

the Escapist

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

Religion and philosophy in games may take on a leading role, where games are produced by spiritually-focused developers who are trying to teach tenets of a religion. Conversely, religion and/or philosophy may be but a minor bit of the lore, serving to explain the motivation of game character(s). Either way, as in real life, the religion and philosophy in game serves as the inspiration for action.

Sure, there are plenty of games without any semblance of religion or not a bit of thought deeper than "this block goes here, this block goes there." But those are also the games that don't really engage the player on a deeper, core level. Entering and exiting a game of *Tetris* is about as difficult as ... turning off the console.

Entering and exiting a game ... adventure ... quest? of *Final Fantasy* is not at all easy. You have to learn to play. And then, you care. You're invested. And the motivation, the religion and/or philosophy of the game world matters. To some this makes the game better; for

others, they are now driven by the dogma of the game structure.

For many, religion and philosophy make the world a richer, more meaningful place. Others feel trapped by the social and emotional demands they place on a person. It might seem that religion and philosophies can play similar roles within a game world. And this week, it is this discussion, religion and philosophy and their role in videogames, in which the writers of *The Escapist* engage.

Cheers,



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In response to "Fei Long and Justin Wong" from The Escapist Forum: The crowd cheered Daigo in that match because he whacked, with verve and panache, a player notorious for being a gutless ultra-turtle. It is *that* simple. Asian-vs.-non-Asian, American style vs. robotic Asian style, "yellow peril," -- none of that stuff was an issue. Take any

two guys of any race, national affiliation, cultural background, whatever; the one that plays like Wong will be booed, the one that plays like Daigo will be a hero.

You saw the same thing during Daigo's first visit to America, back in the Alpha 3 tournament. His Gen barely lost to Graham Wolfe's turtle Dhalsim. Realizing what he was up against (i.e. the hardcore turtling that was the weapon of choice of most of Sunnyvale's top players), he switched to Guy -- and the rest was history. The crowd went nuts as Daigo laid absolute waste to his next five opponents, of whom only the venerable

Alex Valle didn't fall back on turtle tactics. (Incidentally, Valle had more success against Daigo than any of the Northern California players, save Wolfe.)

You saw it **again** when Daigo took on John Choi in the Sagat/Ryu/Balrog SSF2T match. John Choi played turtle Old Sagat the entire match. Tiger, tiger, tiger, tiger, tiger, all damned day. No balls at all, play to win, no style, no class. Boring. So, when Daigo had had enough, he switched to Balrog and mowed Choi down like a weed garden. The crowd went wild with glee.



No one likes a coward. That's all you need to know.

- **M. Cooper**

In response to "The PS3 Deadpool" from The Escapist Forum: The article chooses to compare PS3 sales with Xbox360 and Wii sales across the same month. An alternative might be to compare the PS3's sales with its competitors during an equivalent window after launch. I would do this comparison, but 1UP have done it for me. Interestingly (though not necessarily significantly) the PS3 comes out ahead.

Why might we prefer this comparison? Well, as Allen Varney points out, the PS3 is short of great titles right now. One year after launch, presumably there will be more. As for Europe, even with the console being worse and the price being higher, the launch here in the UK was the most successful in history according to Joystiq.

As for Blu-Ray vs HD-DVD, it would be a brave man who still thought HD-DVD likely to win at this point. Certainly the sales figures are favoring Blu-Ray as much as two to one according to IGN.

If Blu-Ray doesn't win, the other two smart bets are "both" (via dual-format players) or "neither." Not trying to say the article is outright wrong here, but it presents what I see as a rather skewed picture.

- **Dom Camus**

In response to "The PS3 Deadpool" from The Escapist Forum: This comparison is not really too meaningful. Rather than that, it doesn't show a good future for Sony. The Xbox360 already has a large lead NOW. The PS3 needs to outsell the 360 NOW in order to catch up. If it doesn't, the gap in userbase between the two consoles will simply grow bigger. If Sony simply follows or only slightly beats the 360 sales pattern in the equivalent windows, it will simply mean that in the same time next year, the 360 will still have a significant lead. Of course, with the 360's larger userbase, it'll only get more support while the PS3 receives less(overall speaking). Less support -> Less sales -> Less support -> Less sales. Time isn't on Sony's side here.

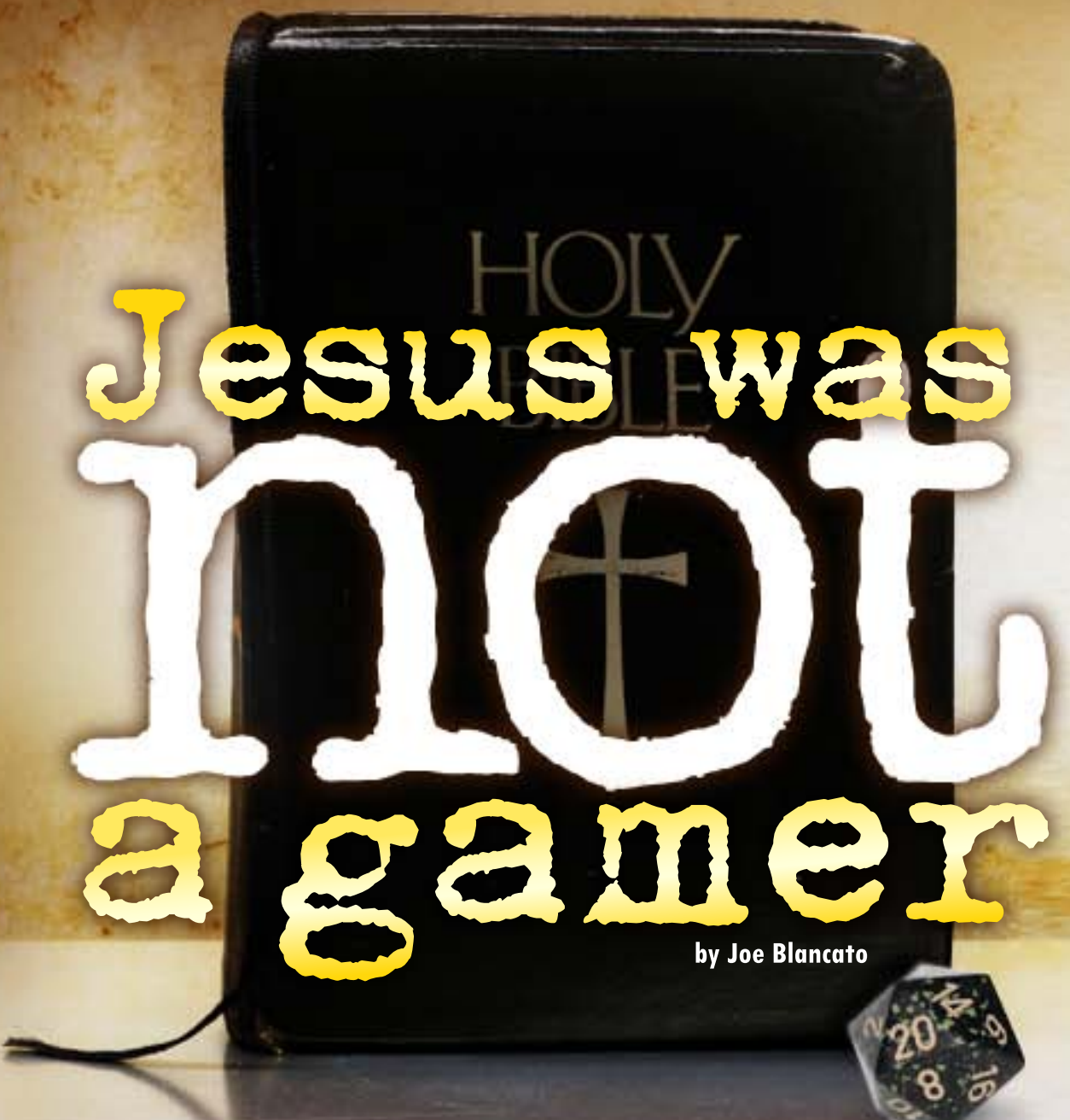
- **Meophist**

In response to "Frostbitten in Florida" from The Escapist Forum:

The more I read accounts like this, the more I realize just how lucky I was. I headed out an hour before the stores opened on Sunday, saw the lines going all the way around the Best Buy and, remembering the phone call the previous week that Fry's would only be getting ten of them, headed back home. Along the way, passed a K-Mart, already open half an hour. Went inside. Three people ahead of me in line. Four Wiix left. And they sold out of all the games (had a preorder for Zelda elsewhere), so I didn't even have to walk out of there with Happy Feet.

- **Bongo Bill**





Jesus was not a gamer

by Joe Blancato

When he stood up, she asked him if he was praying for victory. Patton exclaimed, "Hell no, I'm praying that I do my best."

