

**Playing Angels and Angels at Play:
The Study of Religion in Tabletop Role-playing Games**

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ABSTRACT

Playing Angels and Angels at Play: The Study of Religion in Tabletop Role-Playing Games

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Tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) provide a unique religious experience to players through three levels of interaction. Players engage with religion and religious concepts in TRPGs through mechanics and system rules, setting, and interpersonal interactions with other gamers during the game session. Together these three facets of the TRPG experience create a bridge between the player and the game environment. This allows for players to experience the game setting as part of their conventional reality. Religious constructs erected in the game world and interacted with via the player's character, become authentic expressions of religion worthy of study by scholars of religion. Religion becomes actualized by the player as he translates the experience of his character into personal experience with the game environment. Mechanics help facilitate that translation by creating the liminal space of the game. Rules and system create boundaries for the game that creates the place where religious play can occur. Setting then fills the liminal space providing the environment that is explored, creating an understandable engagement with religious components of the game. Lastly, the act of play, by the player, creates religious belief within the setting. Taken together the game experience of the TRPG is actuated to conventional religious experience, which opens it up as a subject for religious study.

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Introduction

Tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) have become an increasingly popular medium since their advent in the 1980s with the widely known *Dungeons & Dragons* TRPG. At their most basic, TRPGs are interactive games lead by a game master (GM), referee, chronicler, or storyteller. These storytellers guide players through a mental landscape providing challenges, punishments, and rewards for players' actions in the game setting. Each player is in charge of a character which acts as their avatar within the game setting. These characters then act in the scenario provided by the storyteller. The original *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) setting was a high fantasy world, left up to storytellers to describe, but as TRPGs evolved their settings became more defined and now there are settings of every kind from modern reality and high fantasy, to futuristic science fiction and anachronistic pasts. Both characters and setting are heavily diverse, but no matter the game, religion and popular culture are not far behind.

In the study of games and gaming TRPGs have often taken a back seat to the arguably more popular computer and video gaming mediums. This bias is especially felt within the interdisciplinary field of Religious Studies in ludology. Few publications make any effort to explore TRPGs as a dynamic medium of constructed cultural expression, and even fewer touch upon the subject of religion and its place within the constructed culture of the game world. When religion is mentioned it is, at best considered a part of the TRPG narrative within the game, and at worst confined to discussion of the ritual of game play. It is my hope to explore religion in TRPGs as more than external ritual or a coincidental cultural reappropriation, but, instead, as a subject within TRPGs that is expressed on every level of gaming experience and can be taken as

actual religious engagement in spite of its knowingly fictitious nature.

Religion is not the entirety of TRPG experience, but it does make up a part of the internal landscape of the game world. It is better to say then that TRPGs provide a unique form of religious engagement that has thus far been ignored in Religious Studies and ludology. What sets my work apart from the few essays and articles that broach, in depth, the convergence of Religious Studies and TRPGs is that I do not emphasize the external influence of conventional, “real-world” religion on the constructed environment of the game world. I do not deny that conventional religion has an enormous impact on the presentation of religion within the game world. However, rather than focus on the sociological aspects of religion and TRPGs, I take a philosophical approach in order to better lay a theoretical and methodological framework for future forays into religion’s place in TRPGs.

My thesis can therefore be summarized as follows: Because of the experience TRPGs provide players, they may engage with religion in three unique ways. Gamers experience religion within TRPGs as a construct within the game world, the expression of religious ideas and concepts through game mechanics and system, as well as through their act of play. These three facets of gamer experience allow him to, literally, play with religion by creating characters that engage with religion in varying ways. Additionally, the gamer experiences this religious play in two ways, as the player and the character. As a player, the gamer is aware of the fictitious nature of her/his play and the religion he engages with, but as a character s/he experiences religion in a way that actualizes the experience. This binary of experience translates the fictitious religion of the setting into a form of actual religious experience that I will describe over the course of my discussion.

Religion cannot be viewed as a purely external influence on TRPGs, and TRPGs cannot be seen only as a conglomeration of reappropriated cultural ideas. As part of my thesis, I wrestle with related philosophical topics to better explain how the internal reality of the game world must be taken as providing a real player experience. The validity of the religious experience is paramount in my discussion because it leads to my last point, the actual religious experience occurs in TRPGs and therefore TRPGs are worthy of further inquiry by Religious Studies. To better emphasize all of the points above I use the religiously-themed *Demon: The Fallen* as a case study. A game centered around angelic salvation and damnation of player characters in a gritty, modern reality, it exemplifies the tripartite engagement of players with religion and the duality of experience players navigate as the act as both player and demon.

TRPGs cannot be seen as purely passive, acted upon by players but otherwise inert. The primacy of human agency is a valid approach to the study of TRPGs. TRPGs require active participation if a game is to be played, but human agency is not diminished by granting active agency to the TRPG as well. What this does is draw out the active elements of a specific TRPG, such as narrative, setting, or mechanics, and consider them more fully as an integral part in shaping the gaming experience.

Sadly, the argument between ludology and narratology has reduced the debate about TRPGs, and interactive gaming in general, to a small subsection of matters. As Jeffery Howard puts it in his analysis of game design, ludologists (coming from the Latin *ludare* meaning “to play”) “insist that games should be studied for the features that are distinctively related to play, such as rules and simulation.”¹ This lies in opposition to, or

1 Jeff Howard, *Quest: Design, Theory, and History in Games and Narratives* (Massachusetts: A K Peters, Ltd.; 2008), p. 1.

at least in contention with, narratology, which, in relation to the study of games, emphasizes the role of narrative and narrative elements within the structure of TRPGs. Debate has arisen about whether or not TRPGs can be viewed as narratives at all. Many ludologists, including Jennifer Cover, Gary Alan Fine, and Jeff Howard, have taken it upon themselves to bridge the gap between ludology and narratology in an effort to expand the discussion of games and gaming into new spheres of study.

Contemporary game scholars like those above do not mention religion often in their studies, but it is a strong presence within TRPGs, and thanks to their efforts the study of religion within the game environment is now a viable object of study. Religion, as a subject, cannot be studied strictly as a ludological or narratological phenomenon within TRPGs, and instead requires both facets of game theory to fully explore. Narrative is an obvious component of religiosity given our conventional understanding of religious genesis and participation. Text of one form or another plays an important part in religious expression, and therefore story or narrative is often a primary component of religious belief. Even in religions where orthopraxy is emphasized over orthodoxy, tenets and dogmas are passed down in story-based moral lessons, or in larger philosophical sagas. Narrative is essential to religious understanding, and without it, a complete understanding of game religion, and religion in general, cannot be achieved. Ludology and its place in religious studies is a much more complex issue. In the following chapters I hope to outline the way in which these two disciplines converge to allow for the study of religion in the game setting.

Games provide a form of religious expression through their inherent narrative, which can very often hold religious connotations. In the TRPG *Legend of the Five Rings*,

shugenja, an amalgamation of Shinto *yamabushi* (mountain mystics) and Taoist priests, comprise an integral part of the setting communing with kami spirits that allow them to manipulate the five elements, divine the future, and manipulate peoples' bodies. In the *Iron Kingdoms Role-Playing Game*, priests of Menoth, a wrathful god of order and civilization, wage a war for human souls against the Devourer Wurm and its druidic disciples who seek to keep a balance between nature and civilization lest the apocalypse come and destroy all of humanity. In *Engel*, players take up the role of angels in a post-apocalyptic world order, where humanity is ruled by the church and heretics seek to overthrow them and it. Yet another example is *Scion*, a setting where players are the children of pantheon gods from around the world, from Odin and Aengus to Amateratsu and Guanyin. It is a rare TRPG that does not include religion somewhere in its setting. Individual gaming groups may choose to forgo active participation in anything religious within the context of their game, but that does not remove it from the setting.

Because of this interactive dynamic between players, storyteller, setting, and plot, TRPGs provide a unique experience, not just within the confines of games as a genre, but within the broader understanding of life experience. Games are a sociological construct erected for recreation, yet like religion, they permeate a vast span of social experiences. Above all TRPGs are a social event taking place between the various influences mentioned above. Players interact with storyteller to orient themselves in setting and develop plot. The created narrative of a specific gaming group can be viewed as a unique form of socio-religious text. Such a text is the amalgamation of both the conventional religious experience that the gamer brings with them from outside the game as well as the internal experience of the game world. The convergence of these two social frames with

the religious reality of the game world create the crux of the player experience that I am espousing. Additionally, these two frames of experience conglomerate into a single religious experience that is socially real. That is to say, the internal and external experiences of religion and religiosity, both conventional and game-based, are a single valid religious experience.

Taken more generally, TRPGs as a cultural phenomenon demonstrate an array of social necessities including the desire for recreational fantasy that has long been a part of the historical human experience. To describe the social aspects of TRPGs would take volumes, but such trends do exist, particularly in the convergence of TRPGs and religion. Reappropriation of religious concepts into TRPGs connotes a definite social interest in religion, even within imagined pursuits. As will be discussed later, as social views changed so too did TRPGs, changing them from class-based categorical systems interested in defining characters by career or pursuit, to more organic and free-formed systems that allowed for a truer multifaceted understanding of character and self. These external socio-historical influences are constantly at work on any product of popular culture including TRPGs. Because they are discussed so prevalently in other discussions of religion in popular culture I do not emphasize them, instead focusing on the internal reality of the gaming experience within the setting.

From the angle of Religious Studies, TRPGs can likewise be seen as a social creation that embodies many trends in popular religion beyond the reappropriation of certain modern religious beliefs. *Demon: The Fallen* takes much of its cosmology from Christianity, Judaism, and to a lesser extent Islam, but beyond that direct adaptation of conventionally religious dogma, the game reorients and modifies the religious reality at

work, creating its own. *Demon: The Fallen* typifies a social interest in the supernatural and specifically in the religiously heightened reality of the believer. Religions in many TRPGs are real and evocative, sources of great power. They are as real and evocative as conventional religion claims to be on occasion, only in TRPGs belief is not a matter of faith, religion is often an observable and powerful force in the game world that allows the player to experience altered states of religious reality. TRPGs provide a myriad of these constructed religious realities which denotes unequivocally that society, in part or in whole, has an interest in playing with religion, whether by taking up the trappings and traditions of a dead, historic religion, or a futuristic re-imagining of a contemporary one, or the adoption of a wholly unheard of religious practice.

Ryan Dancey points out, TRPGs “by the year 2000...comprised a two billion-dollar industry.”² This is a considerable sum and implies a large following of TRPG gamers. The number continues to grow, but its representation within academic inquiry remains nominal at best, and almost completely ignored within disciplines outside of ludology. In order to aptly study TRPGs, a pivotal question must be answered: What is a TRPG? Definitions specific to the medium are scarce, but two definitions are supplied by Jennifer Cover in her text on TRPG methodology and theory. TRPGs according to Daniel Mackay are “an *episodic* and *participatory* story-creation *system* that includes a set of quantified *rules* that assist a group of *players* and a *gamemaster* in determining how their fictional *character*’s spontaneous interactions are resolved”³ Jennifer Cover also notes Andrew Rilstone’s pithy definition, coming from the perspective of a game designer.

2 Ryan S. Dancey, *Adventurer Game Industry Market Research Summary (RPGs) V1.0*, Wizards of the Coast. Retrieved October 29, 2011, from <<http://www.seankreynolds.com/rpgfiles/gaming/WotCMarketResearchSummary.html>> in Jennifer Grouling Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publications, 2010), p. 6.

3 Daniel Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publications, 2001), pp. 4-5.

Rilstone views TRPGs as “a formalized verbal interaction between a referee and a player or players.”⁴ Cover in her analysis is quick to point out that in the latter example, emphasis is placed on the unique format of storyteller and player. This lies in contrast to Mackay’s more multifaceted definition which allows for the peculiarities of TRPGs to be more than just their interactive dynamic. Sadly, something Cover did not provide was the nigh omnipresent definitions that several TRPGs have given to themselves. In nearly every major TRPG published, among the first topics tackled, is a foreword that introduces those unfamiliar with TRPGs to the medium. Though they are mostly similar to the definitions already given, I will provide a small excerpt from *Demon: The Fallen* describing its own “storytelling system.”

In a storytelling game [TRPG], players create characters using the rules in this book, then take those characters through dramas and adventures called (appropriately enough) stories. Stories are told through a combination of the wishes of the players and the directives of the Storyteller.

In many ways, storytelling resembles games like *How to Host a Murder Mystery*. Each player takes the role of a character - in this case, a fallen angel in possession of a mortal body - and engages in a form of improvisational theater by saying what the demon would say and describing what the demon would do. Most of this process is freeform - players can have their characters say and do whatever they like, as long as the dialogue or actions are consistent with a character’s personality and abilities. The success of certain actions, however, is best determined through the use of dice and the rules presented in this book.⁵

Like Mackay’s definition emphasis is laid on interaction between players and storyteller, but also on the participatory nature of the genre. TRPGs, however, are more than just the internal dynamics of the individual game.

I have used several words to describe what a TRPG is, such as genre and medium, because, in truth, the specific nature of TRPGs, and many RPGs in general, are ill-

4 Andrew Rilestone, “Role-Playing Games: An Overview,” *Inter*Action* Vol. 1., No. 1, Retrieved October 29, 2011, from <<http://www.rpg.net/oracle/essays/rpgoverview.html>>

5 Michael B. Lee et al, *Demon: The Fallen* (Stone Mountain, California: White Wolf Publishing, Inc., 2002), p. 11.

defined even with self-reflexive definitions. Games can be seen as both a medium and genre from the side of narratology, and this leads to ambiguity about how scholars are to interpret the conclusions offered by analysis. Because of the nescient nature of ludology no scholars have yet solved this dilemma. Even Jennifer Cover who brings up this problem in definition prefers to leave the answer open-ended for the sake of continued dialogue between ludology and narratology. For my own approach, these ambiguities need to be addressed. Inevitably TRPGs are both genre and medium, if only because they fit both categories. Genre in this context implies, as James Jasinski puts it, “forms of action or modes of activity.”⁶ TRPGs are categorized most often by their interactive elements and, therefore, most readily fit as a genre. However, medium is the vehicle by which text, narrative, or entertainment is conveyed and is as apt a descriptor for TRPGs as genre. For my purposes, I blend the two since they convey roughly the same concept, though one references the physicality of the text, while the other expresses the intrinsic qualities of the text (i.e. the purpose, the subject, and the style). When discussing TRPGs as a medium I am referencing them in terms of the physical elements of the text, namely the books constituting a given gaming line. When I use genre I am referring to the intangible qualities of the text, and therefore will be more prevalently discussing genre.

Additionally, I adopt Cover’s theory of agency with regard to TRPGs. The unique nature of the TRPG genre is manifest thanks to the combination of interactivity and several forms of agency. The four kinds of agency are: textual, narrative, psychological, and cultural.⁷ Players and storytellers have these forms of agency to varying degrees, but they provide the foundation for the TRPG genre and therefore are the cornerstones of

6 James Jasinski, “Genre,” in *Sourcebook on Rhetoric: Key Concepts in Contemporary Rhetorical Studies* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2001), p.275.

7 Jennifer Grouling Cover, *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publications, 2010), p. 46-47.

TRPG theory alongside interactivity. It may be argued that the rules system that is the core of the game is another unique part of TRPGs. I argue that it is by these rules provided that agency is introduced into the game, and is the first way in which a player interacts with religion within the TRPG.

I have referenced religion several times as an abstract concept. It is difficult to define religion, and ultimately must be seen as an ambiguous social construct that can have several meanings. For my purposes religion is a social event which takes place between a subject and the object of their belief. I call this the trinity of believer, belief, and believed. I borrow from Mircea Eliade by defining religion as an object that is espoused as holding supernatural, divine, or religious significance.⁸ By identifying the object of religious belief we may begin to study the belief itself, which along with the object and the believer, comprises the complex mental construct that is religion. I deviate from Eliade pointedly by denying the necessity of a transcendent sacred which the object of belief must be in touch with. This simple premise becomes much more complicated when discussing religion within the game setting.

The game setting, in many ways, is a second mental reality shared by the players of the TRPG as they engage with it. This reality possesses its own logic and realism, and in many ways is a fully formed cultural construct possessing its own qualities and attributes such as religion. This religion or religious expression is at once connected to conventional reality by the players who take popular conceptions of religion and project them into the game setting, but is also unique since it is a variation on standard belief that often deviates wildly from the knowledge or understanding of conventional religion. The

⁸ Mircea Eliade, "Human Existence and Sanctified Life." *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (San Diego, CA: A Harvest/HBJ Book; 1959), pp. 168-170

problems inherent in the study of game religion stem from one source: it is knowingly fictitious. This implies that players engage with this form of religious expression knowing it to be fake and therefore do not believe the tenets or principles espoused by game religion. Players may not even understand themselves as engaging in religious discourse. Without believer or belief, in contemporary religious theory, it seems impossible to have religion. Mircea Eliade (1956), Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1962), Donald Wiebe (1988), Émile Durkheim (2001), and Robert Orsi (2005), all base their religious theory off the concept that there exists a dynamic between believer and belief that manifests religious reality.

To tackle this problem I use White Wolf Publishing's *Demon: The Fallen*, as an example of how religion can exist in TRPGs without the necessity for a conventionally-conceived believer or belief. *Demon: The Fallen* provides a religiously rich narrative with inescapably religious overtones. Based in the Abrahamic belief in the fall of Satan and his angels, *Demon: The Fallen* thrusts players into the role of demon, exorcist, or thrall (to a demon) and sets before them a setting that they must navigate. This reality, which I explain in greater detail below, is steeped in religious overtones, as players must wage a supernatural war against fellow demons, against God, against humanity, or against themselves. Players must take on the mindset of their characters and engage with this religious reality to varying ends. This kind of suspended belief allows the player, their character, and the religious reality of the game setting to mimic the conventional religious trinity of belief, believer, and believed.

Players, as both external subjects, engage with the setting through the medium of their characters, who exist internally (i.e. in the game). Like Eliade's trinity of the

believer, the object, and the sacred, or Orsi's believer, belief, and believed, there is a constant dialogue between religion, game, and gamer. And just like Orsi, the truth of religion and the reality of a transcendent sacred other is irrelevant.⁹ Reality is an interesting topic when discussing RPGs, and TRPGs in particular, since it is all knowingly fictitious, and yet, in some psychological, sociological, and/or anthropological way, the goings on in a given narrative have transpired in some form of reality.

I adopt Cover's use of "possible worlds" in game theory. I do this firstly, because it provides a useful boundary between topics that more clearly delineate between discussions of "real reality" and "game reality." Also, possible worlds better describe the kind of authentic interaction between players, characters, setting, and religion. The complex dialogue between these facets of TRPGs occurs in more than "the mind's eye." It is not all an imaginative exercise. There is a narratological, sociological, and religious aspect to it that allows the boundaries between reality and game to become porous.

Borrowing from Marie-Laure Ryan, Cover writes:

There can be only one actual world (AW), which is the current physical reality. However, multiple alternate possible worlds (APWs) can exist and are treated as AWs in fictional stories. These APWs, however, are not narratives in and of themselves. Instead they hold the potential for many stories, as does the AW. The text reference world (TRW) is the APW that the text refers to, while the textual actual world (TAW) presents the view of the TRW that the author projects.¹⁰

Cover finishes by describing the "narratorial actual world (NAW)" as the narrator's presentation of the text reference world.¹¹ For our purposes that is the world depicted by the GM to players during the course of the game. The others are fairly self explanatory, and though most often associated with philosophy, possible worlds highlight the kind of

9 Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 12.

10 Cover, p. 90.

11 Ibid.

multi-existent reality that gamers exist in during game-play. Possible world theory also emphasizes the reality of gamer interaction with religion, particularly with religious concepts that otherwise are relegated, popularly, to the realm of ephemera. Demonic possession and angelic power are integral parts of the setting, and need to be understood as existent in one form or another within the context of the game. I do not want to imply that gamers believe in these religious concepts or consider them “really real,” but that within the confines of the game they are taken as fact, a necessity for creating a functioning setting and narrative with authentic character interaction.

Many of these approaches are informed by my own, personal, experience as a gamer and game writer, and, once again, I rely on Orsi to provide a precedent for a conjoined insider/outsider perspective. Orsi is informed on religion thanks to personal experience, it is my opinion that a strong break between the insider and outsider perspective is fallacious, especially in cases of popular culture and religion.¹² I have, in my short time as a professional writer, written for Alderac Entertainment Group (AEG), Privateer Press, and even White Wolf Publishing, though several years after the end of the *Demon: The Fallen* series. I have worked on AEG’s *Legend of the Five Rings* series, Privateer Press’ *Iron Kingdoms RPG*, and White Wolf’s *Scion* series. All three systems are remarkably different as are their settings, but working on them, as well as playing dozens of other TRPG systems, there is a definite continuity in form and goal, as well as influence.

It is unnecessary for an individual to have insider knowledge of TRPGs in order to study them, however, in these nescient stages of research an internal understanding of gamer culture, the gaming industry, and TRPGs as both genre and medium is important.

¹² Orsi, p.

Cover asserts,

In many cases, a great deal of ‘insider’ knowledge is needed not only to play these games but also to analyze them. Therefore it is advantageous to have a researcher who is familiar with the rules and norms of game play and the gaming subculture.¹³

I agree, only on the basis that insider knowledge allows a researcher to make intuitive leaps unavailable to “uninitiated” analysts, because of unfamiliarity with the dynamic of a typical gaming session (if such a thing can be said to exist).

My methodology is, thus, very straightforward. In an effort to prove that religion plays a part in TRPGs and that gamers engage in religious discourse through gaming, I focus on the religious, or religion-like, aspects of the *Demon: The Fallen* setting. These aspects are manifest as both external and internal influences on setting and system as well as textual layout. Gamers, while interacting with the game through their individual agencies, also interact with religion. This religious involvement is not divisive or sectarian, instead they interact with the concept of religion, or the popular zeitgeist of religion. They create and manipulate religious space in the form of possible worlds. The structure of these possible worlds is provided by mechanics, elaborated on by descriptive setting, and is then engaged with through player interaction.

Thus, my first chapter is devoted to the representation of religion and religious reality in the TRPG system provided by *Demon: The Fallen*. Through mechanics, religion is expressed in a quantifiable manner. Faith, Torment, supernatural powers, and demonic ontology are all expressed as both setting and mechanics. Mechanics must bridge the gap between player and character, allowing the player agency of his character, and to translate the results of such actions and the qualities of the character back to the

¹³ Cover, p. 12.

player. Because religion is part of the setting, it must be part of the mechanics. In fact, game religion shapes game mechanics. Mechanics must express the reality of the game and given *Demon: The Fallen*'s heavy emphasis on angelic, demonic, and supernatural existence the mechanics need to allow for the physical, mental, and spiritual complexities of the character. Psychological traits known as Virtues impact the demon's feelings of guilt and shame and in turn impact their Torment, a quantified level of their spiritual damnation. Meanwhile Faith is what fuels their supernatural abilities and the greater their Faith the more potent they, and occasionally their powers, become.

