Religious Experience in *Journey* and *Final Fantasy X*

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Introduction

Final Fantasy X (abbreviated to *FFX*) is a high-budget game in one of the longest running and perhaps the most famous Japanese role playing series (Squaresoft, 2001). It has a huge cast (and a bigger development team) who drive a story epic in scale. Contrast this with *Journey*, the wordless story of just one character's path towards a mountain, created by a team of only thirteen members within a newer American studio (thatgamecompany, 2012). Although these games seem and undeniably are different, there is a key thread, one held more broadly in common with much of human history. These two games, albeit in divergent fashions and with thusly divergent results, both explore important aspects of religion, an ever-elusive and yet ever-pervasive element of society. As an abridgement of a longer, humanistically-oriented work (Caldwell, 2013), the following analysis focuses on the application of close "reading" techniques to gameplay in order to interpret how *FFX* and *Journey* recontextualize ritual actions, construct and maintain sacred space, and (although explored to a limited extent here) situate the goals of religious narrative and in so doing can transmit some of the emotional and social experiences of religion.

Firstly, it must be noted that religion is a notoriously slippery term with shifting understandings and connotations. As used here, religion is best understood as a system of intertwining elements (e.g. emotions, acts, ontological theories, organizational methods) that work in tandem to produce effects within and beyond each individual practitioner. Those effects are defined and emphasized differently even within the field by religious scholars of varying backgrounds, most commonly psychology, anthropology, and sociology. Seminal scholars in each approach have, respectively, defined religion as an inner pursuit of the individual in relation to the world/cosmos (James, 1902), as a symbolic manifestation of social order reinforced though individual emotional responses (Geertz, 1973), and as a dogmatic system that is established and maintained through social customs (Durkheim, 1912) (1).

Regardless of background or focus, however, most scholars of religion would agree that understanding ritual is pivotal to understanding religion. Although scholars again differ on the exact definition of ritual, it almost always includes the behavior of religious participants. Often ritual is described as a prescribed, unchanging set of actions. However, cultural anthropologist and ethnographer Victor Turner (1982) insists that ritual is less about formulae and more about "performance, enactment" (p. 79). By saying so, he notes the connection between ritual and the arts via theatre, which he calls "the most forceful, *active*… genre of cultural performance" (p.104). Such cultural performances allow societies to reflect on its realities, both its strengths and flaws. Thus, by participating in such performances, a society aims to transform itself and its individuals. Turner develops this argument further in his key work *The Ritual Process* (1985), asserting that ritual is necessarily a series of actions that comprise a transformative process, which is catalyzed by, coalesces in, and produces symbols (p. 53). These are "social and cultural dynamic systems" that are observable through the senses and carry meanings that are both malleable and multifaceted (1982, p. 22). These symbols vary; they could be an image, an object, a person, a word, an action, a dream— anything that can condense an ontological state into a perceivable metaphor. Symbols are a form of language, and in fact, languages are systems of symbols, as are rituals. Thus, symbols enable communication. The actions we take, the stories we tell, and the art we create are the ways in which we express our culturally situated identities.

Video games, like other forms of individual and cultural expression, are created from and are comprised of systems of symbols, thus making them a potent means to present or, more deeply, make commentaries or conjectures on the world and its various aspects. Naturally, games like *FFX* and *Journey* do not stand alone in their exploration of religion, as countless works of art, including other narrative media such as literature and film, have been dedicated to parsing what religion and its practices mean to individuals and civilizations. However, video games are unique in that they require interaction between the audience and the medium. This interactive element, felt through the game's response to the player, is shared with both theatre and religion via ritual, the latter as understood as external or internal transformations brought about through sets of actions. As such, video game mechanics, or as specified by James Paul Gee (2012), "all that a player must do or decide in order to succeed," are the key to the medium (p. xvii). For video games, content necessarily follows form, but form is often tied inextricably to content in order to maximize player interaction in what Drew Davidson (2011) calls the stages of involvement, immersion, and investment. Returning to my case studies, *FFX* and *Journey* encourage players towards these stages differently, resulting not only in different kinds of games but different aspects of religious experience to be effectively considered. In *FFX*, we see a more critical view of religion as a social institution, but in *Journey*, we see—and feel—the odyssey as a simple yet intimately powerful inner experience.