- Patton

Chaplains in the locker room. Pointing skyward after a home run. Doesn't it just drive you nuts when you hear an athlete say, "Jesus Christ threw that touchdown pass"? Really, how much can the King of Kings really care about the success or failure of a bunch of athletes competing for nothing other than Pride and Greed, two deadly sins? I think lots of us roll our eyes when we look at these wanton displays of fair-weather faith (who thanks Jesus when they lose?), but athletes continue putting words in JC's mouth, and probably will until the End of Days.

Then again, so do I. Whenever I'm locked in mortal combat in a multiplayer game, competing with some other player thousands of miles away for nothing other than Pride (and if it's an MMOG with free looting, Greed), I toss a silent prayer for victory and bragging rights to the ether. Me, a confirmed agnostic - and a hypocrite.

But something tells me I'm not alone. If pro athletes are thanking Jesus, and I'm thanking Possible Higher Power Maybe Who Knows, something tells me quite a few of us look to the heavens for help, even when we're just, well, goofing off and playing games. And there's a reason beyond the metaphysical for doing so. Since the dawn of civilization, sports and games have been tied closely to the gods we worship far more tangibly than hoping Animus Cristi is smiling down on the big game.

Here, by region, are a few of the games we would have been playing alongside high clergy in past lifetimes. You know, if you believe in reincarnation.

Western Civilization

No sense in getting off on an obscure foot. The Greek Ancient Olympics are the most famous marriage of play and faith on record. Dating back to 776 B.C., the first Olympiad has numerous mythological origins. The first makes mention of Pelops, the king of Olympia who killed King Oenomaus of Pisa (son of Ares) during a chariot race. Pelops went on to get the girl, Oenomaus' daughter, and live happily ever after. To celebrate,

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the first ever Olympic Games were thrown. A second story tells of demigod Heracles winning a footrace in Olympia. After the race, he decreed that a race should be held there every four years. Another credits the origin of the games to the Spartans throwing a similar event a couple hundred years before, in order to appease the gods before a battle. In one story, Zeus himself gets involved; it's told he inaugurated the first Olympiad in commemoration of his defeat of the titan Cronus.

The games were held in Olympia, a high-holy area for the Greeks. During the events, priestesses of Demeter were on hand to oversee the games. To honor the games, Greek sculptor Phidias constructed a 40-foot statue of Zeus made in ivory and gold. Additionally, if the games were in some way corrupted - if athletes took money or someone invaded Olympia as part of a territorial dispute - it was considered blasphemous. And perhaps most telling how closely the Olympics were tied to Greek religion, the ancient games were abandoned in the 392 A.D., when the Christian emperor Theodosius I was picking apart the remnants of paganism in Roman culture.

Of course, the Romans weren't without religious games themselves. The Secular Games, which featured animal sacrifices and ceremonies in addition to sporting contests, were held roughly every 100 years to celebrate each new generation. The procedure of the Games demanded a new ceremony to be held after the last person to witness the previous one died, literally celebrating the death-rebirth cycle.

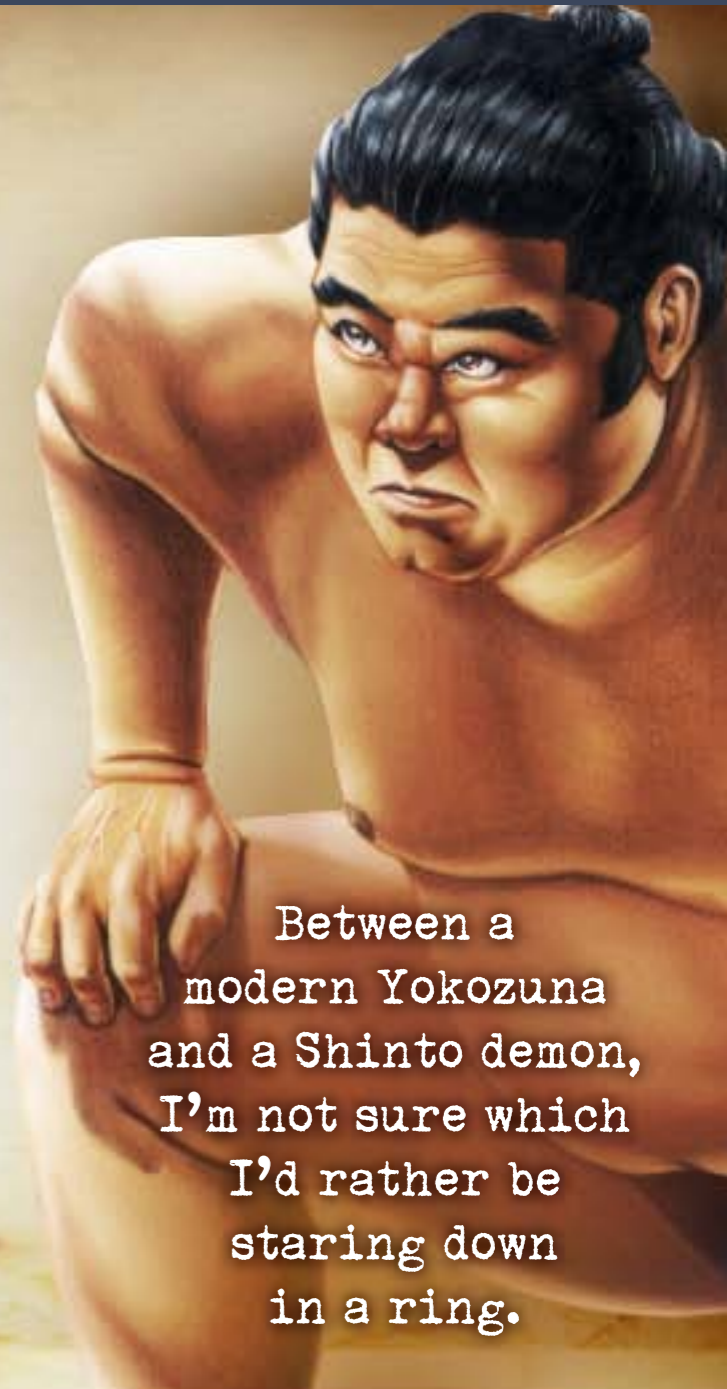
The first Games were held in celebration of the miraculous recovery of a man named Valerius' three children during a Roman plague; they were cured by drinking water from a place called Tarentum. Valerius returned to Tarentum and made sacrifices to Pluto, the god of the underworld, and Prosperina, the goddess of spring and rebirth, to give thanks. Succeeding Games were dedicated to Pluto and Prosperina, as well as lesser gods of disease, the thinking being they would be too busy watching the revelry to create new plagues.

The Far East

Asian spiritualism is flexible enough to make its way into any number of aspects of life, not the least of which is martial arts. While the majority of Eastern martial arts are based in religious

philosophy, of all of them sumo is the most interesting. While it's turned into a competitive sport, the origins of sumo date all the way back to the Chinese Han dynasty. It eventually made its way to Japan and became closely tied to Shintoism. Originally called *sumai*, sumo began its life as a ritual dance simulating something of an exorcism rite. Participants were thought be ritualistically wrestling with a Shinto *kami*, or spirit. Since then, it's evolved into the sport the Japanese go crazy over, where 400-pound men hurl each other dozens of feet and then bow ceremoniously. Between a modern Yokozuna and a Shinto demon, I'm not sure which I'd rather be staring down in a ring.

But for those of us who fear martial combat, we're blessed with go, a Chinese-turned-pan-Asian board game. Famously linked to modern numeromysticism in the movie *Pi*, go's roots are linked to ancient divination techniques. The board itself, a lined network of tiny squares into which you put black and white stones, represents a blank universe. Diviners would then place astronomical symbols on the board and would then make their predictions depending on where players placed their



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stones in relation to the symbols. Even now, the center of the go board translates to "axis of heaven," and the four quadrants retain mystical symbolism: male, female, mountain and wind.

Go's creation is also surrounded in myth and bears similarities to a Judeo-Christian story, that of Moses' discovery of the 10 Commandments. The story

tells of a special mountain with a maze-like ascent. The first person to make it to a cavern at the summit returned with the first go board, made entirely from magical stone. So two guys climb an ancient mountain and one comes back with a game under his arm that ponders the heavens, and another comes back with the foundation for modern lawmaking.

Mesoamerica

While much of the Americas doubtlessly linked games with their omnipresent religions, the only example to survive with any ubiquity was the Olmec game pok-a-tok. Dating back to 3000 B.C.,

pok-a-tok was religious ceremony, political détente and blood sport.

