

The Religions Behind Final Fantasy

Alicia Ong

History of Computer Game Design: Technology, Culture, and Business

March 22, 2001

When *Dungeons and Dragons*, one of the first role-playing games (RPG), came out, it drew the criticism of many Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christian groups. They asserted that the game encourages "blasphemy, assassination, insanity, sexual perversion, homosexuality, prostitution, Satan worship, and necromancy."¹ No causal links between violence and role-playing games have been found,² which raises the question of why these groups are so staunchly opposed to these games in the first place. In terms of violence, RPG's are generally less violent than their first-person-shooter counterparts, and unlike *Diablo* or *Shivers 2* which features demons and devils on its box cover, RPG's feature the heroes of the game, whose goals are to *vanquish* evil. Perhaps the issue here is the fact that RPG's expose people to non Judeo-Christian mythologies, more non-traditional views of religion, and of course, the "occult." However, despite what these fundamentalists believe, RPG's are not the cause of society's fascination with the occult. In fact, the very opposite is true. The popularity of RPG's in the United States stems from society's growing acceptance of alternative religions.

Hironobu Sakaguchi's Final Fantasy series is a prime example of this. Produced by Square Soft, Final Fantasy was originally a third party product of Nintendo until Square switched to Sony in 1996.³ It then produced Final Fantasy VII for Sony, the first *uncut* Final Fantasy title released in the United States. Nintendo had been censoring language and religious references in the previous Final Fantasy games,⁴ limiting what the main design team could do in terms of the plot and theme. This main design team consisted of Sakaguchi—who designed all the games in the main Final Fantasy series, as well as Final Fantasy Tactics—and Tetsuya Nomura, who

¹http://www.religioustolerance.org/d_a_d.htm

² http://www.religioustolerance.org/d_a_d.htm

³ <http://www.landfield.com/faqs/games/video-games/final-fantasy/part1/>

⁴ <http://www.thegia.com/letters/10799/08.html>

helped design the characters for Final Fantasies VII and VIII and the storyline of Final Fantasy VII.⁵

Alternate mythologies and the “occult” have always been present in the series. Every Final Fantasy has the concept of the spell and the spellcaster. In fact, most gamers could not even imagine trying to make it through the game without at least one white spellcaster, one who casts healing and resurrection spells. In addition, some of the more powerful weapons in some games are named after Greek gods. For example, there is the Aegis shield, which is Athena’s emblem⁶, the Artemis bow, and Apollo’s harp, just to name a few.

Chronologically examining the series in depth, we see the same focus on non-Christian beliefs. Final Fantasy I, released in America in 1990⁷, featured four Light Warriors, destined to save the world from Chaos, but in order for the warriors to defeat Chaos, they first needed to recharge four orbs, the orbs of earth, fire, water, and air. Strikingly, those four elements play a large role in Wicca as well as today’s other Neo-Pagan religions. Even more striking is the other Final Fantasy game released in 1990, Final Fantasy Legend I for the Game Boy. In this game, the player’s goal was to venture up the Tower of Paradise (a tower ironically filled with monsters). At the very top of the tower, the player faced the final enemy, and who was this final enemy? It was Ashura, the very Creator Himself! It is a reference to both Hinduism (the Ashura were a race of demi-gods that Brahma had created⁸) and Christianity. That is, the player is encouraged to destroy a creator somewhat akin to the Christian God, a creator who tests to see if people are worthy of Paradise, one who sentences those who are not to eternal punishment.

⁵ <http://www.neo-highwind.com/intro/intro3.shtml>

⁶ <http://www.4cbiz.net/rudnik/greece/olymp/>

⁷ this date as well as future dates of game releases in this essay from <http://sugoi.ctw.cc/Data/Special/FFChrono/>

⁸ <http://www.landfield.com/faqs/games/video-games/final-fantasy/part1/>

In 1991, Final Fantasy II, which was actually Final Fantasy IV in Japan, was released in America. In addition to fighters and spellcasters, a new class appeared: the summoner, who is able to call forth monsters to attack the enemy. Among the summonable creatures the summoner could call was Behemoth, which according to the Apocrypha, was a form of the primeval monster of Chaos that had to be defeated before God could begin the process of creation.⁹ In 1994, Final Fantasy III (VI in Japan) came out, and the player received a couple of new summon monsters like Fenrir and Terrato. Both from Norse mythology, Fenrir the Fenris Wolf and Terrato the Midgard Serpent were created by Loki the trickster god.¹⁰ Summoning them could wipe out some enemy parties in one turn, which isn't too surprising considering summon monsters in general tend to be among the strongest weapons a player can obtain in a game. Perhaps this is what the Religious Right is referring to when they say that video games “encourage the player to worship pagan deities for power,”¹¹ seeing as these summon beasts are rather powerful as well as non-standard Judeo-Christian in origin.