The Light along the Way: *Journey*

A vast pool of glittering sand unfolds interminably under a flaming sun, revealing what seems like a desolate cemetery. A twinkling ball of light leads to a figure, not quite human, with hollow yet expressive eyes of light, sitting on the sand somewhere nearby. Then a faint representation of the controller in your hands appears, arrows on either side. Tipping the controller's ends makes the camera (your perspective, which is all that is shown by the screen) revolve around this figure in the deep vermilion robes. It stands; you may now move as indicated by the controller on the screen. This is the opening of *Journey*, a game that defies the conventions of an industry preoccupied by genre. *Journey* is a brief game, but one filled with a power that has moved many players' hearts and minds in a way and on a scale rarely seen in gaming.

Like that of many well-designed games, the experience of playing *Journey* can be described through Davidson's stages of interactivity. Considering *Journey*'s brief length (two to three hours), those stages must be achieved quickly, with completion and likely the best game experience brought about in one sitting. *Journey* does so through very deliberate world building that advances in sections that move almost exclusively as quickly as the player wishes them. In a playthrough of focused but not rushed speed, the player could reach the beginnings of the investment stage in as little as twenty to thirty minutes of play, as traced below.

Davidson describes the first stage, involvement, as the period in which the player first interacts with the game, learning how to navigate the world presented (2011). The scene detailed at the opening of this section provides a large part of this stage, which lasts at least throughout the next five minutes of play. During this time, *Journey* allows the player to develop enough skills with the game mechanics to continue, like many games (see Gee, 2005), but it does this very simply and compellingly, linking explicit but unornamented instruction to experience in order to facilitate the later use of that information. Beyond this, the player learns on his or her own through applying these tidbits of information to the exploration of the game world. Therefore, the player swiftly masters the simple control scheme and can explore the sands through a viscerality that makes the figure a highly responsive vessel for the relationship between player input and the virtual environment.

Even before the controls are mastered and that stage is complete, players get a taste of the next one, immersion. Immersion takes place when players feel confident enough in their understanding of the mechanics to explore the game world (Davidson, 2011). Exploration breeds immersion, but immersion prompts exploration; that is, players make more sense of the game world as they explore it, but they will only undertake exploration if the game world is compelling enough to do so as its system is learned. Here *Journey*'s audiovisual elements are key, especially as there is almost no text in the game experience. Visually, the deserts and architectural ruins of *Journey* are framed and differentiated through light: the sand here does not merely sit in large, impressive dunes; it glimmers in the sun's rays as the figure steps lightly across it. Amongst buildings, the light mutes, softening in the shadows. By moving about and manipulating the camera, the player can experiment with that light. But to experiment with light is to experiment with sound, as throughout *Journey*, light does not exist without it. Most of the sound, including the music, is based on the player's interaction, retaining a performed element in the sound design as well. The sand crunches under the vermillion figure's feet, and players can prompt the figure to emit bubbles of light with illuminated glyphs from which a chirrup echoes. The trill sound allows communication with animated pieces of cloth in the environment that respond with a chorus of similar glyphs and chirps.

Thus, *Journey* quickly crafts a sensuously rich space that involves players through the influence they have on the world. This is the prerequisite for Davidson's (2011) final stage, investment, during which the player pushes on towards the end of the game. As its name implies, investment requires that the player is enough interested in the game world and the character(s) he or she controls to see what is in store for both. As such, this stage often relies on the game's narrative, which is usually introduced alongside involvement and developed further during immersion. In *Journey*, the narrative at first is no more than the presence of a mountain that lies in the distance, yet seemingly within reach. The player continues towards it during the immersion stage, exploring first the dunes, then a built structure. Here, the red figure activates a pedestal through its call and sits calmly cross-legged in a circle of light at the base of the pedestal. An unplayable vision appears, in which the figure is approached by a similar but larger, white-and-gold-robed figure. The white figure shows what seems to be a visual history of the objects present in the game world (the mountain, the glyphs of light on the figure's robes and "speech," the white figures, and the cloth pieces). The narrative is not yet made clear, so the red figure stands and continues. After rebuilding a cloth bridge between tall towers in the sand and seeing another vision, the figure comes upon more dunes, this time guided by cloth that move like a dolphin or bird. Soon the figure comes to a darker place in which towers churn within a sandstorm. The dolphin-like cloth's movements become urgent and its chirps mournful. Its brethren are trapped within the towers. The player is compelled to free the trapped cloth, an action that not only advances the player's progress but also poses him or her as a singularly important agent within the world. What else can the player do? That question and the expectation that the answer lies ahead is what brings players to *Journey*'s

investment stage and onwards to the end of the game.

