Opening my Shinto Box:
The Mixing of Religions, Traditions and Fictions
in Japanese Role-Playing Games

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Abstract

This paper studies the representation of religious and fictional figures alongside each other in Japanese Role-Playing Games [JRPG], focusing on the case of the *Final Fantasy* series [*FF*]. While others have noted this 'eclectic' mix of traditions (e.g., de Wildt & Aupers, 2020), they:

1) broadly categorize such unhierarchical representations as typical for 'multiple religious belongings;'
2) reductionistically gloss over JRPGs' Japanese cultural-historical context;
3) eurocentrically conclude that this has consequences for concepts of religions as mutually exclusive 'world religions.'

Such a conception of religion cannot be correctly applied to a Japanese cultural product like *FF*.

This paper is an attempt to correct the analytical and methodological mistakes of de Wildt & Aupers, by the first author of that paper, asking "How does Japanese cultural and religious history contextualize the 'flattened' representation in *FF* of monsters and gods from different (non-Japanese) traditions as equals?"

As such, this short paper problematizes earlier analyses by re-orienting religion-scholarly readings of JRPGs toward their Japanese cultural context. It considers Shinto, often considered an 'indigenous religion' of Japan as always already a highly syncretic tradition grounded in a combination of animism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and Christianity; arguing that Shinto only retroactively came to conform to the Western 'world religions paradigm' through codifying and institutionalizing Japan's disparate ritual practices and beliefs. Thus *FF* only continues a typically Japanese appropriation of (non-Japanese) religion which historically always approached such traditions from a more non-hierarchical and 'eclectic' perspective. In conclusion, JRPGs like *FF* continue a tradition of representing religion in Japanese popular culture in inherently playful ways – transgressing boundaries between the sacred and the profane; manga heroes and religious saints and, ultimately, combining elements from different religious traditions, in what I call 'eclectic religion.'

Ifrit in a World of Chocobos

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, Bennu; and so on, alongside the 30-year old series' own lore of Tonberries, Malboroes 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

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.

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 such eclectic representations of religious and fictional figures alongside each other in Japanese Role-Playing Games [JRPG], focusing primarily on the case of the *Final Fantasy* series [*FF*]. The metaphor informing the title is twofold: while the presentation of different sacred and profane traditions seem to be neatly separated and then presented together, as in a bento box – if you will excuse me the mundane lunch box pun – this paper attempts to unpack this eclectic box of ingredients as being typical of Japanese approaches to religion, including Shinto. Broadly, I argue that the primary reason for studying religious representation in videogames in the first place – although I argued this more elaborately elsewhere (de Wildt & Aupers, 2017; 2018; 2019) – is that, while churches in affluent countries like Japan and much of the West are running empty (WIN/GIA, 2015; Dentsu, 2006; Zuckerman, 2006), videogame(serie)s such as *FF*, *Zelda*, and Western series like *Assassin's Creed* and *World of Warcraft* rely on religion for atmosphere, mechanics and storytelling. As a consequence, it is oddly enough less likely for young people to encounter religion in churches and other places of worship than in videogames;[1] pointing to the uneasy double conclusion that while 'serious' things like the state and our personal search for meaning are becoming more secular; the 'fun' parts of popular culture, our play, and games are a vestige of enchantment in which religion can be played with, compared and discarded (de Wildt, 2020).

Specifically, the structure of this paper is aimed at problematizing earlier work on religion in videogames, among which my own, by re-orienting analyses on religion in videogames toward their (Japanese) cultural context. As such, in this paper I will first summarize and problematize my own work on religion in Japanese videogames as eurocentrist; after which I will secondly re-orient this work by historically re-contextualizing religion in a Japanese context; I will thirdly provide an empirical basis for my claims; and fourthly I will conclude that the 'eclectic religion' of *FF* is not exceptional – but instead typical both for JRPGs, and for Japanese cultural approaches to religion as a whole.