Only nobility was allowed to play, and would wear elaborate ceremonial garb over heavy padding. The game plays a bit like a mix of soccer and basketball: Players control a 10-inch, solid rubber ball using any part of their bodies except their hands and feet and try to direct it toward goals on either side of a stone court. What's most interesting is the reward for winning: decapitation at the hands of the losers. It's thought that the post-Olmec civilizations in Mesoamerica considered death by pok-a-tok to be high honor, and the sacrifice was carried out immediately after the game. Pretty tough to put together a dynasty; it makes the football salary cap liberating by comparison.

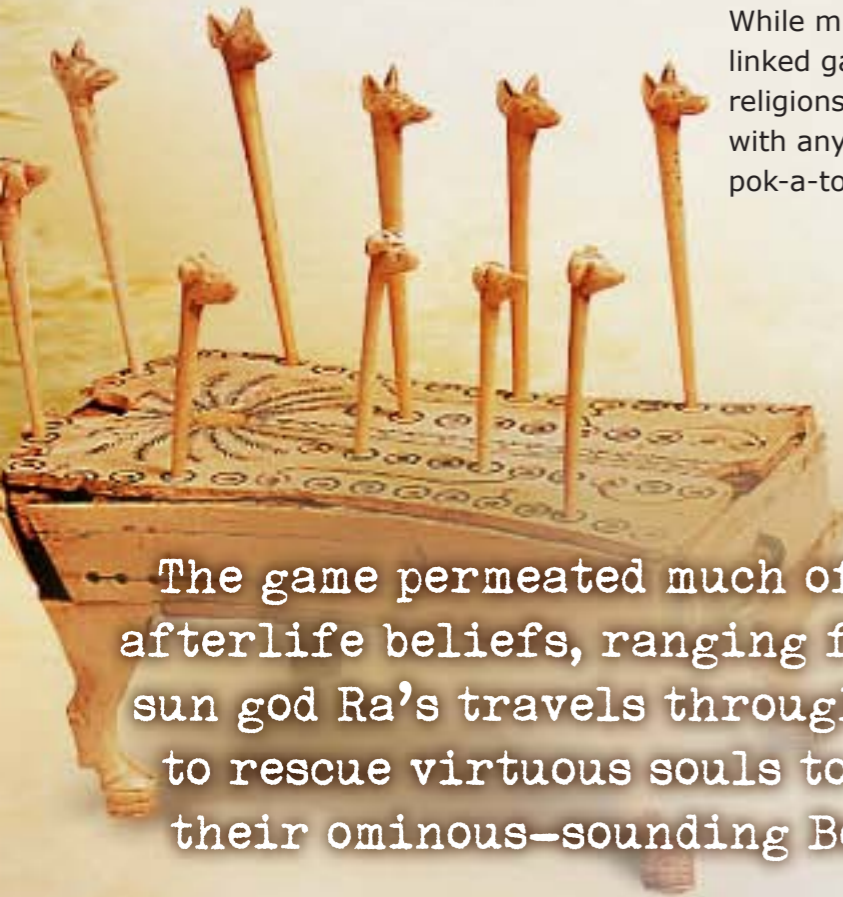
In addition to the blood sacrifices, Mesoamerican fortune tellers would track the path of the pok-a-tok ball during the game, match its trajectory to planetary bodies and then use that to predict harvest gains. The sport was so integral to the Olmecs and their descendant civilizations, it survived all the way up to contact with the Cortez and the Spanish.

The Middle-East and North Africa

At the end of the day, if you want to find the beginning of something human, your searching will probably take you to ancient Egypt. As early as 2500 B.C. senet was designed to bring common people closer to the gods around them. Senet, which means "passing," involves guiding pieces, called draughtsmen around the board and into a small box, representing the afterlife.

While people did play the game for fun, priests and non-clergy used it spiritually to communicate with the dead. Egyptian mystics even had spells dedicated to divining where dead souls were in relation to the positions of a senet board. It's also thought they would use the board to allow a person's soul to reenter its mummy, which they believed was what kept the mummies preserved. In fact, the game permeated much of the Egyptian's afterlife beliefs, ranging from tracking the sun god Ra's travels through the underworld to rescue virtuous souls to rituals within their ominous-sounding Book of the Dead.

Senet boards exist today, and archaeologists have pieced together



The game permeated much of the Egyptian's afterlife beliefs, ranging from tracking the sun god Ra's travels through the underworld to rescue virtuous souls to rituals within their ominous-sounding Book of the Dead.

enough of the rules for The British Museum to host a flash version.

Moving into the Judeo-Christian realm, the Jews developed dreidel, a dice-and-top gambling game, to both hide their religious activity and teach their faith under the oppression of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Antiochus, during the sacking of Jerusalem, made the practice of Judaism illegal, so Jews who congregated to teach the Torah would keep a dice-and-top game handy to fool Greek guards. Eventually, they began carving Hebrew letters onto the top and incorporated the game into their teaching.

After a successful Jewish revolt in Jerusalem, the Jews inaugurated Hanukkah, and dreidel became part of the holiday, used in part to teach children the story of the Greek expulsion from Jerusalem. The letters on the dreidel top stand for *nun, gimmel, hey, pey*, which means “a miracle happened here.”

Jesus Didn't Play Dice with the Worldly

As I did my research for this article, I kept trying to find an instance of early Christian churches, or Jesus, playing games in a way to get closer to God. But each avenue I searched, there wasn't

anything to be found. I came across hazard, but it was developed during the Crusades and was never spiritually motivated. I also found nine men's morris, but it predates Christianity, though boards have been found inside Christian churches. Nothing from Jesus' time. How could Christianity, a religion that now covers the globe, be devoid of early holy games?

The answer lies in two places: Jesus himself and the politics of early Christianity. First and foremost, Jesus wasn't exactly a man of the Earth. Much of his teachings only touched upon what people did **here**. Rather, his message was this life was temporary; a short step in the journey to becoming one with God. The idea of him staging something like the Secular Games, or suggesting his disciples try to speak with him via a senet board, was contrary to all of that. What's more, Christianity is a monotheistic religion. There is no god of discus, just like there's no god of spring or disease. There's just God. Without a Zeus to defeat a Cronus or a demon to dance with, there's not much to draw from.

Additionally, Christianity's beginnings were of secret origins. It was looked

upon as a dangerous fringe cult by the Jews and the Romans. Openly celebrating your faith in Jesus landed you in a gladiatorial match against hungry lions. People had to declare their faith in code; creating something more elaborate than an ichthys would most likely have been viewed as time-consuming and dangerous.

And ultimately, even if there were Christian games like senet or the Secular Games, their chances of surviving Theodosius' anti-pagan purges would be doubtful. This was a man who not only canceled the Secular Games and the Olympics, he expelled bishops of **Christian** ideology different his from Constantinople and Rome. If there were sects that incorporated games into their worship, which could easily have been construed as paeans to old pagan ways, they probably didn't risk passing down the traditions to the generations born after Theodosius.

“Zeus Threw That Touchdown Pass”

And that brings us back to the original question: Does Jesus care if we win the big game? Probably not; if anything, he cares how we **play** the game. But that doesn't mean we're without a little help

from whatever may be up there. Next time you pray for a little help in *Counter-Strike* or during the World Series, consider asking a bit louder: Those old gods who seemed to take such an interest in the games we play probably don't hear so well in their old age.

[COMMENTS](#)

Joe Blancato is an Associate Editor for The Escapist. He quotes Wayne's World and Dr. Strangelove more often than what can be considered normal.



Counter /CULT/URE

by Russ Pitts

The pews are made of ballistic nylon infused with plastic pellets. In front of each rests a rack, not for hymnals, but gaming magazines. There's an altar, but it's not at the far end of the room, under a crucifix, it's right in front of you, and it's made of plastic and glass. This is the church of gaming, my friends, and services

commence whenever we feel like worshipping. We're a devout bunch, we are, but we don't get out enough to proselytize.

The windows may or may not be stained glass (more likely they're posters) and depict our own brand of iconography: Miyamoto coming down from Mt. Fuji

holding hands with Mario and *Zelda*, Will Wright casting the unfaithful out of the *SimGarden*, Cliffy B curbstomping The Devil. We pray to them by hurtling insults (and controllers) when their worship demands sacrifice, we tithe (and then some) to stay in their good graces and we congregate en masse on web forums and message boards to compare and contrast our devotion to the deity ... and fight over whose is better.

And then there's the games. We huddle over them like shamanic medicine, breathing the fumes of "new plastic" and seeing fully-rendered, high-res visions in a quest to soothe our souls, expand our minds or attain oneness with our unique group consciousness. The games are the Alpha and Omega of our shared religion, and through them we relate to each other and the world. Within them we find peace and a vague sense of security, and because of them and the community their worship engenders, we find a home for our wandering souls; a place where we are understood and feel "of worth."