Journey's exceptional design is seen through its immediate but permeating power, one that parallels real world religions as studied by Turner and his ilk. The game does not achieve this power through quickly paced gameplay; rather, the player decides the pace of play. Yet, the immersive potential remains deep no matter which pace is taken. In this regard, *Journey* is most closely aligned with mystical religious practices, those centered around experience rather than theory, feeling rather than describing or discussing. Mystical practices occur at least tangentially in myriad religious systems worldwide, including the visions of some Christian sects, South Asian yogis and ascetics, Jewish Kabbalah, Buddhist meditation, Islam's Sufi dervishes, and so on. The latter are of particular note here due to *Journey*'s visual connections to Sufism, an esoteric branch of Islam that focuses on spiritual unity with the omnipresent divine, Allah. The facades of the game's ruined architecture amongst desert sands and the form of the glyphic verbalizations of the figures and cloth pieces suggest roots in the stylings of the Islamic architecture of medieval Persia or Mughal India, where Sufism and other Islamic traditions flourished. Echoes further resonate through the emphasis on geometric forms that filter light into complex patterns, as often seen in the windows of mosques, and an architectural coloring reminiscent of sandstone, ubiquitous in Mughal India. *Journey*'s glyphs resemble the kufic script found across Islamic art and representation, and like those glyphs, kufic script is often found as inlays of precious material, sacralizing the word of Allah through light and color. As noted above, light is a dominant presence in *Journey*, and the precedent for this can be found in those traditions that bask in light as the manifestation of divinity (see also Pentcheva, 2011). When *Journey* borrows these real-world aesthetics, it borrows a shortcut to what is already culturally interpreted as sacred.

Prominent religious scholar Mircea Eliade (1959) has argued that making a space sacred through rites, aesthetics, or declaration sacralizes the actions within. This is haptically expressed in *Journey*, as the actions themselves suggest the same kinds of sacrality that the visuals do, still in reference to the mystical practices of bodily meditation and contemplation of divinity. During the involvement stage, the player learns that when the robes and the cloth pieces glow, they allow the figure to swirl upward into the air and glide. In this world, the player can transcend the limitations of his or her real form by virtually calling out to an unknown yet benign force to be lifted upwards. The animation that results is satisfyingly peaceful, and the process mimics many real-world forms of meditative practice that aim to separate the mind or spirit from the body, allowing the former to do things that the latter cannot. This connection extends beyond the first moments of flight; as the little robed figure runs, walks, stumbles, cowers, and soars, the player's actions feel like an extension of his or her thoughts through these responsive animations, blurring the distinctions between player and avatar, between real and virtual environments, into a mindful awareness of each moment that is a key component in meditation. But in *Journey*, a player need not train in esoteric meditative techniques in order to experience this mindfulness; they may merely press start at the title screen.

At its core, which has captured the attention of fans worldwide, *Journey* finds the player acting in a ritual fashion, as emotions are conveyed through the controls, translating into the actions of a little vermillion-robed figure. Like ritual, the performance of a transformative process as developed through symbols, the figure's actions have the potential to aid the player's internal transformation through his or her participation, during which the player may contemplate the intersection between the virtual and the inner journey. Through the red-robed avatar, the participant becomes the entity experiencing the events of the story, as in performative, dramatic rituals of the type considered by Turner, Eliade, and others. Thus, *Journey* can prompt an affective response that finds itself within the realms of religion. To refer back to our religious scholars, this response is the effect of the player's "feelings, acts, and experiences" (James, 1902, p. 31) that interpret "a system of symbols" to "establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations" (Geertz, 1973, p. 91) that are "relative to sacred things… set apart" from everyday, profane life (Durkheim, 1912, p. 2), in this case by the game's necessarily contained mediation. *Journey* is therefore a concise crystallization of a certain kind of religious experience, one grounded in introspective meditation on existential realities, into a multimedia experience.

Acting on Fayth: *Final Fantasy X*

The experiential mysticism that makes *Journey* powerful also resonates in parts of *Final Fantasy X*. However, *FFX* is about people and society. Its characters weave and drive the story, the world, and the mechanics through their thoughts, expressions, abilities, and interactions. *FFX* moves along Davidson's stages as *Journey* does, though over a much longer time and with more complexity. The game is as rich in religious ideas as it is vast, requiring an excerpted analysis here. However, even in just the passages parsed below, *Final Fantasy X* uses its mechanics, game world, and narrative to examine socio-cultural aspects of religion, challenging institutionalized religion while recognizing the power of religious affect.