On September 7, 1997, the long-awaited Final Fantasy VII was released. Like its predecessors, it contained non-orthodox references. Midgar, the city where at least one-third of the game takes place, is in Norse mythology—the Norse Midgard refers to the realm of the living, where all humans live. Sephiroth the main villain refers to “a code of sorts...the English word ‘cypher’ comes from ‘sephiroth.’ The word is Hebrew for ‘numbers,’...[which] have ten different aspects. The Kabbalists (Jewish mysticists [often categorized as part of the occult]) believe that unlocking the Sephiroth is the key to interpreting the scriptures from the bottom up, and thus reaching Yhwh (God, Yahweh, Jehovah, etc).”¹² In this case, Sephiroth did not want to

⁹ <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Styx/4022/tempBehemoth.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.landfield.com/faqs/games/video-games/final-fantasy/part1/>

¹¹ <http://www.gocke.net/Internet.htm>

¹² <http://www.landfield.com/faqs/games/video-games/final-fantasy/part1/>

reach God--he wanted to *become* God. He launches a plan to merge “with all the energy of the Planet...[that way, he would] become a new life form, a new existence...I will cease to exist as I am now. Only to be reborn as a God to rule over every soul.” While Sephiroth never manages to fully become a deity, the idea of deity killing still resurfaces. During the final battle with Sephiroth, he has the appearance of a one-winged angel, and angels are symbols often associated with the Christian God. After defeating Sephiroth, the player’s reward consists of a full-motion video clip featuring a very Shinto-like ending. In Shinto, nature—the planet, the environment—is sacred.¹³ In the game, civilization has industrialized, making daily life a lot more convenient for human beings, but the power plants on which civilization relies need to suck energy out of the earth, which slowly transforms the earth into a barren wasteland. Because “the human race fails to preserve this beauty [the beauty and sacristry of the planet]...[it] must be stopped.”¹⁴ This runs contrary to the Christian belief that man does not need to live in harmony with the planet; instead Judeo-Christian beliefs assert that man is supposed to have dominion over the earth.¹⁵

Late January the next year, *Final Fantasy Tactics*, the series’ most religiously loaded game, was released in the United States. Set in Europe in the Middle Ages, the player is repeatedly exposed to the corruption of the Church. Cardinal Draclau, who the main character goes to for sanctuary, betrays him without a second thought. In addition, the player later finds out that the cardinal has allied with a criminal syndicate involved with slavery and smuggling, and even worse, when his henchman Rudvich messes up one too many times, the supposedly holy man does not hesitate to kill him. The High Priest of the land is no better. To increase the Church’s power, he spurs on the war between the two heirs of the throne, and although the hero of the story manages to stop the war and put the rightful heir on the throne, he is actually branded

¹³ <http://www.religioustolerance.org/shinto.htm>

¹⁴ <http://www.rpgamer.com/editor/nightshadow/012501bt.html>

a heretic by the Church. Because the Church wanted to completely cover up its corruption, the one person who decided to record the truth, had his writings confiscated and was later burned at the stake. This is not even mentioning the fact that the last enemy the player had to defeat is the resurrected Bloody Angel, who the Church revered as Saint Agoras.

In September of 1999, Final Fantasy VIII came out. Like the other Final Fantasies, it featured figures from mythologies around the world: Hades, Minotaur, and Cerberus (Greek), Quetzalcoatl (Aztec), Ragnarok (Norse), Shiva (the goddess of destruction in Hinduism), and Tiamat (the co-creator of the world in Babylonian mythology¹⁵). Like Final Fantasy VII, the final battle features an adversary Ultimecia who appears at one point like an angel. In addition, the final battle is set in a “space” background, reminiscent of perhaps the creation where only God exists in the void of nothingness. In fact, that is Ultimecia’s goal. She wishes to compress time, for in doing so, she and no other would be able to exist.

