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# Video Games and Contemporary Esotericism:

A study of eco-spirituality and the  
Grand Polemical Narrative in Final  
Fantasy VII

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**Abstract:** The concern of this essay is how religious change can be understood through the way that conceptions of religiosity and spirituality are represented in popular culture. The success of works of popular culture are due to the ability of these works to resonate with a large number of people, which suggests that popular culture reflects the hopes, desires, fears and anxieties of these people. The object of study for the essay was the video game Final Fantasy VII, released in the late 1990's. An analysis of the religious content of the game was made, which in turn was put in relation to the "Superstory"; an analytical framework proposed by Jeffery Kripal that deals with popular culture from the early- to mid twentieth century. The result of the comparison was that in Final Fantasy VII, sacrality is oriented towards a cosmotheistic world view of a spiritualized nature, and not towards the transcendent monotheistic world view of the Superstory. Likewise, where in the Superstory technology and scientific progress was sacralized, Final Fantasy portrayed these in a more sinister, negative light. This likely reflects the diminishing faith in science that characterizes the late-modern society, as well as the growing concern for environmental issues, concerns that are expressed through fantastic stories in popular culture.

**Keywords:** Final Fantasy VII, video games, popular culture esotericism, Jeffrey Kripal, Superstory, occulture, eco-enchantment.

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# 1 Introduction

This essay deals with the religious, or more specifically esoteric, themes and narratives found in the video game *Final Fantasy VII* (1997). As a relatively new cultural medium, video games constitute an exciting body of research; not only is the activity of playing so widespread that it might be safe to assume that every young person in the Western world in some way has access to digital games, but the form of the media itself allows for a close interaction with the cultural content presented in games in a unique way found in no other cultural expression. While the topic of religion in video games is slowly gaining interest among scholars of religion, the studies done so far has focused on the occurrence of traditional, “mainstream” religious thematics, regarding representations of, for example, Christian symbols or parallels to Buddhist philosophies. Esotericism in video games, however, is a topic that has been relatively overlooked. This is a fact that is somewhat unfortunate, in that esoteric themes are probably amongst the dominant representations of religion within contemporary popular culture, if not *the* most dominant one. Drawing heavily upon genres such as fantasy and science fiction, both heavily inspired by esoteric traditions, many games features themes such as magic, alchemy, demons, witches or aliens. Other common themes are secret societies that resembles the Order of the Rosy Cross or mythical representations of the Illuminati. Most importantly, however, is the depiction of the spiritual transformation of the self through these themes. Studying video games with the gaze of the esoteric scholar is thus crucial for understanding a large part of the way in which religion is represented therein. The study of religion in video games potentially offers new and important insights and perspectives on the way religion is perceived in contemporary society, the way it changes and the role it might come to play in the future.

## 1.1 Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study is to investigate the role that certain video games play in reproducing occultural, esoteric plausibility structures in contemporary society, and how shifting social contexts are mirrored in this occulture. As my object of study, I have chosen the by now classic game *Final Fantasy VII* (1997). The Final Fantasy-series, developed by Square, occupies a more or less iconic status among digital role playing games, and its seventh installation is arguably the pinnacle of the series. Not only is it the most sold Final Fantasy game,<sup>1</sup> it is was the second most sold game to the Playstation console, being distributed in almost 10 million copies.<sup>2</sup> There has been a number of

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1 "Most sold Final Fantasy games": <http://www.vgchartz.com/gamedb/?name=final+fantasy>