Narrowly Defined

That we play games, read about them, argue about them and even make them

does not begin to describe the sum total of the experience to those of us on the inside. That we, as gamers, are misunderstood does not even touch upon the matter. We're beyond misunderstood; we're often willfully unapproachable, wearing our 1UP Tees as a shield against belonging, blotting out our windows to reduce both the glare of the sun and the chance of being seen. We live both for and in the games, and it is there that we feel most secure, most powerful and most **real**. This is not an illusion.

Consider the peyote cactus which, according to Peyote.org, is "employed as a religious sacrament among more than forty American Indian tribes in many parts of the United States and western Canada."

These [Huichol] Indians still assemble together in the desert 300 miles northeast of their homeland in the Sierra Madre mountains of western Mexico, still sing all night, all day, still weep exceedingly.

Those on their first pilgrimage are blindfolded, and the participants are led by the shaman to the "cosmic threshold" which only he can see. All

stop, light candles, and murmur prayers while the shaman, imbued with supernatural forces, chants.

The Huichol Peyote hunt is seen as a return to Wirikuta or Paradise, the archetypal beginning and end of a mythical past. A modern Huichol "mara'kame" expressed it as follows: "One day all will be as you have seen it there, in Wirikuta. The First People will come back. The fields will be pure and crystalline, all this is not clear to me, but in five more years I will know it, through more revelations. The world will end, and the unity will be here again. But only for pure Huichol."

The phrase "only for pure Huichol" echoes sentiments seen on gaming blogs and in Wii lines everywhere that only those who've been indoctrinated, only those who are in can understand and partake of paradise - or *Final Fantasy*. It's a setting apart of one's group from those on the outside and suggests that the shared experience has more value than simply the effect of the drug - or the game.

But what, really, are the effects of videogames on the mind, and can they compare to the psychoactive effects of the

peyote plant? Alan Pope, a behavioral scientist at NASA Langley Research Center in Langley, Virginia believes so. Pope, in an attempt to prove that the same meditative effects experienced with techniques like biofeedback-controlled meditation training could be replicated with videogames, conducted a study with 22 children (PDF) suffering from ADHD. Half of his group was treated with biofeedback meditation, the other half with videogames. The results were startling.


After 40 one-hour sessions, both groups showed substantial improvements in everyday brainwave patterns as well as in tests of measuring attention span, impulsiveness and hyperactivity. Parents in both groups also reported that their children were doing better in school.

There may be far less singing (unless you're playing Singstar), dancing (DDR) or weeping (*Final Fantasy VII*) but playing videogames indisputably focuses the mind, providing clarity and improving concentration, creating a shared experience similar to consuming the bushy, hallucinogenic cactus plant of Mexico. But what of the social component? According to Science Blog, Constance Steinkuehler, a professor of

education at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and Dmitri Williams, a professor of speech communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, claim that some games "promote sociability and new worldviews," which sounds a lot like organized religion to me.

The researchers, claim that MMOs function not like solitary dungeon cells, but more like virtual coffee shops or pubs where something called "social bridging" takes place. They even liken playing such games as "Asheron's Call" and "Lineage" to dropping in at "Cheers," the fictional TV bar "where everybody knows your name."

"By providing places for social interaction and relationships beyond the workplace and home, MMOs have the capacity to function much like the hangouts of old," they said. And they take it one step further by suggesting that the lack of real-world hangouts "is what is driving the MMO phenomenon" in the first place. ... "To argue that ... MMO game play is isolated and passive media consumption that takes the place of informal social engagement is to ignore the nature of what



“playing videogames indisputably focuses the mind, providing clarity and improving concentration, creating a shared experience similar to consuming the bushy, hallucinogenic cactus plant of Mexico.”



“That we get something real and physical from games is only beginning to be understood, but those of us who are in already know **IT FEELS GOOD**”

participants actually do behind the computer screen,” the authors wrote.

The doors, as William Blake (or Jim Morrison) would say, are being cleansed, and we begin to see games as they truly are. Providing both a social and mental stimulus, playing games, in this light, can be seen as quite similar to the benefits of organized religion, offering a sense of belonging, a shared mythology and even the physical stimulus akin to drug-induced spiritual visions, like those experienced by the peyote worshippers of Mexico.

That we get something real and physical from games is only beginning to be understood, but those of us who are **in** already know it feels good to be a part of the culture and to play games. That’s why we play them, why we belong. But can you go so far as to describe videogaming as a “religion”?

Philosophy of Life

Merriam Webster defines a religion as “a **personal set** or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices.” Encarta agrees and further describes religion as “an object, practice, cause, or activity that somebody is completely devoted to or obsessed by.”

According to these two reference sources, videogaming could very well qualify.

Mirren at *Zelda Universe* connects the dots between the *Zelda* universe in particular and organized religion fairly convincingly, starting with the yellow, triangular symbol adorning the T-shirts of many a gamer: “The Symbol. Every religion has one (or even several) major symbol/s. Christianity in all of its branches has the Cross or Crucifix, Judaism has the Star of David, Islam has the Star and Crescent, Taoism has the Yin and Yang etc. What does Hyrule’s religion have? I think any *Zelda* fan should know; the Triforce.”

Tom Rhodes, writing in Issue 66 of *The Escapist* shares Mirren’s perspective on the religious significance of the mythology of games and suggests that gaming as a religion unto itself may be evolving because of such strong symbolism. “With the increasing influence that gaming is having on the collective psyche,” he writes, “[social integration of games] can’t be too far behind, and with it comes controversy. We may have never connected religion and gaming before in any strong way, but that day is arriving soon enough.”

That day may already be here, but is videogaming a religion or a cult? Consulting our references, Webster defines a cult as a "great devotion to a person, idea, object, movement, or work" Again, Encarta goes a bit further defining a cult as "idolization of somebody or something: an extreme or excessive admiration for a person, philosophy of life, or activity" and "sociology elite group: a self-identified group of people who share a narrowly defined interest or perspective." And here we have conflict, since videogaming, based on definitions alone, could be either.

Idolization of Somebody

Last month marked the 10-year anniversary of the infamous Heaven's Gate mass suicide, a brutal act by a cult who all believed (or were led to believe) that a spaceship riding (invisibly) behind the comet Hale-Bopp would whisk them away to the extraterrestrial kingdom of heaven if their souls were freed from their bodies at the exact moment the comet passed overhead.

According to all definitions, anecdotal evidence and statements from former members, the Heaven's Gate community

was a cult, and its members were mostly disaffected outsiders (computer geeks) who raised money for the cult by producing web sites and doing various computer consulting. Whatever trials and tribulations the 39 members of Heaven's Gate faced in their daily lives, their burdens were sufficient to convince them that a better life lay in store for them in the arms of an unknown alien race, about which the only evidence for existence lay in the mind of one man, Marshall Applewhite, aka "Do."

On March 26, 1997, following instructions from Do, the members of the cult, ate poisoned pudding and died. According to Harry Jones, writing for SignOnSanDiego.com, family members of the cultists suggested they'd joined Heaven's Gate "searching for answers and goals. ... Applewhite offered a simpler, more focused way of life that also isolated group members from the outside world and fostered a shared belief system."

Which is very similar to what users experience upon entering the cult of gaming. I learned this firsthand, taking part in the ritual of adoration that was Shigeru Miyamoto's keynote speech at

this year's GDC. As at most Nintendo keynote speeches, there was cheering, standing, yelling "Woo!" and shouting of encouraging pleas such as "You can do it!" and "We made it!" The looks on many of the faces were bordering on manic. There was clearly adulation, identification and love for the man who made *Zelda* and the brand he represents. At the suggestion that Nintendo had finally beaten rival Sony, the crowd, literally, went wild.

Jim Munroe at The Cultural Gutter speaks of his confrontation with the obsessive fans of one particularly symbolic game: "When I posted my bad review of *Zelda: The Legend of Windwaker* (Nintendo, 2003) to this site it immediately inspired a flood of outraged comments ... over 8,000 words about a column that was about 800 words long. ... One of them said that one of my points 'bordered on blasphemy.'"

Wired columnist Clive Thompson, writing about his *Final Fantasy* "virginity" paints a similar picture:

Consider, for starters, the fan base. Gamer culture is already insular, but *Final Fantasy* fans were so wild-eyed

“the **HEAVEN'S GATE** community **WAS A CULT**, and its members were mostly disaffected outsiders (computer geeks) who raised money for the cult by producing web sites and doing various computer consulting.”

and devout that they seemed like a monastic order living inside craggy caves on an unnamed planet. They'd hang out in clusters, painstakingly dissecting snippets of character dialogue, musing on the subtle distinctions of green magic versus the black stuff, bitching about how recurring characters like Bahamut -- *Bahamut?* -- had been reskinned for the latest version.