Setting provides context to mechanics, and in the case of *Demon: The Fallen* the setting must take into account not just the physical landscape but also the metaphysical landscape as well. That is the basis for my second chapter. In setting religion manifests in its most obvious form as churches, preachers, demons, angels, or any one of a hundred other colloquially understood religious phenomena. Setting is the object of religious belief. By itself it has no religious significance, but popular religious conventions give it religious reality. Players, because of their cultural immersion in conventional reality, impute religious significance onto objects in the setting. Their characters are demons, players know that demons are a religious phenomenon because of their place in culture. We give religiosity to the setting, not because we believe the events transpiring within are real, but because we can recognize religious constructs and conventions without a need for belief in them. Thus, setting provides a religious reality, not by its own merit, but because players recognize religiosity within it.

After covering rules and setting, I am able to turn my attention to the unique dynamic between gamer and setting. Players, GMs, and writers all interact with the

TRPG setting, that is the very basis of role-playing. Along with the setting, gamers interact with facets of the internal culture including religious concepts, dilemmas, and organizations. In exactly the same way as people in conventional reality interact with religion to create a personal relationship with what religion entails, so too do player characters (PCs) interact with game religion to create a personal relationship with faith and other associated religious concepts. What makes the dynamic between character and game religion so unique is that the player, with full control over his character is also interacting with game religion, which is, by its nature an extension and/or interpretation of conventional religion. Therefore, players formulate a dialogue with religion through the vehicle of the TRPG. *Demon: The Fallen*, more than perhaps any other game, demonstrates that interaction with indisputable clarity.

A Summary of *Demon: The Fallen*

All games take on an emphasis for game play. In D&D, players create adventurers or heroes (sometimes villains) who play out an epic of their exploits. In *Legend of the Five Rings* players take on the role of a noble samurai who must navigate a myriad of challenges associated with life in the fictitious Emerald Empire of Rokugan. In *Vampire the Masquerade* or its successor *Vampire: The Requiem* players portray vampires, usually neophytes (newly created vampires) who deal with the trials and tribulations of their new existence. The list goes on and on, but each game must limit themselves, in one way or another, to a subsection of the population, isolated from others by position, power, or calling. For *Demon: The Fallen*, players take on the role of fallen angels who were banished to the Abyss after the defeat of Lucifer and his generals at the hands of the

angels loyal to God. The story of the angelic fall is obviously Abrahamic, and one heavily tied to Judaism and Christianity. It is inescapable that players much interact, then, with the Christian mythos surrounding angelology, demonology, and the Cult of Angels. I do not mean that players are plumbing the depths of occult knowledge, but simply that they must adopt the Christian representation within the game as fact for their characters. They are the rebellious angels who turned away from God and joined Lucifer.

Any description of *Demon: The Fallen* must include mention of the World of Darkness setting since it provides the backdrop to an entire collection of White Wolf games. It is also where writers for *Demon: The Fallen* began their setting description in a section aptly titled “What is this Place?”

The world of *Demon: The Fallen* is not our own though it is close enough for fearsome discomfort. Rather the world inhabited by demons is *like* ours, but seen through a glass darkly. Evil is palpable and ubiquitous in the world. The end is upon us, and the whole planet teeters on a razor’s edge of tension. This is the world of darkness.

Superficially, the World of Darkness is like the “real” world we all inhabit. The same bands are popular, violence plagues the inner city, graft and corruption infest governments, and society looks to cities for its culture. The World of Darkness has a Statue of Liberty, it has an Eiffel Tower, it has a McDonalds on every corner. More present there than in our world, though, is an undercurrent of horror. Our world’s ills are all the more pronounced in the World of Darkness. Its fears are more real. Its governments are *more* degenerate. Its ecosystem dies a bit more each day. And there, demons walk the earth.¹⁴

After a discussion about the gothic-punk mood or ambiance of the World of Darkness, a lexicon is provided for ease of reference. Handy definitions are given for words like “Lammasu,” “Malefactor,” or “Scourge,” but these are not used in the colloquial/actual sense. Instead they allude to groups within the setting, in the three cases above, they are three different groups of rebel angels. Other, more common, words like “lore” or “visage” are given new meanings within the setting. Lores are “the basis for the powers of the

¹⁴ *Demon: The Fallen*, p. 12.

Celestials; essentially the collected commands for manipulating the fabric of reality.”¹⁵ Visages are “the proper name for a demon’s apocalyptic or revelatory form.”¹⁶ In turn, Celestials is “a common name for both angels and demons, referring to their divine origins as servants of the Creator,” and apocalyptic form is defined as “the physical reflection of a demon’s Celestial nature.”¹⁷

A creation myth narrative follows as a third-person discussion between a demon and a human televangelist. Relevant information can be summarized simply as the angels were created, the angels, at the behest of the creator, made creation, and then rebelled before being sent to Hell (the Abyss, the Pit). More complexly, Seven “Houses” comprise the entire population of angels given providence over certain aspects of creation. They go by names like The House of the Dawn, The House of the Firmament, The House of the Deep, but after the fall demons refer to their houses differently, and will use those names for ease of reference. The First House was responsible for the light of heaven, which can be understood as nearly synonymous with God’s will. They acted as heralds to the angelic host and delivered God’s words instructing the design of creation. The Second House was tasked with delivering the breath of life to all creation as well as watching over it as guardian angels. The Third House were given dominion over the land that they created. The fourth house watched over the cosmos beyond earth, establishing orbits of the planets, moons, stars, and galaxies. The Fifth house was in charge of the seas as well as the inspiration of man through mystery. The Sixth House created plants and animals and all life, though it was still the Second House that gave them “animation.” The last house rules death and the unmaking of creation.

15 *Demon: The Fallen*, p. 14

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Demon: The Fallen*, p.13.

After the onset of creation, the angels watched Adam and Eve who experienced a life of pure pleasure without comprehension. The angels were forbidden from revealing themselves to creation, and so, in an effort to help out Man they performed a myriad of acts to enlighten mankind to their potential. For example, the angels of the Second House, the House of Firmament, sent winds through rocks to produce music, but Adam and Eve were unable to comprehend it. Eventually, Lucifer, ruler of the First House, the House of the Dawn, refused to watch mankind bask in ignorance and broke God's mandate. Along with a member of each House they manifested and taught mankind. The act is described repeatedly as an act of love on the part of the rebelling angels, though eventually it sparked the "Age of Wrath." This is the angelic war between God's loyal angels and the fallen. Inevitably the fallen were defeated and banished into the Abyss, a place with consciousness but no sensation, away from God.

Angels, tormented by their own minds in Hell, became demons. Those imprisoned then, occasionally, escaped because of the corroding nature of reality in the World of Darkness. Once back on Earth they take possession of bodies inhabited by broken or weak souls. They then begin the long process of discovering the world that is unlike the one they knew before imprisonment as well as rediscovering their divine capacities. Additionally, they deal with the new experience of being within a human body which is unlike the existence of angels. This is where a story begins, and where demons begin their physical, emotional, and, above all, spiritual journeys in the game. Stripped of their divine spark, called Faith, they reap it from humanity to fuel their powers. How they do this, whether through fear and intimidation or kindness and self-sacrifice, determines whether they remain angelic or become true, disfigured demons, dark reflections of their

angelic selves. Players are given the opportunity to play their characters in any way they feel is appropriate, making moral decisions that might strive for salvation, damnation, or just survival.

Ludology, Game Studies, and the Study of TRPGs

Of my many goals for this discussion, one is to provide scholars of religion an accessible understanding of game theory as it relates to religious studies. This is not a new combination of disciplines, but the way in which I apply ludological theory is different than a great majority of studies that have been provided thus far in either discipline. In an effort to better present ludology as a cohesive area of study, it is imperative to outline its historical development and major academic trends. A surprising correlation between religion and gaming is readily apparent from the first compilations on games and culture.

The 1930s is when ludology was first coined as an independent discipline, but before that the study of games in society was taken up by anthropologists and historians to better understand past cultures. Steward Culin is widely regarded as the first academic to study games in depth and publish materials on games and gaming in historical society. His book, *Games of the North American Indians* was a thorough compilation of games, their rules, and the innovations that came with them, and how they related to Native American culture. Primarily a historical study of Native American society, its emphasis on games as integral, even essential, to their culture was passed over by fellow historians by and large.

Cullen published his work on Native American game culture in 1907, and it was

not until 1949 that another book as wholly devoted to the study of gaming and its impact on culture was published. *Homo Ludens*, by John Huizinga, was a revolutionary text in the field of ludology, and while its theories have become somewhat antiquated thanks to deconstructionist and post-deconstructionist methodology, the essential tenets of Huizinga's *homo ludens* remains a core part of ludology. Like Eliade's *homo religiosus*, Huizinga envisioned humanity as essentially driven to an end. While Eliade saw people as essentially religious, seeking the sacred in his search for understanding and cultural growth, Huizinga's 'man at play' was driven to experiment with games and play as a process by which to gain cultural understanding. I append that religion is just one of its inevitable topics, and that games can explore all facets of cultural discourse. All the same, for the purposes here, and sharply abbreviated, games provide the exploratory experience while religion becomes the topic explored.

Huizinga's theory cannot be simplified to only the 'man at play.' While it makes the crux of his argument, the point of his discussion remains that games are the means to understand and explore culture. They create a liminal space of possibility wherein culture is mutable rather than fixed. Play opens possibilities and allows participants to experience an altered state of reality that exists as both game and secondary reality. Huizinga puts it best when he writes on sacred performance. This is an obvious convergence of religion and play. He writes:

The sacred performance is more than an actualization in appearance only, a sham reality; it is also more than a symbolic actualization - it is a mystical one. In it, something invisible and inactual takes beautiful, actual, holy form. The participants in the rite are convinced that the action actualizes and effects a definite beatification, brings about an order of things higher than that which they customarily live. All the same this 'actualization by representation' still retains the formal characteristics of play in every respect. It is played or performed within a playground that is literally 'staked out,' and played moreover as a feast, i.e. in

mirth and freedom. A sacred space, a temporarily real world of its own, has been expressly hedged off for it.¹⁸

Huizinga means all of this literally, and references sacred games as religiously significant in and of themselves. The game is religious because it is part of religious practice. Later scholars will adopt the theory of these performances and broaden them to include non-sacred performance that promotes the same kind of secondary, overlapping reality, such as TRPG. Huizinga provides a necessary first step in the study of games and their place in culture, but he also provides theoretical grounding for game composition and its interaction with both religion and perception as well.

Roger Caillois expanded on these theories in his works published around 1958. His two companion books, *Les Jeux et Les Homme* and *L'homme et Le Sacré*, demonstrate just how interconnected the study of both games and religion can be. For Caillois, these two forces formed the crux of human expression. But again, here, the notion is that the act of play or the rite/ritual of gaming is a religious experience. While this is an intriguing and very viable understanding of games, it is not the kind of religious expression that I will study within TRPGs. Nevertheless, I do not deny that Huizinga, Caillois, and many other scholars of both religion and game theory, are right in their assessment of the gaming ritual as religious. Instead it is my opinion that these scholars have not yet studied the full breadth of religious expression provided by gaming. As above, games provide a religious experience internally (that is *within* the game) and externally (the ritual taking place *around* the game). This internal/external dichotomy is not broached in early ludology because Caillois and Huizinga emphasized more the insider/outsider polemic surrounding games and their participants.

18 J. Huizinga; *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Routledge Publishing: Abingdon, Oxen; 1949); p. 14.

This is a trend that has continued into contemporary ludological theory. Since 1958 ludology has existed as a field, but a majority of thinkers prescribed, in whole or in part, to the Huizinga or Caillois method. It is not until 1983 that game theory was expanded upon in a dramatic way. Gary Alan Fine and his book *Shared Fantasies*, cast games in an entirely different light. This had a great deal to do with his focus on role-playing games. Apart from his theory on RPGs, Fine demonstrated that games and gaming could not be studied generally, and that certain games played certain roles in society. Additionally, because the structure of games were different they were organized as both socially and psychologically different. What this did for ludology was create sub-disciplines within game theory that allowed for far greater exposition using already existent theory. For the first time theory from Huizinga and Caillois was put into direct and practical use. That is not to say that their theories were purely theoretically. Both made liberal use of specific examples of how games created intellectual space in society. What Fine did was draw those theories from the realm of the philosophical and metaphysical into the quantifiable and categorical.

Fine is an incomparable taxonomist, and in his work on RPGs, broke down the interdynamic between players into an understandable and accessible series of social frames wherein interpersonal interaction takes place. There is no doubt that Fine puts emphasis on the human element of role-playing, seeing it as the purpose and pinnacle of RPG usefulness to the study of culture. RPGs, because of their social elements, promote the creation of a subculture. That subculture is then studied by Fine in a highly anthropological way. Taking the RPG as the focal point of the gamer subculture, he studies it as a social construct that, in turn, impacts the culture around it. He studies the

TRPG *Dungeons & Dragons* as far as it impacts real world culture. He makes startling revelations about the nature of reality and logic within TRPGs, but otherwise draws conclusions that highlight the way TRPG reality and logic is reflective of real world counterparts. Fine therefore emphasized two points in his study; the first was how gaming was recursive with culture, and secondly how the gaming event existed at all. Gaming, for Fine, is a collaborative event that produces a streamlined narrative. As the product of a gestalt collective, Fine studied the way TRPGs impacted their players. This is in addition to how the players then impacted the game. Game experience, he admitted, was shaped by game structure. In other words, the setting and rules created the frame of reality for player interaction. Additionally it provided a basis for the collaborative effort of multiple participants. It did this by providing an agreed upon reality wherein players were given equal agency to create narrative via their characters.

From a religious standpoint Fine does not delve any deeper into the connection between spirituality and games than Caillois or Huizinga. Indeed, he dismisses the topic almost entirely. He does not do so pointedly, but instead simply does not mention it. His only point of reference is to the ritual or rite-based congregation of the gaming session. Again, Fine's emphasis is on the sociological aspects of TRPs as a subculture, but that does not mitigate his importance to the overall growth of ludology. Indeed, his first forays into RPG studies open the floodgates for innumerable other scholars.

At this point, the historical and anthropological aspects of ludology are combined with sociological and psychological viewpoints. This goes so far as to almost completely subsume the historical and anthropological features of ludology. This is primarily because, thanks to Fine, game theory no longer concerned itself with historical games or

broad culturally-general understandings of their use. Instead game theory became far more interested in the modern subculture of gaming.

Video games, internet gaming, and TRPGs are the contemporary focus of ludology almost to exclusion. Obviously there is an exception to any generalization, but the majority of ludology emphasizes gaming in modern mediums. Of course, the reason for this change in focus is because of the astonishing surge in recreational gaming since their advent in the 1980s. From then onward, the existence of TRPGs and video games has been all but ubiquitous and grows in popularity each year. The increased popularity and availability of the internet has likewise opened up an entirely new field for gaming. Video games and RPGs are played and discussed online, while other games are unique to the online medium.

Perhaps since this shift in focus from historical to modern, the most influential writer has been Daniel Mackay. He published *A New Performance Art: The Fantasy Role-Playing Game* in 2001 and most texts written after that have made liberal use of Mackay's work. Mackay's book is indicative of the growing popularity of ludology as a discipline. It might even be said that ludology did not truly begin in full until the start of the 21st century. Since then there have been dozens of academic works published on the subject of gaming and, more specifically, on TRPGs. It is impossible to generalize the growth of ludological theory beyond 2001 since the permutations of gaming theory and their specializations have grown so diverse. Instead, it is more conscientious to outline the growth of TRPG studies, a subsection of Fine's earlier RPG studies.

Mackay as one of the first scholars of TRPGs, to the exclusion of all other RPG media, took Fine's theory and applied it specifically to TRPGs. Where Fine described the

social interaction between players and game master (storyteller) as a series of frames, Mackay saw them as spheres. The change in dynamic would prove more accurate to the TRPG medium. Fine's frames described gradual radiating levels of social interaction between players. Fine uses "frame analysis" to describe an approach to the concurrent social realities that players participate in during gaming.¹⁹ Gaming takes place inside a wider social structure of interaction that is the real world event. Simultaneously players also participate in the embedded reality of the game. That is Fine's understanding of social reality; it is gradating levels of social experience one taking place within another, within another.

Mackay's spheres overlapped in a more Venn diagram-like fashion. Rather than having one frame within another, Mackay saw spheres as only occasionally overlapping, being neither apart nor separate from one another. He simultaneously applied the theory of embedded frames, but enhanced Fine's taxonomy. Mackay borrowed from Richard Schechner, a performance theorist, taking ritual as the widest social frame and working inward; performance, theater, script, then drama. This is typologically different from Fine's frames that were defined by levels of participation, not specialized activity.

Mackay's theory moved gaming out of a self-contained medium and understood TRPGs as a type of performance. What that did was shift the emphasis from Fine's completely external understanding of TRPGs and acknowledge that an event was taking place inside the game environment. Fine did not dispute that an event transpired, but ultimately it was within the external reality in which players inhabit. In other words, the collective narrative was being created in conventional reality by players, not within the game environment. Mackay allowed for the emphasis on internal narrative, or story.

¹⁹ Fine; pp. 182-185

Indeed there was no narrative frame acknowledged by Fine, and so Mackay took into account the kind of continuity that gaming can create to produce a cogent series of narrative experiences. Even more than that, it implies that gaming is not just a reflexive experience of reality, but is a medium and genre that can produce an experience unique to itself. In other words there is an event that is culturally unique transpiring during the TRPG session that is taking place both in conventional reality and the game reality .

Narrative theory has become a large part of game theory, and has produced some of the first disagreements about both theory and methodology within ludology. Three camps arose around the dispute between an emphasis on narrative or game. Howard represents a combined approach, emphasizing quest as a bridge between “‘narratologists,’ who see games as stories, and ‘ludologists,’ who see games as rule-based simulations.”²⁰ This is the study of TRPGs and ludology as of 2012. Game scholars currently advocate for a narrative or gaming approach to ludology, while a majority look for a way to integrate both extremes into a singular game theory.

An emphasis on narrative has likewise sparked the first vestiges of interest in the internal reality of the game setting. This is what I focus on in this discussion, and for the most part it is an entirely unexplored part of game studies. Jennifer Cover is perhaps the only scholar to give any theoretical thought to the notion of game reality, and even then it remains a survey of methodology and theory meant to assist others in tackling the subject. Fine’s frames can still be seen in Cover’s theories, but unlike Fine’s frames which layered conventional reality as a series of embedded experiences, Cover’s use of alternative possible world theory allows for more detailed discussion on the ontological reality of game setting. The future of ludology remains unknown, but it is very possible

²⁰ Howard; p. xi

that among the next steps, game scholars will begin to approach the internal reality of the game setting as they approach conventional reality, taking, as I do, the social constructs erected within the game world and understanding them as experientially real.

Theory, Religion, and Entertainment Media

Popular culture has in the modern era of religious studies become an increasingly diverse field of exploration. From the standpoint of religious studies, it is a new and divergent subject, with many ties to religion and religiosity. The study of religion in popular culture has, likewise, been approached in vastly different manners. Each study of religion in popular culture is unique, highlighting assorted and sometimes contradictory facets of the crossover between these two fields of human experience. To understand how varied these studies can be, it is important to understand what popular culture is. Like attempts to define religion, popular culture as a bracketed subject defies simplified definition. Popular culture in many ways is the everyday experience of people and what they are exposed to through advertising, television, film, or art.

Most often popular culture is comprised of those shared cultural experiences that are spread via various forms of entertainment or mass media like those above. But it also comprises those cultural phenomena that are not shared by some kind of obvious mass transmission. Alien abduction and pornography are both cited by Richard Santana and Gregory Erickson as forms of popular culture, in spite of their often controversial subject. While both of these are expressed through various media, they began as cultural transmission that did not start with any direct media. Therefore popular culture cannot be understood as only those parts of culture expressed in a type of popular medium,

although this is most often the case because of the way modern cultural transmission works.

Concurrent to modern popular culture is popular religion. What comprises popular religion is equally difficult to define, but for most theorists it is modern religion and religious expression, either directly or subtly, imputed in popular culture.

Obviously these two definitions of popular culture and popular religion are circular, and that is because the two arise simultaneously in the study of religion in popular culture.

Santana and Erickson, while discussing the aims of their text *Religion and Popular Culture: Rescripting the Sacred*, write:

[W]e examine ways in which film, television, advertising, music, sports, and the news media deal with obliquely religious and theological issues. In many cases the portrayal of religion is not the primary focus of the medium we are discussing, and in some cases it appears to be entirely absent. Each chapter will, in some way, examine preconceptions of religion that slip through, often saying something unintended, subversive, and perhaps most revealing.²¹

Media plays a crucial role in modern popular culture, and contemporary religious studies has provided a means to study and understand the religious aspects of popular culture.

The interplay is often subtle if not wholly unintended, begging the question: can unintentional religious associations be considered religious? That is a question that scholars of popular religion have struggled with and which I wrestle with in this discussion of religion in TRPGs. It is impossible to cover the gamut of academic studies of religion in popular culture, so I focus my discussion here on the major trends in religious studies and the study of religion in modern entertainment media. This is still a large subject, and so I narrow further to three major theories on the concurrent creation of popular culture and religion. Each of these theories focuses almost exclusively on

21 Richard W. Santana & Gregory Erickson; *Religion and Popular Culture: Rescripting the Sacred* (McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers: Jefferson, NC; 2008); p. 1.

American popular culture and one or more ways that popular religion exists in popular culture.

Religion and Popular Culture in America, an anthology of studies into the confluence of religion and popular culture, demonstrates the breadth of analysis in this field. It approaches the topic in two ways: religion's impact on popular culture and popular culture's impact on religion. In the former category scholars analyze elements of popular culture like television, film, or music for its religious aspects. Michael Jindra writes on the Star Trek fandom as an alternate form of religious expression. Trekkies view the television series as visual text, with a canon debated and analyzed in the same manner as many religious canons. This is one of many ways that fandom is a 'cultural religion.' Alongside discussion of popular culture as religion you have discussion of Christian and Muslim groups using popular technology to promote community and connection. There is a definite reciprocity and self-reflexive quality to all of the works provided in the anthology.

The inherent connection of religion and popular culture is the overall theme of the text, and Bruce David Forbes in his introduction highlights exactly that quality of the study of religion in popular culture (and popular culture in religion). For Forbes, "popular culture both reflects us and shapes us."²² It does that by reflecting back what values and qualities we most care about, contemporarily, reinforcing these qualities in culture. A given television show or song becomes popular because of societal choice. In that way individuals in tandem create popular culture. But popular culture likewise shapes a populous. Most prominently, popularity implies greater cultural dissemination and

22 Bruce David Forbes & Jeffery H. Mahan, eds.; *Religion and Popular Culture in America: Revised Edition* (University of California Press: Berkeley, CA; 2005); p. 4.

permutation. It is spoken about and referenced more in popular media. For songs they are played more often, and for television programs they produce more episodes or further seasons of the show. This creates a larger audience of persons who otherwise might not have been consumers of a given entertainment. These entertainments can go on to influence social change by their popularity. Celebrities and visual media often promote certain causes or trends that were not originally a part of the cultural ethos. However, because of their popularity they, in turn, influence society as well as reflect it.