In *Final Fantasy X*, the player is cast as Tidus, a young man displaced from his era and his home city of Zanarkand to a world called Spira, one thousand years in the future. The game is categorized as a Japanese-style, turn-based role-playing game (RPG). This genre tends to limit player interaction significantly through what game designer Darby McDevitt (2013) calls "Destiny" mechanics, allowing these types of role-playing games to transmit a rich story with strong character development and an expansively detailed world. As such, *FFX* presents very few points of interaction, the primary point being combat management. However, during certain portions of the game, the player solves environmental puzzles in a mode that is decidedly ritualistic.

The first of these situations occurs on Spira's island of Besaid. Here the game is still in its involvement stage, so Tidus is learning the social etiquette of Spira, much of which is derived from the worship of Yevon. It is somewhat unclear if Yevon is a god, an institution, or both, but it is clear that Yevon did not exist in Tidus's Zanarkand. He does not carry within him Spira's deeply entrenched "social facts," which are, according to our religious sociologist Émile Durkheim (1895), "ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that present the noteworthy property of existing outside the individual consciousness" and are "endowed with coercive power… independent of [the] individual will" (p. 2). Tidus is thus cast as an outsider to this collective will, though he soon gains an ally to guide him through this society. Wakka, a native of Besaid, acts as a guardian to a novice summoner, a cleric of sorts in Yevon's religious hierarchy. Wakka admires Tidus's skill in the sport of blitzball, a common thread between the two worlds, and decides to help him adapt. To introduce Tidus to Yevon, Wakka encourages him to visit the island's temple. There, Tidus asks questions about what he sees and what occurs within. Although he is at first embarrassed by his disconnect from Spira's social facts, Tidus soon learns of a crisis: Wakka's summoner ward is performing a ritual deep within the temple and has not emerged for days. Tidus, outraged by an apparent disregard for the summoner's safety, ignores the villagers' prohibitions, breaking into the depths of the temple. He is soon confronted by the Cloister of Trials, the environmental puzzle the player must solve to advance.

Unlike in *Journey*, the player is informed that he or she has entered a sacred space and that all actions within are (or ought to be) kept as sacred. Yet, like the space in *Journey*, the temples claim a sacrality beyond what the player is told. Certain audiovisual elements cause the temples to *feel* sacred beyond aa explicit acknowledgement. These elements gain power later in the game through deliberate repetition, but even the early Besaid Temple carries that sacrality due to its roots in real-world religions. A marked difference from the airy, bright village and coasts of Besaid, the temple welcomes Tidus into a dimly lit, high-ceilinged but small rotunda that branches out into antechambers and up into the Cloister of Trials, itself leading to a room separated from the main sanctuary by a retractable door. The rotunda features colossal statues of high priests and other clerical figures from Spiran history, and many of the surfaces are inscribed with the rounded letters of Spira's liturgical language (not to be confused with its common written language seen elsewhere, which resembles highly stylized Roman letters). The religious runes more closely resemble Sanskrit written in a classical script, which would account for their inclusion in the circular diagrams of the sanctuaries, which are themselves akin to Japanese and Indian esoteric Buddhist mandalas (2). These, used primarily for meditative practice, invoke deities represented by their "seed syllables," or, in essence, their monograms (Bogel, 2002, p. 49). Along with the imagery, the music heard in the village is separate from that heard within the temple walls. "The Hymn of the Fayth" (Hamauzu, Nakano, Uematsu, 2001) is a mantra that, as heard in the rotunda in its default arrangement, is sung in harmonizing sections by a chorus, reminiscent of real religious music. A variation of the hymn plays in the sanctuary beyond the Cloister of Trials, featuring only one vocalist, representing the spirit (the Fayth) residing in the sanctuary. Once visited, this spirit can be called upon by the summoner to fulfill the latter's purpose in Yevon's hierarchy.

Thus, the sacred stage is set by the time Tidus reaches the Cloister of Trials. Technically, Tidus is operating outside of ritual, as his outsider status calls into question the sacrality of his actions. Durkheim categorizes such prohibited actions as taboo (1912, pp. 221-229), which run against social facts and threaten the sacrality of ritual. Tidus has little investment in these social facts, instead focusing on what he knows, which is simply that another person is in danger, and no one is acting in assistance. Nevertheless, the puzzle of the Cloister stands in the way. Since that element cannot be bypassed by Tidus or the player, it seems that the puzzle would be intended within the temple to purify the solver's body and mind through contemplation of these actions. I offer this theory with precedence; Durkheim notes that "material maneuvers are merely the external envelope concealing mental operations" through "a kind of mystic mechanism," like the rite of baptism in Christianity (1912, p. 314). Thus, Tidus moves around glowing, colored spheres to manipulate the rooms of the Cloister, but under that, he and the player must to some extent reflect on the physical and spiritual movement from the profane world in the village outside to the highly sacred world of the sanctuary.

