring characters Biggs (left) and Wedge (right) in Final Fantasy XV, dressed in German World War 2 and 1 costumes respectively, produced by Square Enix (2016), taken from in-game screenshot.

This paper focuses on *FF* as an example of this a-historical non-locatable amalgam of cultural heritage, and will later expand its scope by comparison to other games and series such as *Shin Megami Tensei*. *FF* and more particularly *FFXV* function in this paper as a focus to delineate the analysis, using comparison later to contextualise *FF(XV)* as indicative of a broader cultural tendency so that we may empirically ground and think through the implications of our case study for religion, mediation and cultural heritage. Unfortunately, there are only so many words we can fit in one paper.

Results

The analysis below answers the three research questions posed above. First, by focusing on a single example (the mediation of Ifrit in *FF* leading up to their Luciferian form in *FFXV*), asking *which* religious cultural heritage is mediated. Secondly, we ask *how* such cultural heritage is mediated in games, by broadening the scope to how religious and folkloric cultural heritage appears alongside contemporary fiction in JRPGs such as *FF*.

Thirdly, we consider *what* the implications are for religious mediation in 21st century popular culture via videogames, by connecting our results back to theory on religious practice, belief and belonging.

Which religious cultural heritage is mediated?

What we see, first of all, through examples such as Ifrit, is that there is a continuous reconfiguring of a single inherited cultural icon. Ifrit is typical for *FF* and its genre's long tradition of playfully appropriating religious tradition. Although we will briefly set out additional examples, it is productive to look at one example more elaborately.

First introduced in 1990, Ifrit appeared as a 'summoned' demon in *Final Fantasy III* in the shape of a horned yellow (Figure 3), blue or green Infernal creature. Since then, Ifrit has become a staple as either a boss to defeat, a demon to summon for help or both: always depicted with horns, claws and a simple loin cloth or kilt. In their appearance in *Final Fantasy IV*, for instance, Ifrit is called down by players to damage all opponents through their signature spell 'Hellfire' (Figure 4). Revealingly for Ifrit's cultural heritage, the Super Nintendo release named them Jinn, later to be re-named Ifrit in consecutive re-releases of the same game. In that game, summons such as Ifrit/Jinn are called 'eidolons' (Greek for 'phantom' or 'idol,' and the root of Latin 'Idolum'). An 'Eidolon Library' holds details for each, stating for Ifrit:

'Ifrit, the Infernal... Spouting flames hot and hungry enough to consume all they touch, he shows his foes no mercy.'

Oscillating over 26 years between demonic and beast-like, the 'Infernal' idol Ifrit's most recent form in 2016's *FFXV* takes their most humanoid form to date, seated on a skull-adorned throne surrounded by flames and nonchalantly resting their claws beneath their horns (Figure 1).

Figure 3. (left) Ifrit as introduced in *Final Fantasy III* for the Nintendo Entertainment System, original sprite by Square Co., Ltd. (1990), taken from the user-made “Fandom wiki” under CC-BY-SA license.

Figure 4. (right) Ifrit in action in *Final Fantasy IV*, re-named Jinn for the SNES release by Square Co., Ltd. (1991), taken from in-game screenshot.

Thus *FF*’s Ifrit draws from at least two religious sources of cultural heritage: pre-Islamic Arabic folklore, and Abrahamic theo-mythology. In Arabic folklore, Ifrit [عفريت] are types of Jinn [جن, the root of supernatural *genies* in English]. It has since at least the 9th century been presented by Islam sources as predominantly an evil spirit due to its infernal origins (Rees 2013, 91), Ottoman descriptions of fiery appearance and flaming breath (Adil 2012), its categorisation as a *shaitan* [شیطان] (Hughes 1995), and due to Islamic descriptions of an Ifrit interrupting the prophet Muhammed’s prayers (Lebling 2010, 141). However, many stories and depictions retell stories of helpful Ifrit, much like *FF*’s dual depictions of Ifrit as monster and helpful summon. An unknown artist’s depiction of an Ifrit called Arghan Div in the Brooklyn museum shows an Ifrit returning a sunken chest of armor to Hamza – no less than the uncle of Muhammed (Figure 5).

Figure 5. A friendly Ifrit depicted in *Arghan Div Brings the Chest of Armor to Hamza* produced between 1562 and 1577 by an unknown artist, housed in the Brooklyn Museum's Asian Art collection. Opaque watercolor and gold on cotton, 79.1cm by 63.3cm. Image uploaded by the Brooklyn Museum under CC-PD-Mark license.