This is the basic give and take between society and popular culture, religion is just another factor in that interplay, and as already noted, has a complex relationship with both society and popular culture. Forbes outlines four relationships religion has with popular culture. He outlines them as: Religion in popular culture, popular culture in religion, popular culture as religion, and religion and popular culture in dialogue.²³ Religion in popular culture denotes the relationship Santana and Erickson stated above, where religion is an often subtle but ubiquitous influence on popular media. Forbes writes:

Best-selling, popular music has included Joan Osborne's "[What if God Was] One of Us," U2's "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For," and Madonna's "Like a Prayer." The video of "Like a Prayer" features burning crosses, a gospel choir, and a black Christ figure, all mixed together with sensuality. The *Da Vinci Code* and the *Left Behind* fiction series have broken sales records in bookstores. The animated television program *The Simpsons* frequently features the family's interchanges with their very religious neighbor Ned Flanders, and even personal appearances by God and the devil. Movies and television shows ranging from *The Exorcist* to *The X-files* to *Buffy* suggest a widespread fascination with demonic position, vampires, and a variety of occult phenomenon.²⁴

These examples highlight the kind of universality that religion has in popular culture and specifically society's preoccupation with it. Most often these factors are subtle, going

23 Forbes; p. 10.

24 Forbes, p. 1.

unseen as topics of theological or religious significance. But, in cases like Madonna's "Like a Prayer," they can be overt, denoting an obvious dialogue between religion and popular culture. What the anthology of *Religion and Popular Culture in America* provides is a survey of the topic, and its myriad approaches. It highlights the complexity of both religion and popular culture, and how they combine to create popular religion, best described as popular *conceptions* of religion.

It does avoid one topic, religious elements inherent in the context of a given media. Forbes quotes Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause, referring to elements of popular culture, like television shows, songs, and film, "not as ends in themselves but as means of unlocking their meaning in the culture as a whole."²⁵ Santana and Erickson depart from the traditional approach for exactly this reason. While a majority of their study can be covered under the otherwise comprehensive survey provided by Forbes and Jeffery H. Mahan, Santana and Erickson study the *object* (song, film, game, television program) as well as its cultural impact. I cover their approach to television programs like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in greater depth in my second chapter. Here I want to point out Santana and Erickson's departure from traditional theory about popular culture. Unlike the theory presented by Forbes, the two authors take popular culture as an object of study, in and of itself, and not just as a reflective or manipulative influence. When they study *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, they study its impact as a popular cultural phenomenon, but they also look at it as an object independent of its socially influential qualities. This approach allows them to tackle the subject of religion and popular culture in a new way. Prior to Santana and Erickson the study of popular culture was relegated to the sociological and

25 Nachbar, Jack & Kevin Lause, eds.; *Popular Culture An Introductory Text* (Bowling Green State University Popular Press: Bowling Green, OH; 1992); p. 5-6. In *Religion and Popular Culture in America*; p. 5.

psychosocial impact that society had on it and that it had on society. The same holds true for the study of religion in popular culture. It was purely a matter of interdynamics between subjects. Santana and Erickson allow for the exploration of these interdynamics within the television program, film, or other visual media. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* does not just reflect the values of contemporary society, it has a culture and reality internal to its setting that can be studied independent or in tandem with its social qualities.

Study of the object, leads directly into deconstructionist theory in the study of religion in popular culture. Typified by David Chidester's *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture*, religion becomes an object beyond popular definition. Something need no longer be associated with religion in any shape, form, or manner, but could still exude religious qualities thereby making it a form of religion. Baseball, McDonalds, and Coca-Cola could all be considered religions. They are not religion, but as mass cultural phenomena they exhibited all of the social aspects of religious existence and/or experience. Forbes' anthology touches on the idea of popular culture as religion, but Chidester takes that relationship and no longer studies the cultural phenomenon's social aspects exclusively. He also asks the overarching philosophical question about religious ontology. Aspects of popular culture completely contained within a secular paradigm exhibit extremely religious qualities, while there exist religions that possess almost no traditionally religious traits.

At other times popular religion is knowingly fake, but is still considered authentic. Authenticity is, not surprisingly, the focus of Chidester's work, and is a profound and necessary subject to study. Authentication is necessary to declare something as what it is. The question becomes where does this authenticity need to come from in order to be

‘actual?’ In Chidester’s own words:

In an essay I wrote in the mid-1990s on the church of baseball, the fetish of Coca-Cola, and the potlatch of rock ’n’ roll...I was willing to consider these activities as religious, not because I said they were, but because participants, real people, characterized their own involvement in these enterprises as religious.²⁶

But even then Chidester struggles with the colloquial word usage. When we participate in religion, or say that we are, particularly in reference to popular culture, are we being facetious or literal? That is a question of authenticity. Likewise, obviously fake religion can have real religious impact, again drawing into question authenticity in religion and popular culture. Specifically we have a problem with religious authentication when it intersects with mass media and popular understanding.

In each of these three case we see a different approach to religion and popular entertainment media, but universally religion is a direct and subtle influence on the everyday experiences that people have with media. The same holds true with traditional text-based media like TRPGs. These three theories represent the current state of religious studies and popular culture. It is by no means complete and given its advent as an acceptable subject for academic studies in the 1990s it has had little time to fully explore all facets of the intersection between religion and popular culture. Nevertheless, it covers the complexity of the current state of study. In the last ten years religion and popular culture has become an increasingly elaborate discussion, and the three approaches above demonstrate the growing need for definition.

The current state of the study of religion in popular culture can be summarized as being preoccupied with three major theoretical pursuits. The first is highlighted by *Religion and Popular Culture in America*. A survey of many different approaches to the

²⁶ Chidester; p. 4.

subject, it denotes the direct or classic approach to the subject. It is an approach mimicked by any other academic study of a humanities subject. The study of religion and popular culture is defined as a sociological event and therefore specific cultural phenomenon that comment on the state of popular culture, religion, and society. It is their congruent influences on one another and society at large that is under scrutiny. The same approach was used in the early stages of ludology and the study of games in culture. This classical approach sees religion not as an object, but as a social construct that reflects society and not itself.

Santana and Erickson expand on that classic approach by allowing religion and aspects of popular culture to be viewed as things in and of themselves. Religion in popular culture is not only a social dynamic at play that tells us only about society. It is also a created subject that has nuances and interdynamics between the two subjects of religion and popular culture independent of societal influence. They do not deny that popular culture and religion are crafted by society, but that the created objects of popular religion and popular culture now have an existence of their own that must be studied as more than an ephemeral exchange of social ideas with no reality of their own.

In order to have objective existence, however, Chidester points out the third preoccupation in the study of religion in popular culture, the philosophical or ontological approach. If religion and popular culture are objects of study then they must exist as concrete things within the human psyche, but what can appropriately be called religion, or more complexly 'real religion' and 'fake religion?' The answer is up for debate, but it highlights the continued need for a philosophical grounding in the field of religion and popular culture.

It is difficult to categorize these three approaches, and they do not represent the entirety of the study into religion and popular culture. They do, however, represent the three facets of study that are most often pursued within the field. Researchers approach religion and popular culture as having a reciprocal cultural influence on each other and on society. In tandem, others research the specific objects or points of crossover between religion and popular culture to better understand their correlation as an independent phenomenon as well as a cultural one. Lastly, when not handling religion and popular culture directly, researchers in the field question the fundamental nature of their research and its inherent relationship to all three of the subjects involved: religion, popular culture, and society. Whether sociological, anthropological, psychological, or philosophical the discussion remains focused on one question: How does religion relate to popular culture? These three examples take radically different approaches to answer that question and offer revealing and equally different answers to it.

Chapter 1: The Mechanics of Religion

TRPGs are discursive by nature, and require that their creators and players engage with the imaginative reality that is the game setting. It is easy to understand setting as possessing religious qualities since it can directly manifest imaginary constructs like churches, priests, gurus, beliefs, dogmas, and tenets. What is not so easy to grasp is how the underlying system that propagates and supports the setting engages in religious discourse. Rules are synonymous with TRPGs and nearly every TRPG created to date uses a rules system of one form or another. To the average observer the system of rules that make a game a game are little more than external frameworks meant more for the benefit of the player than the character s/he plays. In some ways this is correct. Game mechanics are based in conventional reality. They are not imagined or illusory. They are concrete guidelines for the successful arbitration of a given game session. They provide the basis upon which players play the game and resolve conflict.

In its most abstract form, the conflict is a situation in which an outcome is uncertain and therefore in need of mediation. On a more specific level, conflict is an interaction within the game setting that requires resolution. This is where the game system and the game setting merge into a singular entity, allowing the transition between conventional reality and the alternative reality of the game setting. Mechanics create the foundation of everything within the setting, acting like the physics of the imagined world. In doing so they provide the *reality* in the game setting. Without a system of rules in place event resolution and individual capacities would be incomprehensible. Thus, the rules/mechanics of a TRPG interact with religion and its corresponding concepts by creating them within the game setting.

I tackle this dichotomy between system and religion first because in many ways it is the most basic and the most foundational. Discussion of setting is partially irrelevant without a firm understanding of how that setting is represented by mechanics, of course the two are inseparable and, as such, I handle them in tandem often in this chapter. Nevertheless, my goal is to emphasize the religiosity inherent in the *Demon: The Fallen* system by way of not just its subject matter, which is more setting-based, but in its presentation of mechanical concepts, such as the quantification of various spiritual/religious attributes of character creation. It would be impossible to cover the entirety of *Demon: The Fallen* and its religious connotations, thus I hope to provide a basic understanding of how ludology merges with religious studies in the study of the TRPG game system to provide a new avenue for religious inquiry. I do this by outlining the base mechanics of the *Demon: The Fallen* system as a demonstration of this convergence. Core mechanics are tied to main setting pieces, such as religion, since they work together to create the interactive narrative available to players within the TRPG.

Historically, the dichotomy between setting and system has its roots in the merging of narrative with early 17thc. war games. The first mention of a localized, board-based war game was as early as 1811 by Herr von Reisswitz. The game was a modified version of one created approximately thirty years prior called *War Chess*; it was renamed, *Kriegspiel* (German for “war game”). The Prussian game was eventually adopted by the British who expanded the rules from its more simple chess-like form, into something much more akin to the modern war game. It possessed terrain and was arbitrated by an “umpire” who would determine the results of battles by a system of rules.²⁷ Gradually

27 Daniel Mackay, *A New Performance Art: The Fantasy Role-Playing Game* (McFarland & Co. Inc. Publishers: North Carolina, 2001), p. 13.

war games increased in complexity adding variable win scenarios and differing rules for various factions. Dave Arneson, a war gamer, and cohort Gary Gygax, author of fantasy war game *Chainmail* (1971), combined forces to create what is widely considered the first TRPG, *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D).²⁸ D&D successfully combined the popular fantasy quest narratives of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, *The Faire Queen*, *Sir Gwaine and the Green Knight* and similar high fantasy stories, with the rules-centric war game.

They limited the scope of the war game to a single party of cooperative player characters given stats and abilities according to a complex series of rules. Dennis Waskul puts it most succinctly:

Participants create fantasy personas from basic attributes generated by random dice rolls. From these dice rolls, players assign their persona varying levels of strength, intelligence, wisdom, dexterity, constitution, and charisma - creating imaginary personal characteristics that are best suited for the specific kind of fantasy personas they would like to play. A player who intends to develop a wizard or illusionist needs a persona with great intelligence and wisdom, while the persona of a thief or assassin needs great dexterity and charisma; each fantasy persona has prerequisite attributes...²⁹

More specifically, a player rolls four six-sized dice (often abbreviated as 4d6), taking the three highest numbers. This is to generate six stats ranging between 3-18, with a statistical median of 13-14. These numbers then correlate to certain ability (stat) modifiers (e.g. 8-9= -1, 10-11= +0, 12-13= +1). These modifiers are then used throughout the character's statistics adding to dice rolls to determine actions taken by the character. A character making a climb roll to determine whether they are able to scale a steep hillside adds their strength modifier to the skill roll, while a wizard's intelligence modifier determines how potent his spells are. The system, at its most basic, is linked to the kinds

28 Mackay, p. 15.

29 Dennis D. Waskul, "The Role-Playing Game and the Game of Role-Playing: The Ludic Self and Everyday Life," *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity, and Experience in Fantasy Games* (McFarlane & Co. Inc, Publishers: North Carolina, 2006), p. 21.

of abilities it needs to convey. For D&D that is the myriad of fantastic powers inherent to the setting..

The System of *Demon: The Fallen*

Demon: The Fallen is no different from other TRPGs, and its system is created to emulate both supernatural and mundane skill, talent, knowledge, and faculty. Unfortunately, it is not as widely documented because of the primary focus by ludologists on D&D. *Demon: The Fallen* follows what is colloquially known as an “in-house system.” Many game publishers have a signature system that they use in the creation of their games. For Wizards of the Coast it is the famous D20 system used by D&D, alluding to its use of a twenty-sided die for most rolls. In truth the system uses anything from a four-sided die (d4) to a 100-sided die (d100 or d%). Alderac Entertainment Group uses the “roll & keep” system. The system has players add a trait such as strength, reflexes, intelligence, etc. to some other numbered stat such as a skill like Horsemanship. A player then rolls a number of ten-sided dice (d10) equal to both the trait and the skill and keeps dice equal to the trait. The kept dice are then added together to provide a final result. Eden Studios uses their “unisystem” which uses 1d10 and adds a set modifier, usually a number derived from adding a trait and a skill. In all these cases the player is often rolling against a target number (TN, alternately “difficulty class” (DC)) hoping to roll above it to indicate success.

Demon: The Fallen is similar but different. White Wolf uses a storytelling system with a point-buy format of “character creation“, a general term used for any game wherein a player is given a set number of points to distribute throughout his character’s

statistics. Unlike D&D which is one of the only systems to determine its stats randomly, a majority of games are designed to be internally balanced. PCs are provided with the same number of points and are then given the freedom to customize their character however they choose. The basic idea is that with the same number of points all starting characters will be inherently equal.

In most modern TRPGs the first task set before a player is to generate a concept for their eventual character. This takes into account certain specifics of the setting which are outlined briefly in the core rules of *Demon: The Fallen*. I use the term “core rules” to imply those rules which are outlined in the first and most essential *Demon: The Fallen* publication. Rules covered in later books are supplementary rules meant to expand the mechanics of the game, usually to encompass new phenomena that are introduced within the book (i.e. rules for creating exorcist characters in a book devoted to fighting demons; rules for creating earthbound demons in a book about antagonist demons). Principally, the concept is to guide future steps of the character creation process. The concept is dependent upon a basic knowledge of the setting and the rules system.

Armed with these basic facts outlined in my summary of the *Demon: the Fallen* setting, character creation follows a simple formula. Concept in hand, a player is provided with three sets of Attributes: Physical attributes, consisting of Strength, Dexterity, and Stamina; Mental attributes, consisting of Intelligence, Perception, and Wits; and Social attributes, consisting of Charisma, Manipulation, and Appearance. The player designates each group as either primary, secondary, or tertiary. A player distributes seven points (7pts) between his primary attributes, 5pts between his secondary attributes, and 3pts between his tertiary attributes, with each attribute beginning at 1. The player

then distributes points between three Ability groups: Talents, Skills, and Knowledge. Talents are natural abilities like athleticism, a gift for expression, or intuition, among others (represented by the Athletics, Expression, or Intuition Talents). Skills are learned abilities like driving, musical performance, or survival training (represented by Drive, Perform, and Survival). Knowledges are areas of study such as computers, finance, linguistics, or religion (represented by Computers, Finance, Linguistics, and Religion). Once again a player chooses which group of abilities is primary, secondary, or tertiary and then distributes the appropriate number of points (13/9/5 for primary, secondary, tertiary respectively). At this stage in character creation no ability may be rated higher than 3 (on a scale of 1-5). Next are advantages which include Backgrounds, Lore, and Virtues. Backgrounds are various benefits to a character that cannot be equated by attributes and abilities such as monetary resources, social influence, followers, contacts, or allies. Lore and Virtues are more complicated and are tied heavily to which House and faction a player chooses, and will be discussed later. The fifth and final step in character creation is the “finishing touches” such as recording the character’s Faith score (3 for starting characters), starting Torment, which is based upon their House, and Willpower which is equal to the sum of their two highest Virtues.³⁰ The player is also allowed to spend “freebie points” which are additional points that can be spent to increase the number of an attribute, ability, Virtue, Lore, Background, or Willpower. Any numerical value on a player’s character sheet can usually be increased with freebie points, though at a different exchange rate (i.e. increasing an attribute costs 5 freebie points, but increasing Willpower only costs 1pt). These points allow for added variation between players, as well as for the increased competence of characters in certain abilities

³⁰ *Demon: The Fallen*, pp. 123-124.

or Lores (above the limit of 3).

The choice of House and faction is paramount to character creation and is actually done first as part of the concept state of character creation. However, it is also the most complex and I handle it last because it goes to the heart of the matter, which is that religion is conveyed in the system of the TRPG. Concepts such as Faith, Torment, and Virtue are part and parcel of *Demon: The Fallen*, quantified out of a necessity for fair gameplay. The same goes with mechanizing many other parts of the setting, like Houses and factions. Houses provide a player with a list of specific Lores that their particular character can take during character creation, and in many ways metaphysically orients the player's Fallen within the biblical narrative that the writers have erected. Factions provide a moral code that psychologically orients characters within the setting. Factions do this by providing certain social benefits and minutia. The same holds true for Houses, though their mechanical benefits are far more apparent.

The seven Houses relate directly to those referenced in my introduction, although they go by codified names that reference their demonic nature. Devils, Scourges, Malefactors, Fiends, Defilers, Devourers, and Slayers correspond with the First, Second, Third, and so on House, respectively. Each House is then given access to specific Lores. For example, a Devil may gain competency (indicated by increasing rank) in the Lore of the Celestials, Lore of Flame, and/or the Lore of Radiance, while a Scourge may take the Lore of the Winds, Lore of Awakening, and/or the Lore of the Firmament. House Lores are different because of each House's unique purpose in the creation of the universe. While Devils from the House of the Dawn conveyed the light and will of Heaven, the Scourges from the House of the Firmament carried the animating breath that gave life to

all creatures. Together Houses and Lores provide the most direct confluence of supernatural elements that players directly interact with mechanically. They define the parameters of the character's abilities and provide a path of progress as the player begins to roleplay his character in-game.

Factions are slightly different. At their base they represent certain ideologies and reactions to imprisonment in the Abyss and life before and after it. Together there are five factions: Cryptics, Faustians, Luciferians, Raveners, and Reconcilers. Cryptics spent their time in the Abyss contemplating God's omniscient plan for creation, concluding that their fall was part of a preordained working of the Creator. Faustians seek revenge on God and the angels and seek to awaken human potential so that humanity can be better foot soldiers in the next war against Heaven. Luciferians are a complex organization seeking the return of Lucifer (wherever he may be) and the readying for battle against Heaven upon his return. Raveners seek only to destroy creation, sometimes in an effort to draw out the angels for battle, other times as a twisted form of mercy for creation, and sometimes just because they feel like it. Lastly the Reconcilers seek God's forgiveness and look to do good or righteous acts that might inevitably save their souls. Each is ideologically different and so they each provide a different benefit in the form of Virtues.

Virtues are independent of Factions as a mechanic, but a PC's faction, if he has one, will say a great deal about his moral makeup, not to mention how to interpret the points he has distributed between his Virtues of Conscience, Conviction, and Courage. A Ravener who has a high marks in Conscience might well be the aforementioned "angel of mercy," who understands her/his mission of destruction as an ameliorating process. Meanwhile one with low Conscience but high Conviction could be the more anarchist

destroyer, who kills, vandalizes, or demolishes because of a single-minded need to destroy or fulfill his/her goals. Very little escapes quantification within the TRPG setting. This is not always the case, and some TRPGs purposely avoid quantification of psychological aspects of a given character, often even as they quantify certain aspects of mentality like intelligence, perception, willpower, or awareness. In *Demon: The Fallen* and games like it, however, the setting demands a system that takes into account moral as well as physical dilemmas, and so, by necessity it ranks Virtues 1 to 5. Quantification is essential to all aspects of the gaming experience within *Demon: The Fallen* because no matter the existential state (physical, mental, social, or spiritual), it must be interpretable through dice rolls. These dice rolls offer agency to the character and allow them to make use of their physical, mental, or spiritual faculties to aid them in completing a specific task or overcoming a given challenge or conflict.

The Mechanic of Faith

Faith is, perhaps, the most unique and essential mechanic of *Demon: The Fallen*, and requires exposition before discussion of Lores since Lores require Faith in order to work (on occasion). As the rules explain, “*Faith* is the core of the fallen’s power, the ability that once let them literally move mountains.”³¹ Faith represents the well-spring of power that angels, prior to the fall, had through their love of the Creator. It literally represented faith in the Creator, and since angels possessed complete faith in their endeavors, their power was at its greatest. After their fall from grace, however, angels no longer have a transcendent Faith in the Creator that allows them the ability to alter reality on the great scale that they had previously. Instead, they are limited in their Faith, which

³¹ *Demon: The Fallen*, p. 159.

is greatly diminished in potency. This is represented by a starting Character's beginning Faith score of 3. Though "freebie points" can be spent to enhance this number to show some greater spiritual strength, Faith for the fallen is not equal to that of the angels.

The Faith held by the fallen is an internal source of power stemming from faith in oneself or in humanity, rather than faith in the Creator. Ironically, they have no ability to generate their power themselves. Cut off from the creator, the fallen are completely without the power of faith, and like a variation on the vampire mythos, they must take their power from mortals through two means: reaping and pacts. Reaping, in *Demon: the Fallen*, represents a sudden burst of belief by a mortal (normal person) that the demon is a supernatural creature. In spite of its simple nature, reaping can be a diverse experience as the core rules point out.

Reaping can take any form that convinces a mortal, without a doubt, that the demon is a true supernatural being. A mortal being skinned alive by a creature from Hell has no doubt that it is real. Likewise a mortal who receives the aid of a shining guardian angel knows that a divine power has intervened.³²

This is fortunate since as a fallen uses Faith, they come under greater risk of provoking a state called "Revelation" in mortals. Revelation is just that, a revelation to the reality of the supernatural. The demon's human guise cannot hide their true nature and so the mortal becomes aware of their secret being. This does not automatically allow for reaping, but with further interaction, a mortal's faith might be taken.