Eclectic Religion

Prompted by the initial observation above, myself and a co-author set out to do a formal analysis of *FF* as a series, tracing the depiction and multiple cultural heritages of Ifrit as an initial case. We used our formal reading of Ifrit to argue that, as an amalgamate of Arabic pre-Islamic mythology; Christian depictions of Lucifer; and miscellaneous mythical sources, Ifrit is indicative for a certain mode of depiction we then called "eclectic religion" (de Wildt & Aupers, 2020).

Before I problematize our argument there, it is worth summarizing it briefly. Firstly, we showed that Ifrit's multiple religious belongings were indicative of a trend indicated in religious scholarship of de-institutionalizing religious practice and belief outside of a "world religions paradigm" (Hedges, 2017). What this means is that many traditions of religious belief and practice are mutually exclusive: either you believe in Hinduism and everything it involves; or in Islam; or in Christianity; and so on. Secondly, we showed that next to Ifrit, an enormous amount of deities and mythical beings from all manner of traditions get a similar treatment in Japanese videogames, including Odin (Norse mythology), Minerva (Roman), Bennu (Egyptian), Shiva (Hinduism) and Leviathan (Abrahamic), to name a few. Thirdly, we argued that their depiction alongside each other continues this "multiple religious belonging" (van der Braak & Kalsky, 2017), of Ifrit and other deities by making them equally true and believable – in contrast to a 'world religions paradigm:' either you believe in all of them or you don't. Fourthly, we

[1] This may sound simply provocative, but it is true that 2.2 to 2.5 billion players globally (>28.5%), 17 out of 126 million Japanese citizens (14%), and 338 out of 512 million EU citizens (66%) spend over 6 hours per week on average in-game (Limelight, 2018; Newzoo, 2017; Statista, 2020; WePC, 2019); whereas weekly church attendance for adults under 40 years of age is 36% globally, 10% in Europe, and declining (Pew, 2018) – and although Japan was one of the few countries in which weekly attendance <40 was *not* measured, Japanese citizens under 40 pray less (10%, compared to 16% of Europeans) and score lower (4% compared to 19%) than European young people when asked whether religion is important in their lives (ibid.). Put colloquially, for many European and Japanese citizens below 40, religion is a thing we see in videogames – where the magic is *real* – instead of in a church or temple.

argued that this depiction *alongside* 'fictional' characters such as Cthulhu, and Mara (Figure 2), furthermore blurs the distinction between what can be considered fiction, myth(olog)ical and divine. Fifth, we observed that the case of Ifrit and similar figures in the *FF* series was indicative of other series such as the *Shin Megami Tensei*, *Xenogears/-saga/-blade* and other series. Sixth, and finally, we concluded that such a flattened hierarchy of 'eclectic religion' is essentially new to Western conceptions of institutionalized religion, as it has been predominantly defined and treated in modern scholarship and discourse on religion.

Figure 2. An encounter with fan-favourite monster Mara in *Shin Megami Tensei: Strange Journey Redux* for the Nintendo 3DS, taken from in-game screenshot.

Eurocentrism

However, while analyses such as de Wildt & Aupers (2020), have taken note of JRPGs' eclectic mix of traditions, such analyses:

- broadly categorize such unhierarchical representations as typical for 'multiple religious belongings,' as an a-specifically Asian and pre-Abrahamic phenomenon;
- reductionistically gloss over the specific Japanese cultural-historical context in which *FF* and its kin came to exist; and
- eurocentrically conclude that such representations of 'eclectic religion' have consequences for concepts of religions the world over as mutually exclusive 'world religions.'

Such a conception of religion cannot be correctly applied to how series such as *FF*, as Japanese cultural products pertain to where Japanese religious practices and beliefs actually originated, nor how they were conceptualized and retrospectively codified in their own Japanese cultural-historical context.