2 "Most sold Playstation games": <http://www.vgchartz.com/platform/5/playstation/>

spin-offs based on the game, including the prequel *Crisis Core* (2007), the sequel *Dirge of Cerberus* (2006), the animated short film *Last Order* (2005), and the full-length animated film *Advent Children* (2005). However, it is still the original game that has received the most recognition and love from fans of role playing games for now close to two decades. The leading video game site IGN calls Final Fantasy VII the “RPG<sup>3</sup> by which all others are to be measured”.<sup>4</sup> It is the game that has been on gamefaqs.com's chart of the top 100 most popular games for the longest time (well above 5600 days at the time of writing),<sup>5</sup> and the web page fanfiction.net lists as many as twenty-nine *thousand* works of fan fiction on the topic Final Fantasy VII.<sup>6</sup> Popularity aside, the game features one of the most intricate stories in gaming history, and in the very centre of its compelling narrative lies questions of religion and spirituality. Starting with the assumption that the success of a work of culture is its ability to resonate with the people that encounters it because it mirror their cultural environment,<sup>7</sup> I hold that the religious themes of Final Fantasy VII cannot be fundamentally unrelated to the success of the game. The game has been able to resonate with a large number of people because they have been able to relate to its content, allowing the game to reflect, reinforce and reproduce certain ideas present in this content. Analysing the game and trying to map these ideas will likely result in a picture that correspond to certain currents of contemporary spirituality, and reflecting certain attitudes towards religion.

The theoretical basis for the analysis will be the “Superstory”, an analytical framework devised by Jeffrey Kripal in his volume *Mutants and Mystics – Science Fiction, Superhero Comics and the Paranormal* for understanding mystical and esoterical tropes in genre of Superhero comic books. As such, it is based on studies similar to the one that will be conducted in this essay, but with one important difference; the genres that are subject to the study of Kripal, Superhero comic books and science fiction novels, have had their formative period in the early to mid-twentieth century, during the peak of modernity. Final Fantasy VII was on the other hand release just before the turn of the millennium, in a society that is usually described as late modern. If the content of popular cultural works mirrors the cultural environment these works are products of, we might therefore expect that the religious thematics of Final Fantasy VII should differ some from the material that Kripal has analysed. The contents of *Mutants & Mystics* thus provides an interesting base for not only exploring the way that religion is reproduced in popular culture, but also to add to the understanding of how culturally conditioned representations of religious and spiritual ideas are shifting as society

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3 An abbreviation of “Role Playing Game”. This game genre is further discussed in section 2.1.

4 “IGN”: <http://www.ign.com/games/final-fantasy-vii/ps-494>

5 “GameFAQs”: <http://www.gamefaqs.com/features/topgames/>

6 “FanFiction”: <https://www.fanfiction.net/game/Final-Fantasy-VII/>

7 Kennet Granholm, “The Secular, the Post-secular and the Esoteric in the Public Sphere” in *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem & Kennet Granholm (Equinox Pub., Sheffield, 2013), 327.

changes. Since the object of study disseminated in this essay is a video game and not a comic book, there might be reason to wonder whether the Superstory really is applicable as a theory for the stated purpose. However, while there might be differences between the two media, they also have several aspects in common. Both have until fairly recently been viewed as forms of “garbage” culture. Both are geared towards a young, “nerdy” audience. Both offers a mixture of easy going, childish or even pubertal elements together with more serious themes of existential and spiritual nature. Most important of all, neither are created in a vacuum, but are products of their cultural context, and mirrors the wishes, dreams, hopes, anxieties and fears of the time of their creation.

The research question thus reads as follows: “How does the mythemes of the 'Superstory' correspond to the occultural, narrative content of Final Fantasy VII, in relation to the late-modern society?” In order to answer this question, I intend to do a textual analysis of the dialogue content of the game. As religion will be seen as the orientation of human cultural systems towards sacred objects (further elaborated in section 4.1), this analysis aims to delineate the objects of sacrality in the world of the game. My basis for understanding the religious themes of the game will be the historiographic approach to Western Esotericism suggested by Hanegraaff, as well as the contemporary spiritual discourse here referred to as “eco-enchantment”. Both will be accounted for in sections 4.3 and 4.4 of this thesis respectively. The religious content of Final Fantasy VII will than be compared to that of the Superstory (further elaborated in part 3) in order to see in what ways sacrality is constructed, which objects are deemed as sacred, and how it differs between the game and the Superstory. Lastly, I will discuss this comparison in relation to the difference between the high modern and late modern societies, and the role popular culture plays in reproducing religious world views. My understanding of these subjects are discussed in sections 4.4, 4.1 and 4.2 respectively.