The other way fallen gain faith is through pacts with mortals. Like Faust's demon, the fallen often enter into agreements with mortals who, in exchange for some wish or desire, offer the demon devotion and/or worship.³³ This devotion is the source of faith and is represented dually as a mechanic for gaining Faith and as the Pacts Background,

³² *Demon: The Fallen*, p. 160.

³³ *Ibid.*

purchasable during character creation or after the game has commenced. As a Background it allows a player to have a previously established pact with a mortal. The nature of these pacts are even more diverse than the methods used for reaping, and often depend greatly on the nature of the demon making them, both psychologically and metaphysically (which can be the same thing). As the writers emphasize:

High-Torment demons tend towards corruptive pacts, offering mortals their secret desires, luring them with promises of power and luxury. Low-Torment demons may prefer pacts of genuine gratitude and devotion on the mortal's part, such as fulfilling someone's dream of becoming a great artist, or healing a critically injured or ill person.

These are the only two ways that a demon can acquire Faith, providing a deceptively simple system for players to acquire the power for their character's abilities.

The Mechanic of Torment

Concurrently, Torment is a system that, impacts Lores and character mechanics just as much as Faith but in a completely different manner. Like Faith it is rated in a scale of 1 to 10, but unlike Faith which gives you rewards for having an increased score, Torment is a punitive system, that signifies a Fallen's spiral towards true demon-hood. As the writers put it:

A demon's *Torment* is a measure of the anguish and suffering it carries, and how it deals with those painful memories....A demon with a permanent Torment of 1 is close to forgiving and letting go of the sins of the past, and deals with them extraordinarily well, for the most part. A demon with a permanent Torment of 10 is consumed by his own pain and torment, incapable of doing anything except inflicting the same on others.³⁴

Torment is scaled on a temporary and permanent basis, although the term permanent is misleading as there are several ways for the player to increase and decrease his permanent Torment through gameplay. While a player's Faith score can only be increased

³⁴ *Demon: The Fallen*, p. 160.

with Experience, Torment is much more fluid and is at the core of the *Demon: The Fallen* TRPG. The game is about the fallen's struggle with his own time in Hell and the deeds s/he has done in the distant past. The new life given to the fallen adds opportunity for damnation and salvation. As such, when a person commits a selfish or cruel act their Torment increases. When they commit acts of kindness and selflessness, then their Torment decreases. Torment is a systemic marker of a player's in-game actions causing his character to become more jaded and destructive or more saintly and compassionate.

Hierarchy of Sins (Fig. 1.1)³⁵

Permanent Torment	Sin
10	There is no sin. You're already damned. Why not do whatever you want?
9	Casual violation of others, murder for no reason, thoughtless cruelty and torture, near-mindless savagery.
8	Premeditated violation of others: plotted murder or assassination, systematic destruction of another, long-sought revenge.
7	Sins of passion: murder in a fit of rage, giving in to feelings of hate, anger, jealousy, or irrational prejudice, encouraging the same in others. Destroying particularly inspirational or meaningful objects. Doing personal harm through addiction or other self-destructive patterns of behavior.
6	Destruction of the works or inflicting intentional emotional harm through cruelty or neglect.
5	Accidental violations: Doing harm to others through carelessness, negligence or thoughtlessness. Neglecting duties or responsibilities. Betraying another's trust.
4	Theft from, or deception of, others without just cause. Breaking your sworn word.
3	Doing harm (physical, emotional, or spiritual) to a mortal for any reason other than self-defense or the greater good.
2	Doing harm to any mortal creature for any reason other than self-defense or the greater good (a disrespect for the order of Creation). Permitting any lesser sin in your presence without at least trying to prevent it.
1	Any act of cruelty, selfishness, or thoughtlessness. Allowing any such act in your presence without trying to prevent it. An unwillingness to sacrifice for the greater good.

As the character's Torment increases the player must struggle against the confines of the *Demon: The Fallen* system. Torment is increased or decreased based on certain

³⁵ *Demon: The Fallen*, p.159.

Virtue rolls. When a demon sins they roll a number of dice equal to an applicable Virtue (Conscience, Conviction, Courage). The Hierarchy of Sins provides an outline for storytellers to gauge player action.

If a player commits one of the sins outlined or a similar act, then a roll is required. If the player fails that roll then the PCs virtues were simply not strong enough to stop a moment of selfish indulgence, resulting in temporary Torment. When 10 points of temporary Torment are acquired the character's permanent Torment increases by 1. What the Hierarchy of Sins represent is when a player must make a virtue roll. While a low Torment is beneficial for several reasons, the benefit of a high Torment is that the player is able to act more freely with their character without worrying about lesser sins. Only sins covered in a higher bracket cause a further degeneration of the character.

Individual games may vary in their application of the Hierarchy of Sins, but the core rules present Torment as a scale of mental and spiritual health, combining both mental and spiritual well being into a single score. Since it reflects a spiritual state of being as well, the system reflects this by modifying Lore based on the character's Torment. Each time a Lore is activated, the roll to do so is compared to the Demon's permanent Torment. If the roll is lower then the power is tainted with the degrading influences of the fallen's darker side. For example, a Lore that normally summons a strong breeze, would do so, but the wind would be fetid and noxious evoking powerful nausea. Torment also impacts Apocalyptic Forms. Normally an Apocalyptic Form is a powerfully angelic mein that more accurately represents the reality of the fallen's existence. A pale equivalent of the fallen's former angelic body, it becomes increasingly corrupted by Torment the deeper the character sinks into sin. The perversion of the

normally majestic, awe-inspiring, or even godly form makes them appear much more akin to the demons presented in the art of Hieronymus Bosch or Martin Schongauer. Spines, maws of gnashing teeth, huge, hulking forms with multiple eyes, extra limbs, and inhuman skin; all of these are present in *Demon: The Fallen* to represent a more obvious degeneration.

Mechanics as part of Religious Narrative

System and setting are inherently connected. From game arbitration through dice rolls to the initial process of character creation, mechanics are informed by setting narrative and, in turn, inform setting narrative. That is because setting and system express one another on different game levels. I have discussed Faith, Torment, Lores, and their subsidiary mechanics, and each time, I have made note of the deeper narrative that they are meant to express. That is because that is their function. Faith, as a mechanic, represents the faith of the setting. Faith is reaped from humans because they can still have faith in the Creator, but the fallen are no longer tied to that wellspring of power. At best they can leech divinity from others. Faith tells us that narrative by how it works mechanically, how it interacts with the game, and how it can be used. Torment is the spiritual ascension or decline of the angelic soul. As the character sins he degrades, falling further from the Creator. The Hierarchy of Sins is a perfect example of religious concepts being appropriated into mechanics that explain narrative.

Mechanics reflect setting truths just as much as setting reflects the confines of the mechanics. The three key mechanics to dissect in detail are Faith, Torment, and Lores when studying the intersection of religion and *Demon: The Fallen*. All three of these

systems, as can be seen above, are heavily interconnected. Together they form a mechanical template that represents the supernatural components of the character. There are two parts to mechanics: the mechanics themselves, and the narrative they embody. Put another way, Faith, Torment, and Lores are just the supernatural agents of *Demon: The Fallen*, but they are also the Thomistic spirit of the fallen. Pure soul, the demon/angel has no corporeality without the human body it has usurped. Mechanically the body is not just seized, it is completely changed in relation to the system of rules. Humans interact differently with Faith, and while they can still possess Torment, it is not so damningly extreme as demonic Torment. Lores are all but unheard of among humans, though demons can gift supernatural powers to human thralls by way of mechanics. However, when a demon possesses a human body, subsuming the soul within it, it changes the way the system views the character.

Mechanics also help differentiate between standard fallen, possessing human bodies and the Earthbound, ancient demons summoned to Earth rather than escaped from hell. Instead of bodies, they possess objects, akin to djinn or genies inhabiting rings or lamps, or locations. They still use many of the systems of *Demon: The Fallen*, but are quite different in their presentation and abilities. Earthbound can use their Lores to greater effect, cannot move easily from place to place, and collect Faith differently than the fallen.

All of these circumstances, collectively, engender a complex religious philosophy and theology in the setting and mechanics of *Demon: The Fallen*. Like Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* and his sacred performance, the rules of the game construct a theoretical, and theological space, where religious narrative can be played out. Unlike Huizinga's sacred

performance, however, there is no acknowledgement by participants of any religious truth being conveyed or affected by the performance. Players enact pseudo-religious narratives as demons, their hunters, or their servants within the confines of the mechanics, which simultaneously express the base narrative of the setting, namely the metaphysic or ontology of demonic existence, psychology, and spirituality. Religious philosophy is tied up in setting and system, expressed equally by both.

In game theory, game rules are relegated to a singular paragraph that describes in little detail only what is needed to grasp the most basic precepts of the game under discussion. When discussing game rules and religion, though, they cannot be ignored. Not only are they a valid point of connection between TRPGs and real world religion/religiosity, they are also imbued with a unique quality that is missing in all other facets of religious studies; they quantify belief. *Demon: The Fallen* does not just do this through the mechanic of Faith, which is literally a enumerated quantity of belief, but through the system in general. Faith is tied to Torment, both of which are tied to Lores, which are in turn tied to physical, mental, and social abilities and attributes, that are then modified by backgrounds and secondary qualities like Virtues and Willpower. The character itself is a quantified belief, be they a possessing demon, a mortal exorcist, or human thrall. How do we then understand the connection between unquantifiable beliefs that exist in reality and their quantified counterparts in the TRPG?

Cover helps bridge the gap between reality and game, via mechanics, stating, “Affordances are the physical aspects of a medium that allow for certain types of discourse to develop while constraining others.”³⁶ What this implies is that through the rules of the game (just one kind of affordance), the TRPG seeks to narrow the game-play

³⁶ Cover, p.56.

experience to a specific narrative. I do not believe constraining is the appropriate word, since any TRPG seeks to allow a panoply of gaming experiences, but in terms of character design and basic mechanic/setting rules, obviously, only certain narratives can be told. Games must revolve around the actions and events of those character types supported by the setting (e.g. fallen demons, earthbound demons, exorcists, or thralls).

Sara Lynne Bowman phrases it more accurately, writing,

One innovation arising from the science fiction theme in RPGs was the development of ‘skill-based’ game systems as opposed to so-called ‘class-and-level’ systems. Essentially, modern characterizations of identity resist the cookie cutter archetypes of the fantasy genre. Instead, science fiction characters were offered a variety of skills and could customize their specialties according to the demands of the story and their character background... Skill-based character creation also reflected a more modern conceptualization of personality. Rather than relegated to predefined social roles based on profession and social status, modern society allows for more varied interests, identities, and personality characteristics, reflected in this enhanced form of customization that later game systems provided.”³⁷

She goes on to analyze the birth of the science fiction genre, commenting on *Demon: The Fallen*’s sister system, *Vampire: The Masquerade*. Created in the aftermath of “Generation X,” the complexity afforded by modern gaming systems stemmed from an awareness “of their [Gen Xers’] own participation in the negative developments of the modern world, such as the exploitation and oppression of marginalized social groups.”³⁸

She comments:

Role-playing games such as White Wolf’s *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) surged in popularity during the nineties and in the early part of the twenty-first century, thematically exploring this sense of hyperawareness and critique of power, consumption, and greed. *Vampire*, along with other games in the World of Darkness, presented a fight against the overwhelming sense of ‘evil’ and self-interest that have become prevalent in the modern world.³⁹

37 Sara Lynne Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems, and Explore Identity* (McFarland & Company, Inc.: North Carolina, 2010), p.20.

38 Bowman, p.21.

39 Ibid.

Whether her interpretation of generational dynamics is accurate is inconsequential, but it provides an excellent platform for society's impact on game systems. Rather than focusing on society as a whole, it is instead more relevant to understand popular religion as affecting these mechanics in the same way as denoted above.

If we assume that religious dogma, at least in part, is the antecedent to the *Demon: The Fallen* setting, then the mechanics are a direct expression of that religiosity. As stated above, it is undeniable that a Christian paradigm is at play within the game, even if it cannot be defined as solely responsible for its creation. In its most direct form, quotes from Christian scholars are used to punctuate chapters in several different books of *Demon: the Fallen*. In a more subtle form, the metaphysics of angelology play out in the game setting and system.

Religion is not new to TRPGs, especially *Demon: The Fallen*, but as Michael Tresca emphasizes, with the shift from goal-oriented quest missions in the early era of TRPGs to the more story-oriented games of the 1990s, there came the increased potential to explore religion for religion's sake. *Demon: The Fallen* does that by integrating religion into its very mechanics.⁴⁰

The fallen are expressed mechanically as possessing only mental and spiritual qualities. They possess Faith, Torment, Lores, Abilities, Virtues, Willpower, and only certain Backgrounds. Physical appearance, Attributes, and Merits are all dictated by the possessing body. The fallen are, thus, spiritual entities possessing no sense of corporeality *mechanically*. Without a vessel they are without any means of physical influence outside of their Lores. This state is further complicated since their spiritual being cannot exist on

40 Michael J. Tresca, *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games* (McFarland Publishing, Inc.: North Carolina, 2011), p. 67.

earth (at least for long) without a physical vessel. If a fallen is exorcised from its body or object it must find a new host or it will be drawn back to the abyss. All of these actions, exorcism, incorporeal existence, and banishment are all expressed mechanically through various rolls that determine the outcome of various events. The exorcism, for example, is, at its most basic, a contested Willpower roll, where the exorcist and demon roll dice equal to their Willpower scores and whoever rolls more successes wins the roll and determines the outcome.

The fallen require a physical anchor in the world, and without it they are weakened in their influence. Thus demons must be understood as necessarily corporeal in a way no different than basic human metaphysics. The demon's soul replaces or suppresses the human soul in the body it inhabits. In the case of Earthbound, their soul is tied to an object providing them with their corporeality, albeit in a less traditional manner. The mechanics quantify the connection of the soul to the "body" through the Willpower trait. The higher the trait the stronger the soul/mind is able to hold onto the vessel it possesses. Indeed, it was because of a low Willpower that the human soul was possessed in the first place. Demonic psychology is then divided into the three Virtues which comprise a basic outline of a fallen's mental response to its actions. These reactions then regulate its own mental and spiritual corruption or salvation. Time and time again the setting and its core conflicts and challenges are expressed in mechanics. The setting is inaccessible to players without mechanics since they provide the means of taking dramatic action within the setting. Mechanics are contextualized by narrative, but also give agency to the player to impact that narrative. This is especially true when players transition from mundane tasks to supernatural ones like the use of Lores.

Faith and Lores play a unique part in the spirituality of *Demon: The Fallen*.

Unlike Torment which is so key to all other aspects of the rules, Faith manages to remain independent of mechanical attachment. A demon can have high or low Torment and have a completely non-correlative Faith score. Faith represents the spiritual power of the fallen, or, more accurately, the quintessence of its spiritual power. The higher the fallen's Faith the greater spiritual strength it has. But that strength is completely independent of all other numerical values. An angel could have a high Faith, but have the very fewest Lores possible. This would represent a fallen that is spiritually receptive and mature, but that is nascent in the use of her/his divine abilities. A character could also have a high Faith and a high Torment. Such a character would be a powerful demon, the likes of Lucifer or his generals. These variations make characters complex and unique within the game. The mechanics provide that basis for narrative reality, and allows the player to more accurately represent the character in the game setting.

The connection between player and character cannot be understated at this juncture since the character sheet becomes the player's means of interacting with the game. There is, of course, a predominant social angle in TRPGs, but the character sheet offers players a cogent outline of their character's psychology, abilities, and qualities that allow the kind of direct experience of religious exploration that will become essential in later discussions. One player, according to Bowman, reported "his favorite RPG is *White Wolf's Mage: The Ascension* because the game's philosophies and mechanics forced players to think outside the box."⁴¹ The same could be said about any TRPG, with mechanics functioning alongside narrative to produce the experience of a player's "second life." Another interviewee reported to Bowman:

41 Bowman, p. 66.

I remember one character in particular that I created who was... a strongly evangelical preacher who was convinced that [he was] Jesus... And it was one of those experiments where I was just like, 'Let's see what happens when I make this.' And it was completely incompatible with the universe that this role-playing game existed in. But it was one of those experiments where I was just playing around with numbers and rules and character creation [and thought], 'Let's throw this out, see if it floats.' And it was a horribly fun character. Horribly, horribly fun.⁴²

This kind of character experimentation is fundamental to the TRPG genre, and that this example, in particular was religious in nature, demonstrates the kind of experimentation that can go on in a typical game of *Demon: The Fallen*. The player's emphasis on rules and character creation is also important to note, since it is through the process of character building that the character's personality and physicality are made real to a player. Also, it is where this player and others engage in a type of religious discourse through mechanics. The character above did not work with the setting, but the ultimate goal was the character's genesis in mechanics, to see it expressed in the quantifiable terms of the system. This gave it both cohesion as a complete persona and understandable faculties in the game system.

Demon: The Fallen provides this metaphysical physicality through the rules it provides. The character above, while not created for *Demon: The Fallen*, can be easily replicated within the system. A player could emphasize social attributes over physical ones to engender a focus on aggressive proselytizing. Religious knowledge might be less important than good social skills, awareness, a way with expression, leadership, and subterfuge. Dependant on the kind of preacher the character was, Backgrounds like Allies, Fame, Followers, Influence, or Resources might become important. Lore meanwhile might tend towards the social as well like the Lore of Humanity that allows

42 Bowman, p. 175.

comprehension of every spoken language (better to spread your message), and an ability to better manipulate others into accepting you as friend rather than foe. The Lore of the Celestials or the Lore of Radiance might also fit for a more legitimate proselytizer, providing the power to impart visions or command respect, or even worship. Freebie points might be spent on increasing the character Faith to represent an incredible Faith in him/herself, or on bettering himself as a messenger of God, increasing abilities or giving himself more Backgrounds.

This is how religion is imparted into the game via its mechanics. Popular religious notions and concepts are quantified to become understandable within the paradigm of the game. All of the mechanics of *Demon: The Fallen* in some way relate back to the quantification of the supernatural or the religious. Obviously, this is at once an obvious quality of *Demon: The Fallen*, but also complex. Yes, Faith is represented by a score of 1 to 10, but these numbers do not, in and of themselves, quantify the spiritual. That is done through game-play and character creation above. Without setting or player involvement, these mechanics are just rules. But taken in context, they become a quantified version of the thing they represent. A Faith 5 is not just a midland score for something ranging from 1 to 10, it represents a decided level of spiritual power and competence that can and should be represented through character concept, background, and demeanor.

Setting is clearly the primary connection that players have with a TPRG, but mechanics make the setting manifest and therefore cannot be separated from the facets of the game they represent. Spirituality and the supernatural are created by mechanics. Just as Bowman explains, the science fiction and horror genres of tabletop role-playing were primarily driven by a need to expand beyond the acquisition and maintenance of power,

and instead focus on the complexity of the person. She is right that this shift was to allow for psychological complexity, but in doing so, it allowed for religious and spiritual complexity too.

Psychologically, *Demon: The Fallen* encourages players to settle on both a concept and demeanor at the earliest stages of character creation. Unlike the broad usage of the term “concept” I used above to denote a general idea of the overall character, this use of concept is indicative of the character’s inherent psychology. Examples are provided ranging from criminal, drifter, or outsider to entertainer, socialite, or nightlifer. This concept defines who the character is at their core, while their demeanor is the affectation they exude to the world. At the very onset of character creation, players are encouraged to think of their characters as psychologically complex rather than two-dimensional. What increased psychological complexity allows for is increased types of reactions to a given situation which allows for individualized spirituality or religious expression. The character is not a two-dimensional shell, but in a very real way a separate persona that the player animates and empathizes as. S/he does this thanks to mechanics which tell her/him the nature of the character s/he is playing. It gives the player a quantified, and understandable grasp of the character’s strengths, weaknesses, limitations, and mentality. The character is not the player, and that distinction is made in the setting through mechanics. Characters can take radically different actions than the player, and perform better or worse in various aspects of life, because the mechanics ground the character in the alternative reality of the game setting. Psychological complexity, in essence, separates the character from the player and makes them into Orsi’s believer within the setting. Mechanics demand and promote this detailed level of psycho-spiritual

complexity during character creation and beyond to help facilitate the authenticity of character interactions with the setting.

Religion, in *Demon: The Fallen*, is not a generalized template of belief given to a character like it may be in other level-based games like D&D. Instead, the players are encouraged to explore their religiosity through setting and enforced by game mechanics. The religious aspects then become integrated into the general expression of religiosity within *Demon: The Fallen*. By linking the setting so heavily with religious narratives, the mechanics uphold a religiocentric relationship with spirituality. Faith and Torment represent the crux of this internal support structure. Faith can be interpreted as a reward system, offering benefits for a high score, while Torment represents a punitive system, punishing for bad behavior. In any game, no matter the system, players can produce complex psycho-spiritual narratives surrounding their characters. However, in *Demon: The Fallen*, that narrative is thrust to the forefront by the support of the mechanics. Rather than being optional, the game centers around the psychosocial and spiritual development of its characters as they maneuver the vice-ridden World of Darkness. This is most directly represented through the acquisition of Experience Points.

Experience points are points given to characters, usually at the end of a given game session that can then be spent to improve certain stats of the character. Like freebie points during character creation, experience points can be exchanged at varying rates to increase abilities, attributes, backgrounds, Lores, and other values of the character. Even Faith and Torment can be raised or lowered respectively. The game session is, literally, quantified, as the players' real experiences are turned into usable points that mechanically improve their characters. This is how growth and development happen both mechanically

and socially. It is telling that these strongly religious, spiritual, and/or metaphysical concepts like Faith, Torment, and various supernatural powers can be increased via experience. It implies that the mechanics as well as the character are not stagnant in the World of Darkness but are given agency via their mechanics.

Conclusion

Players represent a character's spiritual strength in the face of overwhelming proof against the goodness of humanity through an increased Faith score. They show remorse and loyalty to the Creator by maintaining a low Torment either through abstinence from sinful acts or through the expenditure of experience, which represents a hard-earned victory over their own lesser nature. Mechanics are representative of the setting, and as Mackay would put it, they create game setting and reality. He writes, "The imagination-entertainment environment is a simulation created by a machine that follows no map or model in reality. It does not imitate it simulates."⁴³ For Mackay setting is created by mechanics, which is intuitively reversed. One would assume that setting creates mechanics, after all that is how I have phrased it thus far. But indeed mechanics create setting as much as setting creates mechanics. Mechanics are, in some ways, the physics of the gaming world, and therefore determine the width and breadth of action that can be undertaken. In truth setting is another form of mechanic. It exists only so far as mechanics define it. Beyond that the setting becomes incomprehensible. Abstract notions like religion and religiosity exist in a nebulous state within the mechanics. Religion at play in *Demon: The Fallen* is a simulacrum of real-world religion, created in the game setting. Mechanics give religious reality to the setting by supporting various metaphysical

43 Mackay, p. 37.

truths. Concepts like Faith and Torment and supernatural abilities like Lores and Apocalyptic Forms are real in the setting because the mechanics make them so. Therefore mechanics create religious reality. Faith is representative of the relationship Man or the fallen have with God. Torment is the spiritual state of the fallen. Lores are the angelic disciplines of the fallen and represent the entirety of their external powers. The mechanics make them real and provide players the agency to use them through their characters to enact change on the game setting. In other words, they interact with the game's religious reality through mechanics. Other aspects of religion are purely setting-based and those are discussed in my next chapter, but for a great portion of the religiosity that players interact with, mechanics manifest it either through player or non-player (storyteller) character stats or through dice rolls meant to resolve conflicts, including skirmishes using supernatural gifts.