This paper is an attempt to correct the analytical and methodological mistakes of de Wildt & Aupers, asking "How does Japanese cultural and religious history contextualize the 'flattened' representation in *Final FF* (and similar series), of monsters and gods from different (non-Japanese) traditions as equals?"

Re-orienting JRPG Theology

This aim of re-contextualizing JRPGs in their Japanese cultural context is framed here as a method of 're-orienting' them. Rather than a formal 'method,' the logos behind this re-orienting is to actively reflect on my previous work – by not just calling out cultural appropriation or cancelling a term; but adding another lense.

In writing the previous analysis, already bracketed there as "aware of the Western frame of reference that inevitably informs our analysis and interpretation" (ibid., p. 7), we took a eurocentric approach as a way of being strategically reductionist. This was not a mistake, as stated there, arguing that "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 […] come to the game from outside of Japan" (ibid.). However, this text is meant to function as an addendum: an attempt at de-centring the Eurocentric perspective of my own work, by placing the analysis back into its Japanese context – in an effort to 're-orient' studies of games and its religious concepts, as I and others also attempted elsewhere in the case of "re-orienting the video game avatar" (de Wildt, et al., 2019).

Religion as a European concept

Such a re-orienting is important if only because the concept of religion as predominantly used in the study of religion, the sociology of religion and in studies of religion in videogames, takes 'religion' to be an institutionalized form of belief and practice conforming to a Western (protestant) bias (Meyer and Houtman 2012; Pels 2012; Wharton 2014).

To re-conceptualize religious representation in a Japanese context, here, is necessary because the Japanese relation to such Western concepts of religion is doubly fraught. Firstly, because it is a recently and reflexively imported concept into Japanese culture. Secondly, because

the historically religious practices and beliefs of Japan do not conform neatly to such a world religions paradigm.

It is a staple in world religious studies that the concept of religion most used in academia is applied and imported to other parts of the world from a European template (e.g., Fitzgerald 2000; King and Hedges 2014). In other words, the "world religions paradigm" (Hedges 2017), in which religions are considered mutually exclusive, is a typically 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). The reason this is a problematic perspective is that, as various scholars including Hedges have observed, multiple religious belonging is alive and well – especially in Asia broadly. 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 religions 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.

Religion in Japan

In the Japanese context more specifically, it is frequently argued that the 'indigenous religion' of Japan, Shinto, only retroactively came to conform to the Western 'world religions paradigm' by codifying and institutionalizing Japan's disparate ritual practices and beliefs in retrospect (e.g., Pilgrim and Ellwood, 1985; Josephson, 2012), in an act of what Jason Ānanda Josephson describes as the post-war "invention of religion in Japan" (2012).

Rather than through a Western lens, the disparate practices and beliefs of Shinto should instead be seen by comparison as a highly syncretic tradition grounded in animistic ideas, Buddhism, Taoist notions, Confucianist worldviews and Christian beliefs and traditions (Fiadotau, 2017; Navarro Remesal, 2017). Japanese religion remains, in practice, exemplary for a more "flat," non-hierarchical and syncretistic perspective drawing from disparate sources of folklore, popular culture and traditions outside of Japan (Hori, 1994; Kamstra, 1967; Porcu, 2014). 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; Walter 2014), in games and their transmedia franchises (Hutchinson, 2019; Blom, 2020).

Mixed Fantasies

As an examples of such boundary-transgression, *FF* games are fundamentally set in a mix of culturally and historically a-specific non-place. The first *FF* in 1987 was still influenced by the American *Dungeons & Dragons* world, leading its designer Akitoshi Kawazu to state that "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, the first game was initially set in a Tolkienesque fantastical, medievalist setting: while the first game (titled just *Final Fantasy*) 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.

Beyond *FF*, for another example of how extensive such eclectic juxtaposition may present itself as, let us look to a fan-made list of monsters appearing in the *Megami Tensei* series – much like in *FF* (Figure 3). It shows that this game series – which extends itself to the upcoming

Shin Megami Tensei V, due in 2021, and the *Persona* spin-offs, including *Persona 5* most recently – 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 2, above).