Eventually, it became terrifying for any self-respecting gamer to admit that you *hadn't* played a *Final Fantasy* game.

A Self-Identified Group

Game developers haven't cured cancer, fed the poor or eradicated global strife. They make games. And yet many are treated like saints, more respected than the president of the United States and loved more deeply than most gamers love

their own kin. And yet, to those of us on the inside, this is not an aberration. This is, simply, the way it is. It may seem strange unless you belong, unless you're **in**.

Love, as Shakespeare says, makes fools of us all. The poor Heaven's Gate folks loved Do deeply, and believed in him and the way of life he represented. We love games, and the people who make them, and from the games themselves we get a physical and spiritual sense of well-being, and a communal feeling of belonging. For the games we do truly foolish things like stand in line, overnight, outside, for the chance to (maybe) spend buckets of money on devices that do (essentially) the same thing as the ones we've already bought, five times over..

Is this the same as swallowing a poison pill to get to heaven? Are gamers at risk of becoming a massive cult rivaling all the religions of the world, drawing in the young and disaffected, focusing them toward the goal of ... something? Perhaps not. Perhaps there is a wide disparity

between wearing a T-shirt and committing mass suicide, and one would have to argue that the cult of gaming itself reflects multiple cults, each seemingly at war with one another over rival systems and even games. But the similarities are unmistakable, and one must ask oneself what would happen if Miyamoto weren't such a gentle soul?

What if, standing before the assembled might of his fans, he hadn't said "My vision does not have to be your vision. I am only one person," but rather "If our will is so strong that no hardship and suffering can subdue it, then our will and our [Nintendo] might shall prevail?"

[COMMENTS](#)

Russ Pitts is an Associate Editor for The Escapist. He has written and produced for television, theatre and film, has been writing on the web since it was invented and claims to have played every console ever made. His blog can be found at www.falsegravity.com.

“**The poor Heaven's Gate folks loved Do deeply, and believed in him and the way of life he represented. We love games, and the people who make them, and from the games themselves we get a physical and spiritual sense of well-being, and a communal feeling of belonging. 》**”



A Lack of Faith

Why Christian Games are Doomed to Fail

by Lara Crigger

“What is man, that thou shouldest magnify him? And that thou shouldest set thine heart upon him? And that thou shouldest visit him every morning, and try him every moment?”

- Job 7: 17-18

For all the angels and messiahs and Raptures, Christian videogames, as a rule, just aren't all that Christian. Oh, they have plenty of Scripture quotes, Bible stories and nonthreatening rock anthems by Jars of Clay. They deal with themes like salvation and the Post-Apocalypse, and players get to smite demons, lead Israelite armies and convert non-believers. God games cram together all the juicy features you've come to expect from pop-culture treatments of Christianity. But don't be fooled. Even Jesus would be embarrassed to play *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*.

So many contemporary Christian games are unintentional self-parodies. By embracing Evangelical culture so indulgently and completely, these games are nothing but interactive stereotypes. Take the above-mentioned *Eternal Forces*. Rock stars as the messengers of the Antichrist? A faux-Pope, decked out

in snazzy Catholic cardinal robes, acting as the right-hand man of evil? You **can't** be serious. Anyone who willingly plays this cringe-inducing balderdash should rend her PC in shame. Worse, *Eternal Forces* is far from alone in its self-indulgence and supercilious attitude toward its “built-in” audience. Many Christian titles address their consumers as both simpletons and suckers: Because our game includes crucifixes, you'll overlook its contrived, outrageous plotlines.

But as conspicuous as they are, these faults aren't structural. Flaws like unbelievable characters or contrived storylines are just surface cracks, as easily repaired as, say, blocky animation or poor camera angles. It's fixable. Just find the right story, the right characters and the right context, and you can make it work.

Then again, if you fix the surface cracks, the real defects bubble to the surface, and those are harder to scrub away.

Let There Be Violence

Christian developers suffer the same videogame violence *Catch-22* as the rest of the industry, but in some ways, they

get it worse. If they include death or combat in their games, Christian designers invite outrage from all quarters. Without physical conflict, however, their games will be financial failures, widely ignored by the gaming community. Exacerbating matters are certain self-righteous members of the media and gaming community, salivating like E.K. Hornbeck at a Tennessee tent revival, who gleefully, proudly denounce the obvious Christian hypocrisy, be it real or imagined.

That's crap. If anything, God games aren't violent **enough** - or, at least, violent in the right ways.

From the *Mahabharata* to the Old Testament, we've used combat, gore and death as a narrative tool to replicate and examine the similar violence raging inside each of us.

It's a metaphor for the soul. That's the core of religion, behind the Bibles and the singing and the wafers that melt on your tongue: that action-reaction conflict, the incessant animal struggle, that purging of whatever doesn't work. It's about the fear inside, a competition

of identity and mortality, of righteousness and survival, and the hope that even if all things must come to an end, maybe, just maybe they don't have to.

Eternal Forces tried to capitalize on 10,000 years of imagery and failed, because the game didn't commit fully to those ideas. I mean, the Biblical Tribulation - that's violent, juicy stuff. That should have **worked**. Instead, the developers held back, sanitizing the situation, wiping it clean of blood and gore, yes, but also of pain. As a result, death in *Eternal Forces* has no cost; it's just a winking out, a tally mark on a scorecard rather than an intimate, terrifying event.

I'm not surprised, however. Pain is uncomfortable, unreliable and tremendous. It consumes you, casting doubt and shadows on everything you believe. Just ask Job.


Job and the Crisis of Faith

Squeezed between the friendlier Book of Esther and the more accessible Book of Psalms, the Book of Job is one of my favorite Biblical passages. It's often ignored by aggressive Sunday school

teachers, who purse their lips at its flowery language and themes of depression, loss and suicide. But this philosophical dialogue about why bad things happen to good people resonates in ways all of King David's begatting doesn't.

Job is a genuinely nice guy, the sort who looks after orphans, prays for his kids and never cheats on his taxes, and God rewards him richly for his goodness. But one day, Satan suggests that God put Job to a test, and God readily obliges. After Job loses all his livestock, suffers the death of his seven sons and contracts a nasty case of full-body boils, he loses heart. Depressed and defeated, Job famously begs to take God to court for His crimes.

But Satan had a point, egging God on like that. If by being good, you can entirely avoid misfortune, what distinguishes righteousness from commerce, a mere business transaction between you and God? If Job only reveres God because he receives blessings in return, does his worship mean anything at all? As nice as he is, Job never questioned or challenged this exchange, and he never had reason to.



**If by being good,
you can entirely
avoid misfortune,
what distinguishes
righteousness
from commerce?**



“He who wavereth is like a wave of the sea, driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think he shall receive anything of the Lord. (James 1:6, KJV).” Ouch.

So he was trapped, stuck in his own ignorance. His faith was blind, empty, like a salve without a wound. It had no doubt to give it contrast and weight: Having never been tested, Job’s faith had never passed the test.

Job’s pain leads him to doubt, and he suffers a crisis of faith of such magnitude, you’d expect to read it in a Jean-Paul Sartre play, not the Good Book. Job and his three best friends argue over God’s motives for evil and loss, and our protagonist angrily accuses God of punishing righteous men while letting sinners go free. It’s not that he ever stops believing the existence of God (this is the Bible, of course), but the point is Job no longer believes **in** God - which in reality is far worse. His trust is gone, his faith decayed. That’s one hell of an unapologetic stance for a Biblical hero to take.

Job’s doubt is violent: Not bloody, of course, but painful, tumultuous and incredibly uncomfortable to witness. Yet, one of the lessons of the Book of Job is this doubt matters. It can’t be ignored or argued with or reasoned away. Instead, it’s a test we all take, where each of us comes to different conclusions; but

there’s no avoiding the final exam - without it, spirituality, philosophy, even existence as we know it is utterly meaningless. Like a bridge walked upon, like a hypothesis tested, doubt is more important than reverence, sacrifice, even hope, because it brings you closer than you were to Truth and thus to God.

Doubt in a Pop-Christian World

Judging by Job’s happy ending, God agrees that doubt has its uses; and for his part, Jesus was quite tolerant of questions and challenges, too. He embraced Thomas, skeptic of the Resurrection, and fondly teased a seasick Peter after a storm nearly capsized their boat. (“Oh ye of little faith, why did you doubt?”) Jesus even experienced his own crisis of faith: As he died on the cross, he echoed the voices of countless future Christians and asked, “Father, Father, why have you forsaken me?”