The mechanics of *Demon: The Fallen*, interact with religion, spirituality, and the supernatural in three distinct ways. The system is created by setting, wherein mechanics are erected to support a given narrative. Secondly, the game system is necessarily religiously-inclusive given its subject matter. This interaction is mostly semantic, including mechanics like Faith and Virtue. Neither of these qualities are necessarily religious, but taken in the context of the game world, they become religious, leading to the third form of interaction. Mechanics create religion and spirituality within the alternate reality by producing the foundational basis for the game world, character creation, and action arbitration, specifically those aspects related to the expression of religious ideas and actions. With demons running amok as characters, one does not need to look far for integration of religious ideas in *Demon: The Fallen*. Mechanics provide

the outline for in-game existence, and therefore produce setting.

Chapter 2: Setting and Religious Reality

Setting is the most interactive aspect of the role-playing experience. Rules and judicious mechanics create the fundamental reality of the game world, but setting is the lens players use to understand their characters and the narrative of their actions. Setting encompasses everything about the alternate reality of the game. It is all aspects of the game that are not themselves the characters, and even then the characters are inexorably tied to the realities of the setting. Players use their character to create setting, in effect manifesting the game narrative through their characters' actions. In the same way that individuals create society and culture in conventional reality, characters create the world around them through their existence and actions.

Many ludologists who study TRPGs tend to separate setting and narrative, even if only lexically; however, the two are codependent on a level that makes their separation a detriment to their understanding rather than an asset. Setting is a blend of text-based canon provided by the authors of the TRPG and player interaction with that setting. Player interaction takes the base concept of the setting provided textually and manifests it into a mental reality. The textual world is only a template to provide the base realism and logic of what will become the broader setting. It provides history and context to what will inevitably become a player-centric reality. The textual world is then taken by the player to create a much more varied and interactive setting. The description of the World of Darkness I provided in my introduction is a heavily abbreviated discussion of setting, and that is because in the span of those few paragraphs the player is able to construct a much more extensive reality. From the description players infer a great number of cultural similarities between what they know in conventional reality and the game setting.

Descriptive generalizations provide the basis for creating a much more elaborate game environment. That is true for all TRPGs. The player fills in the gaps of the game reality, creating the world as he navigates through it.

For *Demon: The Fallen* and other TRPGs, religion is created and expanded in the same way. Along with setting, religion and religiosity is engaged with because it is a manifest part of the setting. It is at once an external influence on the setting, being a part of popular culture, but simultaneously it is an internal construct unique to the setting in which it is created. It is my aim to detail how religion exists as an external social force acting on the setting of *Demon: The Fallen*, how it is an internal part of its setting, and how both of these aspects take on an independent existence as setting is engaged with by players. I will leave a majority of the discussion about players and their impact on religion within *Demon: The Fallen* to my third chapter, but because of the interconnected nature of mechanics, setting, and play, I cannot bracket one subject from the others completely.

It is my hope to focus on setting and its relationship with religion and religious expression within TRPGs as distinct from rules/mechanics or the interactive aspects of play. This distinctiveness comes from setting being a wholly narrative facet of the game. Mechanics are narrative because of their interaction with setting, but are themselves more process rather than product. Play is, likewise, more a story-building element of role-playing rather than the narrative itself. Through player interaction the setting is expanded and narrative is created. When this narrative tackles various aspects of setting, it can be said to be religious and therefore players are interacting with a reality of religion even if it be fictitious in nature.

Setting is a complex construct, and is difficult to separate from player interaction since, in truth, the setting is an entirely mental construct. However, there are distinct elements of setting that can be analyzed independent of the player, if only partially. These elements, taken from Fine's study of fantasy gaming, are realism and logic. As he writes, "In order to understand the process by which players and the referee jointly construct game events, one must examine two critical dimensions of the referee's fantasy world: realism and logic."⁴⁴ In this brief passage Fine has outlined some of the core precepts of game setting. The first is that, in spite of its cooperative nature, the referee (or storyteller in the case of *Demon: The Fallen*) is in control of the setting. As the arbitrating authority, the storyteller's word, to an extent, is law. Where realism and logic fit in, is how the storyteller and players can interact in the same setting creating Fine's "shared fantasy." They provide a social framework by limiting the reality in which the game is played.

Realism and Logic

We view setting as a social and psychological exercise, that is existent, simultaneously, in all players' minds, constructed and constrained by socially imposed limitations of realism and logic. World building is an individual process as well, taking place inside the mind of each person. The process is akin to a reader creating a novel setting as s/he reads. As the reader engages with the material, a mental construct of the setting and its characters is created that is elaborated on as the reader learns more about the setting. The gamer, while reading the setting provided by the authors of *Demon: the Fallen*, creates a personal vision of the setting. The point of the provided game setting is to impart the same understanding of the setting to all readers who then interact with the

⁴⁴ Fine, *Shared Fantasy*, p. 80.

same mental construct. That same construct is imputed into the minds of separate players through a consistent presentation of realism and logic

Obviously, as Fine points out, “‘Actual’ realism is an impossible goal.”⁴⁵ Realism, in this instance is an “illusion of realism.”⁴⁶ It is not a defined concept that is applied equally to all games, not even all games of *Demon: The Fallen*. If we take the self-described setting of *Demon: The Fallen* as a darker, more fractured reality than our own, that is a distinction in realism. Other than the grittier reality of *Demon: The Fallen*, the setting is comparable to conventional reality. *Demon: The Fallen* makes decided reference to that fact in an effort to provide a basic realism to the game for players. The difficulty in defining either realism or logic in a given game comes from the inconsistency with which they are applied. Even in a single TRPG, realism can be applied strictly or casually. This means the game setting can be very close to our own reality or as far away as desired. Even in *Demon: The Fallen*, a setting almost entirely like our own, there exist supernatural forces like the fallen which change the realism of the setting. Playing a demon, an exorcist, or a thrall shifts the realism of the setting away from the conventional reality the setting is built upon into a different experiential world. What this means is that setting creates reality for the player, not just the other way around.

For Fine, realism is primarily a historical demarcation. It represents the level of adherence to the established chronology of human events in conventional reality. *Demon: The Fallen* has, therefore, strict realism. Its history prior to any game occurs in tandem with reality. The given history of both *Demon: The Fallen* and reality are exactly the same. There is an inherent contradiction in realism in *Demon: The Fallen*. On the one

45 Fine, p. 81.

46 Ibid.

hand there is the supernatural aspects of the game that provide for a completely fantastic setting, but also a demystified history that grounds the game within the bonds shared with conventional reality. In reconciling these two realities, the fantastic with the mundane, the liminal space of play is created. This is the setting as it interacts with the players and their characters. Players navigate characters through a hidden supernatural reality that exists juxtaposed to mundane reality. Realism stems from the duality of fantastic and mundane that together create a consistent state of adherence or departure from conventional reality. That consistency creates realism by providing players and their characters with a basis upon which to act rationally or sensibly in the setting.

Unlike realism which is a preset condition of the game setting, logic is the limiter on character action. In a reality where no human can fly, or where only a special sub-sect is able to do so, then it is logical for the player to not suddenly proclaim that their character takes flight. This is hyperbole, of course, but it illustrates a crucial point. Logic is psychological realism. Realism provides the reality of the game world, and logic, used in this context, denotes the reasonable and rational within the game world. Put another way, realism is a character's external reality giving sense to the non-character setting, whereas logic is her/his internal reality shaping the mental landscape of the character. The convergence of the internal and external landscapes comes when external events begin to impact the internal mentality of the character. As we saw in my first chapter, *Torment* is a prime example of this convergence, and is carried over into setting automatically since *Torment* expresses a narrative truth of the setting. Another way is through derangements that players can acquire after experiencing traumatic events. In both cases, the realism of the setting acknowledges that external trauma can produce comparable trauma to a

character's psyche. That is, in fact, one of the primary facets of the game experience in *Demon: The Fallen*. That is the realism of the game, the game world adhering to a certain degree to conventional reality, in essence adopting conventional reality to one degree or another. That is the level of realism in a given game.

Logic, instead, denotes a game-based consistency with itself. Fine relegates logic more to a component of social interaction between players and the storyteller, but he does write,

Logic can be understood as realism that ignores historic validity. The logic of a society is built into the meanings that events and objects have. Consider a fantasy role-play game based on contemporary American society. Realism in such a game implies a game logic. The existence of 'automobiles' in the game, and players' (and characters') knowledge of how to use these large metallic objects, means that the game permits operation of these machines. If the players were unfamiliar with these objects, they would have to acquire knowledge of automobiles in the course of the game - the *logic* of these pieces of machinery.⁴⁷

In spite of logic's seat in the communal consciousness of the gaming group, consciousness is inherent to the setting as well. Logic implies an understanding of cause and effect thinking, according to Fine, and I would opine that more basically it requires, aptly, inductive logic. What changes then is how that logic is applied to the alternate reality of the setting. Specific to our aim, *Demon: The Fallen*, provides a reality to religion that is simultaneously congruent with conventional reality and, yet, is completely differentiated from it. More clearly, in conventional reality there exists a certain base logic of ritualism, superstition, and magical sympathy, that implies that prayer, spells, and/or gestures will promote a certain outcome. The same holds true for in-game reality, the only difference between the religiosity of conventional reality and that of *Demon: The Fallen* is that within *Demon: The Fallen* certain aspects of religious belief are

47 Fine, p. 84.

known, with absolute certainty, to exist. This holds true only for the player characters and those “in the know” (i.e. other fallen or supernatural entities). Outside of themselves, the *logic* that religious precepts are real, to one degree or another, is completely hidden.

In the World of Darkness prayer *can* work for anyone, but only those with true faith enjoy the reality of functioning prayer. Represented in the system by the Truth Faith merit/background players are able to represent characters who can either warp reality by their faith or truly have some ability to coerce a higher power to action. The nature of True Faith is not defined, much like the possibility for the salvation of the fallen. Instead possible answers are given to their exact nature. This provides a logic and realism unique to these qualities, namely that they are, until discovered otherwise through the course of game-play, ineffable.

To summarize, setting is the mental construct of a player or players based on a set realism and logic that governs the reality of the setting. It is imperative to understand how setting creates a distinct reality as we press forwards, because it is here that I deviate from many ludologists. Game scholars have emphasized the reality of game events purely as psychological events within a singular reality, that is conventional reality. I postulate that two separate experiences occur simultaneously in two separate, yet concurrent realities. The nature of this dualistic experience I explain in my third chapter, but for now game setting is the second reality that runs concurrent to conventional reality. As I will explain below, because game setting is a reality, the religious aspects of it can be studied in the same manner as conventional religion.

Setting as Religious Text

To study religion and setting in TRPGs, and *Demon: The Fallen* more particularly, it is best to approach it in a similar manner to television. It is not an intuitive jump in methodology and theory, but surprising similarities arise between religion and television, and religion and gaming. Santana and Erickson provide the foundational theory behind understanding religion in television, and draw away from the standard analysis of viewer interaction with the program being viewed. Instead, they follow a much more comparable line of study wherein they analyze a given television broadcast as a viewable text. That is how one must approach the study of TRPGs as well. The core book and supplements of the *Demon: The Fallen* line are more than just a list of referential material. They are a world-creating text, providing setting that is then expanded upon by players. The similarity comes, primarily, from the dualistic reality of both television and TRPGs. In conventional reality, television programs are performed by actors who recite lines to create the secondary reality of the fiction created. The actor is not the character, but the character, within the confines of the created reality, has a kind of existence. This is the same as the gamer experience of being both player and character, interacting with two states of reality.

Santana and Erickson frame their inquiry into religion and television by first quoting Simon During, who highlights the pivotal problem in both the analysis of television and TRPGs. He writes, “it is as if the programmes themselves aren’t worth taking seriously as they impact the viewers [and] it has been impossible to concentrate on close readings of TV texts or to construct a TV canon.”⁴⁸ The same holds true for TRPGs, which have, thus far, been analyzed almost solely based on their psychological or

48 Simon During, *Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 114-15.

sociological dynamics. Up till now, TRPGs have been considered little more than window dressing to a much larger and generalized social event that transpires, when in truth the games are every bit as important as the people who play them.

Like Santana and Erickson's understanding of television drama, which can be viewed as an "observable text in themselves, as objects available for study," we cannot be lulled into the same trap of believing that TRPGs are passive in the role-playing experience, particularly when it comes to providing religion within the game setting. TRPGs create a part of the literary landscape that lies in juxtaposition to defined scripture. Televangelism is an obviously religious form of television, wherein scripture (particularly the Bible) is made into an observable text. *Demon: The Fallen*, would then be comparable to science fiction programs like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Supernatural*, or *True Blood*. They both share a fictitious reinterpretation of religious truth, and more importantly, when it comes to setting they can be analyzed exactly the same. Just like the internal setting of the World of Darkness in *Demon: The Fallen*, the programs listed above are given to the viewer as a foundational "canon." They provide the realism and logic of the world in which the episode transpires. Each additional episode is then akin to a supplement published in a game line, each one expanding and expounding upon the initial setting, offering greater detail and complexity.

Episodes become an increasingly diverse canon that adds to the setting reality, independent of the viewer. The same is true for TRPGs and their supplements, which are free from player influence. What makes TRPGs different from television dramas, is that players, unlike television fandoms, can do away with this canon selectively or entirely in an effort to create their own setting. It is theoretically possible for a group to do away

with every aspect of the game, keeping only the mechanics to reinterpret the entire setting. *Demon: The Fallen* could take place in a post-apocalyptic future that is set on the Moon. However, from both personal experience and the stance of provided texts as a provided canon, the above example is aberrant from the standard game setting. Instead, if settings are modified it is to set in other times such as Victorian or Edwardian England or during the Italian or French renaissance. White Wolf Publishing created an entirely separate line of books for the World of Darkness setting placed in the Middle Ages, including *Demon: The Fallen*, *Dark Ages*. Mechanics were tweaked, rather than completely reworked in order to provide an experience designed to show the difference in mentality and supernatural power during that period of human history.

The change to period did not change the world, and it can be said the *Dark Ages* line was another part of detailing the World of Darkness setting, one that gave more insight into its history than any other products published. In spite of the radical change in setting from modern to historic, the setting and game canon did not change. Realism and logic were modified, after each publication, to give a better understanding of what the setting was like as a whole. As Doug Seacat of Privateer Press Inc. once wrote in an online blog,

Over the years I have had a hand in shaping some of the first accounts of our history, and I have put my pen to work making ongoing revisions and updates over the years. Such revisions are important since ours is a living and changing world. Sometimes a closer examination of a faction or region requires us to revise previously stated facts or to reconcile apparent contradictions. It is best to think of this as revising our records to better reflect recent discoveries.⁴⁹

He called himself a “creative historian,” and in many way he is right. With each publication he creates history, but that is not all he is. With how integral religion and

49 Doug Seacat; “Insider 3-23-11” Last Modified March 23, 2011. <<http://privateerpress.com/community/privateer-insider/insider-3-23-2011>>

belief is to the *Warmachine* and *Hordes* universe put out by Privateer Press, it would be just as easy to call Mr. Seacat a “creative theologian” as well. He goes on to state,

This is similar to how scientists and archeologists make discoveries that force us to reexamine our understanding of our world. Since this is a fictional setting of our own design, we have a bit more liberty. But we strive to make such revisions judiciously and without compromising the larger stability and plausibility of the world within the parameters we have set for it. As part of my job I need to know not only what we have printed, but also what we later revised or reinterpreted. I try to integrate these myriad facts into a seamless and cohesive whole.⁵⁰

Although Fine wishes to give godlike authority to storytellers, I think game designers and writers play a pivotal role in producing setting, creating both system and setting, which is then modified, rather than recreated by players. In other words they provide the true foundation for realism and logic within the game that is then deviated from by players and storytellers.

Setting as Religious Space

With setting now defined and theory outlined, what information can be garnered from using a television studies methodology? According to Santana and Erickson, nothing, but this is not Nietzsche’s nihilist nothing, but rather an exercise in liminality. Nothing can be stated with certainty when approaching setting because setting itself is a liminal space. Therefore the religious aspects of the setting are equally liminal, but that does not mean it is pointless. The opposite is true according to Santana and Erickson. Liminal space, where a blurring of fiction and reality occurs, is where popular religious discussion is most effective.

TRPGs like television dramas are primarily discursive, meaning narrative. Setting is the forum in which this story/discussion takes place. Here we find more overlap

⁵⁰ Ibid.

between media theories. Cover agrees with Santana and Erickson on the primacy of narrative to open discussion, but takes a somewhat more philosophical approach. While the scholars of religion Santana and Erickson view the fictitious space of the television drama as a place of personal exploration of religion, TRPGs are literally places for exploration. Players of TRPGs do not retroactively engage with the text like with television, they actively explore setting in as many ways as people in conventional reality can explore the world.

In both theories, the end is the postulation of a set reality and the theoretical navigation through that reality. Cover explains,

We see that space is important to the TRPG, so much so that entire books are written only to describe storyworlds. Nevertheless, the actual exploration of that space within the game is almost always connected to narrative. Just as narrative aesthetic may be grounded in a history of linguistics and print texts, the idea of spatial aesthetics seems more appropriate for digital environments with strong visual elements.⁵¹

When Cover speaks of possible-world theory, she uses it more as a convenient tool to understand the break in reality between the actual world (AW) and the game world (APW; alternative possible world). That is not all it allows for. It allows for two things when interacting with religion, it provides the theoretical/discursive world where players can explore religion and religious theory, and it does so by creating, in essence, a real religion within the context of the game.

Cover inadvertently creates a parallel with Mackay when she states,

Possible-worlds theory originally comes from the study of philosophy and logic. It helps to explain how someone can say, 'If it rains tomorrow, I will wear my jacket' when the current situation does not involve rain. Logically, the speaker can think of a world where it will rain... We recognize that things are true in this possible world that may not be true in the actual world because we recognize the

⁵¹ Cover, p. 83.

logic of the story world.⁵²

Compare the above to what is written by Santana and Erickson:

While it is perhaps impossible to point to any one trend in the presentation of God or religion on television, it does seem true that some of the most vigorous theorizing - by both fans and scholars - is being constructed around the complex and ambiguous alternate worlds that are created within shows of the fantastic, the supernatural, and the monstrous.⁵³

Possible-worlds theory is inescapable when discussing the alternative textual style of setting, and just as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* provokes discussion on “the ontology of the soul, the possibility or impossibility of free will, the negativity of heaven, and the contradictory present/absent existence of God,” so too can (and does) *Demon: The Fallen*, and in much the same way.⁵⁴

Demon: The Fallen centers its characters in a world with a firmly entrenched story world. As demons, exorcists, or thralls, the player’s perspective shifts to empathize with a given character reality. They must adopt the setting as reality, and immerse themselves in a new religious reality. Demons, exorcists, and thralls, all have first hand experience of religious truth, and that is what deviates the setting from conventional reality. Religious truth for most characters in *Demon: The Fallen* is not a matter of belief, but of fact. God, the Creator, is real, although his nature is a matter of dispute, indeed it is the heart of the game narrative. The fallen rebelled against God out of two equitable reasons. The first and foremost is a base disagreement with God’s ineffable mandate to leave humanity to its own devices, without interference from the heavenly host. The second was an increased distance from the Creator as the angels struggled to understand His motives.

52 Cover, p. 89.

53 Santana & Erickson, p. 123.

54 Santana & Erickson, p. 124.

The growing divide between the angels and the Creator is explained in an opening narrative between Rev. Matthew Wallace and Noah, his estranged son. Of course, Noah is no longer the reverend's son, but is a demon in Noah's body named Gaviel. Gaviel explains the Creator's estrangement from his first creation (angels) as a bardic story. He recounts a meeting between several angels. Below outlines the conversation of Belial, Ahrimal, and Usiel:

[Belial:] As we of the Firmament fly to the aid of any charge in danger, so may God lift us away from this hazardous shore. We cannot know, but we can trust in Him who does, the Unmoved Mover, the One Outside the World. If he tells me to reveal myself to our beloved charges, I will do so with infinite gladness in my heart. But if he compels me to remain hidden, no force in this world or the next could make me break faith.'

'How wise your counsel would be, if only we could *know* his will!' cried Ahrimal. 'With reassurance of His word, I would wait until the stars dimmed. But we have no word!'

'We have the opportunity to see as He sees' said Usiel, but there was doubt in his voice.

'For myself,' said Belial, 'I would take that chance - but what of Haniel, what of Injios, what of the Dominion of Summer Breezes and the Angel of the Unseen Light? They went, they saw and they are no more! Not one of them from lowly angel through mighty throne, has returned to give word, give hope, give knowledge! Haniel was your boon companion, Usiel. Where is she now? When you speak her name, no echo returns! When you ask her what she saw, get you any answer?'⁵⁵

In this small excerpt, which is part of a greater, and far more detailed account of the conversation, the angels discuss the nature of the Creator, the nature of themselves, their relationship to the Creator, the nature of being, and any one of a hundred theological and philosophical issues. What makes the above passage so crucial, is it highlights the pinnacle problem that began the inevitable Fall. The angles have imperfect knowledge of their perfect creation. Debate rages, and while a solution is given, the consequences of that action are unknown, a proposition as uncomfortable to angels as to humanity. What

⁵⁵ *Demon: The Fallen*, p. 30.

this narrative also provides is a history relevant to the players. With the setting as a text, players create characters that engage with this narrative in a direct and meaningful way. The engagement with setting is not passive, players are asked to empathize emotion and motive onto their character as they navigate the philosophical complexities of the angelic rebellion. Each character is a fallen angel, one who turned on the Creator in favor of humanity, and thus the players are asked to comment on these religious truths of the setting via their character. The character's feelings, thoughts, and actions are all motivated by their initial relationship with the story world.

Ironically, Rev. Wallace is confused more that the angels discussed the matter at all rather than with the nature of the conversation. Gaviel is quick to correct the reverend's misunderstanding, citing for the third time the completely different ontology of angelic/perfect existence and perception. For angels reality is multivalent . He states,

'I am giving you the version you can understand, all right? Lailah and Ahrimal did not talk *about* physics, they continued their discussion *through* physics. On one level, they were discussing the motives of the Maker and His will in a sunny palace on the moon. On another level, they were waves and particles interacting on the barren crust of an airless, lifeless rock. A third level had all the participants as musical elements, improvising against one another to communicate pure emotion.'