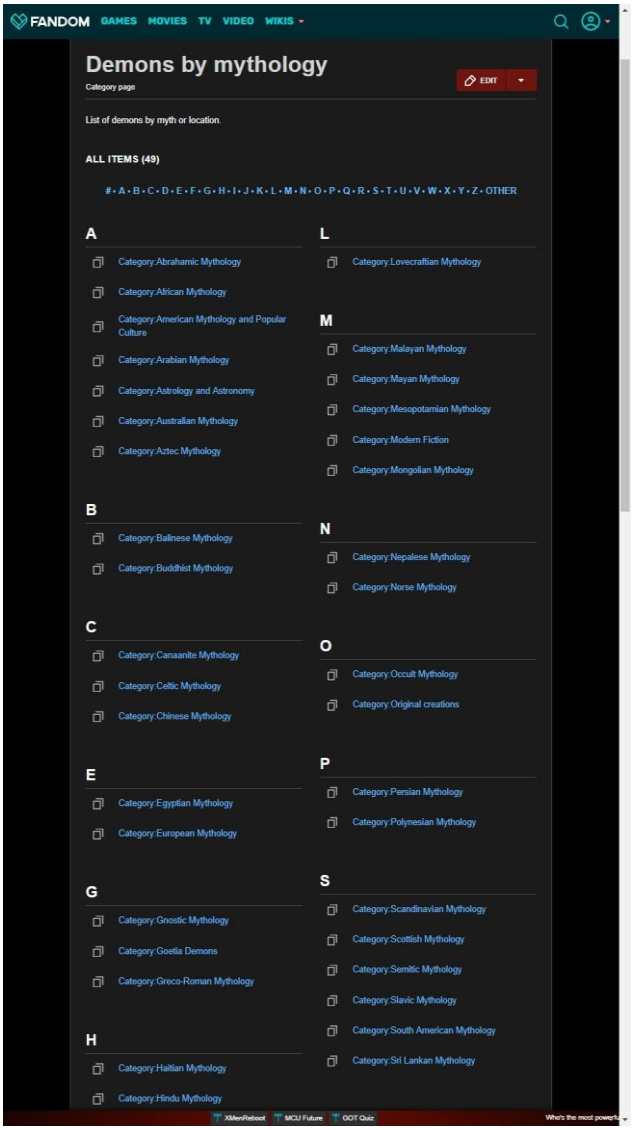

Figure 3. The community *Shin Megami Tensei* Fandom website lists the game's Demons (creatures that are encountered and can be enlisted to aid the player/protagonist) by mythology. The scrollbar at the edge of the screen indicates how elaborate the list of sub-categories is.

Religious Bento Boxes

Although this contribution is short, it hopefully shows the extent to which the "eclectic religion" posed by de Wildt & Aupers (2020), as conceptually impactful in the West, is in fact inherent to Japanese historical approaches to religion, rather than an exception in its own cultural context. As such, we conclude that this juxtaposition of various religious, folkloric and fictional traditions was never at odds with traditions of religious belief and practices, when re-oriented toward its own Japanese context. Instead, the 'eclectic religiosity' of these games echoes culturally specific ways of combining religious beliefs and practices in Japan's religious heritage.

In conclusion, *Final Fantasy* and its kin are like religious bento boxes: a convenient container for a plethora of disparate representations (religious, historical, contemporary-fictional) to snack on. This kind of representation only continues a typically Japanese appropriation of (non-Japanese) religion which historically always approached such traditions from a more non-hierarchical and 'eclectic' perspective. Such JRPGs rather continue a tradition of representing religion in Japanese popular culture in inherently playful ways – transgressing boundaries between the sacred and the profane; manga heroes and religious saints and, ultimately, combining elements from different religious traditions, in what I have clumsily called a 'shinto box' of eclectic religion.

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