While each new religious reference was not in and of itself significant, the fact that each Final Fantasy contained alternate mythologies was. Each additional religious reference acted as a sort of foot-in-the-door phenomenon; players who followed the series became accustomed to such references, perhaps even to the point of expecting such allusions, allowing the writers to insert more religious references which in turn, feed back into player expectations. This paved the way for the more direct address of religion found in Final Fantasy Tactics while reducing the shock that would come with such an address in religion-sensitive America. If the themes present in Tactics had come out at the start of the Final Fantasy series, it probably would have sparked much more controversy than today. However, one might ask then why Final Fantasy Legend I didn’t cause that much controversy. After all, the player *does* kill the Creator in it. However,

¹⁵ <http://www.netmedia.org/nhpc-fairfax/docs/19980906.htm>

¹⁶ <http://www.landfield.com/faqs/games/video-games/final-fantasy/part1/>

this Final Fantasy was released in 1991 just when the franchise was starting, way before Final Fantasy had the publicity and attention it receives now. In addition, Final Fantasy Legend I was the “hardest out of all the Final Fantasy Legends gameboy games.”¹⁷ So out of the relative few who actually bought the game, only a small percentage of that number actually finished it and witnessed the rather blasphemous end game scenario.

Nevertheless, by the early 1990’s much of the furor over video games had died down¹⁸, and designers did not have to worry too much about religious implications. Around the same time, the role-playing game grew increasingly more popular, culminating in the record sales number of Final Fantasy VII. No RPG has even come close to FF7 in terms of sales.¹⁹ In Japan, the ratio of PlayStations sold to copies of Final Fantasy VII sold is nearly one to one: nearly every single person in Japan who owns a PlayStation has a copy of Final Fantasy VII.²⁰ Final Fantasy VII also sold very well in North America. It “inspired a new interest in RPG’s in a much larger audience than before, and although Final Fantasy VIII didn’t have the huge ad campaign budget that Final Fantasy VII did, the game still sold almost half a million copies in its first week of release in North America.”²¹ Both are testaments to the increasing popularity of the Final Fantasy series despite its rejection of orthodoxy.

During the same period, Wicca and other New Age Neo-Pagan religions have also grown in popularity in America.²² The occult, particularly Wicca, is becoming more accepted in popular culture--from movies like *The Craft* and *Simply Irresistible* to television shows like *Charmed*, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Marian Zimmer Bradley’s *Mists of Avalon* focused nearly entirely on the systematic destruction of the Goddess worship by

¹⁷ <http://members.aol.com/starrealms/ff1help.htm>

¹⁸ http://www.religioustolerance.org/d_a_d.htm (Dungeons and Dragons)

¹⁹ <http://www.thegia.com/news/9909/n02a.html>

²⁰ <http://www.rpgamer.com/editor/darien/061100mh2.html>

Christians, and it managed to make the New York Best Seller List without too much protest from the Religious Right. This acceptance naturally extended itself into the arena of video and computer games. Editor-in-chief of *Next Generation*, a respected computer and video-game magazine, Chris Charla sees the appearance of occult imagery in computer games as an extension of today's popular culture rather than an indication of religious beliefs. "I think that a lot of games and computer gamers are interested in fantasy stuff, and that lends itself to spells and magic users and the occult and arcania."²³ This is not to say that the occult is totally accepted. As one religious site proclaimed, "we can't prove that these games are teaching you a form of witchcraft, but much of the magic being practiced in the video games is an exact replication from Satanic, Wiccan, and Cabala sources. If you are concerned about your children getting involved with pornography on the Internet, you should be just as concerned if they are playing 'games' that use a form of witchcraft."²⁴

Regardless, American reaction usually has little effect on the basic game design. With Sony, little is now changed between the Japanese and American versions of the games. Even with the large North American following of Final Fantasy, the games are still designed primarily with the Japanese in mind. Game design for the series has always been done in Japan where religious material is "treated very casually."²⁵ As a matter of fact, the Japanese tend to be rather open to all forms of spirituality. Many Japanese are Buddhist as well as Shinto.²⁶ Shinto especially lends itself to an openness towards other people's beliefs about the sacred since anything and anyone can be a god, or *kami*, in Shinto--a great person like the Buddha, a volcano,