At the same time *FFXV* connects the *shaitan* categorisation of Ifrit to its Abrahamic interpretative end: Hebrew Šāṭān [שָׁטָן], meaning an adversary or accuser, which in the King James Bible became the primary English word, together with Lucifer, for the Christian Devil that tempts believers into sinning, and who rules over Hell (Kohler 2006; Hoffmann 2012). ‘Lucifer’ comes from the Latin name for Venus, the morning star whose movements have been associated with a fall from the heavens,

which has in turn led the King James Bible to apply the metaphor to Satan/Devil. The introductory image of a horned Ifrit casually seated on their throne surrounded by skulls and fire carries a visual reference to common depictions of Lucifer. We see commonalities with Alessandro Vellutello's Lucifer, illustrations to Dante's *Divina Comedia* by William Blake, Gino de Bini's illustration for Rapisardi's *Lucifero* (Figure 6); or contemporary images of the goat-like Baphomet on the throne as popularised by the Church of Satan and actor Tom Ellis as the eponymous *Lucifer* popularised by Fox and Netflix (Figure 7).

Figure 6. Gino de Bini's depiction of Lucifer for the cover of poet Mario Rapisardi's *Lucifero* (1887), reproduced under CC-PD-Art license.

Figure 7. The Satanic Temple in Salem’s representation (left) of Baphomet on the throne, by artist Luciana Nedelea; and Tom Ellis as the eponymous *Lucifer* in promotional material for Netflix. Permission personally granted by artist, respectively reproduced promotional material for non-commercial purposes.

Hence, when we ask *which* religious cultural heritage is depicted, the answer is: all of them combined. First of all, in the case of Ifrit we see that this one Japanese cultural product layers two kinds of cultural heritage unto Ifrit: the pre-Islamic Arabic beast-like Jinn and the Abrahamic (i.e., Judaic/Christian/Islamic/etc.) ‘infernal’ Lucifer. It draws together two disparate traditions associatively, and without compunction about the paradigmatic distinction between the two traditions of religious cultural heritage, nor their communities, beliefs and practices. Second of all, Ifrit is no exception. The same can be said for *FF*’s depictions of Odin, Minerva, Bennu, Shiva, Leviathan and many others (Figure 8).

Figure 8. An eclectic collage of *FF*'s depictions of (left to right) Odin (*FFVIII*), Minerva (*Crisis Core*), Benu (*FFXV*), Shiva (*FFX*), and Leviathan (*Dissidia NT*), not always recognizably like depictions in their own culturally inherited traditions. Based on in-game screenshots.

How is such cultural heritage mediated?

We have established that *FF* blends various cultural heritages, without necessarily reproducing them faithfully. Additionally, these characters are more than singular signs, meaningful only within their own tradition of religious or folkloric cultural heritage. They are, secondly, juxtaposed eclectically: widely different and seemingly incompatible cultural heritage exists and interacts within the same fictional world as each other and the characters controlled by the player. Furthermore, these disparate traditions are combined without regard to whether these are historically existing, folkloric, institutionalised religious, or (contemporarily) fictitious sources.

The example from *FF* might be clear: we have already pointed manifold to the combination of Germanic/Nordic, Greco-Roman and other cultural heritage co-existing. For another example of how extensive such eclectic juxtaposition may present itself, let us look to a fan-made list of monsters appearing in *Shin Megami Tensei* – much like in *FF* (Figure 9). It shows that the game draws freely from historical mythologies that are Abrahamic, Australian, Balinese, Celtic, Chinese, Haitian, Japanese, Occult, Mayan, Scottish, Slavic, Zoroastrian and so on, alongside H.P. Lovecraft’s literary mythos (Cthulhu, Azathoth), historical figures (Cleopatra, ‘Führer,’ Longinus), miscellaneous modern fiction (Carmen from the eponymous opera, Milady of the *Three Musketeers*, Zorro), and the game’s own inventions, such as mascot Jack Frost and fan-favourite Mara – a tentacled phallus on wheels (Figure 10).

Figure 09. The community *Shin Megami Tensei* Fandom website lists the game’s Demons (creatures that are encountered and can be enlisted to aid the player/protagonist) by mythology. The scrollbar at the edge of the screen indicates how elaborate the list of sub-categories is.

Figure 10. An encounter with fan-favourite monster Mara in *Shin Megami Tensei: Strange Journey Redux* for the Nintendo 3DS, taken from in-game screenshot.

Showing practiced, i.e., actively worshipped divinities from ‘world religions’ (Hindu, Christian, etc.); together with historical and folkloric (Arabic, Egyptian, Roman, Greek); and ostensibly fictional (Lovecraftian, Tolkienesque, house lore) deities collapses the sacrality of several religious traditions seen as mutually exclusive in a ‘world religion paradigm’ (Hedges 2017). Instead, games like these show all religious figures (worshipped or not) and fictional creatures as equally sacred and existent, diegetically. In games, ‘gods just exist’ (Schaap & Aupers 2017): there is no doubt as to their epistemological status, even if this is in contradiction to the established communities who worship them outside of these games.