'Different facets.'

'Yes. *We are* natural laws, Matthew. Or we were.'⁵⁶

This comes before a lengthy discussion on the nature of Adam and Eve. Gaviel asks Rev. Wallace:

'Were they Adam and Eve, a woman and a man, or were they the evolved descendents of apes?'

'They were a woman and a man, as the Bible says.'

'Correct. But they were *also* a multitude of ape descendants. The universe was made in seven days, on one level, but that same span of time was billions of years on another.

'Or consider the Angels of the Firmament. On some levels of reality they

⁵⁶ *Demon: The Fallen*, p. 31.

were conveying the life-giving breath of the Maker on a purely scientific level - they were, literally *were*, the process by which solar energy striking simple carbon molecules agitated them into forms of ever increasing complexity until they became organic molecules, then primitive single-celled animals, then nucleated cells and so on, up to and including dogs, cast, and humans. But *at the same time* they were crouching over the mouths of newly sculpted creatures of all types, breathing into their mouths to animate them.⁵⁷

The examples go on, explaining how all things existed in convention, but also as song, poem, or Platonic form. Passages like the above examples are consistent throughout the written narrative of *Demon: The Fallen*. Not only do they highlight the pensive nature of the text, they also demonstrate the kind of theoretical discussion that goes on in the setting of *Demon: The Fallen*, specifically religious discussion. As I have already stated, one of the fundamental points of the game is to navigate not just the exploration of physical setting, but to explore a character's struggle with their actions against the Creator. All of the above are issues that they must deal with, in character, every game session. The setting demands this kind of theological and philosophical discussion. Angels knew a perfect, uncorrupted world where reality and *potentia* were one and the same, where the limitations of the fallen world are a far cry from what they have known. Just like Gaviel struggles to explain the ontology of creation to Rev. Wallace, the setting forces players and characters into a liminal state between divinity and mundane existence.

What is more, beyond the one-sided setting of a play or television drama, setting comes alive because of audience participation, forcing greater interaction with religious themes and theories. Ambiguity is constant in *Demon: The Fallen*, and even the notion of a Christian God is up to interpretation given the text. Is Gaviel presenting angels and the Creator in a Judeo-Christian light because it is accurate, or is he doing so for the benefit

⁵⁷ *Demon: The Fallen*, pp. 25-26.

of his Christian televangelist listener? In truth it could be both, neither, or either depending on the interpretation of the storyteller. The writers define a great deal of the basic setting, and provide a basic philosophical and theological framework for the game, using Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist religious tropes to engender a sense of accessibility for the reader, but the truth of the setting is still mutable. All religion can be correct, no religion can be correct, any one religion could be correct. These are all viable variance for the setting. The published setting material implies that there is a grain of truth, or useful information in any given religion, though finding it is difficult, sifting through arcane tomes and esoteric teachings.

Religion exists in setting because it engenders a need for religious discourse. This discussion need not be intentional or even conscious. Players do not need to realize that they are interacting with religious ideas or constructs. They are interacting with religion by interacting with the setting. They comment on religion through their character and its actions in the narrative. That narrative becomes a form of religious expression that can be studied even if it exists in a fictitious reality. Huizinga can provide a duality of theory that makes the expression of real religion in a fictitious setting more clear. Huizinga alludes to an altered state or space of perception, defined by game rules, but in which a sacred reality is being made manifest. He meant this as a literal religious field, where religious practitioners engaged in play and religious devotion simultaneously.⁵⁸ Here that religious belief exists only within the ‘sacred space’ of the gaming world, and not in conventional reality. Believer, belief, and believed continue to exist, but it is the character, not the player that is the believer, and the belief and believed likewise exist solely within the confines of the game setting, but they still exist. Players engage with religious reality

⁵⁸ Huizinga, p. 14.

because their characters do, not because they, themselves, are having an religious experience.

Bowman gives the best example of this in her interview with a gamer (Omega) who stated the following:

I felt the same rage as homophobes feel in today's society. I felt the same thoughts and the same process and the same atrocity [similar to how] one religion despises another...And with playing that character I understand it now. I still don't agree with it, but at least I understand that, most of the time, these people don't choose to have these feelings.⁵⁹

The above came from an interaction with a “NPC [that] was intended simply as a tool for the storyteller to provide local color to the town.”⁶⁰ In other words, it was interaction with the setting that produced the personally edifying experience accounted by Omega. The situation and its actions were fictitious, but the experience was real. Within the APW, theoretical action is real action leading to what Bowman calls the “experimental self.” I will discuss this in greater detail in my third chapter when I wrestle with player interdynamics as religion in TRPGs, but for now, setting provides the basis for the experimental self by creating the world in which the theoretical self explores.

Fictional Setting as Actual Religion

Put bluntly, TRPG religion is real and can be understood as such. This runs counter to my earlier statements that religion within setting is a theoretical discussion, but just as possible worlds can produce real effects on conventional reality, so too do the alternate worlds of the TRPG setting. *Demon: The Fallen*, and its World of Darkness, are not real, and great pains are taken to impress upon the reader their status as a game.

59 Bowman, p. 66.

60 Bowman, pp. 65-66.

Thanks to the gaming hysteria that sprang up in and around 1985, with parents decrying TRPGs as occult practices that lead to teen suicide, White Wolf provides a warning in their books. Whether this warning should be seen as tongue-in-cheek given their much later printing date, or not is a matter of speculation, nevertheless it strongly demarcates the fictional setting from objective reality. The disclaimer reads:

Demon: The Fallen is a game. Like board a[sic] game, you play it around a table with friends. The difference here is that there is no board, and there may not even be any pieces. It's still a game, though. It is *not* real life. Monsters are the product of our imaginations - they are not real. **You are not a demon.** It's that simple. If you can't distinguish reality from fantasy, put this book down and walk away. For everyone else, have fun.⁶¹

The actions undertaken and the setting interacted with are not conventionally real. As the disclaimer says, the player is not a demon while he plays the game. However, the experience of play does exist conventionally, and creates a duality of experience. Fine notes,

Fantasy role-playing games are cultural systems. They are woven worlds of magic and belief. They have social structure, norms, values, and a range of cultural artifacts, which if not physically real, are real to those who participate in them, and presumably (if I can stretch the metaphor) are real to the characters that inhabit these fantasy worlds.⁶²

Religion both comprises and inhabits this reality. It helps to define the stated structures, norms, values, and cultural artifacts. In the case of *Demon: The Fallen* its influence is broadened to social and spiritual dynamics that are explored. Rather than calling the world of the TRPG an alternative possible world, it would be more accurate to call it an alternative concurrent world. Unlike other possible worlds that help postulate "if-then" statements, the game world is a cohesive reality wherein other possible worlds are derived. That is what allows game space to be the liminal, experimental reality that early

61 *Demon: The Fallen*, p. viii.

62 Fine, p. 123.

ludologists postulated it was.

Roland Barthes would call the setting, and its dependant features like religion, “structures” and describes them as “actually a *simulacrum* of the object, but a directed, *interested* simulacrum, since the imitated object makes something appear which remained invisible, or if one prefers, unintelligible in the natural object.”⁶³ His *homo significans* (structural man) uses fabrications of the real world like those experienced in the game world “not in order to copy it but to render it intelligible.”⁶⁴ Put more simply, the objects and experiences within the setting, while only simulacrum of reality, possess a reality of their own as mental constructs. We gain greater understanding of these mental constructs (and their associated objects) through engagement with them. Mackay infers further that, “the performance can be understood not merely as an attempt to imitate the impression of reality...but to imitate the process *underlying* our reality.”⁶⁵ In other words, it breeds an increased understanding of the imitated object, such as religion. Game religion becomes real because players engage with it through play.

Through the simulacrum the storyteller and player are forced to engage religion and religious thought both within the game world and in reality. These two processes are one and the same. Players exist as both player and character, and therefore engage setting on two levels, that of the player who understands setting as a fictitious game reality, and as a character that takes game reality as its conventional reality. Setting and its associated structures are, existentially, both of these realities concurrently.

Religion, as a setting construct, demonstrates the dichotomy between game and conventional reality pointedly. While Christian dogma and practice within the game are

63 Roland Barthes, Richard Howard, trans., “The Structuralist Activity,” *Critical Essays* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 215.

64 Ibid.

65 Mackay, p. 67.

simulacra of dogma and practice existent in conventional reality, they are nevertheless still a form of actual religion, independent of conventional reality. That is possible because a social reality is constructed within the game. As noted above, the setting is imaginary, but that does not make it unreal. The mental actions undertaken by players within the erected setting of the game-world exist and have consequences. Players engage with game religion through the reality of their characters. That reality, based, in part, on conventional cultural constructs, is necessarily divided from conventional reality by both the structure of the game and the altered state of reality (i.e. the inclusion of demons and other obvious supernatural phenomenon). This also gives us an altered state of religious reality, that separates the religiosity of the setting from conventional religion.

In *Saviors & Destroyers*, the complexity of demonic life is increased with the introduction of exorcists. The very idea of exorcists and exorcism is religious by necessity, and whether the players are the exorcists or fighting against them, the religious reality of the setting is forced upon its players. If demons exist then so must exorcists, and specifically, so must the tools exorcists use. That is the realism and logic of the setting. In one notable passage, the *Prayer of St. Michael the Archangel* is offered as efficacious to anyone who recites it. How or why this prayer is effective is unexplained, but it is presented alongside the Christian exorcism as useful tool in combating the fallen. The Christian Exorcism is explained as:

[T]ypically performed by a priest or bishop and involves the recitation of certain prayers in repetition (these are actually different for every priest, but they usually include readings from the Gospel of John, the Prayer of St. Michael the Archangel, and Psalm 67). The ceremony can begin with, “In the Name of Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, strengthened by the intercession of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, Mother of God, of Blessed Michael the Archangel, of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul and all the Saints (and powerful in the holy authority of our ministry), we confidently undertake to repulse the attacks and deceits of the

devil.” It can continue on with an echoed prayer (answered by a secondary priest or by the single priest) exhorting the Devil to leave the body through the invocation of the name of the Lord, Jesus Christ.⁶⁶

Alternative exorcism rituals are provided including personal exorcisms which are akin to psychotherapy or a plea to the soul who originally inhabited the body to return. The basics of a Jewish exorcism are also given, citing the difference between it and Christian exorcism:

The chief characteristic of Jewish exorcisms was a repetition of the names of all the good angels. Names were key in the mythology and magic of early Judaism, and the act of exorcism was no different. It was also believed that Solomon had crafted certain formulas in his mastery of demon banishment, many of which were based on numerology, language and Qabbalistic writings.⁶⁷

All three of these examples denote the inclusion of conventional religious reality into the game setting, going so far as to provide the *Prayer of St. Michael the Archangel* in the text. Part of the Catholic exorcism ritual, *Demon: The Fallen* adopts, verbatim, specific aspects of real world religious practice. On one level, then, these adaptations are the objects that they copy, but on another, because of their inclusion in the game setting, they are an independent construct. But that construct is interacted with by characters. These constructs provide the basis for character belief. In essence, the object of belief, or the believed, is everything within the game setting. The character interacts with setting the way we interact with the world, and therein creates an existent reality concurrent to conventional reality. Players experience setting through their characters, and so the reality of the setting for their characters becomes a reality for the player. Beliefs manifested by the character because of setting are created by the player, again, because of setting. Game settings do not just impact characters, they impact players.

⁶⁶ *Saviors & Destroyers*, p. 81

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

The primacy of religious negotiation, through setting, within *Demon: The Fallen* is found in every facet of the World of Darkness. From demons and exorcists to the quests and goals that drive them, the physical as well as spiritual realities of the setting force players to accept an alternate view of reality from their own. That is the key point of setting, to provide a reality in which mental scenarios can be played out in as little or as much detail as necessary.

It may be mere coincidence that as players complete goals and grow as individual characters they acquire experience points. In truth, experience is the perfect word for the kind of interaction that occurs within, and through, the setting. And just like their characters, players too, acquire experience in the alternate framework of the game. Jeff Howard writes “‘Participation with every ounce of one’s force’ suggests unswerving effort to reach a goal of self-expression and self-improvement. This is an enterprise that we can only admire in one of the knights searching for the holy Grail but which we can cultivate in ourselves through gaming.”⁶⁸

For Howard, the only purpose of gaming is “enacted, meaningful action.” This is done through the quest narrative. A player-driven exercise in TRPGs, it highlights the absolute necessity of the setting to accomplish Howard’s goal. As I began this chapter, narrative and setting are one and the same, and Howard summarizes that point well as he describes meaning as:

...the impact of the player’s accomplishments on and within a simulated world...a narrative backstory that conveys emotional urgency by revealing why the player-avatar is performing an action and what effect this action will have; [and] expressive, semantic, and thematic meaning: ideas symbolically encoded within

68 Jeff Howard, p. 7.

the landscape, objects, and challenges of the quest and enacted through it.⁶⁹

Lasting impact on the setting is the primary, meaningful goal of all players, but that is not the only one. Each of Howard's three meanings relate back to setting because setting gives meaning to players. It is, as stated earlier the liminal space where discussion can occur. Like Plato's man with the ring of invisibility, and the discussion that followed, there is a theoretical world with a philosophical problem: will the man continue to be moral or will his power beyond the ken of mortals lead to corruption? Perhaps more than any other game, *Demon: The Fallen* summarizes that quandary, providing the philosophical and theological space wherein these types of ontological questions can be asked. Through realism and logic, a world is created with religious investitures that bleed into every part of the setting. Santana and Erickson confess that the setting, even in the far more concrete television medium, is not a place for answers. Players must struggle with the questions available to them through the setting, and apprehend their own answers about the possible religious truths presented to them. That is the point of setting, to provide the reality for exploration and experimentation, of religious life. A simulacrum of conventional reality, it mirrors rather than mimics popular religion, reflecting it back on "real reality." *Demon: The Fallen* does this through its strong psychological and spiritual elements that permeate the setting, making the TRPG as much about wrestling with the nature of being and the existence of evil, as about acquiring power, wealth, and glory.

69 Jeff Howard, p. 25.

Chapter 3: Religion and Player Experience

The most explored component of TRPGs is the interactive element between players and storytellers to create a cohesive gaming experience. Ludologists, even those uninterested in TRPGs, have focused on the human element of gaming since the inception of the discipline. Psychology and sociology dominate the field of study which is why I cover its contributions to religious studies last. Under the auspice that system and setting are vital contributing factors to the gaming and religious experience of the player, the interdynamics of TRPGs can be understood as somewhat different than what has previously been published by a majority of gaming scholars. For them, the primary source of topical edification comes from the human agency at work within TRPGs. I do not deny that it is a crucial element to the overall gaming experience, indeed it is the experience itself, however, unlike others I do not take it as premier among the components of the TRPG medium. Instead it works in tandem with system and setting to give a more even and accurate portrayal of religious expression, exploration, and experience. Rather than seeing the human element as the only viable agency of TRPGs, I understand it as a trinity of parts that culminate in the overall whole of the TRPG. Likewise, all three aspects of the TRPG produce the religious experience in gaming.

That being said, unlike mechanics and setting which can be studied much like any text, with their own unique quirks given their textual style, the social and psychological elements of TRPGs are as complex as the people who play them. Thus, to give any true insight into the topic, I take *Demon: The Fallen* as my primary example, and specifically how the mechanics and setting work with players to allow for religious exploration. In the previous chapter I already discussed certain ways in which setting promotes this

exploration, but focusing on the player and storyteller, I will emphasize different facets of these same elements. As such I will, rather than focusing on how setting allows for such exploration, be focused on how gamers interact and create experience through mechanics and setting. In other words, my primary subject is the person and their personal and shared religious experience given through *Demon: The Fallen*.

Game Experience and Religious Exploration

Jeff Howard best outlines the gamer's experience by emphasizing the quest narrative. At the heart of any game session there is the notion of in-game exploration of setting that is the quest narrative. He quotes Susana Tosca who writes, "The idea of [the] quest as a search with a transcendent meaning (as in "quest for the Holy Grail") is part of the everyday use of the word and no doubt has some influence in the way players and designers look at them."⁷⁰ The transcendent even transformative element of the quest is tied essentially in its colloquial and lexical meaning. The quest is not only transformative for the player character but for the player him/herself. The gaming experience is not stagnant, it is active, participatory engagement with the material. In other words the quest is players exploring setting through mechanics. This is the essential connection between the three main components of the TRPG. It is also how religious experience is translated from setting to player and back again.

Howard outlines three dimensions in which exploration takes place. Player exploration takes place in three directions: up, out, and down. He means these quite

70 Susana Tosca; "The Quest Problem in Computer Games;" *Proceedings of the First International Conference on Technologies for Interactive digital Storytelling and Entertainment TIDSE '03*; Ed. Stefan Göbel et all (Darmstadt: Fraunhofer IRB Verlag, 2003); <<http://www.it-c.dk/people/tosca/quest.htm>> in Jeff Howard, *Quest: Design, Theory, and History in Games and Narratives* (A.K. Peters: Wallesly, Massachusetts; 2008), p. 2.

literally, but they can be understood metaphorically as well, denoting different kinds of personal, transformative experience. Up is the first direction and is compared to the exploration of the spiral tower or a ziggurat. Metaphorically it relates to the improvement or transcendence of a character through their experience. He acknowledges:

The space mirrors the leveled progression of character development in the process of initiation central to the gameplay of role-playing games. When a player accumulates sufficient experience points within a role-playing game, her character moves to a new 'level.' Level in this context refers to a measurement of the character's achievements....At the same time, a level often refers to a demarcated spatial area with a particular set of challenges that must be overcome before a player can move to the next area. The leveled ascent up spiraling towers or ziggurats is the spatial equivalent of leveling up one's character...⁷¹

Ascension takes on all of its connotations, and, once again, demonstrates the tripartite nature of the gaming experience. The leveling mechanic, the leveled setting, and the tiered progression of the player experience work in tandem to create gameplay.

Next is outward exploration demarcated by travel from place to place. Rather than exploring a given locale which is, for Howard, done through upward or downward movement, outward movement covers the raw concept of exploration. It relates to the search/quest narrative as a whole, and as I will show, relates to the mundane elements of the quest. Terms like mundane should not be understood as meaning banal or unimportant, but as implying those elements of the game and character experience which are worldly as opposed to otherworldly or extraordinary. The experience of talking with some John Doe in a dark alleyway of New York, in *Demon: The Fallen*, is mundane but not uninteresting. It may also yield a clue that leads to a more upward or downward oriented quest. Outward movement facilitates upward or downward movement.

Additionally, outward movement is an oversimplification of full lateral

⁷¹ Howard; p. 47.

movement. Howard does not mean outward movement as solely external but a combination of outward exploration coupled with an inward quest. The inward journey is both literal and physical. It primarily denotes a return to the familiar after exploration of the unknown. Literally, player characters often return to their “normal” lives after the events of a given story. After the characters have solved the mystery and put an end to whatever untoward effect might have transpired, they return to standard acts of day-to-day life. The character, having changed from his experience, now interacts differently or similarly based on the actions of the quest. I take the outward and inward journey to mean more than what Howard proposes. Allegorically it can also mean exploration both external and internal, and as stated already, exploration of the unknown versus the known.

Whether laterally or medially, players can then explore, simultaneously, downwardly. Downward investigation can be seen similarly to upward exploration. They both are represented by levels wherein characters face greater and greater challenges as they continue. Where upward journeys are transformative or transcendent, downward quests are edifying or enlightening. Obviously transformation of the character can be attained via enlightenment, but the kind of growth connoted here is of a more cerebral variety.

Upward motion, as opposed to downward, suggests physical transformation which can be both literal and metaphorical. Literally, characters can change a great deal as they increase in experience. Players may spend their experience points purchasing physical attributes or skills, increasing their physical competency. They can also increase their Appearance attribute. However, more often this transformation is metaphorical,

implying overall competence and power of the character. The character becomes faster, stronger, better than they were before through the player's experience with the character. They attain greater supernatural powers which leads to greater capabilities, whether it be conjuring infernos or swaying whole crowds to subservience.

What downward exploration provides is knowledge. It is the intangible, unquantifiable benefits of experience. Wisdom, to an extent, can be substituted by stats on a character sheet; however, players gain it simply by empathizing with their characters and adopting their characters' experiences as their own. Howard likens downward quests to the dungeon or labyrinth and writes:

The exploration of a dungeon corresponds closely to the phase of initiation known as 'descent into the underworld,' which both Frye and Campbell describe through the recurrent mythological image of the labyrinth. Venturing into a dangerous underground space is a recurrent motif associated with the passage through trials because it signifies confrontation with the monstrous forces of darkness, whether conceived as a natural fear of the dark, the manifestation of unconscious contents, or a metaphysical battle with evil.⁷²

The knowledge gained in downward exploration is of the unknown. There may be no mechanical benefits gained by the experience of a downward quest, there is an acquisition of information. Put another way, the character and player are initiated into setting mysteries, transformed by the knowledge they acquire. It can be said then that any time a character learns or a player gains understanding from his experience then downward exploration has occurred. Put another way, upward movement is symbolic of internal, or internalized, experience (self-improvement), while downward movement implies external experience with the setting (edification).

72 Howard, p. 50.

Game Experience and the Experimental Self

Howard's three forms of exploration help underline the complexity of player and setting interaction. It also demonstrates the methods by which a player can become the experimental self. The experimental self is a reoccurring part of game studies, highlighted most completely by Sarah Bowman. Bowman emphasizes identity alteration as a key dynamic at work when players translate into characters and back again. I have already covered the notion of character experience as player experience, and the experimental self is the vehicle for that translation because it is the *player's* character. Unlike setting or mechanics which can be studied without the complexity of human agency, role and character are inseparably tied to the gamer who plays them. There is no separation between character and player and actions taken within the game are actions manifested by the player.

As I continue, it is important to remember that TRPGs are primarily a source of entertainment and not elucidation. Gamers engage in role-playing sessions as a means of fun and therefore the kind of interaction with religion that occurs is of a very particular nature. Nevertheless, whether the player is aware of their experience or not, they still engage with the setting, make choices, problem solve, and inevitably learn from their encounters with the setting. A return to Erickson and Santana and their analysis of religion in the popular television drama *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, demonstrates unequivocally that in spite of the medium there is merit to the kind of religious commentary that comes from even seemingly frivolous or unserious activities. There is an ontological reality to religion within the game world, it is only a matter of explaining the nature of that reality and its impact on the player. There is also the impact that players

have on game religion, and both must be explored here to provide a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between game, religion, and gamer.