However, before proceeding to do this, let's do a brief survey of the contemporary landscape of popular culture, and religion in video games.

## ***1.2 Religion in Video Games***

When secularisation theorists in the mid twentieth century pondered the future of religion, their forecast seemed clear; religion was gradually disappearing from the face of the Western world. Less and less people went to church and less and less people proclaimed a belief in God. The population of the West was seemingly losing interest in religious matters; not least, it was believed, because that an increasing number of people were receiving secular education. As such, religion had simply become unnecessary for the modern citizen who now had access to rational, scientific

explanations for just about everything they might come to encounter in life. While some secularisation theorists, such as sociologist Bryan Wilson, was of the opinion that religion in the future would be practised only by some few fanatics involved in world rejecting sects, others, such as Steve Bruce, thought that it would go away altogether.<sup>8</sup> The one thing that everyone agreed on was that it would certainly not be gaining in popularity. As we all know by now, they were wrong. The popularity of several new religious movements and the New Age-culture are usually brought forward as evidence that the demise of religion has never been further away than it is today.<sup>9</sup> My concern in this essay is not, however, people's *involvement* in any new, hip, spiritual movement. Instead, I will focus on how people are *exposed* to religious ideas through the consumption of various kinds of popular culture; in this case video games.

When considered from the perspective of secularisation theory, it may seem somewhat odd that a people that is on the verge of rejecting God would spend so much time and money to indulge themselves in stories that overflows with religious symbolism. Surely, a truly secularized society that has done away with its old myths would not care for new stories of irrational, made up beliefs? Yet, that is precisely what the people of today's Western world does; not only are such stories popular, they are the basis for many of the most successful novels, films and video games of today. To survey just a few of the religiously themes games, we can have a look at for example *Castlevania* (1986), where the hero fights his way through the castle of the vampire Dracula armed with a whip and, you guessed it, a cross. In the historically oriented strategy game *Age of Empires* (1997) the player utilizes monks to convert enemy troops to join his or her side. Likewise, the central theme of *The Legend of Zelda – Ocarina of Time* (1998) is the so called “triforce”, an object containing all the power of “the three Goddesses”, and the struggle between the hero Link and the evil Ganon to gain control over this object. In *Breath of Fire* (1993), the creators utilizes the Asian spiritual symbol of the dragon to represent the awakening of an immense, super-natural power within the protagonist Ryu. On the whole this suggests, I will argue, that interest in religion is not declining but rather changing, shifting from what is referred to as “traditional” modes of religion to new ones. We find expression of this shift in popular culture, as will be argued in this essay.

### **1.3 Are Video Games Anti-Religion?**

Among the games of today, a somewhat recurring theme is that of deicide. Aside from

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<sup>8</sup> See Judith Fox, “Secularization” in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, 2. ed., ed. John Hinnells (Routledge, London, 2010) and Christopher Partridge *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Volume 1 Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*, (T & T Clark International, London, 2005) for a more thorough discussion.

<sup>9</sup> Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 1*, 46.



employing a wide array of religious tropes, the main object of these games is, in one way or another, to kill or defeat God himself. The final boss of *Final Fantasy VI* (1994), Kefka, is not only a god, but bears an eerily resemblance to the *Pietà*-statue by Michelangelo, depicting the Virgin Mary holding the crucified body of Jesus in her arms, and the battle with him is accompanied by baroque organ music. *Xenogears* (1998) ends with the killing of the Creator, and *Chrono Trigger* (1995) with a battle against the entity Lavos, who is revealed to have been the source of mankind's development of intellectual as well as spiritual powers. In *God of War* (2005), the hyper-masculine main character Kratos not only wreaks havoc in a world of ancient Greek mythology, but ends up slaying both Ares and Zeus in the process.

