

“At the Same Time ... Both Truth and Fiction”

Interrelation(s) of Psychology, Faith, and the Esotericism of the JRPG

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Of all of Japan's many contributions to the videogame industry, it is perhaps the 'Japanese Role-Playing Game' genre (hence 'JRPG') that remains its most definitive landmark. The *Dragon Quest* series (Square Enix since 2003) is arguably the definitive example of what would later be understood as the JRPG, whose systems, design and theming were highly influential on the game industry as a whole, in which a young hero embarks on a 'grail quest' vanquishing multitudes of bandits, warlocks and dragons in order to save the kingdom. Here we see the benign references to religion; Churches are the trademark 'save point' throughout the series where the player can heal their wounds, purge debilitating illnesses and resurrect fallen comrades by interacting with the local priest; in fact, the anglophone translations of *Dragon Quest* parse saving the game as 'confessing [your] sins'. This action implies that the priest is alleviating some of the burden from the player (in that saving the game state allows the player to return at a more convenient time), but the player also receives a benediction as confirmation that the state is saved, and the console can now be turned off. Though this remains an innocuous stirring of religious parallel in the Japanese videogame, it will be seen that this dynamic between religious practice and gameplay becomes staggeringly complex.

Prior to further writing, it is important to lay out a functional definition of the JRPG. At best, this term is slippery given it is typically applied post-hoc to a genre of Japanese games by its Western fans and is not defined by strict formal conditions. Fundamentally, the term 'Japanese Role-Playing Game' implies that games within the subgenre satisfy the condition of originating in Japan and that the player determines the actions of a given protagonist. The term 'Role Playing' itself might produce some explicit notion that the player possesses a great deal of control over their player character; in reality, none of the games in this chapter present narrative divergences based on player choice beyond the three possible endings typical to the *Shin Megami Tensei* series (Atlus since 1987), discussed later in this chapter. Instead, this role-playing element is understood as mechanically

driven i.e. the task of managing equipment, spells and skills in a manner akin to a traditional pen- and- paper roleplaying systems seen in *Dungeons and Dragons* (TSR 1974), *Call of Cthulhu* (Chaosium 1981), *Vampire: The Masquerade* (White Wolf 1991), and so on. However, there are shared aspects across *Final Fantasy VII* (Square 1997 [referred to as *FFVII*]), *Xenogears* (Square 1998) and the *Shin Megami* series that define them as JRPGs. Combat is typically ‘turn-based’, e.g., the player and enemy unit take turns in combat to deal out attacks, as opposed to the battle occurring within real time. The proficiency of each character in combat is determined by statistics (or ‘stats’), where a higher-value number attached to strength, for instance, would cause the character to inflict a higher (numerical) damage value to an opponent. JRPGs tend to prioritize world-building where the player canvasses an entire world through the course of their playtime; the world of *FFVII* is organized over an entire world map which the player can traverse, while the plot trajectory of *Xenogears* moves from small parochial villages to ancient, colony-sized starships – the ever-expanding scale of the JRPG is a common defining trait, pairing both with the typical monomyth structure (unlikely hero on a grail quest), and a significant time-investment produced by the player in order to complete the game. As an example, players could expect the task of bringing *FFVII* to completion would take roughly 40 hours, with likely well over 60 hours required to access every secret and item that the game has to offer. This culmination of extensive playtime, expansive setting and (typically) turn-based focus leads the JRPG to have a considerably above-average focus on narrative development. The story of an RPG is typically produced through interactive text sequences through which the player will press a button on their controller to advance from one dialogue box to the next, thus simulating an exchange of words between characters that progresses according to the player’s behest. Many of the games examined within this chapter also make use of FMV (‘Full Motion Video’) animated sequences that are much more cinematic in production quality; effectively a prestige moment within the play experience wherein the player is treated to an event unfolding in greater visual detail; *FFVII* makes particular use of this in the opening moments of the game, where Cloud, the protagonist, is shown to leap off the side of a 3D-rendered speeding train to arrive at his rendezvous site. This spectacle is heightened by this transition from high-quality animated graphics into the game-space proper, accentuating the game’s high-calibre of graphic production seen throughout the title. Other forms of narrative development are found in the expanded mechanical and traversal options that the player discovers as the game progresses. The acquisition of an ‘airship’ or other floating craft towards the denouement is common, opening up the player’s access to the game world significantly; a development that parallels the time-investment and mastery necessary for the player to reach this point in the game. Thus, the JRPG is structured to reward persistence and growth on both a systemic and narrative level; arguably a major reason for the enduring nature of the genre.

In terms of gameplay, success in the JRPG is determined by making prudent choices during combat, and tailoring the characters beforehand through allocated equipment and an increasing suite of additional combat abilities. In a broader case, the appeal of a JRPG is that it presents a grand narrative that incorporates exploration, combat and expanding play mechanics within an epic narrative form. Progress for the player is rewarded both by the continuation of the story and new places to see, as well as the capacity

to chart the increasing combat proficiency of characters with ever-growing stat values. Of the games discussed in this chapter, *FFVII*, *Xenogears* and the *Shin Megami Tensei* series fulfill the ludic expectations of the JRPG in this regard. It should be stressed that, as text-heavy games, the player's continuing interest in the game is contingent on identifying with both the sprawling storyline and navigating the ludic obstacles the player must overcome to reach them.

The success of the JRPG form has led to diversions from the high-fantasy rubric of the epochal *Dragon Quest* series. This divergence is most explicitly seen in the later *Shin Megami Tensei* series. Whilst the series mirrors many aspects of gameplay seen in *Dragon Quest*; beating monsters, gathering increasingly powerful equipment, and saving the world from evil, the games are (by an overwhelming majority) set in modern-day Tokyo in the wake of a Biblical apocalypse. In *Shin Megami Tensei II* (Atlus 1992), there is a 'secret' boss encounter with Hecate which is almost entirely possible to miss, as it requires the player to be present in Yesod, within Yetzirah, during a full moon¹. Kaneko, the lead artist for the *Shin Megami Tensei* series, was asked years later in an interview about this easily missed event, specifying that "that's because she is a three-faced god" and, as the goddess of liminal spaces, could therefore plausibly be connected within the chambered dimensions of the Kabbalah (d1994). While only a fleeting example of religious aptitude in the *Shin Megami* series, it indicates the level of care and attention given to 'remixing' religious figures and spaces within a distinctly Japanese idiom, beyond the superficial inclusion of religious imagery seen prior in *Dragon Quest*. This trend becomes increasingly popular from the mid-1990s onward, with *Neon Genesis Evangelion* ([referred to as *Evangelion*] 1995–1996) frequently referred to as a cornerstone of modern anime, in which troubled teens in biomechanical **mecha** combat 'angels' prophesied in an in-lore version of the Dead Sea Scrolls. *Evangelion* is unquestionably a landmark anime given its continued cultural impact, with a feature-length animated finale producing a definitive close for the series in 2021 (Anno). However, *Evangelion* departs significantly from the **mecha** subgenre in that the experience of occupying a mech is far from empowerment, and more a source of profound trauma for the show's protagonist, Shinji, who remains a malleable pawn in conspiracy (driven by his own father) to enact a man-made rapture in which humanity is erased to become a singular, incorporeal consciousness. Where a totalizing summary of the events of *Evangelion* remain out of the remit of this chapter, it is reasonable to assert that the show's successful fusion of existential philosophy, psychology and cosmic horror would produce the thematic basis of several games subsequent. *Final Fantasy VII* and *Xenogears*, two Squaresoft properties released only a few years after *Evangelion*, most notably carry the influence of their anime predecessor by virtue of their (oftentimes) nihilistic reflections on the hubris of man.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the extent to which Esotericism is used within the JRPG, and its increasing integration within complex videogame narratives, and provide a more definitive account of how the JRPG, in particular, tends to formally mirror the occult complexity of non-mainstream (or non-canonical) religious texts as a

1 Yesod and Yetzirah are both territories within the Tree of Life as described in the Kabbalah. Yesod is the foundation of the material world as made by God; Yetzirah is the 'World of Formation', in which matter is given form, often considered symbolic of the manifestation of consciousness.