²¹ <http://www.neo-highwind.com/intro/index.shtml>

²² <http://www.geocities.com/scimah/wicca.htm>

²³ <http://www.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/9705/29/cyber.lat/>

²⁴ <http://www.gocke.net/Internet.htm>

²⁵ <http://www.thegia.com/letters/10799/08.html>

²⁶ Hisayo Okano Lipton, *Japanese Language, Culture, and Communication B J008B/J108B Course Reader* (Stanford: Stanford Bookstore Custom Printing, 2001) 7-8.

even a bug.²⁷ In addition, Shinto shares Wicca's belief in magic. The Japanese often visit Shinto shrines just to buy the various charms they sell there—the standard good-luck charm, a charm for good grades, a charm for safety while traveling.²⁸ One can see these Shinto influences in the series. In Final Fantasy III, VII, and IX, charms or accessories play a significant role in the abilities and strengths of the characters in battle, and this is not to mention that every Final Fantasy features magic in some form or the other.

Yes, there are still people out there that feel that “if an item contains reference to any minority religion then it is ‘evil’ and should be banned.”²⁹ However, that is only a small percentage of the population. The average gamer probably doesn't even recognize most of the religious references present in the Final Fantasy series, but even if he cannot intellectually appreciate Final Fantasy in that fashion, he certainly is able to appreciate it emotionally. In spite of the cultural and religious difficulties inherent in designing a game to appeal to everyone, the Final Fantasy series has overcome that and more, achieving a loyal, worldwide following. Regardless of culture or religion, there is something about Final Fantasy that strikes a chord in people, making it possible for them to identify with and become emotionally attached to the characters. In a sense, the player becomes the characters, characters who reside in a fantasy world where magic flows abundantly, where Bahamut and Shiva can be summoned with a simple wave of the hand, where the quest, the journey itself is its own reward.

²⁷ Lipton 7.

²⁸ Lipton 53.

²⁹ <http://www.rpgamer.com/editor/scar/090300ls.html>

Works Cited

- “alt.games.final-fantasy FAQ”
<http://www.landfield.com/faqs/games/video-games/final-fantasy/part1/>
- “Behemoth, Leviathan, Lilith” <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Styx/4022/tempBehemoth.html>
- Coffin, David F. “Man’s Dominion Over Earth”
<http://www.netmedia.org/nhpc-fairfax/docs/19980906.htm>
- “Dungeons and Dragons and Other Fantasy Role-Playing Games”
http://www.religioustolerance.org/d_a_d.htm
- “Final Fantasy Legend 1 Game Help” <http://members.aol.com/starrealms/ffl1help.htm>
- Gocke, John. “Putting God in His Place” <http://www.gocke.net/Internet.htm>
- Harnest, Michael. “Final Fantasy VII’s grandeur”
<http://www.rpgamer.com/editor/darien/061100mh2.html>
- Hii, Sharleen. “Introduction to Final Fantasy” <http://www.neo-highwind.com/intro/index.shtml>
- Kent, Steven L. “Cyberplay: Why do so many games have violence and devil imagery?”
<http://www.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/9705/29/cyber.lat/>
- Korossy, Arpad. “Hironobi Sakaguchi Interview” <http://www.thegia.com/news/9909/n02a.html>
- Lipton, Hisayo, Okano. *Japanese Language, Culture, and Communication B J008B/J108B Course Reader*. Stanford: Stanford Bookstore Custom Printing, 2001.
- Milligan, Allen. “Double Agent” <http://www.thegia.com/letters/10799/08.html>
- “Olympic Pantheon” <http://www.4cbiz.net/rudnik/greece/olymp/>
- “Shinto” <http://www.religioustolerance.org/shinto.htm>
- Skold, Lara. “Re: Frustration Factor” <http://www.rpgamer.com/editor/scar/090300ls.html>
- “Sugoi—Final Fantasy Chronology” <http://sugoi.ctw.cc/Data/Special/FFChrono/>
- Tazbir, Brian. “Final Fantasy 7: The Ending and its Cultural Influence”
<http://www.rpgamer.com/editor/nightshadow/012501bt.html>
- “Wicca and Buddhism—Towards an Interfaith Dialog”
<http://www.geocities.com/scimah/wicca.htm>