Although it is beyond the passage read above, it is worth considering a nonplayable scene from the game to further illustrate *Final Fantasy X*'s methods of ritualization. The summoner found at the end of Besaid's Cloister of Trials is a dynamic and kind young woman named Yuna. Throughout the game, Yuna creates fluid ritual settings via the actions made available to her by Yevon. At one such time, Yuna must perform a dance in order to guide the

spirits of those who had been violently killed to their final resting place. This visually and aurally striking sequence, the Farplane Sending, arguably sets the emotional tone for the rest of the game. Dusk has settled into the sky with pink and orange hues bouncing off of the surface of clear water. Yuna's bare feet step gingerly over the surface of the water as memorials float gently under her. She stops a few meters from the dock where onlookers gather. She looks out over the water, blinking in the bright light of the sunset as she holds her staff. Her eyes close; she breathes in deeply, and she begins to dance. The Hymn is sung slowly, accompanied by stylistically Japanese instrumentation as Yuna's sleeves and skirt flow out around her. Tidus stands on the dock; just moments before he had been asking why the party was stopping there. Now he is silent, a look of somber awe on his face as he watches Yuna and as the mourners collapse beside him in their grief. The spirits of the dead, materialized as balls of light trailed by chromatic shimmers, rise from the memorials and join in Yuna's rhythmic pirouettes. Soon a spiral of water ascends below her feet, lifting her onto a liquid stage colored by the sky and the spirits. The sequence then fades to black. This dock was not sacred before the party's arrival, but there is no doubt that Yuna's dance makes it so. She guides the spirits from Spira to the Farplane, freeing them from the liminal plane between life and death (see Turner, 1985, p. 95). This scene, though more emotionally potent and affective, continues and socially legitimizes what Tidus's actions in the Cloister of Trials begins: sacralizing the player's role in the game world through the characters under the player's command.

Conclusions

In both *Journey* and *FFX*, the mechanics and the worlds and stories in which they are situated are inextricably connected. Both games draw upon symbols from real religious systems, borrowing their powerful connotations when constructing virtual sacred space. However, where *Journey* allows the player to directly experience religiously imbued actions (through the shorthand mediation of the controller), *FFX* has the player guide characters through religious actions within a social system. Through this difference, the two games mirror different styles of religious practice and, like the definitions of religion, can serve divergent functions in religious analysis.

The pursuit of such religious analyses of and in games is a critical one for religious/humanist scholarship and game design alike. For humanist scholars, new media represent people's new ways of interacting with culture through creation, consumption, and inspiration. It is crucial to the humanities to find effective, i.e. contextually appropriate, means of "reading" such new media. To do so is to keep the humanities relevant to the current possible experiences of being human. For game designers, the humanities and the cultures it encompasses hold a wealth of information on the most powerful motivators for human action and experience. By tapping into this corpus and into areas like religion, game designers can make richly compelling games, ones that successfully lead players through Davidson's stages and thus through a complete, satisfying experience while also moving players. This can also be leveraged in education. Religion can be a difficult subject to teach, due to its deep, complex roots in contextual experience. By designing video games that can condense such experiences into a space that will not interfere with cultural practitioners, game designers will be able to create games that can teach about religious practices in a way that captures at least elements of what makes those practices compelling. In so doing, religious scholars and students, or faith leaders and converts, may be able to gain an educational tool that encourages exploration, fosters emotional investment, and nurtures the cross-cultural understandings that are the ethical ideal of humanist studies.

Endnotes

(1) These scholars are exclusively from Europe and America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, yet their works remain highly prominent in their academic fields. Their theories appear here because they are useful and well-established foundations upon which current religious studies build further, primarily through adapting these older ideas to distinct historical situations, such as that of video games in the twenty-first century.

(2) One player put in significant amounts of visual comparison to decode these glyphs and letters and to provide theories related to their origin in Siddham and Japanese *kanji*, coming to many of the same conclusions. Unfortunately, it is hard to verify his or her sources beyond the game itself, as citations are limited primarily to links to Wikipedia and other non-verifiable sites. However, the piece is a fascinating read, and I will cite it here for additional reference. See Helluin. (n.d.) *Final Fantasy X* symbols and glyphs. *Squidoo*. Retrieved from http://www.squidoo.com/final-fantasy-x-symbols-glyphs

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