form of repurposed religious experience. Necessary to this account is the inclusion of multiple videogames that demonstrate a conceptual tie between esotericism and character psychology. *Final Fantasy VII* is particularly useful here as a popular and (comparatively) well-documented title, in which Cloud Strife, the protagonist, must first reckon with his self-delusion to save the world from an extraterrestrial lifeform posing as a messiah. *Xenogears* is a useful and timely comparison, released only months after *FFVII*, which echoes a similar link between character psyche and a cosmic battle, albeit on a more blatantly mythical scale. Following this is the *Shin Megami Tensei* series, which has defined itself in appropriating and recontextualising religious, mythical, and folkloric figures into a consistent (and **local** mythos), where the protagonists pick through the remains of a post-apocalyptic Tokyo in order to battle opponents, demonic and divine, in order to rebuild the universe according to the player's decisions. The final videogame is the more recent title *Nier: Automata* (Square Enix 2018) which offers a distinct divergence from the other titles as a third-person 'Action RPG' that utilizes major works of philosophy and an unraveling story structure to form a treatise on 'positive nihilism', in which the game's android cast must confront the purpose of their existence in a world where their human creators no longer exist.

Where readings differ on the precise constituents of a JRPG, Schules presents a distinctive reading of the genre as construed more through media interrelation than ludology, stating that:

[...] One way to understand the Japanese qualifier of JRPGs is through its position in a larger framework of creative media brought together under the aegis of soft power. Despite soft political discourse to the contrary, JRPGs are Japanese not because of any intrinsic quality they possess; rather, they are Japanese by virtue of their relation to other creative media. (2015: 71)

Schule's interpretation of the JRPG as a component of a broader media landscape suggests that Roquet's (2014) approach is similarly applicable to a wider context, given that Japanese media forms are more loosely parsed 'by proxy' than through the formal properties of production. The argument would then follow that the JRPG responds to similar cultural influence and economic incentives offered in anime production; at the very least, it is evident that *FFVII* and *Xenogears* both draw considerably from the narrative and thematic framework laid out in *Evangelion* years prior. In terms of historical influence, there is a body of research to support periods of renewed interest and engagement with religious cults in Japan. The most sensational reference point of this will be the sarin gas attacks perpetuated in 1993 by members of the cult movement *Aum Shinrikyo*, an event which prompted serious academic research in the aftermath, particularly in determining the complicity of the religious movement in coordinating and executing the attack. Ian Reader has provided perhaps the most substantive account of *Aum Shinrikyo* to date, with *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan: The Case of Aum Shinrikyo* (2000) examining beyond the apocalyptic sensationalism of the cult itself towards providing for individ-

ual motives, testimonies and social pressures that caused *Aum* to be succeed both at its genesis, and in the years following the notorious subway attacks².

In terms of providing a scholarly basis for unravelling this distinctive link between player-character, psychology, and esotericism within the JRPG, Roquet's (2014) paper on what he defines as 'cosmic subjectivity' has provided a detailed firmament. In writing on *Night on Galactic Railroad* (Sugii 1985), Roquet notes that cosmic subjectivity proposes:

A form of self-understanding drawn not through social frames, but by reflecting one-self against the backdrop of the larger galaxy. (2014: 124)

Through this research, Roquet asserts that there is a generational shift in anime production studios (and their audience) that is marked by a cosmos interlinked with the protagonist's psyche (2014: 126). The consequence of this approach is that anime from this period detached from the familiar narrative structure of interpersonal relationships/interdependency and instead focused on the production of a wholly other universe that their intended audience could be immersed within, effectively liberated from the notional idea of media as reflective of pre-existing social realities (2014: 127). Where Roquet develops the concept of cosmic subjectivity in-step with a reading of *Night on Galactic Railroad*, a particularly haunting and elegiac adaptation of a Miyazawa short story, he presents a schema of potential influences; cultural, historic, and economic – that had a direct impact on this transformation of audience taste and similarly relates to the mythical, unreal approach to storytelling taken by Japanese game studios years later.

The academic reflections on Japanese media production, shifts in audience demographic, and the cultural relevance of cult religious practice culminates with the idea that the JRPG embodied these tensions during Japan's 'lost decades'³. The *Shin Megami Tensei* series, in particular, is organized around competing religious ideologies in mankind's End of Days. The research produced in relation to religion and the videogame has been beneficial, where the recent interest in this present, yet overlooked concept is mounting. Primarily, this chapter considers the manner and extent to which the JRPG incorporates the motifs of Esotericism. This research constitutes an initial attempt to coordinate the diverse and emergent work produced by this topic in recent years, and deliver an account of the many methodological approach(es) used in relation to religious motifs in the JRPG. Finally, this chapter posits what could be further uncovered by the unique convergence of theological and literary hermeneutics in application to the videogame.

The most simple introduction to this is offered by the introduction of character psychology seen in *FFVII*. Rather than ascend to the role of a legendary hero, Cloud is positioned as an exceptional (yet begrudging) mercenary until the inconsistencies in his story, and eventual accusations of being nothing more than a failed clone, produces an intense emotional breakdown that renders Cloud catatonic towards the close of the second act. What liberates Cloud is not the recovery of a hidden inner strength, but instead the acceptance of his own weakness. Cloud's weakness refers both to his literal lack of

2 Reader revised the original 1991 publication in a new edition (2000) after the subway attack, and has revisited the subject extensively throughout his academic career.

3 'Lost decade' is a rough anglicism of the Japanese term, *Ushinawareta Jūnen*.

physical strength in childhood, but more aptly refers to his urge to be 'noticed' by others, providing an explanation to how easily he succumbs to the illusory narrative that he is a failed clone of the legendary soldier and key antagonist, Sephiroth. The events revealed in Cloud's coma scene radically alter the perception of the narrative; the original hero-villain duality between Cloud and Sephiroth is now one momentarily displaced to that of Zack⁴ and Sephiroth, where Cloud has been displaced by the motives that have guided him thus far.

Cloud's gesture of self-acceptance sets an optimistic tone as the game moves towards its concluding hours; that having no destined place within *FFVII*'s grand narrative is reason to persevere. In this sense, the narrative forgoes the typical moral dualism of heroic conflict, opting instead to place the awakened Cloud as an outsider, clearing up the residue of events which occurred seven years before the game's beginning. This awakening marks a significant shift in *FFVII* as the narrative escalates to a mythic level as the party travels through to the center of the planet to confront Jenova; a fight that culminates in a confrontation with the final, angelic incarnation of Sephiroth.

This restructuring of the classic heroic narrative is indebted to the implementation of dialogue in-game. Greg Smith's (2002) formalist analysis of *FFVII*'s 'cinematic dialogue' explores how text within the game first appropriates cinematic form, then diverts from it. Much like a filmic narrative, *FFVII* sets up the motivations and goals of its key character (Cloud), at the outset, but the interactive nature of the game's combat serves the narrative function often left to film dialogue. Thus, *FFVII*'s dialogue performs another task, as Smith notes that "many of the key lines of *FFVII* are there to fill us in on the past, not to point us toward the future" (2002: n.p.). Smith's (2002) study demonstrates that *FFVII*'s preoccupation with the past is a definitive example of game dialogue serving a function beyond the emulation of film dialogue; however, this interrogation of the past also suggests a desire to reconcile modernity to myth. The events of *FFVII* readily parallel numerous contemporary crises in Japan's recent history; a colossal natural disaster, roving cultists, political corruption, militarization and financial depression⁵. References to these motifs are abundant in other media in Japan, but *FFVII* takes a particular approach to weave these disparate and terrible conditions into a singular, explicable narrative. The extent of these storied and terrible occurrences imply a formative approach with the production of *FFVII*'s narrative in which both natural and man-made tragedies become uni-

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- 4 The character of Zack remains an enigma throughout the duration of *FFVII*. Zack is an elite soldier on whom a confused Cloud has adopted his personality in the wake of medical experiments conducted on him prior to the game's events. Cloud uses Zack's sword in combat and is styled almost exactly like him; their singular separating difference is in hair colour; blond (Cloud) and black (Zack). Zack is dead by the beginning of *FFVII*, but the 'residue' of his life is often addressed by Aeris and Tifa, both of whom recognize Cloud as his double.
 - 5 The devastating Great Hanshin Earthquake (1995), the Tokyo Subway attack (1995). Japan's 'lost decade' of 1991–2001, and the significant tensions concerning the introduction of PKO law (1992), the latter of which is explored in detail in Mamoru Oshii's *Patlabor 2* (1993). Political corruption is a likely parallel to the so-called 'Recruit Scandal' (1989), which implicated the then-current (and previous) Prime Minister(s) in an insider trading ring, whose investigation was ongoing through the 1990s (Johnson, 2000).

form symptoms of one malevolent force – Jenova – that seeks to consume the lifeforce of Gaia's inhabitants.