But the New Testament - particularly the letters of the Apostles - preaches a different approach. Stuffed with reprimands against the faithless, the Apostles suggested constant vigilance against questioners and skeptics, arguing that they couldn’t be trusted or reasoned with. James, for instance,

writes, “He who wavereth is like a wave of the sea, driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think he shall receive anything of the Lord. (James 1:6, KJV).” **Ouch.**

For the most part, the modern Evangelical movement abides by the Apostolic example, treating doubt like an intellectual plague that must be quarantined for the faithful to survive. Most Christian videogames, created with that same Testimonial bent in mind, also follow suit. If these games do address a crisis of faith, the outcome is inevitable, even pre-destined: The Good guys will hang with God, the Bad guys end up with Satan, and once converted, neither side ever looks back. (In fairness, *Eternal Forces* does address the conversion issue, but the process is glossed over; treated, once again, more like a plot or gameplay device than a compelling story in and of itself.)

Without spiritual challenges or questions, these characters become automatons of destiny, acting out a story they don’t control or participate in making. So you end up with violence without pain, faith without doubt - a one-dimensional

cartoon of everything religion stands for, stripped of its sense and resonance.

Let There Be Light

Even still, the solution isn't as simple as plunking a grieving father covered in boils down into post-Apocalyptic New York. Doubt is a deeply personal experience, one that everyone has. But oddly enough, doubt only makes sense at the time and to the person having it. Even Job is alone in his misery, and his friends, helpless observers, just can't understand how he feels. So how do you replicate such a specific, unique experience as a crisis of faith into something as broad and mass-market as a videogame?

The trick, I think, is to make the violence inseparable from the player: That is, give the player the opportunity to explore her own crisis of faith, to feel it from the inside out, through her own actions and freedom of will. The interactivity of videogames offers a great advantage: The divide between character and observer is already half-scaled, and in certain types of games (adventure games or RPGs, for example), the barrier is even lower. So to seize upon that

open-endedness, Christian games would need to take a page from *GTA* and allow players to make any choice that they see fit, be it Christian or evil or some gray space in between; and, more importantly, to permit all options at all times. Give players that freedom of choice to be tempted by Satan, to be convinced by God or to dabble with both - just like real life, just like the rest of us do. Give players the full experience of the consequence of free will. Games like *Planescape: Torment* understood this well, feeding off players' emotions and moral choices to drive the plot.

Yes, it's risky. Conceivably some impressionable soul could be seduced by evil (or, well, as much as anyone could be seduced in a videogame). But you can't do doubt halfway. A crisis of faith is a violent, brutal affair, and if it's going to work in a videogame, that game has to commit itself to the idea fully. Sure, people might still shun these titles (after all, doubt is not nearly as sexy as exorcising demons), but then again, they'd probably have shunned them in the first place. At least this way, the games are honest, treating players with respect and not like some "built-in" audience.

Besides, look again at the Book of Job. After all his fears and suffering, after all his questions and tirades, Job scores a reprieve from his pain. God doesn't apologize for the bad times, of course, but He does eventually restore Job's fortunes, healing the sores, refurbishing his property and, best of all, blessing him with more children. Out of that darkness and tribulation, Job's faith has actually become stronger than it was before. His doubt was not something to be feared, or avoided, or shunned, but rather embraced, because it made him a better person in the end.

Maybe it's about time the same thing happened to Christian videogames, too. A crisis of faith is, after all, good for the soul. [COMMENTS](#)

Lara Crigger is a freelance science, tech and gaming journalist whose previous work for The Escapist includes "Mind Over Matter" and "Searching for Gunpei Yokoi". Her email is [lcrigger\[at\]gmail\[dot\]com](mailto:lcrigger[at]gmail[dot]com).

Give players that freedom of choice to be tempted by Satan, to be convinced by God or to dabble with both - just like real life, just like the rest of us do.



Once peaceful and thriving: The Gods Won't Help You in Ragnarok

by Christian McCrea

In the mythology of the frozen North, the Gods know their place. As we peasants till the earth with our frozen knuckles waiting for the sun to return, we expect results from those above. If the crops failed, we could blame the crop-bringer Thor as much as praise him when frostbite held back. If famine persisted, we could sacrifice our own King to him. Finally, if that failed, we'd sentence him to being forgotten. Early Christian missionaries were baffled by a people who had adapted every part of their mythology to pain, disease,

darkness and the inexorable crawl of famine. A God above the judgment of man? Who you couldn't touch or kill? What fun could that possibly be?

The Norse have been thoroughly represented in computer games; their names plundered for games as diverse as *StarCraft*, *Max Payne*, *Age of Mythology* and the brilliant-but-forgotten *Hammer of the Gods* (Holistic Design, 1995). Among them all, Norsehelm Productions' *Ragnarok* (aka *Valhalla*) is the most brutally unforgiving, and

therefore fitting, take on the impossibly bureaucratic and complex Norse mythology. It continues to provide an object lesson in game balancing 15 years after it first began shattering the dreams of anyone who dared to step outside the safety of their village.

On the surface, *Ragnarok* is an unassuming rogue-like PC game possessed of a peculiar amount of traditional RPG mechanics. Many of the *NetHack* elements are there, but the constraint of a tightly formed mythology and mission structure makes the chaos and random area generation infinitely more compelling. While much less is possible for the player than in most rogue-likes, the tension and paranoia of the game turn random dungeons into heart-stopping affairs.

The game introduces you to a somber situation via text on an introductory screen: "Your village, once peaceful and thriving, is deserted and overrun by creatures from the nearby forest." Your list of quests doesn't begin small; simply go to the battle at the end of time, and

be sure to bring the gods all the weapons they'll need to kill the creatures of chaos, before they die themselves. There are no "please clear my basement of rats," only "help end the world in a slightly less depressing manner." And so, you venture out as one of six classes and fumble through a system of codes that need methodical unraveling before you can hope to live past a single screen of the forest outside.

You can read scrolls and drink potions, if you find them, but the scrolls are "ragged" or "papyrus," the potions "grimy" or merely "orange." They could bless your sword with a much-needed +1, or far more likely, kill you horribly, described in the sparsest prose at the bottom of the screen, "You die." Your only choice is to work your way around the safer edges of the world, picking off what you can while scouring for scrolls of identification that will let you avoid drinking or reading anything disastrous. Slowly but surely, it's possible to turn the odds in your favor and begin crawling through the lists of quests. On your second playing, *Ragnarok's* genius is apparent; where "grimy" was a boon for

one character, for the next it means instant death.

You Die (and die and die)

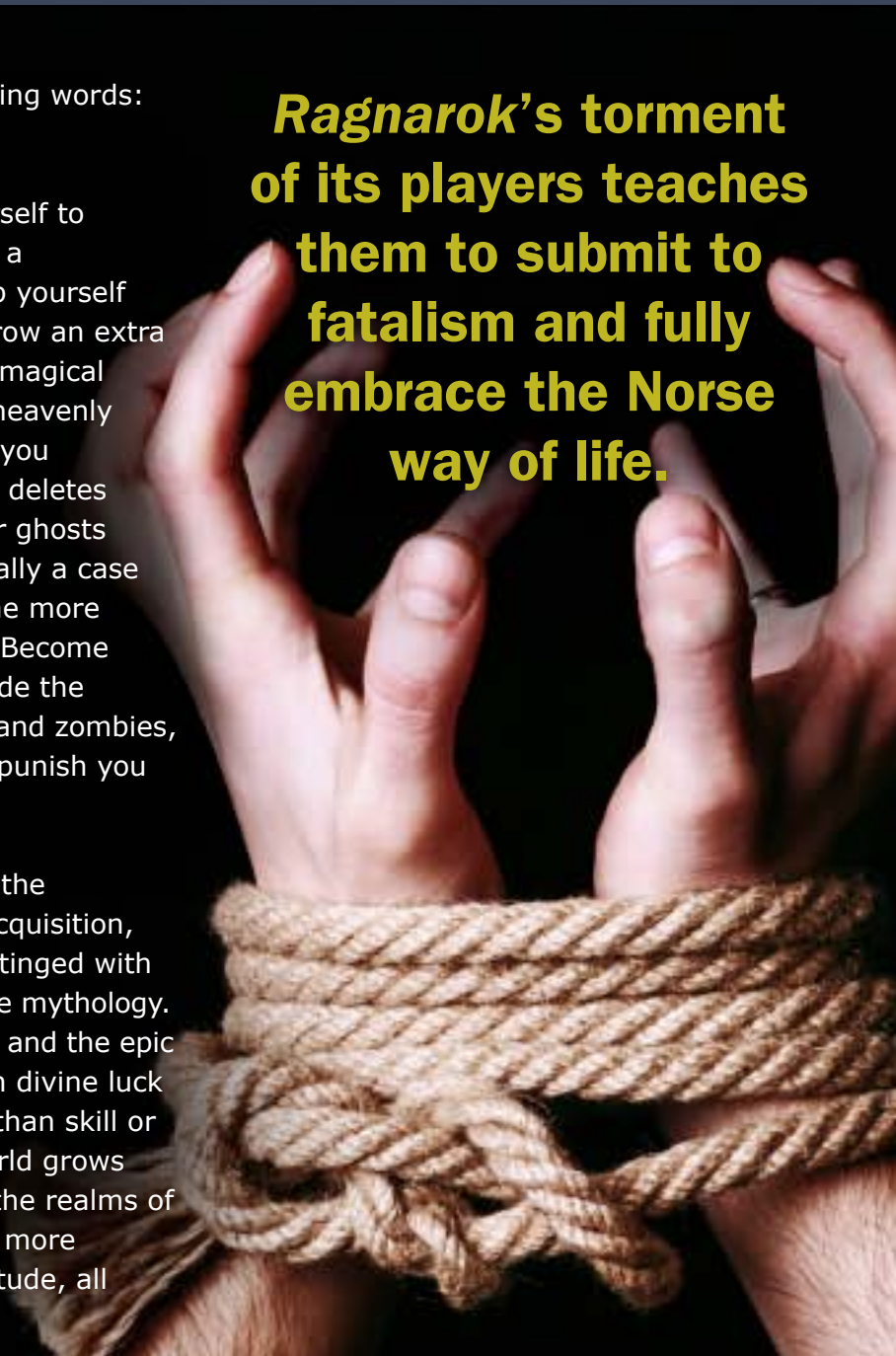
This controlled chaos means more than just replayability. *Ragnarok* is nothing short of a simulator for the capriciousness of the ancient world. Life for characters in the game is as brutal and forceful as the time it represents. Whereas other games are happy to use Norse mythology as an identikit racial mode that plays nicely with others to provide a mix of abilities or units, *Ragnarok's* torment of its players teaches them to submit to fatalism and fully embrace the Norse way of life.