Bowman's understanding of this interplay is via altered identity and the self. In truth gaming identity is a complex issue creating multiple levels of self that go into a given player character. Put most succinctly, Bowman writes:

These categories are based less on the archetypal essence of the persona and more on the player's feeling of 'sameness' between their primary identity and the character concept. Often, the characters work to serve a certain function for role-players, be it psychological exploration, boundary transgression, or simple stress relief. Guided by the manner in which my respondents describe their character I offer nine major types of roles: the Doppelganger Self, the Devoid Self, the Augmented Self, the Fragmented Self, the Repressed Self, the Idolized Self, the Oppositional Self, the Experimental Self, and the Taboo Self.⁷³

She is quick to add that rarely does a character fit into only one of these categories.

Characters serve several psycho-social functions simultaneously. In *Demon: The Fallen* very nearly all of these selves can be seen to engage in religious discourse, again thanks to player and character experience being one and the same. As a necessarily religious concept, players are invited to explore religious themes whether overt or subtle. What *Demon: The Fallen* propounds to do is provide a religious narrative that players then create and shape. Using setting and background as the foundation for this narrative, characters explore creating demonic personalities and actions. Each part of the story, because it revolves around the characters, is religious. The altered identity, as the character, therefore provides an outlet for any of the above selves. The popular concept of demons is tied to religion, and so, when a player seeks to emulate the thought of a demonic personality onto their character, then that character and the player are engaging in religious discourse. That is done through Bowman's varying self.

⁷³ Bowman, pp. 155-56

The Doppelganger Self is a replica of the “primary identity” (i.e. the player) as a character in-game. Normally considered amateurish or shallow, Bowman offers one positive aspect of the Doppelganger Self and that is an increased self-awareness for the player. When a player portrays a facsimile of her/himself there comes an increased scrutiny of action begging the constant question “what would I do?” Of course, this form of altered identity is valuable for analysis of game religion’s impact on the player since it is played out in-character directly.

Likewise the Devoid Self is a useful archetype given its grounds as similar to the player but lacking “an essential quality that the player possesses in the ‘real world’.”⁷⁴ While usually not religiously motivated, the Devoid Self loses a basic ability often by having a disability, being alienated from society, or lacking in resources. Alternatively, the Augmented Self is much like the Doppelganger Self but improved beyond the primary identity. It is difficult to distinguish between these two selves in character type because in a majority of cases characters have capabilities beyond the standard human. This is certainly the case in *Demon: The Fallen* where demonic/angelic powers are mandatory. Still, the Augmented Self relies more on mundane or human capabilities rather than supernatural ones. An Augmented Self might be a character who is similar to the player in personality and temperament but may be more socially popular, possess far greater resources, or be more athletic. The Doppelganger Self gives dispensations for powers as Bowman points out in her own experience:

I played in a *mirror* game, for example, in which we each imagined ourselves, in our current positions in life, suddenly turned into vampires. This interesting exercise forced us to think ‘as if’ our primary selves were placed in the unique situation of suddenly becoming night-dwelling predators.⁷⁵

74 Bowman, p. 166.

75 Bowman; p. 164-65.

The remaining selves are much more complex, deviating to a greater degree from the player identity. The Fragmented Self selects certain attributes from the player to create a new persona. These traits become heightened to create a primary psychological motivation. The varying manifestations of the Fragmented Self are as diverse as the person who plays them. Bowman notes:

[T]hese seeds generally arise from a mental interest or perhaps psychological or spiritual need inherent in the individual at the moment of creation. These seeds may represent important aspects of self that need expression, such as grief, or of a mere passing fancy, such as an interest in a particular style of music.⁷⁶

While I refrain from documenting personal experience, during a given game campaign (i.e. series of game session and stories that create a larger epic) I and the other players were requested to play a variation on ourselves. Rather than a doppelganger of our self, we were asked to take those attributes of our personalities that we felt most defined us and create a character based on this typified version of Self. Unlike the previously discussed selves, these characters are Fragmented Selves as they took only portions of the primary identity of the player and created, for lack of a better term, a caricature of his/her personality. Bowman provides another relevant example of the Fragmented Self: “In the World of Darkness, the Gangrel vampire clan and the various types of werewolves provide players the opportunity to explore their animalistic side, a process known as *anthropomorphic* role-play, or *anthro*.”⁷⁷

Demon: The Fallen provides its own equivalent in the form of the Devourers, fallen angels who formed all living things on Earth during their angelic lives. Their Lore (Lore of the Wild, Lore of the Beasts, and Lore of the Flesh) allow Devourers to change

⁷⁶ Bowman, p. 168.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

form and create and manipulate all forms of flora and fauna. At the height of these powers they can create chimeric amalgamations of animals from nothing. Combined with a strong instinctual/bestial nature, the Devourers allow for the adaptation of baser human elements in order to explore their impact on character psychology. The Fragmented Self allows that, by narrowing a player's interest onto a specific aspect of his/her Self.

In some ways the very choice to play *Demon: The Fallen* as opposed to another system already connotes an interest in the major themes and concept of the setting. Players play *Demon: The Fallen* for the experience of playing a fallen angel descended into the equally fallen World of Darkness, attempting to cope with the harsh psychological realities of their own existence. Coupled with themes from the individual story presented by the storyteller, a great deal of personal exploration can take place via the character.

The Repressed and Idealized Self offer variations on the Fragmented Self. Bowman interprets the Repressed Self as a regression to a more innocent or childlike state. Repressed because of our societal pressure to be mature, games allow characters to play with naivete, age, and cynicism. I would broaden the Repressed Self to be any manifestation of repressed desire in-character. The Repressed Self is a deeply personal manifestation of the Self and is often hidden behind the Experimental Self in my definition. Most often, because the player's interest or desire is repressed the only one capable of identifying a Repressed Self is the player her/himself. The same may hold true for the Idealized Self, that promotes a perfected version of the player's persona. However, the Idealized Self need not be perfect in the eyes of others, and may possess flaws that are glaring to observers. Nevertheless these flaws are considered "charming" or "interesting"

by the player.

The Oppositional Self is a character that is almost completely unlike the character. If a player is shy, smart, and unpopular, the character is verbose, dim, and popular. This is a relatively simple example, but it highlights the basic concept of the oppositional self, which is to step completely out of the known self and adopt a radically different persona while in-character. Unlike the Repressed and Idealized Self, the Oppositional Self is more noticeable to others, since it takes elements of the player's external personality as well as internal psychology, and reorients them.

All three of these Selves, the Repressed, Idealized, and Oppositional Self, can often be confused with the Experimental Self, which according to Bowman is a Self born more out of curiosity than a conscious or subconscious mimicry, in whole or in part, of the primary identity of the player. The Experimental Self is made when a player creates a character for the express purpose of trying new combinations of traits, abilities, or powers. Often this is mechanically driven. 'Elton' from Chapter 1, who sought to create a take on Jesus as a character, is an example of Bowman's Experimental Self. His interest was driven partly in interest of making a Jesus-like character, but also in the challenge of how to go about making the most accurate form of that character within the confines of the system.

Oftentimes concurrent with the Experimental Self, the Taboo Self is the exploration of social taboos through character and setting. Themes often include: "incest, cannibalism, murder, rape, abuse, and transgenderism."⁷⁸ To that list I would also add sexuality and disease (particularly sexually-transmitted disease). Additionally, it includes fundamentalist and other radical religious views.

78 Bowman; p. 176.

Though the Taboo Self is almost always linked with the Experimental Self, the Experimental Self is not always taboo. Unlike Bowman, I take the Experimental Self to include a great deal more than systemic and setting experimentation. In my definition of the archetype, the Experimental Self includes all of the Selves, since each is an experimental version of the Self, even when directly aping the player's primary identity. I, therefore, take it as a juxtaposed and simultaneous meaning of player character. The player character, no matter the variance from the player, is still an experimental version of the self. It is experimental because it exists beyond the conventional reality of the player.

The Experimental Self is not relegated solely to players. Storytellers, who create portions of setting for their specific narratives also run (act as) non-player characters (NPCs). These NPCs are all the other people who interact with player characters. They can be a bum, a prostitute, a single mother with two kids, a mysterious stranger, a CEO, literally anything and everything. The setting and characters that a storyteller creates and runs, amalgamate, into a kind of Experimental Self. Just like the player character that is an extension of the player, so too are the setting and NPCs an extension of the storyteller. They can be studied in the same way, though with different foci. Instead of isolating the singular character as the Experimental Self, the setting and narrative theme of a session along with the overall goal of the story being told produce the storyteller's experimental experience. A storyteller who seeks to slowly unveil the underhanded machinations of an all-too human and fallible priest, controlling his parishioners via blackmail, manipulation, and the black arts, is experimenting with religious archetypes and associated themes.

Here is the crossover between Howard's theory of exploration and Bowman's

Experimental Self. While the storyteller solely experiments with story and genre, the players experiment with character by exploring the story created by the storyteller (and to another extent the original authors of the TRPG). When not viewed in tandem, Bowman's theory allows the analysis of personal religious experimentation through character and system, while Howard allows analysis of personal religious experimentation through setting and system.

Game Experience as Ritual

Before proceeding further there is a form of religious interaction that is purposed by ludologists in relation to the interdynamic of players during a TRPG session. That is the religious element of ritual. Covered by others, Bowman, again, provides the most succinct interpretation of this ritualized play. She quotes Emile Durkheim, emphasizing his theory in the primacy of religious ritual to all aspects of human life. She summarizes: "For Durkheim, understanding the most early and basic forms of religion illuminates the ways that even the most complex social structures function, despite any cultural specificity."⁷⁹ If we understand all social acts as ritual meant to reinforce religious principles, then all interaction takes on religious significance. She goes on to state:

If we think of a traditional dramatic play as a ritual, then stage props take on symbolic meaning beyond their everyday use value. No item is placed on the set by accident, no costume arranged arbitrarily. Indeed for the performance to assume significance, certain agreements must be made between audience members and actors, observing the sanctity of the space and the process. To fully transform from one identify to another, to transport from one time and space to somewhere altogether different, each participant must respect the rules of engagement, agree to 'suspend disbelief,' and fully immerse themselves in the narrative. Role-playing, when understood as ritual, contains these same defining elements.⁸⁰

79 Bowman; p. 48.

80 Bowman; p. 49.

The job of a scholar of religion is to interpret these symbols and evaluate them for their religious meaning. On one level that is exactly what I have described above, outlining ways to analyze the ritualized exploration and experimentation that transpires within a gaming session, while on another I ignore it entirely.

Durkheim's theory is too broad for this analysis of religious interplay between player and game because it speaks more to the ritual of gamer interaction, rather than the products of that ritual. It is also why I avoid Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*. In both cases gaming is viewed as a cultural activity creating religion through its ritualized activity. In neither case are the religious aspects of the game setting acknowledged.

The religious experience that I seek to analyze within *Demon: The Fallen* is more conceptual, existing independent from, yet in tandem with, player action. I purposely ignore the external religiosity of the gaming ritual because it is already acknowledged as possessing religious validity. Instead, I emphasize the internal religious reality of the game setting here by defining the nature of player exploration and the ontology of game religion. Durkheim saw religion as ritual, and therefore player interaction *is* religion in his theory, but for my purposes, religion exists separate from that interaction, but is shaped, manipulated, and recreated by player experience. Still, it is important to note that religious theory and ludology have touched previously in the analysis of game ritual.

Rather than focus on the conventional reality of the gaming ritual, my attention is, instead on the shared mental environment created by players during the gaming ritual. Mechanics provide grounding for the setting and enforce the continuity of reality. Setting is, literally, everything that players interact with, and in some ways are the player

characters themselves. However, players are equally unique to the manifestation of religion within TRPGs because they are the animating force of the shared game reality. They give life to the setting, and through the interactions of the players and storyteller, the active narrative is created rather than historically recounted.

Game Experience as Culture Creation

Fine writes, “Because of our participation in fantasy role-playing games we were more than a group of friends sharing experiences. We were actively engaged in creating a culture.”⁸¹ When Fine wrote this he was referring to the creation of the gaming subculture within modern society, and he is not wrong. But his words can be taken in a different context to mean that the interactive action of players creates culture, not just in conventional reality, but within the game world as well. Fine clarifies his point and emphasizes:

Game events can be meaningfully referred to by the group as a gaming history develops. While a historical focus applies to all groups to some extent, in gaming groups this historical focus is particularly salient, because the game events continue from week to week, and the gaming episode is seen as having a history of its own.⁸²

It is obvious that Fine’s focus is on the recollection of players as a form of culture generally. Players discuss the events of games, recounting with varying emotions, the actions, victories, or failures of a given gaming session (or several). Since this is a unique form of interaction to gaming it creates the gaming subculture. However, it does a great deal more than that. These recollections do not only amalgamate into a generalized culture of gaming shared by the entirety of a given subculture. They are also particular to

81 Fine; p. 138.

82 Fine; p. 139

a given gaming group and develop a bipartite form of culture that exists in both the actual world and the alternative possible world of the game setting. The duality of this cultural experience springs from the duality of the player experience. The player experiences the game within the setting through his character but also in conventional reality because of his existence therein. The game experience is player experience and is referenced by the player in the same manner that he would recount conventionally real events.

Mackay provides a detailed account of the interaction between varying levels of player experience, using Fine's concept of perceptual frames. To highlight the complexity of gamer perception, experience, and culture, Mackay argues for the inclusion of the critic or researcher in the gaming experience:

The artistry of the role-playing game is evidenced in the doing, in the sense of engrossment and ability to play at being another. But this artistry is also confirmed through bonding with fellow players - through an awareness of the emotion that flows behind the creative distance of the role that players voluntarily assume. This last point - the internal feeling of the role, the organic sense of acting out an imagined theater of events - is why it is so necessary that any analysis of role-playing game performance be participatory. Because the assemblage of character takes place in the imagination rather than on-stage, a critic who presumes to evaluate such a performance must also participate in the imagining of a character.⁸³

What Mackay inadvertently alludes to is the primacy of internal gaming culture to the understanding of external gaming culture. Internal gaming culture can be understood as the culture of a given game setting wherein the player characters engage with and build culture, imputing a previously nonexistent significance to varying parts of the game setting. This in turn creates its own culture in-character via the shared narrative. These experiences are then recollected out-of-character and create a shared cultural experience between players engaged in that session. In the same way people impute significance

83 Mackay; p 80.

onto conventionally existent objects, players do the same through their characters in the game setting.

Discussion about religion or other internal cultural phenomenon of the game becomes exceedingly difficult because of this need for participation. To study religion in a meaningful way within the TRPG requires a scholar of religion to engage with, or at the very least observe, a session or series of sessions. The setting and mechanics have obvious religious connotations, but the full gamut of religious experience comes from player interaction with system and setting. For that reason I narrow my interest to describing the way religion manifests in *Demon: The Fallen* based on game theory. Religion manifests dually as a game experience, experienced by the character, and as a conventional experience, experienced by the player. That duality merges to manifest engagement with religion in the complex expression described over these three chapters.

TRPGs and Multi-Leveled Experience

The difficulty in reporting this kind of cultural experience is because the experience being garnered both in the gaming world and conventional reality is the same. Simultaneously because the experience takes place in two realities, it becomes two distinct experiences. To demonstrate the point, I turn to Cover who discusses the narrative convention of TRPGs. She acknowledges, “The player may articulate the desire for their character to complete an action - *I take out a dagger and cut through the rope to escape from the orcs.*” The use of *I* is important in this context. The *I* is the player, however, it is also the character who is “actually” taking the action. The two are inseparable as already stated, and the liminal state between player and character disappears once a game

commences.

Cover uses Fine's perceptual frames to create her own theory of narrative frames, dividing up player experience into several different spheres of existence. The player, of course, exists in all of these simultaneously, but narratively s/he exists in only one at a time. Of particular interest are the social, game, and narrative frames. The social frame is his conventional self, discussing matters not related to the game world. This includes unrelated banter as well as discussion of game mechanics such as what should be done to resolve a specific action taken in-character. The game frame consists of those discussions that apply directly to the game world, such as what actions a person might be taking. Lastly, the narrative frame are those words spoken in-character that create a dialogue between two characters within the setting.

I emphasize these three frames because in all cases, the referred to party is I. Cover illustrates this point very well in the exposition of her own gaming group, and during the social frame, one of her fellow players, Mary is having a conversation with the DM (dungeon master or storyteller):

DM: All of you that rolled a ten or less you get a plus two to your constitution but you do have a minus four to your wisdom and dexterity (laughter).

Mary: Ah, but as it turns out my charisma's still doin' its thing.

DM: Oh, yeah, drinking doesn't hurt your charisma.⁸⁴

Later on in the Game Frame, Mary is having another back and forth, this time with fellow players:

Mary: Well, I've got to go, um, meet up with Ka'Goth (laughter) the, uh, Orcish bard (laugh) later this evening, uh...

Mark: Yeah, uh, I'm going with you.

Jenny: Yeah, Yeah - - -

Mary: At the Foppish Wererate, so....

⁸⁴ Cover; p. 97.

Jenny: I'll go with you too.⁸⁵

Lastly we have the narrative frame, which by sheer necessity must be narrated in first-person (e.g. "Hello I am Ka'Goth"). The "I" is an ever-present subject converging the external self of the actual world with the internal character of the game world. This is more than just semantics or ease of conversational flow (rather than saying "my character" or "[character's name] does.."). It is, also, more than the obvious reality that the character is not sentient independent of the player, therefore unable to experience an event differently from the player. What the multiple "I"s denote are the varying levels of self that exist simultaneously, all engaging in the same experience creating the multifaceted player experience.

It is essential to identify these levels because any attempt to understand the experiential process of gaming must take into account the complexities of player interaction. In many ways the social, game, and narrative frames equate neatly with the three forms of player interaction I have already described. The social frame equates to player interaction with other players, the game frame exists when a player interacts with the game system, and the narrative frame alludes to player interaction with setting. It is not a perfect equivalent since the game frame can easily encompass player interaction with both system and setting, but primarily the game frame is the sphere in which players and storyteller utilize the structures of the game to create the narrative frame. This is done with character action and game arbitration (e.g. dice rolls).

Taken as a whole, the player experience is divided into six separate forms coexisting in tandem and concurrently with one another to create the overall narrative event. These six forms are also the levels on which a player interacts with game religion.

⁸⁵ Cover; p. 100.

The first three are as already stated; the player's experience of religion *in* setting, *through* mechanics, and *as* character. Howard's theory then divides the exploration of setting and character into the transformative, the literal, and the enlightening, relating to upward, outward, and downward exploration, respectively. These are not just the ways exploration impacts the player, but also the ways in which the player interacts with setting concepts, specifically religion. These three means are present, to a greater or lesser degree, in all religious discourse between the believer and the believed. One may be transformed or enlightened by religion, but under the literal definition, the practitioner, or believer, can explore religion in a direct way such as through pilgrimage, physical devotion, or prayer. Literal exploration in real world religion, in other words, relates to those external practices that invoke the other two forms of religious exploration. Transformation and enlightenment come as a product of exploration, being changed physically, spiritually, or mentally by religious devotion.

Game Experience as Religious Experience

The same holds true for religion in TRPGs. The reason for the similarity is because, primarily game religion *is* real world religion. It is real because modern theory focuses so heavily on religion stemming from human reaction or interaction with what is variously called religion. The human component is essential to the study of religion, and though I handle it last, it is nevertheless the most vital part of game religion. I do not discount my earlier assertions that religion in TRPGs is inseparable from setting and mechanics as well, but along with that, it is when all three are interacting together that religious experience is had. And that experience is complex, existing on numerous levels

of personal interaction. A gamer does not only process religion for himself as would be the case in standard religious devotion. Instead he is both insider and outsider concurrently. He is divorced from the literal religious experience that his character is experiencing, but being that the player is his character, and as such seeks to empathize with the mentality and spirituality of his game persona, he experiences religiosity in duality. He is two people, essentially, both experiencing the event from different perspectives. Add to this the use of mechanics as a lens through which players view various facets of religious belief and practice, and their interaction with every level of the game must be understood to give an accurate portrayal of religious experience in the TRPG medium.

There is a very distinct difference between conventional religious experience and game religious experience. That difference is the separation from the religious subject that exists when studying game religion. Just like conventional religion, game religion or religious experience is comprised of a trinity of believer, belief, and believed. The dynamic of religious engagement requires an understanding of all three of these facets of religious reality. In conventional religion, this engagement is direct, with the practitioner being the believer in the given doctrine, dogma, or tenet. The practitioner creates religious reality by imputing religious significance to a given object.

The same holds true for game religion, but it is more complex because the player does not believe directly in the object to which he is imputing religious significance. Instead, it is the character that is the believer, with the believed existing in the concurrent reality of the game. This is what allows for the separation of the player from the religious reality of the game. It is also how the player can remain unaware of his engagement in

religious discourse, since the player is not the one directly engaging with religion, it is his character. The dynamic between player experience and character experience, however, allows for fictitious religion to be studied as actual religion. The player may not be the believer in a given religious precept, but he empathizes with the character, adopting the character's mentality to provide a semblance of realism. The character is not separate from the player, but is a concurrent self, manifested as a second reality of self-expression. This second self, is both separate from, and conjoined with, the player, that makes actions taken by the character manifest as experience for the player. This is how fictitious religion becomes real religion. Though it exists only within the reality of the game, it is a real experience had by the player through his character.

Much of what has been outlined is very general and applies to any form of study that intersects with gamer interaction inside the framework of the TRPG. Religion comprises a subset of the exploratory experiences available to players. It is because of the above understanding that the player is the "I" of the character, that character's experience with religious concepts translate into 'real' experience with religion. The game is an experience with a religious dialogue. It may not equate to Socratic discussions on the ontology of Love or Justice, but the narrative created during the game session is a mental experience that provides an ontological reality to imaginary religion.

The problem then becomes identifying the merit of this knowingly false religiosity. As discussed in previous chapters, there is no delusion that the events within the game are real in a physical sense. They are mental experiences known to be fiction, not fact. That differentiates the religion of TRPGs from real-world religion. We *know* that the religion in TRPGs is fake.

That does not deny its authenticity. As dozens of religious theorists have pointed out in the long history of religious studies, the truth or falsity of religion is not required for their study. In other words, religion in an academic sense does not proceed from its reality, it proceeds from other facets of its structure. What these facets are changes drastically from theorist to theorist. It is unlike anything that has been studied in a religious context before. Unlike Santana and Erickson and their analysis of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, I am not interested in studying fantasy religion for the sole purpose of how it relates back to existing religion as we know it. Obviously that is a part of any religious study, especially one based on religion and the human experience. I am more interested in the study of game religion as *sui generis* religion. The religion and religiosity of *Demon: The Fallen* and how it interacts with its gamers does not need to be done by relating it back to already existent societal tropes. Much like scholars do not necessarily study Christianity *in relation to* all other forms of religion, I postulate that game religion, as a unique form of human religiosity, can be understood independent of other forms of religious experience. I do not imply that further information cannot be garnered from a blending of study, but that game religion merits its own study because it is unique and not a Frankenstein's monster-like construct amalgamated from various parts of popular religion.