Similar to the anxiety of angelic beings expressed in *Evangelion*, Sephiroth's ultimate, ascended form taken in *FFVII*'s final battle is deliberately angelic, clad in wing and halo; beyond this, he is also capable of attacking the party using the entire cosmos⁶. Tellingly, the game *Xenogears* (Square Product 1998), released after *FFVII*, culminates with the protagonist and his accomplices destroying a cruel and unfair god in order to liberate the surviving humans from an oppressive angelic regime. *Xenogears* was created from a story initially proposed by Tetsuya Takahashi and Kaori Tanaka as the basis for *FFVII*, but turned into a new and separate IP, allegedly deemed "too dark and complicated" for one of Square's mainline titles (Yip 2010: Page Number or n.p.). Soraya Saga, a freelance writer, illustrator, and partner to Takahashi, concedes that the works of Nietzsche, Freud and Jung in particular were influential in the writing of *Xenogears*, posing that the game responds to the inherent questions of humanity: "where do we come from, what are we, where are we going?" (Yip 2010). The motif of recollecting the self plainly reappears in *Xenogears*; the protagonist, Fei Fong Wong, is a construct of a 'monster', a 'coward', and the false persona of 'Fei'. Fei's bifurcated identity neatly overlays with Freud's model of the psyche (his monstrous self is literally named 'Id'), while the imagined persona of 'Fei' shields him from the truth – that he is, in fact, the reincarnation of a deity known as Abel. This particular synthesis between character interiority and cosmic horror, mediated through psychology and spiritual intertext, is a congruent element seen across *FFVII*, *Xenogears* and *Evangelion*.

In this sense, *FFVII* exists in a gulf where it mirrors the religious anxieties of *Evangelion*, develops the continuity of the *Final Fantasy* series, and establishes the major theme of identity then explored with the release of *Xenogears*. All of these texts engage in the miniaturization of humanity through an ever-increasing scale. This structural shift reorients the hero narrative from the horizontal conflict of hero and villain towards a 'vertical' narrative in which humanity lingers at the bottom rung of a totalizing mythic order. As stated above, Cloud's psychological growth is significant on a narrative level, and arguably gratifying to the player, but it remains that the outcome of the hero's success (in destroying Sephiroth/Jenova) is ambiguous with regards to humanity's long-term survival. The motifs of apocalypse and destruction is a common and long-running motif of Japanese media, but *FFVII* builds these elements into a narrative in which the hero must first remember himself before passing through the crucible.

Xenogears provides an intriguing contrast to *FFVII* given their approximate development time and release, both under the aegis of Squaresoft. Where *FFVII* was fundamentally designed as a blockbuster title slated for global release, *Xenogears* is a comparatively niche title, only released outside of Japan in North America. *Xenogears* has also long faced accusations of being 'unfinished', as the second disc is effectively an exposition-

6 This attack in particular was altered to look much more spectacular for the Western release of *FFVII*. This version was eventually relaunched in Japan as *'Final Fantasy VII: International'*, in October 1997.

heavy slideshow that terminates with a boss fight and epilogue⁷. Despite these difficulties, *Xenogears* maintains an explicit focus on religious myth, interspersed with psychological conceits in which the protagonist, Fei Wong Wong, is awakened to his complicity in the world's strife. *Xenogears*' commentary is notoriously explicit, given the conclusion of the game where Fei and his party destroy God/Deus, a hybrid bio-organic AI revered as a deity. The defeat of God then prompts the revelation that he is not in fact a deity, but an ancient automaton merely operating as a conduit for an interdimensional entity known only as 'The Wave Existence'. The fusion of the being known as Wave Existence and Deus was mediated by the Zohar (or Zohar Modifier), an energy source that trapped the Wave inside the body of Deus. Where the story of *Xenogears* is already conceptually complex, Fei's role in the story is more significant than it first appears. Fei begins the game as a humble painter in a small agrarian community, yet it is revealed that he is the conduit for the (benevolent) Wave Existence which he encountered in his original form as a child, thousands of years ago. Thus, the story of *Xenogears* is a totalising narrative in which Fei is the accidental progenitor of a cruel and apocalyptic universe, but also its savior. 'Fei' has been reincarnated countless times to achieve the final goal of liberating the Wave Existence – and mankind – from technological slavery. Given the nature of *Xenogears*'s mystic narrative, the opening quote of "I am the Alpha and Omega", appears particularly apt⁸.

In this way, *Xenogears* adopts a great deal of religious and psychoanalytic terminology. This approach helpfully tethers the remote cosmic narrative to identifiable concepts, but also presents a world where technological advancement and deification are indistinguishable from one another. Of particular note is the use of Zohar to describe a sophisticated power source. In the real world, the *Sefer ha-Zohar* is a foundational text of the Kabbalah, an exegesis on the Torah that formed the basis of Kabbalistic theology, at once revered and disputed in theological criticism (Huss 2015). Huss notes that the *Zohar* was a particular point of resistance to the *maskilim* in the eighteenth century as part of a "...struggle against traditional Jewish circles, especially the hasidic movement in eastern Europe" (2015: 9). Yisraeli has also commented on the unique nature of the *Zohar* as an exegesis:

The Zoharic exegete makes a great effort to settle enigmas and difficulties regarding the early aggadah yet does not adopt any visibly forced hermeneutic or theological agenda. What is not always clear, however, is the degree of authority these sources possess in the author's eyes. Or, to formulate this more acutely, to what extent a particular author permits himself to ignore earlier talmudic sources or gives his own teaching greater weight. (2013: 130).

Given the descriptions offered by Huss and Yisraeli, the *Zohar* represents a text whose value is determined by the reader; both in terms of recognizing the validity of the text,

7 Tetsuya Takahashi, director of *Xenogears*, elaborated on the game's 'unfinished' state, attributing it to the inflexible 2-year development cycle, and the cadre of inexperienced personnel on the project who were struggling to implement (then-new) 3D graphics. The decision to make the second disc text-heavy permitted *Xenogears* to be released on-time and within budget.

8 The quotation is Rev 22:13 (KJV) verbatim, albeit with the order altered to read '...the beginning and the end, the first and the last.'

and in interpreting the authority that it holds in contrast to other Talmudic texts. That the Zohar in *Xenogears* integrates a being of manifest consciousness into a deified shell thus comports with the so-called mysticism of the *Zoharic* texts; an attempt to bridge the boundaries of body and soul, and, more importantly, as a site of intersection between a fearsome material god and the transcendent consciousness unwillingly harbored within.

There are further references to Kabbalah in *Xenogears*. Razael, a supercomputer used to store the sum total of human knowledge comports in name and purpose with Raziel, the angel of god "who stands behind the curtain and listens to all that is decreed in heaven and proclaims it" (in Gaster 143). The Merkavah (Merkabah), the flaming chariot of God described by Ezekiel, exists in *Xenogears* as the transportation system for Deus. Balthasar, Melchior and Gaspar, the 'three wise men' that journey to visit Christ, appear in *Xenogears* as sages who pass on their wisdom to Fei. In particular, Balthasar relates to Fei the story of mankind's expulsion from paradise, with the addendum that:

Bitter at having been driven out of paradise, humans used the wisdom they had to make giants. With these giants, they planned to challenge God himself. But God poured his wrath down on them. All who defied God were destroyed. But God himself did not escape unharmed. Taking paradise with him, the wounded God buried himself deep beneath the ocean to sleep for eons. Before going to sleep, God used his remaining power to create right-hearted humans to live on this planet. (Square Product Development Division 3 1998: n.p.)