Element by element, what begins as survival morphs into an aggressive assault on the game mechanics, as you menace the unseen data spreads. You figure, for example, that a scroll of blessing can be used to empower a scroll of identification. That scroll can then identify everything in your backpack. Eating certain monster corpses gives you powers. With each scrap of knowledge, the game bends to your will. In the process, dozens of your heroes will perish, in one form or another, falling

prey to those two ever-hanging words: You die.

You manage to teleport yourself to Slaeter's Sea. You are hit by a hatchetfish; you die. You zap yourself with a wand; you die. You grow an extra finger; you die. You commit magical genocide on a race of bats, heavenly rangers appear; you die. As you continually perish, the game deletes your save file but keeps your ghosts around to torment you; literally a case of anti-experience points. The more you lose, the harder it gets. Become careless and the forest outside the village screams with ghosts and zombies, former selves come back to punish you for not being strong enough.

From the simple graphics to the deliberate pace of weapon acquisition, every aspect of *Ragnarok* is tinged with the sadness and fury of Norse mythology. Vast forces swirl around you, and the epic quest will be fulfilled through divine luck and an iron will much more than skill or experience. As the game world grows and you can escape into all the realms of Midgard, the monsters grow more powerful by orders of magnitude, all



Ragnarok's torment of its players teaches them to submit to fatalism and fully embrace the Norse way of life.

capable of smashing apart your hours of play but urging you on with the promise of dropped loot and an edible corpse.

Underneath the rhythm of difficulty and weirdness sits something utterly unique; you are being slowly religiously converted. Not into the literal worship of 16-color gods only a handful of pixels high, rather your approach to the game can take on any form, as long as it adjusts to the possibility of the next keystroke teleporting you inside the stomach of a Hel dragon, having an entire class of items written out of existence forever or finding yourself deep in a mushroom-powered hallucinogenic death sequence. The result of this abusive relationship is the player gradually becomes more Norse in his style and method of play. They simply have to in order to climb over Yggdrasil, the world-tree and finally across Bifrost, the rainbow bridge to heaven where the gods are already half-dead, having waited so long for your arrival.

Make Me a Believer

RPGs have always been steeped in eschatology; the study of the end of the world. Heroes go from sleepy amnesiacs

to saviors and Gods in a matter of hours, without ever disturbing the gel in their hair. By the time we reach the end we are a walking inventory of potential. Like all good saviors, death is impossible, and we can roll back the stone to reveal the save file. To save the world, heroes have to be blank slates, their paths to greatness inevitably slicked with blood.

Norse heroes are different in one subtle way: They are equals of the gods in every respect, who are mortal, bound by laws and have gods and giants of their own to fear. There is no resurrection, only rebirth. Forget becoming the God of War and reveling in vaguely homoerotic triumph on a brooding throne; the real battle has just begun. Norse mythology is, and always was, playable. Every journey is heroic. It demands people accept chaos, and then shows them how to tame it. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, the falcon cannot hear the falconer – the hero wades in, eye-deep in hell, and prays for good fortune.

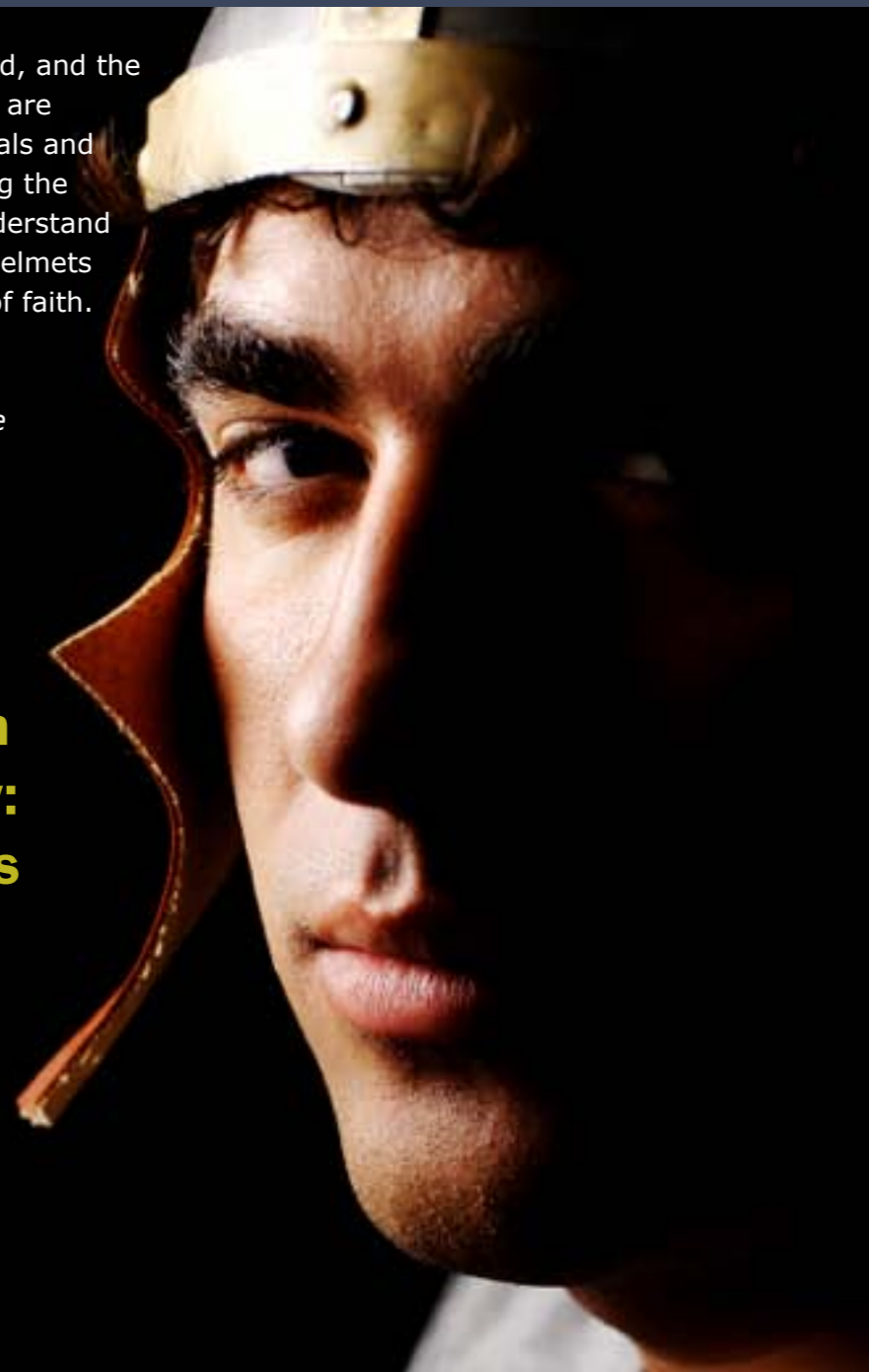
Ragnarok is ultimately a gaming paean to an ancient way of life. It is neither faithful nor meticulous, but acts as a manual for true believers. To be Norse is

to know you're already doomed, and the gods are coming with you. We are trained through the game's trials and errors - through actually eating the corpses of our failures - to understand it wasn't all feasting, horned helmets and heavy metal. A true test of faith.