Simultaneously, religion and religious studies are a delicate and ill-defined part of culture. The aim of any study of religion and personal interaction is to prove that the religion or religiosity is accessible as a subject for study. To that end I have outlined the method by which in-game religious experience is, in actuality, real world religious experience. In spite of its, seemingly, frivolous nature, religion in gaming is a dynamic

and unique expression of human interaction with religiosity. It is, literally, people playing with religion, and that is very much the case in *Demon: The Fallen*. That is why I agree with Cover when she reminds us:

[J]ust because games hold this potential for increased understanding of the AW does not mean that the primary motivation for playing them, or the rhetorical situations that they respond to, relates to this understanding. For me, the point of TRPGs respond to such an exigency seems too clean, too simplified. It seems too much to argue that TRPGs always bring players to greater understanding of the world and their place within it. They are, after all, games - mostly played for entertainment. The claims above seem to benefit the educators in us, looking for value in popular text. We want to show that it is valuable to learning, that it can be useful in our classroom, that it improves our lives. While this perspective is not altogether bad, it undercuts the way that TRPGs are actually engaged with in society.⁸⁶

There may be little academic merit to the study of religion in TRPGs, however, I think that does not preclude their usefulness in understanding game religion as an expression of popular religiosity. It may not teach us about ourselves as we engage with it independently as a game, but when studied as an internal and external cultural experience it can teach us a great deal about the nature of human interaction with religion and religious experimentation. In many ways *Demon: The Fallen* and other TRPGs are a distilled form of popular religion. It takes those facets and parts of religious dogma; like demons, exorcisms, Faustian pacts, and salvation, and reinvents them in a way we find entertaining, even enjoyable to experience.

Conclusion

What I have attempted to provide here is an outline for the study of this religious expression. People engage with religion in a variety of ways, some of which they may not take as religious at all. I find it very possible for gamers to play *Demon: The Fallen*

⁸⁶ Cover; p. 120.

without believing they have engaged in religion. It may even be more comfortable for them to do so, or else they might not be able to enjoy the experience of play as fully (or at all). Given messy social connotations that are still associated with TRPGs since the occult panic of the 1980s, some people handedly avoid any association between religion and TRPGs, however, in spite of their unwillingness to engage consciously with the religion in TRPGs, that does not mean it does not exist.

In *Demon: The Fallen*, religion creates the foundation for the setting, to play the game is to become an actor in a religious drama. Your character, if fully detailed in a way that is supported by the system, must have a personality and history that they engage with. That personality takes into account a knowledge that the Creator exists, that angels crafted reality, and that there came a point when angels began to lose faith in the Creator's divine plan and fell from grace. It would be foolish of me to say that players *must* be one of these fallen, since the system supports the creation of demons, exorcists, and thralls (of demons). Still, whatever the character type there is a distinct relationship to the supernatural, and in this case, the supernatural is necessarily religious. An exorcist or a thrall might be an atheist, combating demons, thinking of them as little more than entities beyond conventional description. The thrall may think the demon is simply a mage or sorcerer with the kind of boons that the thrall is given. That does not take religious belief, however, because of the overarching narrative of the setting, religious affiliation must, at least, be considered. Knowledge or belief in the Creator or demons as fallen angels must be established for a non-demonic character, because it orients them in the setting and in psychology.

This is just one level of player interaction with religion within *Demon: The*

Fallen. Character is a combination of setting and mechanics, but only once it begins to interact with other facets of the setting does it begin to provide experience for the player. The player is the character, and yet distinct from it. Together they must interact with setting and mechanics to play the game, and given the context of the game world, it is nary impossible to not interact with religious concepts that breed a religious experience. This experience need not be edifying for the player. The player is not transformed or enlightened as the character is, but because they experience the game through character, they are still touching religion, and provide a avenue for religious discourse in the real world. Religious concepts are expressed in the sheer existence of *Demon: The Fallen* as a form of entertainment, but with the interactive complexities inherent to the TRPG medium, that expression is as complex and multifaceted as the people who play it.

Conclusion

Religion is a complex construct that more and more in contemporary religious theory is a cultural conception greater than the sum of its parts. But these parts still exist, many of them working in tandem to manifest the moving, shifting, changing apparatus that is called religion. It is taken, almost universally, as true that religion cannot be simplified to an abstract definition reliant on some external concept of spirituality or supernatural significance. Religion is an event, a process, an active and participatory experience wherein the practitioner engages with religion. It exists in a precarious state of existence both as an external object and an internal experience. Mircea Eliade wrote,

For it is through symbols that man finds his way out of his particular situation and ‘opens himself’ to the general and the universal. Symbols awaken individual experiences and transmute it into a spiritual act, into metaphysical comprehension of the world. In the presence of any tree, symbol of the world tree and image of cosmic life, a man of the premodern societies can attain to the highest spirituality, for, by understanding the symbol, *he succeeds in living the universal*. It is the religious vision of the world, and the concomitant ideology, that enable him to make this individual experience bear fruit, to ‘open’ to the universal.⁸⁷

A majority of his theory has been defamed, replaced with more complex forms of religious understanding. The above is no exception, but I think it is wise to examine the principle that belief and believed arise inseparably from the experience of the practitioner. For Eliade, the supernatural is made manifest when the believer manifests it. As if it were magic, the practitioner imputes religious significance onto an object and that object becomes religious. Of course, there is another necessity to religious existence for Eliade and that is initiation. A practitioner must be drawn into the mysteries of religious truth. For Eliade, “Initiation is equivalent to a spiritual maturing. And in the religious history of humanity we constantly find this theme: the initiate, he who has experienced

⁸⁷ Mircea Eliade, “Human Existence and Sanctified Life,” *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (A Harvest/HBJ Book: San Diego, 1959); pp. 211-12.

the mysteries, is *he who knows*.”⁸⁸

But even so, the object, the belief, and the believer all exist in a precarious triumvirate. They uphold each other and give reality to the religious experience. Robert Orsi would, no doubt, agree with this expression of religious existence. He is a post-modern theorist and as such puts great emphasis on human agency in the existence of religion, but he too demands the necessity for a bipartite notion of religion. It must, by necessity be both an object of belief and the belief. At times this object is the belief itself, but at others the object is like Eliade’s tree, which gives rise to belief through the practitioner. Above all, for both Eliade and Orsi, Religion is experiential. It is an occurrence which is as complex and unique as the event itself. This is what allows for the study of religion in TRPGs alongside more classically defined religious topics.

The experiential elements of both game and religion propel my overall thesis, and allow for the translation of fictitious religious experience into actual religious experience. Through mechanics/system, setting, and player interaction with both one another and these two facets of the game itself, the trinity of believer, belief, and believed is established in-character. While the player can divorce himself from the reality of character experience, the duality of experience implies that in one form or another the experience of the character is the experience of the gamer who plays it. Engagement with religion via character becomes religious experience for the player. Mechanics and setting become the lens and space by which the player explores the religious reality of the game.

In Eliade’s theory on initiation, the importance of the initiate’s journey from profane to sacred perception (labeled *hierophany* by Eliade) is emphasized and is further extrapolated upon in his essay *The Quest: History and Meaning In Religion*. The initiate

⁸⁸ Eliade; pp. 188-89.

is put on a quest for paradise, the origin, or source, wherein the practitioner seeks the source or truth to an otherwise unknown phenomenon. It is through this quest that profane perception becomes sacred and symbols take on their meaning. TRPGs manifest this symbolism in numerous ways including literally, wherein objects and words take on different meanings for those initiated into the gaming experience. Less internal to the game, however, is the manifestation of religious experience through the game, itself a symbol for many religious truths. This does not imply that any true initiation into deeper truths has taken place through play, but the same experiential and transitive process has taken place, if only briefly. Players engage with the religiosity of the setting (symbolic reality), through character (symbolic selves), and take from their mental actions a communal experience of a religious reality.

It is fascinating how much manufactured religion, such as that created for TRPGs, obeys the same principles as its real-world counterpart. In spite of being fictitious, there is an inherent logic to the manifestation of religion even within the realm of fantasy. Religion in TRPGs provides a unique demonstration of created religious belief. It is impossible, for now, to say whether it gives any allusion to how conventional religious belief is manufactured, but what TRPG religion can teach us is how we *think* it is created. Like any fiction, whether novel, theater, or television program, it is a mirror of the society that made it, and in that way it tells a great deal about that society and its cultural concerns. Religion has always been a powerful driving force in society, and its spread to the entertainment mediums of our society is telling about its ubiquitous nature.

On one hand, you can study TRPGs and their religion as a reflexive product of contemporary society, but thus far that is all ludologists have provided to the discussion

on cultural values and societal realities. TRPGs, in spite of their entertaining nature, are a thing that can be bracketed from society and studied in a way that does not view TRPGs as a simple byproduct of the modern cultural ethos. Instead, they can be seen as unique expressions of more abstract societal conventions. Put another way, TRPGs can be studied as a thing in and of themselves. Religion in a TRPG is a thing created in the same way as conventional religion because it can be studied as conventional religion, and possesses its own qualities that other forms of religious expression do not have.

Mechanics and setting provide two of the most obvious breaks from conventional religious reality. Religion in TRPGs exists in a dualistic state as both a mentally contrived event that takes place in the established reality of the game *and* as an actual event taking place in the real world. Religion's existence in the TRPG environment is the reversal of liminality, wherein religion exists in all states of existence simultaneously and not only in the gap between object and person. Mechanics fill the liminal space between reality and game by translating events of the game into quantified, understandable forms. Mechanics are, in their most basic form, a means of balance and arbitration. The use of dice creates a statistical margin for success and failure and allows storytellers and players to gauge the realities of the game world. Additionally, the game system provides a structure to the play experience. It delineates and flags off the boundaries of the game, and creates the ability for players to engage with the setting in an understandable and quantifiable manner. Since this includes religious constructs like faith, sin, damnation, and salvation, the system must quantify these facets of the play experience. In that way mechanics are the liminal state, and comprise the game that allows for religious play. It is still only the raw space for play, however, and without setting it is empty.

Nevertheless, mechanics of dice rolling, character creation, and overall game arbitration, are the basis for the player to know *how* he can interact with that setting, and more importantly what his capacities are. A character with the ability to fly, with mechanics to support that game reality, might see events and solve problems differently given his capacities. Mechanics create the reality and logic of setting just as much as setting itself. It has been said before, but mechanics are the physics of the game world, wherein flights of fancy are drawn back down into possible reality. A character might stare across a twenty foot expanse thinking that he will make the jump, but as the player looks at his dice pool and weighs the possibility of success, we begin to understand what kind of a role mechanics plays in gaming reality.

Religion is likewise manifest through mechanics and given a kind of logical reality. More than any other facet, mechanics are bound to their individual TRPG. *Demon: The Fallen* has unique mechanics because of the experience the game is meant to provide. As such, what can be said about mechanics more generally is limited, but within the confines of *Demon: The Fallen* we can see an example of how mechanics manifest religious concepts and conventions. Faith and Torment, two sides of the same coin, are quantified statistics in *Demon: The Fallen* because they play a large role in the game environment. They fuel powers, twist the psyche, beatify or condemn the soul. And yet, they are mechanics, quantified measurements of spiritual reality within the game. Nowhere else in the study of religion is there a numeric representation of spiritual strength, suffering, and enlightenment that directly impacts the spiritual capacity and religious devotion of the individual. The system of *Demon: The Fallen* does just that, instituting a culturally unique perspective on religion and its representation. That alone is

worth study, but beyond its reflexive qualities, this religious construction, taken in tandem with setting and player interdynamics, is religion in a hitherto unseen manifestation.

Religion, as already stated, is a multifaceted social, spiritual, and mental construct, but add to that already existent complexity the translation back and forth of religious reality to and from the game world into the real world and you have a new mode of religious engagement. Mechanics are part and parcel of that engagement, fluidly expanding and defining the liminal space between game and reality. Player thoughts are acted out in character actions through the medium of game mechanics. Those mechanics must therefore allow for a wide breadth of human experience, religion being one of them. Spirituality, metaphysics, ontology, theology, and belief are represented mechanically via the character's capabilities, affiliations, and archetype. Without setting, these mechanics lack context, when in tandem with setting, they readily relay information from one reality into another, including religious experience.

In order to grasp the religious experience of TRPGs, it is, therefore, necessary to discuss mechanics and setting together. Setting is symbolic reality both a a simulacrum of conventional existence and as an alternative world superimposed over the real world. That is the ubiquitous duality inherent to TRPGs and the religion they create. When describing the Earthbound, powerful demons bound to an object or location, the rules state:

Without exception, the Earthbound are hideous beyond compare. They are creatures of blasphemous deformity so grotesque as to shock mortal minds into madness. Some are able to summon up the illusion of beauty, but illusion is all they can manage. Behind the mask remains an image of appalling horror. Despite the extreme hideousness, Earthbound characters may have Appearance ratings from 1 to 5 and anywhere in between. For these character, the Appearance

Attribute represents just how ugly the character is - or, more accurately, the degree to which the character can influence others with its physical appearance.⁸⁹

From context alone, the reader can gather that the Appearance attribute does not normally function as above, usually representing physical beauty rather than grotesque deformity. Whichever the case the Appearance attribute is a statistical representation of a physical truth within the setting. That is how mechanics work, giving reality to the setting, while the setting give context to mechanics. Without that understanding, the Appearance attribute is an undefined mechanism of the system without form or apparent function. But, when coupled with the mythos and game reality, it is given form, literally.

All parts of setting that the player can reasonably interact with (and even a few things he cannot) are explained via game mechanics. Players can interact with the supernatural and the spiritual truths of the setting by its sheer nature as “a storytelling game of Infernal Glory.”⁹⁰ Setting again highlights the fictitious elements of religion within the TRPG, but active agency allowed via mechanics make the participatory elements of the medium all the more engaging. That engagement, allowed for by setting and system, is what inevitably makes religion in TRPGs a full religious experience. On the other hand, setting also offers a different philosophical problem to the study of religion. TRPG religion is a known falsity. It is not taken as religious revelation by the player, the human agent, interacting with the game. Setting adds to that problem by mimicking a religious history, which, in and of itself, is not religious nor real to begin with.

As already stated, post-modern theory emphasizes the existence of religion as both an object and an experience in conjunction. The experience gives the object

⁸⁹ *Earthbound*, “The Face of Terror”; p. 65.

⁹⁰ *Demon: The Fallen*; p. 7.

religious significance, thereby creating religion. Religion cannot exist without human experience, and often in the study of religion in bygone eras such as the Middle Ages, or the Wei Dynasty, scholars seek to understand religion in terms of how the people of the time interacted with perceived religious constructs. That holds true for much of religious theory and methodology. The problem of studying religion in TRPGs comes from both false religion and false religious history. This proves no problem when studying religion in TRPGs as an ahistorical phenomenon that has no internal concept of historical, religious continuity. But that would prevent a full grasp of game religion and its experience.

Without recriminations, the fictitious aspects of TRPG history might be likened to the created origins of the modern day Wicca or Neo-Pagan religion. Many scholars confine their study of these religious movements to their historically accurate beginnings with thinkers like Gerald Gardner or Charles Cardell. Gardnerian Wicca is studied as beginning in the 1950s, but it claims roots that go back to Classical Antiquity and beyond. While scholars should remain dubious of a true connection between earlier pagan rites and those employed in Neo-Pagan religious practices, there is nevertheless a claimed history that must be explored in order to understand the contemporary experience and religious exploration of Wicca practitioners. Chidester, who struggles at length with the problem of religious authenticity writes:

Although the production of popular culture might in many ways look, sound, smell, taste, and feel like religion, there is a distinct possibility that they are not actually religious. Baseball is not a religion; Coca-Cola is not a religion; and rock 'n' roll is not a religion. But then all kinds of religious activity have been denied the status of religion, including indigenous religions labeled as superstition and alternative religious movements labeled as cults. What counts as religion, therefore, the focus of the problem of authenticity in religion and American popular culture. Making the problem worse, some religious activity appears

transparently fake, including the proliferation of invented religions on the Internet, but even fake religions can be doing a kind of symbolic, cultural, and religious work that is real.⁹¹

Of course, Chidester could easily broaden his understanding of religion and American popular culture to popular culture in general, and does, in spite of his limitation above. What Chidester provides is a clear understanding that religion is mutable as a form. When phrases such as ‘false religion’ or ‘fake religion’ or ‘fictitious religion’ are used they tell us that religion can be false, fake, or fictitious and still be religion. Deeper, it connotes, once again, that religion is created experientially, and that in spite of the fictitious nature of *Demon: The Fallen* and other TRPGs, the religious precepts it propounds “can be doing a kind of symbolic, cultural, and religious work that is real.” That is the entire point of this discussion, to prove that religion in TRPGs is not only entertainment containing religious elements but is a form of religious engagement whether the gamer is aware of his religious involvement or not. It is the experience, not the awareness, that gives reality to religious exploration.

What setting provides then is still a false history without any factual or real world basis. Nevertheless it propounds a religious continuity which players explore and make real. Like game religion, itself, the history is made real through engagement with it. It becomes, in a way, true, for the character and therefore for the player. The player does not believe that the history is an edifying religious truth, but empathizes and interacts with it as though it were for the sake of character depth and experience. In such a way, the setting’s fiction is both true and false simultaneously. It remains fiction, but experientially the setting is both real and fake, providing the duality of experience described above.

The conversation then becomes whether the subject as I’ve outlined it can truly be

91 Chidester; p. 9.

called religion. Demons, angels, hell, Faith, Creator, Evil, these words are used repeatedly in *Demon: The Fallen*; they are the religious elements of the game that propagate what I have stated as religion. They are the concepts that uphold the notion that what is being discussed is religious in nature. Taken separately they can no doubt be taken in several contexts that are not particularly religious although they are, occasionally, supernatural. What is it about this fictitious religious narrative that makes it religious? Early theorists, like Eliade and Clifford Geertz saw religion, in part as a quest for understanding. Religion satisfies a need for explanation of the unknown; the origin of creation, the reason for evil, the reason for being. Of a fashion, *Demon: The Fallen* offers a creation narrative that answers all these questions. That alone does not make the narrative of the angelic fall from grace religious, rather it can be said that it is religious because it is a simulacrum of real world religion. In spite of my want for game religion to be taken as *sui generis*, I do not deny that its authenticity comes from real world example. We know that the religion and religious concepts in *Demon: The Fallen* are based, loosely, on the religious teachings of nearly every major religion in the world. The very idea of an angelic fall from grace is heavily steeped in the Abrahamic religions. It cannot be denied that they were the source for the idea of *Demon: The Fallen*.

Game religion and its reliance on real world religion for authenticity does not in any way diminish its unique religious expression. Religion has traditionally been understood in a binary. Chidester acknowledges:

Dilemmas posed by fake religion, I propose, go to the heart of whatever we might want to mean by religion. As we recall, the Latin term *religio*, whatever it meant, was inevitably defined in antiquity as the opposite of *superstitio*, which was understood as conduct based on ignorance, fear, and fraud. Superstition, as fake religion, represented both the defining opposite and defining limit of religious authenticity. The problem of the opposition between superstition and religion,

between alleged fraud and assumed authenticity, has persisted in the constitution of what counts as religion in modernity.⁹²

We can recognize religious elements within *Demon: The Fallen* even if the medium itself is not religious. Just as *religio* and *superstitio* were both forms of religious belief, one was considered real the other fake, but that did not stop superstition from being a structure of belief that was startlingly reminiscent of “actual religion.”

In the end, the study of religion in TRPGs is a poorly understood and unexplored form of religious expression. The discussion above, in its entirety is to bring to light this illuminating cultural phenomenon as an apt field of inquiry for the religious studies community. Here I have presented a great deal of ludological theory in hopes of exposing its existence and its use to the study of religion. With *Demon: The Fallen* as an obviously religious TRPG, I used it to provide the most direct and easily established connection between religion and gaming. This first foray is not without its problems and while I have highlighted some of the most basic ontological problems that face religion in TRPGs, there are many others that are not yet explored. Most of these are matters for further discussion as scholars of religion pursue topics within TRPGs. The problem of evil is just as much a part of the TRPG world as it is a part of the real world, especially in *Demon: The Fallen*. It touches both religious and psychological fronts, begging the question: why do we seek entertainment in a past-time that seeks to emulate the worst of the world’s, and occasionally religion’s, worst qualities? The same holds true for enterprises into sex and sexuality in religion. *Demon: The Fallen*, and others, present angelic beings in the same way as John Milton; prone to romantic entanglement as humans. Angels are ambiguous in their gender, referred to by common pronouns (he/she) but in

92 Chidester; pp. 191-92.

metaphysically unstable circumstances. Earthbound demons do not seem to be gendered, although they can possess hideously deformed genitalia. Each piece of sex and sexuality in *Demon: The Fallen* bridges on religion in some immediate way.

To discuss the multitude of religious dilemmas that face religion in TRPGs and the *study* of religion in TRPGs, is an expansive field of inquiry. It is as wide as religion itself, and more importantly as wide as gamers can conceive religious belief. With the foundation provided here, the duality of player experience and the validity of game religion as authentic religious experience, all topics of Religious Studies must now be tackled within the confines of the game. An entirely new religious reality exists that comments on existing quandaries in the field of Religious Studies and is available for its own analysis. If religious engagement in the game world is actual religious experience, does it provide an enlightening or transcendent experience for the gamer? Can games provide religious insight in spite of being knowingly fictitious? If we take engagement with fictitious religious reality as an actual form of religious engagement, does that imply that there is no difference between conventional and fictitious religion? I avoid the messiness of these questions in an attempt to focus on my overarching theory of religious reality in TRPGs. There can be little doubt that the gamer experience is a multifaceted one when it comes to engagement with religion in TRPGs, but they are obvious avenues for further intellectual pursuit. This is in addition to broader inquiry into the nature of, and trends in, TRPG religious cosmology, organization, presentation, and representation, to name but a few.

Players make the game, and while Eliade was right that every man or woman can be the *homo religiosus*, he or she is simultaneously a *homo ludens*. If this is the case then

a crossing of the two is inevitable. Religion seeps into every facet of cultural expression to one extent or another, and TRPGs and gaming are not different. But likewise, the “Man at Play” is essential to the cultural growth of society, according to Huizinga. It provides the conceptual space necessary to produce culture. In such a dynamic, religion creates games and games create religion. They are both omnipresent in society, and cannot help but touch one another in obvious and powerful ways. Presented here is just a survey of this convergence. It is an introduction to methods and means by which religion infiltrates and permeates TRPGs and therefore how TRPGs create, shape, and change religion both as a real world phenomenon and as a unique form of religious expression, a religious construct all its own. Via setting, system, and player, the TRPG medium expresses a kind of religious understanding, the nature of which is still unknown, but with further study it is reasonable to assume that we will learn more about the place of games, religion, and religion in games, in society.

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