Thus, the story of *Xenogears* directly incorporates Judeo-Christian motifs into the framework of its narrative, and is viewed in continuity with the religious prophecies and exegesis that have, in the case of *Xenogears*, dispensed apocalyptic visions that were accurate portents of the world to come. This necessarily situates the player between the pillars of the Judeo-Christian mythos of the past, and that mythos in future continuity, with modern experience effectively a forgotten lull between apocalyptic states. The utilization of myth in *Xenogears* is part of its mystical exploration of humanity, where truth is found in myth, and the age of reason is rendered inscrutable.

Xenogears introduces further mystification through its stylistic implementation of Jungian psychology where Fei's ego, superego, and 'shadow' become external, physical manifestations with their own identities. This parallels a similar narrative approach seen in *FFVII*, where Cloud's interior revelations about himself, and the unclouded view of childhood experience, renews him with the self-determination necessary to destroy the malignant god of Jenova. *Xenogears* similarly has Fei reckon with his subconscious, albeit as external manifestations of his earlier selves. Fei's Id conglomerates into 'Id' after a dissociative event, a repressed and destructive entity sealed away into Fei's consciousness. Representation is also given to ego and superego. The antagonist known as 'Grahf' is similarly born from Fei, as the power-hungry remnant from a failed pre-incarnation (notably named Lacan). Grahf continually urges Fei to awaken to power like him, which would allow Grahf to possess Fei's body and obliterate existence. Similarly, 'Coward' acts as Fei's ego; the original version of Fei that encountered Zohar, preserved within Fei. Much like how *Xenosaga's* cosmic narrative is maintained by adhesion to Judeo-Christian concepts, the psychological element adds another interpretative construct that dis-

rupts the linear narrative, where Fei operates as both protagonist and antagonist. Fei is effectively a construct that harbors multiple identities (or aspects), and his journey is one that confronts him with the myths of the past; now necessary in determining his future. Through this complex narrative the player is similarly tasked to unpack and successfully navigate a narrative that affords no simple victories; like the player, Fei is an extradiegetic entity. Where they differ is that Fei's archetypes or *selves* produce complications beyond a conflict of good and evil. Since the Zohar is enshrined as the supreme and secretive force controlling the universe of *Xenogears*, it would seem that *gnosis*, in particular Fei's self-knowledge, will restore a collapsing reality once attained.

It is interesting to note that, where *FFVII* and *Xenogears* both present personal revelation as a necessary awakening to their purpose, their representation differs significantly. *FFVII* features a more internalized approach where Cloud's understanding adopts a more Jungian model; Tifa's presence as a living spectator to Cloud's memories lend this narrative sequence is reminiscent of dramatized talking therapy; particularly in how Tifa's externalized role causes her to prompt Cloud to retell his defining experiences, successfully bringing on his catharsis that his authentic self is more than the culmination of his false memories. Meanwhile, *Xenogears* pitches Fei against the manifestations of his former and present selves, where the fate of the universe is contingent on the aspect of 'Fei' to persevere and finally destroy Deus, while preserving the existence of humanity. What is evident in considering Square's parallel RPG titles is that human psychology and religious myth present an intertextual mode from which to interpret the game. *FFVII*, in particular, has invited a variety of academic approaches towards the topics covered within it; as an environmental parable, as corporate critique, and as the embodied anxieties of Japanese culture towards the end of the Lost Decade. Both *FFVII* and *Xenogears* adopt the approach of highly complex structures that cause the narrative to gesture outward to wider cosmic motifs which at times cause the causal aspects of the story to become mystified. This could be perceived as a consequence of long-form storytelling, as both games require significant time investment to complete, necessitating a horizontal expansion of story elements to present the player with a greater degree of narrative milestones. The inclusion of spiritual and psychological intertext also serve to present a modernised myth that incorporates internal (psychology) and external (cosmos) motifs that both minaturizes human experience and yet enshrines the triumph of the individual; their interiority and catharsis.

Perhaps the most distinctive and long-lived model of spiritual intertext is seen in the *Shin Megami Tensei* [referred to as SMT] series. SMT has held a consistent presence in the Japanese market since the release of *Digital Devil Story: Megami Tensei*, which was released originally on the MSX in July 1987. A Famicom version followed in September of that year. Both versions were co-developed by ATLUS and Telenet Japan, though the Famicom version adopted a familiar turn-based JRPG formula, differing from the original's more action-focused entry, and the version that debuted on Famicom systems would become the model for the series going forward. Both titles were an adaptation of the same source texts; Aya Nishitani's *Digital Devil Story* trilogy (1986–1988)⁹. Henceforth, the series would

9 The novel trilogy was also adapted into an OVA (Nishikubo 1987), part-financed by Tokuma Shoten, the publisher of the original books.

form an extensive media landscape consisting of anime productions, manga, music albums, live stage shows, TV series, and numerous spin-off games. Most notable of the spin-off titles is the *Persona* series (Atlus since 1996), which debuted on the PSX in 1996, and in recent years has largely eclipsed the original series in popularity in USA/European territories, particularly with the release of *Persona 5* (Atlus 2016) and its own subsequent spin-offs and remasters from its initial release date in 2016. It would be reasonable to conclude from these observations that the *SMT* series has had a long-lived cultural impact in Japan, but that, beyond *Persona*, has only begun to gain substantive traction in the West. This is partially due to the breakout success of *Persona*, which has prompted the re-release *SMT: Nocturne/Lucifer's Call* and the recent release of *SMT V* (Atlus 2021), the latter of which was widely advertised and celebrated with a 'premium edition' version that includes the game alongside stickers, a soundtrack CD, and other ephemera for series fans¹⁰.

Arguably, the appeal of *SMT* lies in its high degree of cultural specificity. The series is almost entirely set in some variation of Tokyo that the player can explore. Much of Tokyo's particular landmark structures (Tokyo tower, the Diet building, Shibuya Crossing) remain distinctly intact even in apocalyptic conditions, and lend a sense of place and cultural nuance to the world that the player explores, beyond the more idyllic fantasy world of *Dragon Quest*, or the poly-cultural dwellings seen in *Final Fantasy VII*. *SMT* can be credited for a number of distinct innovations in gameplay and narrative design. A prominent feature of the series is the 'negotiation' system, in which the player-character can utilise a 'talk' command to speak directly to a demon opponent and convince them to give the player an item, cease their attack, or, ideally, join their party as a friendly combatant. The ability to recruit demons, each with their own strengths and weaknesses, predates the better-known combat system seen in the *Pokemon* series (Game Freak since 1996), and likely produced the blueprint for this 'monster collecting' gameplay model. *SMT* has collectively over 750 'demons' across the series and provide a highly global collection of deities from Judeo-Christian lore, Celtic fables, Hinduism, Gnosticism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Egyptian, all manner of apocryphal religious figures (Lilith, Mithras, Yaldabaoth), and even North American cryptids (Mad Gasser, Mothman). By all accounts, *SMT* is one of the most detailed compendiums of religious figures, demons, and deities to date.

A significant narrative aspect of the *SMT* series is that the games typically have three possible endings, referred to as the 'Law', 'Chaos', and 'Neutral' paths, respectively. The nature of these endings each represent a player-led 'alignment' based on specific dialogue choices they have made, and actions they have taken in-game. The 'Law' ending is reconciliation with God; the world is restored back to the Garden of Eden before the fall, and mankind is welcomed into paradise. However, this comes at the cost of human autonomy, and human experience ceases to experience any self-determination or free will. Chaos is antinomianism in practice, where the influence of the divine is purged from Earth. The world thus returns towards 'Might Makes Right', a world determined by the whims of the strongest, whether human or demon. The neutral ending is an intriguing

10 *SMT: Nocturne* was originally released on the PS2 in 2001. A titular 'HD Remaster' edition was released in 2020 for the PS4, NS, and PC.

middle-ground, in which mankind emancipates itself both from the divine and the infernal, separating humanity from the interference of deities altogether. This ending is, in gameplay terms, typically much harder to obtain than either capitulation to the divine or allegiance to Lucifer, requiring both precision and patience on the player's part to prevail with logical and partisan decisions made consistently through the course of the game.