[COMMENTS](#)

Christian McCrea is a freelance writer for The Escapist.

Norse heroes are different in one subtle way: They are equals of the gods in every respect.





Paladins can LOOT?

by Raja Doake

Lawful Good or Neutral Evil? Open Palm or Closed Fist? Such questions were inconceivable in gaming's early days. *Rogue* didn't care if you styled yourself a noble hero, and the classic Gold Box games wouldn't let you be much else. The first major North American computer roleplaying game to seriously consider any form of player alignment, *Ultima IV*, demanded the player conform to the game's eight virtues. When your choices are limited to honesty, compassion, humility and the like, it's hard to be, well, evil.

But just how far have we come in the past two decades?

Ultima's Virtues, *Fallout's* Karma and Reputation, *Fable's* point system, *Jade Empire's* Paths and other player alignment systems owe an enormous debt to the original alignment system – the one introduced by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in *Dungeons & Dragons*. Originally just a single axis with three points (Law, Neutrality, Chaos), *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* expanded it into the two-axis, nine-point Good-Evil/Law-Chaos framework used most famously in the digital realm by BioWare and Black Isle.

On the surface, the "Gygax model" seems to offer more flexibility for player alignment systems than its most common CRPG alternative – single-axis Good/Evil models. Both typically associate Good with altruism and Evil with self-interest, but the Gygax model offers the additional axis of Law and Chaos, corresponding roughly to authoritarianism and libertarianism. This allows games implementing the Gygax model to assign alignment labels to actions that wouldn't be clear-cut in a single-axis Good/Evil model.

For example, is rescuing your convicted friend from prison a Good act if she is actually guilty? This is awkward to address in a single-axis framework, but in a game implementing the Gygax model it would shift the player's alignment in the Chaotic direction. Regardless of motive, it is a clear defiance of law. What about a player who advocates changing the law, then? Civil disobedience is certainly Chaotic, but legitimate legal protest doesn't exactly conform to the Gygax model's ideal of Lawful, which entails conforming to the will of a sovereign.

The Gygax model's weaknesses stem from its origin in *D&D*, which began life as a glorified tabletop miniature wargame. Players in *D&D* needed to be able to choose from balanced classes with defined roles, and the player group needed a common goal. The alignment system restricted the actions of players choosing to play certain character classes, which compensated for the special abilities of those classes. The prominence of altruism and the overall emphasis on heroism at the Good end of the alignment spectrum helped foster player cooperation. To make it work, Good and Evil were precisely defined,

tossing aside more than two millennia of philosophy, which made it difficult for any game implementing the model to ask meaningful questions about the nature of Good or Evil.

Typically, the Gygax model is codified in a CRPG by assigning alignment weights to various actions and dialogue choices. A player wishing to be Good should choose the most polite dialogue options and make sure to commit acts of kindness on a regular basis; a player wishing to be Evil can feel free to fling all manner of insults at non-player characters and then rob them blind. Neutrality is awkward – rather than remaining Neutral by striving to chart a course along the middle ground between Good and Evil and/or Law and Chaos, players remain Neutral by perpetrating an equal weighting of Good and Evil acts. There's no way to differentiate a shift toward Neutrality from a shift toward Good, Evil, Law or Chaos in the Gygax model.

This way, though, the player's conscience is salvaged preemptively. When the inevitable slaughter of hordes of enemies begins, a Good player has already rationalized killing them as the inevitable consequence of their Evil nature – and

their experience point value. If the player has the audacity to choose Evil, well, what conscience is there to salvage? Indiscriminate slaughter is Evil's watchword.

Alignment weights can also be abused more directly. If you pickpocket a farmer but rescue the blacksmith's daughter from her kidnappers, the net result is a shift in your alignment toward Good. Trying this approach in real life will make you pretty unpopular and maybe even land you in jail, but somehow it works just fine in BioWare's *Neverwinter Nights*. In fact, a Paladin in *NWN* can go to an inn, loot someone else's wardrobe and remain a Paladin; in tabletop *D&D*, the Paladin would immediately lose all unique Paladin abilities and have to undertake an atonement quest to regain them.


The outcome of these problems is twofold: Most CRPGs that implement an alignment system only assign weights to a small subset of actions – hence *NWN*'s looting Paladins – and also severely restrict player choice in terms of both dialogue and course of action, in order to focus the game's narrative. In other words, the principal effects of the Gygax model on North American CRPGs have been less

open, more linear gameplay, cliché-riddled plots and simplistic characterization of both players and NPCs.

Some CRPGs, notably *The Elder Scrolls* series, eschew player alignment systems almost entirely in the name of player freedom. However, player alignment system or no, CRPGs can't avoid answering the classic question of moral absolutism vs. moral relativism. If Good and Evil exist in the game world, it's because they have been codified during the development process; the system's discrete nature is inherently limiting.

That said, it's entirely possible for a game implementing a player alignment model to take a nuanced approach to ethical questions – just ask Black Isle Studios.

After two critical successes in the form of *Fallout* and *Fallout 2*, Black Isle tried their hand at the Gygax model and created (another) one of the best CRPGs of all time: *Planescape: Torment*. Where *Neverwinter Nights* might have four dialogue options at a given point, *PST* might have eight – if the player's intelligence, wisdom or charisma attributes were high enough. Combined with the directly observable instances



“If you pickpocket a farmer but rescue the blacksmith's daughter from her kidnappers, the net result is a **SHIFT** in your alignment **TOWARD GOOD**. Trying this approach in real life will make you pretty unpopular.”

the Escapist



“*Jade Empire* abandons Gygax, but the OPEN PALM AND CLOSED FIST paths are simply a re-imagining of the same altruism/self-interest divide.”

and effects of alignment in the game world – for example, the entire town of Curst moves from one plane to another because the aggregate alignment of its citizens’ actions shifts – the result is a much more interesting take on the Gygax model, allowing the player more ethical flexibility. It is possible (though difficult) to play through *PST* without killing more than a handful of creatures, and the “best” of its multiple endings can only be obtained if the player can avoid killing the game’s final antagonist.

Whatever the player alignment system, robust dialogue is crucial to capturing ethical nuances that most CRPGs simply steamroll over. Some of BioWare’s pre- and post-NWN efforts are also known for expansive dialogue trees: The *Baldur’s Gate* series uses the *D&D* ruleset and implements the Gygax model, and the first *Knights of the Old Republic* game combines the *D&D* ruleset with Star Wars’ Light and Dark sides of the Force. However, the *Baldur’s Gate* games encourage heroism in traditional Gygax fashion and shy away from murky ethical questions. *Jade Empire* abandons Gygax, but the Open Palm and Closed Fist paths are simply a re-imagining of the same altruism/self-interest divide.

Obsidian Entertainment, formed by a group of Black Isle alumni after Interplay closed Black Isle, crafted the sequel to *KotOR*, adding an Influence value to the alignment system, to track the extent to which NPCs were open to persuasion by the player. This is a natural extension of *Fallout*’s Reputation – a single number that determines whether word of the player’s altruistic or self-interested actions (represented by the Karma value) has reached a given NPC. It contrasts starkly with *PST*, where a sufficiently charismatic player can persuade an NPC to virtually any course of action. Such NPC-specific player attributes, combined with branchy dialogue trees, can create richer player-NPC interactions and allow a developer to pose more interesting ethical dilemmas to the player.

Still, the strength of Gygax-model CRPGs like *PST* suggest it may not be the inherent restrictiveness of the Gygax model holding back North American CRPGs, but rather CRPG developers using it as a crutch to simplify characterization and storytelling. Because Good and Evil are defined so clearly by the Gygax model, it’s extremely easy to create cookie-cutter characters and railroad

players along a couple of paths toward the all-too-common “Good ending” and “Evil ending” – that is, if an “Evil ending” is even included.

Settings, graphics and physics are becoming increasingly complex in CRPGs, and player alignment models need to grow along with them. The kinds of deficiencies revealed by NWN’s looting Paladins have to be resolved, but there is much further to go. Obsidian has explored Evil player alignments more deeply than most, and they’ve made an effort to chart some of the ethical murk between the Gygax model’s well-defined Good and Evil, but even they have yet to stray too far. We need an ambitious developer to take that first complete step outside the long shadow of the Gygax model, abandon Good and Evil, and treat in-game ethics with the detail and nuance they deserve. [COMMENTS](#)

Raja Doake is a would-be writer in engineer’s clothing who lives in Ontario, Canada, and spends way too much time thinking about this stuff.

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