The answer to *how* such cultural heritage is mediated and changed through videogames is that videogames such as *Final Fantasy*, through their encyclopedic need to take from a large variety of traditions, flatten theologies into a non-hierarchical database of anything from the history-based and world religious to the folkloric and contemporary popular-fictitious. In other words: the phallic wheelbarrow Mara is just as real and sacred as the Hindu Destroyer-Transformer god Shiva. This may be deeply

unsettling to those who worship Shiva, but at the same time it raises questions on the ontological distinctions between historically worshipped gods and (recent) fictional deities (de Wildt and Aupers 2017). Religion scholar Markus Davidsen calls this distinction ‘history-based’ versus ‘fiction-based,’ finding that there are indeed actively worshipped fiction-based deities with religious believers, communities and practices (2013), some of which – unlike Mara – are actively worshipped. Examples of this blurring boundary between institutionalised religious worship and contemporary fiction are manifold, including the Church of Jediism (Possamai 2005); various Tolkien religions such as the Elf Queen’s Daughters (Davidsen 2012). Arguably Scientology, too, shows that the boundaries between institutionalised faith and popular media are difficult to distinguish: a church claiming 4.4 million adherents each year, whose tenets are based on the works of science fiction author L. Ron Hubbard.

Discussion: What are the implications?

The analysis of *FF* demonstrates both a fictionalisation of the sacred, and a sacralisation of fiction. What are the implications of this mediation of multiple religious traditions presented together eclectically, and as equal in (ontological, epistemological, cultural) status to contemporary fiction? Firstly, that the ‘world religion paradigm’ crumbles, in which only one institutionalised tradition of belief and belonging can be adhered to at the same time. Secondly, that it replaces this paradigm with one of ‘multiple religious belonging,’ in which, again, ‘beliefs, values and practices from various traditions are combined without any particular tradition being completely embraced, or perhaps even without an awareness of the traditional origins of those beliefs, values and practices’ (van der Braak and Kalsky 2017). *FF* and its kin present worlds in which various traditions eclectically belong and interact – without necessarily the burden of belief (Davie 1990).

That these videogames – although popular globally – hail from Japan is no surprise. As noted, religious syncretism and multiple religious belonging are more common in Asia and deeply rooted in Japanese history and (popular) culture (Fiadotau 2017; Navarro Remesal 2017). Even Japan's Shinto religion itself is arguably a collection of disparate beliefs and practices (Pilgrim and Ellwood 1985; Josephson 2012), whereas the positioning of a monopoly of truth within one (codified, institutionalised, delineated) religion is arguably a Western, mostly Abrahamic invention (Cornille 2010; Oostveen 2017). This, however, makes the introduction and popularity of Japanese games such as *FF* in a Western context even more interesting. Being by and large enculturated in a Western 'world faith paradigm' (Hedges 2012) the question is what these games do for Western audiences. Instead of presenting religions as institutionalised and mutually exclusive, games like *FF* create a fantasy world in which various religious cultural heritages come to life alongside each other, outside of a world religion paradigm. *FF*'s diegesis thus enacts a thought experiment: what if all gods and superhuman entities are equal? Cthulhu, Cain, Abel, Ame no Uzume, Lucifer, Ifrit, Shiva, and so on.

What does it mean for an artefact to show religious plurality where different religious assumptions are playfully presented in coalition and opposition? In sociologist of religion Peter Berger's words on the consequences of globalist modernity and cultural pluralism for religion:

'The pluralistic situation multiplies the number of plausibility structures competing with each other. Ipso facto, it *relativizes their religious contents*. More specifically, the religious contents are "*de-objectivated*," that is, deprived of their status as taken-for-granted, objective reality in consciousness. They become subjectivized.' (Berger 1967, 151-152, emphasis added)

By showing that multiple religious cultural heritages – their stories, their gods, their

truths and beliefs – can co-exist eclectically, games like *FF* or *Shin Megami Tensei* relativise and de-objectivate religious contents. This flattened hierarchy of truth claims, in other words, collapses the sacrality of several religious traditions seen as mutually exclusive from a ‘world religion paradigm’ perspective (Hedges 2017).

By ‘remixing’ various religious tradition eclectically, (Japanese) videogames can confront us with the fictional and socially constructed nature of traditions – no matter how sacred. Despite mediating divinity for those who believe, they are *also* showing religion as cultural heritage. By presenting the divine as interchangeable, videogames flatten theologies across fiction-based and history-based; practiced and non-practiced religions. Although this might be seen to commodify and trivialise divine traditions and practices, they essentially revert the use of religious cultural heritage to a cultural attitude toward religion that lies outside of European/Middle-Eastern conceptions of religion; and predates the Abrahamic (monotheistic) World Religion Paradigm which monopolises truth values of certain traditions to the exclusion of others; and serves to present them as objective.

This, we conclude, shows the vital role that (digital) cultural heritage plays in enacting theories on religious pluralism, especially when it represents alternatives to idealised, monolithic and singular religious traditions of ‘ultimate meaning,’ in which one tradition is taken as the complete and only answer to human meaning-making (Berger 1969). Secondly, we conclude that the ‘Eclectic Religion’ of these games represents a much less fantastical and idealised representation of religious practice. One that is, rather, representative of much of the world’s religious practice of historical mergers and assimilations of intangible cultural heritage; and that is explainable through pluralism as a specific understanding of the post-secular in modern, digital and global societies. Within such a use of cultural heritage, religion is neither final, nor fantasy.

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