The original *Shin Megami Tensei* (Atlus 1992) establishes the narrative blueprint for the series onward and is worth relaying in detail¹¹. The player controls the protagonist in modern Tokyo who receives an email from 'Stephen' containing a supposed demon-summoning computer program¹². It is not long after this point that Tokyo becomes invaded by demons; a number of failed experiments at teleportation technology have opened a rift to the Abyss, and war breaks out. The US military, stationed in Tokyo, impose martial law and launch an offensive on the invading demonic forces. A Japanese militia force led by Gotou, an SDF General, emerges in response to US intervention, parsing demons as ancient, native spirits destined to usher the world into a utopia. A third faction, led by the 'Heroine', strives to prevent the clash of US/Japanese armed forces as a means of protecting Tokyo, the site in the middle of this struggle. At this stage, the player is able to support any of these three factions, but this support is moot as the US General reveals himself to be the disguised form of Thor and sets off a nuclear holocaust that exterminates nearly all human life from earth. The protagonist and supporting cast survive this event thanks to the sacrifice of the Heroine and return to the world thirty years later. The remaining US and insurgent forces now denote themselves as 'The Messiah Order' and 'The Ring of Gaea', respectively, marking humanity's return to religious fanaticism. The Messiahs have appointed themselves as the human representatives of God's will, tasked with ushering the remnants of humanity towards the 'Thousand Year Kingdom' as described in Revelations. The Gaeans refuse the diktat of the Messiahs and seek to summon Lucifer to engineer a world in which the strong can determine their own fate. The player now faces a choice in which they can support the cause of the Messiahs led by the angel Aniel (Anael), aid Echidna in liberating Lucifer, or slay both figureheads to assert their own freedom in reshaping the world. The game concludes at the top of the Messiah-built cathedral, perched above the clouds. In supporting the Messiah cause, God appears to the protagonist and bids him to preach His word for mankind's salvation. Following the Gaeans causes Lucifer to appear before the protagonist, welcoming him to a 'golden age' of freedom. If both sides of the conflict are defied, the player is instead greeted by Taishang Laojun, the revered founder of Taoism, who urges the protagonist to build a

11 The original games, titled *Megami Tensei I* (1987) and *II* (1990), were superseded by *Shin Megami Tensei* (SFC, 1993). 'Shin' (meaning 'True' or 'Extended') is typically used in Japanese media franchises in a manner analogous to what would be termed as a reboot; a new beginning based on a pre-existing IP.

12 The *SMT* series protagonists are typically player-named. However, supplemental texts have each provided a name for the *SMT1* protagonist including Sho, Kazuya, and Futsuo. The latter name is particularly interesting as Futsuo can be interpreted as 'Ordinary Man' and 'Contact of Buddha', respectively. It should be noted that the openness of interpretation is due to character names being represented (initially) in Kanji, then transliterated to Katakana. Rather than considering this a definitive interpretation of the names, it is indicative of the ambiguities, intentional or otherwise, that recur throughout the *SMT* series.

new world "...built by neither reliance on God nor demons, but by the hands of people themselves" (Atlus 1992: n.p.).

In totality, *SMT* appears to embed modern and systemic anxieties into a fiction of the apocalypse. In the first instance, the emergence of demons into the modern world again exclaims the unspoken divisions of US-Japan relations; the US military imposes martial law to fight back the tide of demonic invaders, which prompts an immediate and reactionary movement on behalf of Japan's national defence force, the JSDF. Gotoh and his allies identify with demons as the ephemera of Japan's collective past; as spirits seeking to take revenge on a conflicted and compromised nation. The chaos of this otherworld invasion is only inflamed by the drawing of battle lines between two national forces and prompts such a loss of control that the earth itself is brought to the very brink of oblivion. The intrinsic difference of opinion of what 'demons' represent are contingent on the cultural framework of their observer, and consequently the demons themselves can be interpreted as inert beings that instead provoke humanity to rediscover their impulse for tribalism and war. That this conflict between American and Japanese interpretation continues beyond the point where these national indicators no longer have any meaning suggests that mankind's destructive nature is endemic; even the afterlife is at peril.

The 'neutral' alignment similarly ratifies this interpretation, as the presence of a Taoist deity simultaneously sidesteps the Western perception of individual moral reckoning as good versus evil (or angels versus demons), and instead that clarity is brought from the acceptance of these aspects embedded in human consciousness. Laojun's statement that the protagonist is "part of [the universe], yet also all of it [...] it includes law and chaos within it, too" (Atlus, 1991) suggests that this is a preferable moral viewpoint in that it is both conciliatory and presents the individual as part of a greater universal fabric. By extension, Laojun represents spiritual ascendancy beyond the binaristic Judeo-Christian values represented within *Shin Megami Tensei* and reasserts the value of Eastern philosophy in the serene acceptance of life as an experience of continuous change. By contrast, the Messian and Gaean faiths that dwell in the ruins of Tokyo seek to evade this state of 'being', through deference to God's Thousand Year Kingdom, or inviting Lucifer as the architect of an uninhibited world of *hylics*¹³.

This dichotomy between Eastern and Western religious perspectives within Japanese games has been articulated by several scholars within recent years. Returning to the subject of the *Zelda* series (Nintendo EAD 1986–2013; Nintendo EPD since 2015), Hemman notes that where the games superficially present classical aspects of Judeo-Christian narrative tropes, there are nonetheless distinctly Buddhist archetypes present within the series, particularly in the nemesis of Ganon:

The necessity of an apocalyptic catalyst for rebirth and renewal is connected to a worldview inspired by Japanese Buddhist traditions, which are referenced in the Japanese text associated with Ganon, Demise, and Ganondorf, including the ways in which these characters speak and refer to themselves. Far from being a collection of

13 The *hylic* is considered the lowest form of human life within the Gnostic faith. The *hylic* is defined by a preoccupation (or spiritual bond) to the material world, a being thus incapable of divine experience.

one-dimensional villains who mindlessly strive for power and control, the various permutations of Ganon in the *Zelda* series add cultural depth to the games, thus endowing the conflicts underlying their narratives with a greater sense of literary complexity. (2021: 17)

Of particular note in Hemman's argument is the citation of the term *monen* which refers to Ganon's obsession with the continued apocalypse(s) he visits upon the world of Hyrule, both as a misplaced desire in being attached to the world, and a refusal of the ephemeral nature of living (2021: 11)¹⁴. Despite Ganon's flawed impulse to repeatedly incarnate and devastate Hyrule, the subsequent apocalyptic landscape can be as beautiful as it is deadly. This is particularly evident in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo EPD 2017) in which the environment is populated with winding rivers, lush valleys, and snow-capped mountains alongside monster dwellings. That the apocalypse itself is rendered in such morally ambivalent terms parallels the position of *Shin Megami Tensei*, where even the end of human history presents divergent options in forging a future.

It would be remiss not to note the extent to which YHVH's representation within *SMT* mirrors Gnostic eschatology, in which YHVH has 'adopted' the role of divine authority in the (present) absence of any higher power. Several distinct Gnostic figures are accounted for within *SMT* such as Sophia, Satanael, Yaldabaoth (Ialdabaoth) and the Demiurge. In *Shin Megami Tensei NINE* (Atlus 2002), Sophia appears initially as a human, working in a flower shop. It is later revealed that she has been incarnated in mortal form as punishment for the creation of Yaldabaoth, who is himself the form taken by YHVH to plot the annihilation of humanity. The Demiurge similarly reflects Gnostic biblical exegesis, depicted as the creator of the material world yet spiritually ignorant, and as another aspect of YHVH. This appraisal is largely consistent with the Sethian cosmogony, in which the 'creator' is the demiurge, and man's expulsion from Eden is a step towards liberation from the material universe.

An additional complication to the reading of *SMT* is the increasing significance of Jehovah (YHVH) in the overarching continuity of the series. *SMT II* (Atlus 1994) begins where the prior game's 'neutral' ending left off. The Messian cathedral is destroyed, but Messiahs have remained, transformed into an angelic race that now runs the 'Tokyo Millennium', the lavish above-world civilization built on the ruins of the previous apocalypse. The new protagonist in *SMT II* is Aleph, a bio-engineered messiah fabricated to summon YHVH and bring the world to order. Aleph encounters YHVH for the first time (along either the chaos or neutral path) if they destroy Satan before he expunges all life from earth; an act assisted by the use of the 'Megiddo Ark', a powerful laser weapon. YHVH regards killing Satan as defiance of His will, having created both Satan and Lucifer as executors of divine judgement and temptation, respectively. The three 'alignment' endings presented for the game all produce the result of banishing YHVH and His power over earth. In the chaos and neutral endings, this is achieved through the act of deicide. YHVH's parting proclamations differ in the ending where the earth will become a 'confused' world

14 In general, Link's nemesis in the *Zelda* series is commonly either Ganon or Ganondorf. Ganondorf is the original human incarnation of the deific Ganon. Ganondorf appears in the form of a human, where Ganon is a porcine bipedal beast.

(Chaos), that mankind is fundamentally too weak to exist without God (Neutral), or that Aleph will now rule the world with divine authority in His absence until he is returned to being by 'The Great Will'. That YHVH's reincarnation is subject to another higher power displaces the notion that YHVH has sole universal authority within the theological landscape of *SMT*. This is expounded on once YHVH returns in *SMT IV* (Atlus 2013) and *SMT IV: Apocalypse* (Atlus 2016b), a direct continuation of the former. Adding to the complex inter-factional disputes that have defined the *SMT* series are 'The White'. Described in the supplemental artbook as "the embodiment of the ancient races destroyed by the angels" (ATLUS, 2013, n.p.)¹⁵. The White claim that they are the creators of YHVH and the architects of the endless and inter-dimensional conflict. This is explained to Flynn, the protagonist of *SMTIV*, in the hope that he will assist them in their goal of breaking the continuous cycle of conflict through the total obliteration of existence. The alternative, as The White see it, is an eternal proxy war between Lucifer and Merkabah, who superficially appear to be in total opposition to one another, but are, in reality, merely pawns of YHVH to ensure His unquestioned authority as mankind's creator. It is evident that the complexity of *SMT*'s master narrative has increased as it has continued, with significant vertical expansion that incorporates several competing ideologies about the value of faith, life, and humanity's place within the cosmos.

As *SMT* has continued, the spiritual horizon of its meta-narrative has faced considerable expansion. The canonicity of the 'neutral' path in the majority of the series suggests that the humanistic path of self-determination is a morally preferable outcome than obedience to either the organizing forces of the cosmos or its rejection. The neutral path represents a middle-line devised in the margins of theological binarism, but it does not offer any conclusion to the riddle of humanity's purpose within the spiritual world, as, indeed, later entries in the series demonstrate that neutrality banishes these deific interlopers for a time, but are soon to return.

The very nature of the *SMT* series is a religious myth of its own with resultant *lacunae*, expositions, unreliable narrators (and, in English, potential translation errors) that invite extensive commentary from seasoned fans of the *SMT* continuity. Western fans of the series are numerous enough to maintain an active fan presence online, where systems of morality, canonical endings, and the roles of token characters are open to frequent debate. An intriguing outcome of *SMT* is the attempts to organize the titles into a definitive continuity.

The 'Amala Multiverse', a fan image produced by 'LouieSiffer' (2021), was posted to Reddit's *SMT* board, where it has been subject to continuous refinement and vocal feedback. The sprawling image is itself a fan-made esoteric artifact that unifies disparate source texts – mainline and 'spin-off' *SMT* titles, novels, manga, and anime – into a summative timeline of *SMT*'s known universe. This attempt to produce a coherent continuity relies on interpretation based on the various endings (Law/Chaos/Neutral) of preceding games. This exercise, though speculative, suggests a meta-narrative wherein all *SMT* properties exist within a continuously looping multiverse in which the destruction and

15 The *SMTIV* "Strategy & Design Book" was included with the 'Collector's Edition' of the game released in 2013.

recreation of the universe has (at least up to this point in the series) continued indefinitely. Where the series implicitly enshrines the humanistic values of the neutral alignment path, the notionally 'ideal' alignment is left up to the player, given the often ambiguous resolutions offered at the conclusion of each game; the moral dimensions of the alignment continue in online discussion boards and forums, and has certainly aided the relevance of the series in internet discourse. In any case, it would appear that the neutral ending(s) seen in the SMT series do little to dislodge the divine order that sees humanity struggle against supernatural intervention in perpetuity.

Where the production of elaborate mythical structures appears largely relegated to the JRPG genre, *Nier: Automata* appears to 'evolve' the apocalyptic narrative in terms of both the density of its philosophical *nous* and embedded within gameplay design itself. *Nier: Automata* is ostensibly an action-RPG (or ARPG) concerning a long-lived proxy war between androids and alien 'machines' on earth, from which humanity is wholly absent. The story begins from the perspective of the androids, with the player initially beginning the game as 2B, tasked with invading earth to establish a transportation route for further invasions. The purpose of the androids is ostensibly to exterminate machines (robots) in order to make the world safe and habitable for the return of humans; the androids are told that humans reside bunkered on the moon until the earth is secured.

Familiar to the structures of the aforementioned games, this relatively simple conflict between two forces is significantly complicated as the story progresses. 2B and her partner, 9S, discover that the alien machines, long abandoned, have begun to emulate human societal structures and behaviors. This is evident in a number of locations in-game, such as a carnival in which they endlessly parade amongst themselves, and a forest grove where the machines practice a Middle Ages form of monarchy, in service to an infant king that will never grow. This establishes a dichotomy early on between android and machine response to existence. Machines are shown to have very little capacity to learn but strive to overcome this impairment through external and endless repetition of mundane tasks. The pathos of this implicitly futile and eternal endeavor is sealed with the design of the machines, who have squat proportions and childlike features that indicate a helpless and fragile demeanor. In game, they typically pose very little threat to 2B as enemies, and in gameplay terms are neither threatening, nor difficult to dispatch. Androids are considerably more advanced than the machines both in appearance and ability. As the last remnant of a human-organized military faction known as YoRHa, the androids are capable of traveling from their orbital base to Earth with ease, and are demonstrably stronger and more individuated from machines. They also inhabit idealized feminine figures, dressed in Victorian-esque clothing reminiscent of the Japanese subgenre of 'Gothic Lolita' apparel, which produces an uncanny contrast when placed against the derelict earth they explore¹⁶. Despite their personal individuation and sentience, the player's initial protagonist, 2B, demonstrates little understanding of the world beyond the parameters of her mission, and YoRHa's preoccupation with the 'survival' of humanity appears largely misplaced. Where the machines mimic human behavior through external action, the androids are inherently idealized facsimiles of humans that remain perpetually ignorant

16 To clarify: 9S is the only male android in service to YoRHa, and is both slight and androgynous in comparison to his gynomorphic peers.

of their lost cause. The fate of mankind is revealed much later into the game, when it is made clear that humanity has been extinct for thousands of years, and that the admittance of this foregone conclusion would collectively rob YoRHa of purpose. In the end, it is machines that can more comfortably exist in a world where they no longer need to serve the purpose they were assembled for.

Once more, the thematic issue of *gnosis* is articulated with reference to a significant number of scholars, and notably includes both an Adam and Eve as powerful antagonists¹⁷. Adam and Eve parallel closely to their biblical counterparts, despite the fact that they are male siblings. 2B and 9S observe Adam's birth from an artificial machine womb and attempt to kill him. As a newborn, Adam does not retaliate initially as the player fights him, but eventually adapts to the situation and begins to fight back. Adam is seemingly killed after 2B and 9S impale him through the stomach with their swords, but instead Eve is born from Adam's wounds and carries his injured brother to safety, paralleling the biblical Eve's creation from Adam's rib. Where Adam and Eve are nude in their first encounter with 2B and 9S, they are later shown to be clothed as a means to both mask their nudity and emulate typical human mores further. While ostensibly 'machines', Adam and Eve more closely resemble the android protagonists (white-haired and beautiful), signaling that machines may have finally produced a close equivalent to human beings in their efforts. Adam, in particular, is fixated on learning human concepts and is particularly fascinated by death, a state which is seemingly only temporary for both siblings. Thus, Adam and Eve pose as a 'Genesis' for machines, as the production of the brothers enables the machines to break the stalemate of their physical inferiority to androids, and bring about an era of machine rule, free of android intervention. Ultimately, however, this path to ascendancy is fraught; the androids continue to impede this growth, while machines grow increasingly frantic to inspire humanity in themselves; as later towards the game, a cadre of machines assemble in a murderous cult to 'become as gods', where their deaths, and the deaths of others, are thought to bring them closest towards this definitive aspect of human experience.

The androids are similarly trapped, as YoRHa are not, in fact, in service to a supposed 'Council of Humanity'. YoRHa contrived a false narrative of the survival of humanity as a means of preventing a hopeless existence – to ensure that this plan was successful, the machines were permitted to invade YoRHa headquarters and destroy all traces of information barring the story of humanity's survival, thus erasing the truth and enabling androids to exist in eternal conflict with machines in the hope of one day rescuing their human masters. This endless loop is in-part achieved by the efforts of 2B: her 'B' suffix denotes that she is a 'battler' android unit, but her true designation is later revealed as '2E'; an executioner who specialises in killing other androids. Thus, it is revealed that her true task is to execute her inquisitive partner 9S when he gets too close to the truth of the android's situation. This plan appears to parallel monotheistic spiritual practice, in which the androids of *Nier: Automata* work tirelessly to salvage the residue of a god that, for them, no longer exists. Any moment at which 9S might gather evidence in support of

17 Many characters in *Nier: Automata* are named in reference to known philosophers: Jean-Paul (Sartre), Simone (de Beauvoir), Pascal, Immanuel (Kant), Marx, Engels, Grün, Hegel, Ro-Shi (Laozhi), and Ko-Shi (*Kongzi*/Confucius), among others.

the latter is met with a swift execution by his combat ‘partner’, 2B. This desperation for spiritual truth is mirrored by the machines that dwell on earth. Their mantra in the later stages of the game, a plea to ‘become as gods’, marks the first stirrings of an authentic and **original** proto-religion conceived by droids that were, millenia ago, manufactured for the sole purpose of menial labour. The collective formation of an expressible and ubiquitous *shibboleth* represents the first light of robotized divinity; with terrible consequences to follow. Comparatively, humanity has achieved divinity in their passing – they are never to be seen again, but the structures and machines now rust in their wake, left for 2B and 9S to learn from. The moral of *Nier: Automata*, if one is to be found, is that the struggle for spiritual independence comes from a reckoning with the strictures of the past without adherence to those values.

This cyclical structure seen in *Nier: Automata* is enabled by its replayable structure and multiple endings; 26, in total (Endings A-Z). The endings available can come from comically poor decisions made by the player (i.e., perishing from attempting to eat a fish, manually removing 2B’s internal BIOS, abandoning an important battle), but the endings provided also account for the diversity of ways in which 2B’s story has come to a close. Given that androids are continually re-assembled on death, there is a suggestion that each ending has occurred as a canonical endpoint of this cyclical struggle. The task of a complete narrative of the events of *Nier: Automata* is also left largely to the player’s intervention. Much of the backstory is presented through a pseudo-epistolary collection of transcripts, logs, recorded memories and server data. Beyond this, there are ‘weapon stories’ which are only fully available once the player has completely upgraded the weapon in question. These ‘weapon stories’ all tell parables of an ancient era, many of which refer to unnamed characters grappling with emptiness and despair, affirming the core themes of the text. It is also possible for the player to prematurely discover the extinction of humanity, if they locate the ‘shipping records’ document, a manifest that describes resources ostensibly being sent to survivors on the moon – revealing that the pods are sent to their destination empty. *Nier: Automata* shares many thematic characteristics of the preceding games covered, but the narrative is more open-ended through the combination of multiple endings, multiple playable characters, and a vast quantity of supporting texts found within the game world. Further to this, *Nier: Automata* can be seen as a distillation of the cosmic anxieties of *SMT/Xenogears/FFVII* by its through-line of nihilism, where neither machine or android can claim to know themselves, or their creator. The consistent allusion to modern philosophy, as well as the religious ‘remix’ of Adam and Eve into male siblings, produce a modern myth that considers the role of a religious awakening in a world beyond enlightenment, and beyond history.

There is one final ludic surprise in *Nier: Automata* which is important to consider in the wake of this desolate theme. In Ending E, the player is asked to delete all of their save data in order to save both 2B and 9S. This is no small request, as dozens of hours of gameplay are necessitated to reach this point of the game. The player is directly queried on the logic of deleting their data, prompted with a series of questions that seem intentionally organized to have the player contemplate the task of playing the game itself¹⁸.

18 Questions include “Do you have any interest in helping the weak?” (Taro 2017: n.p.), “This person, who cries out for help, even as we speak, may be someone you intensely dislike. Do you still wish to

The outcome of deleting the save data is only clear later, as the player is tasked to survive a *shmup*-style credit sequence in which they pilot a simple triangular spaceship (reminiscent of *Asteroids* (Atari Inc. 1979)) and shoot down enemies tagged with names of *Nier: Automata*'s development team¹⁹. This sequence is intentionally difficult, and, if the player dies enough times, they will be asked if they wish for help. Then, the player's ship will be joined by other ships; each representing a comrade that sacrificed their save data in what is otherwise a wholly single-player game. This meta-gameplay suggests that existential despair is something bested by self-sacrifice and serving the needs of others, while the task of completing this difficult hurdle leads to the reconstruction of 2B and 9S. It is clearly stated that the narrative experienced by the player might play out again, but that it is all towards the 'possibility' of a different future. The game closes with the concluding phrase: "a future is not given to you. It is something you must take for yourself" (2017: n.p.). *Nier: Automata* presents a clearer moral invective at its close than the preceding games, and predominantly tasks the player to decide for themselves the meaning, if any, taken from the experience. In any case, *Nier: Automata* appears to detail a similar spiritual journey as its forebears but integrates a redemptive meta-narrative through interactions presented directly to the player.

In total, the games under analysis in this chapter have each presented an attempt to place the notional aspects of individuality – ethics, philosophy, psychology – within a wider context of religious myth. An important facet shared between these titles is the experience of time and history as cyclical events. In *Xenogears* and *Nier: Automata*, the protagonists wander a wasteland left thousands of years ago from a lost civilization of technologically advanced humans. In *SMT*, the quest for humanity's liberation from demonic interference travels across time and space, towards parallel and multi-tiered realms of existence.

An omission from this is *FFVII*, which gives an ambiguous ending where mankind appears to be saved from the immediate threat of an extinction-level event (via meteor), but the epilogue set 500 years into the future shows the leonine Red XIII accompanied by pups who pause to overlook an overgrown and desolate Midgar, with no living bodies in sight. An intriguing addition to this is the recent *Final Fantasy VII: Remake* ([referred to as *Remake*] Square Enix Business Division 1 2020), which has numerous narrative diversions from the original game. The term 'remake', in videogame terminology, typically implies that the game has received a graphical update, reworked gameplay systems and/or additional content. Where *Remake* lavishly recreates the opening of *FFVII*'s raid on Reactor 1, the events of the original narrative are quickly disturbed by 'Whispers'; a conglomeration of cloaked, ghostly figures, who directly intervene at any point of narrative divergence in *Remake*. The Whispers are described in-game as "arbiters of fate" that manifest when "someone tries to alter destiny's course" (Square Enix: Business Division 1 2020: n.p.).

help?" (ibid.), "You may not receive thanks for your efforts [...] that your efforts are purely for show. Do you still wish to help?"

19 'Shmup' is a common contraction of 'shoot 'em up', a game genre where the player commonly pilots a small craft and shoots numerous enemy units. The differentiation of 'Vertical' and 'Horizontal' shmup is used as a prefix for the orientation of the scrolling field of play.

This would lend credence to the idea that the Whispers are an unsubtle reference to players familiar with the previous iteration of events, particularly as these regulators of fate are vanquished at the end of the game, leaving the story to freely divert from the original blueprint of *FFVII*. That such a distinct narrative contrivance is embodied in *Remake* means that the original game is no longer a discrete entity, but part of a larger canon of an *FFVII* 'universe', as much as the series has seen expansion into books, films, spin-off games and character cameos in other SQUARESOFT titles²⁰. This would also apply accordingly that *Remake* is not a direct retelling of the original *FFVII*, but an alternate series of events in a parallel world. Thus, the exception of *FFVII* from cyclical time is redressed with the release of its remake.

The interpretation of narrative in the JRPG remains to be problematized by the presence of cyclical time, their typically contrived (or **mystifying**) narratives, and, to parallel scholarly theology, the question of canonicity surrounding each text. A distinguishing feature of Japanese gaming is the notion of a 'Player's Guide'. In Western parlance, a Player's Guide is akin to what would be commonly understood as a 'Walkthrough' or 'Guide Book', either an authorised or unofficial supplementary text that advises new players on optimal choices, secrets, boss combat strategies, and other such information. In Japan, guidebooks can often be a source of additional (canonical) information that provides context to in-game events. *Xenogears*, in particular, is supported by *Xenogears: Perfect Works* (Squaresoft 2000), which provides a detailed history of events set prior to the beginning of the game and adds considerable historical context beyond the narrative remit of the game itself. Similarly, the official art book for *Shin Megami IV* (Atlus 2013) provides a number of elaborations and clear definitions of some nebulous figures within the game; particularly that of The White and their objectives. Therefore, specific interpretations of each title can be contingent both on the player's familiarity with other games within the same series, and their knowledge of information that exists externally from the games themselves.

This question of canonicity has direct ramifications on how one should reflect on the JRPG, with the crucial issue of whether a game within a larger series should be considered solely, or as part of a wider continuity. As illustrated within this chapter, *SMT* is shown that where individual game events are repetitious (i.e. surviving a post-apocalyptic Japan via the command of demons), the deific order attempting to manifest control on humankind is continuously in flux. For instance, the spin-off title *Devil Survivor: Soul Hackers* ([referred to as *Soul Hackers*] Atlus 1997), Recontains the same core gameplay facets and setting of *SMT*, but is set within the more localised space of a **fictional** harbour town rather than the familiar prefectures and special wards unique to Tokyo. This smaller scale is reflected in the cosmology of *Soul Hackers*, which focuses more expressly on Native American spiritualism. This is introduced early in the game as the player-named protagonist is befriended by the Mi'kmaq spirit of Kinap who provides the player with limited prescience. This takes the form of 'vision quests' in which the protagonist possesses the body and final memories of a deceased character. The mechanical function of this vision

20 Cloud cameos in *Ehrgeiz: God Bless the Ring* (PSX, 1998), *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (NS, 2017), and the *Kingdom Hearts* series (PS2, 2002-), a Squaresoft-Disney IP collaboration, in which he plays a significant role.

quest is to preview the powerful new demons and new areas that the player will invariably retrace later in the game. Through the enlightenment provided by Kinap, the player is suitably armed to wage combat against the Manitou, poisoned by its lingering contact with mankind. As is typical of the series' transformation of religious themes, the ubiquitous Manitou has been divided into two opposing forces; the destructive antagonist recalls the Alongquian manifestation described as *Otshee Monetoo* ('bad spirit') that strives for the end of humanity. Thus, *Soul Hackers* evidently mirrors much of the content and context of its *SMT* forebears, but its position as a 'spin-off' title permits an exploration beyond the often Abrahamic meta-structure seen in the mainline series.

Where *SMT* explicitly plays out in parallel/alternate universes, or what we may now comfortably label a 'multiverse', the *Xeno* series (Square/Monolith Soft since 1998) of games; *Xenogears*, *Xenosaga* (Monolith Soft since 2006) and *Xenoblade Chronicles* (Monolith Soft since 2010) appear to occur within a linear timeline, albeit not reflected in the chronology of the titles released. *Xenosaga* provides considerable exposition on the events that lead to *Xenogears*, with particular reference to 'Lost Jerusalem' (Earth), in which Jesus Christ, Mary, and the Apostles produce the sacred words known (in-game) as the Lemegeton, and the faith known as 'Ormus' produced in the wake of Christ's crucifixion. Anyone who could recite the words of the Lemegeton would be granted access to the advanced control system of the Zohar, while the Ormus exists as a religious organization that zealously protects the Lemegeton; with which they maintain exclusive control of universal power. That the faith of the Ormus is represented by the iconography of an inverted Cross of St. Peter creates an unsubtle and sceptical form of Christianity whose outward evangelism masks the fundamental principle of control. Where these elements are not broadly at-play within *Xenogears* (Lost Jerusalem is referred to as an 'inviolable region' without further explanation), it can be seen the later titles provide further historical exposition on the original title, and continue to introduce greater degrees of complexity in its interpretation. *Xenogears*, in the tradition of a JRPG, is already a mysterious and multi-layered text, and the context provided by additional titles appear to only mystify its text further. The question of whether games should be subject to theological exegesis can be said to expand beyond the boundaries of JRPGs with openly religious themes. One might expect the *Kingdom Hearts* series (Square since 2002), a 'crossover' game in which *Final Fantasy* and Disney characters coexist in relative harmony, to be a simple affair. Instead, each volume in the series abounds with the tropes of the esoteric; the separation (and manifestation) of mind, body and heart; the fall; trinity; sacrifice, death, and resurrection. The *Kingdom Hearts* series certainly demonstrates the fascinating continuation of the motifs articulated within this chapter and suggests its suitability for a theological reading, even if two parts of this Trinity contains both Goofy and Donald Duck.

Taken collectively, the JRPGs examined here present a unique retelling of creation myths, imagine a world beyond the apocalypse, and rally the heroes against the supposedly unconquerable force of destiny. These fantasies are enmeshed with a postmodern sensibility. In the original *Shin Megami Tensei*, not even a nuclear apocalypse thaws the strained relationship between American and Japanese armed forces. In *Nier: Automata*, the characters pick through the philosophies left by an extinct society as they reclaim their own sense of belonging on a lost Earth. In *Xenogears*, the Holy Ghost must be freed

from its harbour in God's shell, while Fei must find *gnosis* in bringing his fractured consciousness back into being. At all levels, the individual is brought up against the unrecognizable will of the cosmos to discover themselves.

The resultant conclusion reached through this analysis is complex. What can be definitively established is that many JRPGS are fundamentally syncretic texts. Where it may be possible to discount this as purely functional; a 'necessary evil' for long-form or multi-volume JRPG series, the level of consideration to the cosmogeny of *SMT*, the quest for *gnosis* in *Xenogears*, and the earnestness of *Nier: Automata*'s characters in the wake of human extinction seem to collectively represent the desire for these games to grapple with the complex spiritual dynamic of human life. Even *FFVII*'s cadre of false gods and mythic creatures exist to relate a story rich in contemporary parallels; reconciling with the calamities of the present through its alien obverse. Whether parsed as palliative to those that play them, or an effort towards the product of spiritual reflection, the JRPG serves as a distinctive modern conduit of religious expression.

From an examination of these works alone, it is clear that the JRPG has incubated the myths that have been uttered from humanity's beginning, now infused with the complexities of modernity. Then, finally, to understand them is to scrutinize the *logos* that brought faith into being.

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