This has led many to take the view that these games present a narrative that is essentially critical of religion. A YouTube video named "Why Final Fantasy is Anti-Religion<sup>10</sup>", arguing for the same thesis, have at the moment of writing close to one and a half million views, and online forum discussions about this topic range from Christian players wondering whether they should take offence<sup>11</sup>, to atheists stating it is "one of the best things about the game<sup>12</sup>". Aside from the online gaming community, scholars have also drawn the same conclusion, such as claiming that "...*Final Fantasy XIII* frequently include negative depictions of religion".<sup>13</sup>

While these popular and scholarly analyses might seem understandable, they do tend to overlook a rather important element of these games; the story of deicide is often told alongside the story of esoteric, personal transcendence. More often than not, the god that is slain is not the benign Father, the true creator of the universe that offer redemption and grace, but rather an imposter or usurper that, aside from threatening to destroy the world, stands in the hero's way of receiving spiritual liberty and true knowledge about himself. Further, that which follow the slaying of the god is seldom some sort of atheistic Utopia, where the death of the imposter god leads to a disenchanted world cleansed of all irrationality. More often than not, the hero instead reaches spiritual insight, transcends his or hers personal limitations, and in the process the true, spiritual order of the universe is restored. These types of stories thus closely resembles those of esoteric myths. The antagonists are all variations of the *Demiurge* of late-antique *gnosticism*,<sup>14</sup> whom the protagonist must

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10 "Why Final Fantasy is Anti-Religion": <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLhiWw3pzQk>

11 "Final Fantasy Forums": <http://www.finalfantasyforums.net/threads/43265-Final-Fantasy-s-religious-themes-should-one-be-offended>

12 "The Thinking Atheist": <http://www.thinkingatheist.com/forum/Thread-Final-Fantasy-games-are-anti-religion>

13 Robert Geraci, "Theological Productions: The Role of Religion in Video Game Design", *Cultural Perspectives of Video Games: From Designer to Player*, ed. Adam L. Brackin & Natacha Guyot, (Oxford Inter-Disciplinary Press, New York, 2012), 201.

14 Gnosticism was a proto-esoteric Christian current that flourished during late antiquity that, based upon a strict dualism between matter and spirit, held that the Lord of the Old Testament was not the true God, but an evil, petty imposter, the *Demiurge*. Through mystical insight, man could achieve true knowledge, *gnosis*, and through that knowledge end his separation from the true divinity. For a brief introduction to gnosticism, see introductory chapter

overcome. Kefka of Final Fantasy VI ascended to godhood by disrupting the balance of the three Goddesses of Magic, and must be defeated in order to restore that balance. In God of War, Kratos goes through the game with iron shackles literally bound to his wrists, that are broken when he finally defeats Ares, and in the sequels *God of War II* (2007) and *III* (2010), his adversary is Zeus, whom he battles in order for himself to become the king of Olympus. This narrative of deicide and transcendence is also told, perhaps in the most obvious way, in *Baldur's Gate* (1998), where the protagonist finds out he or she is the bastard child of a god, and then goes on to battle human beings, demons and other gods alike in order to ascend to godhood.

Because of this, I would say that many of the games that gets associated with anti-religious notions are, on the contrary in fact imbued with spiritually significant ideas. These ideas are, however, not those of the orthodoxy of traditional religions, but draws from traditions that historically have been considered deviant; esoteric traditions. Such themes are by no means exclusive for video games. Rather, they are in some form present in every form of mass media, and form the backbone of several pop-cultural genres such as those already mentioned of fantasy and science-fiction. The expression of the esoteric in popular culture will in this essay be referred to as “occulture”, further elaborated on in section 4.2.

## **1.4 Thesis Outline**

After having stated the purpose and research question in the Introductory part, as well as given a brief overview of the religious and esoteric themes present in video game, I will in part 2 of the thesis move on to discuss the limits of its scope, as well as issues regarding the methodology of this type of study. The video game media is a heterogeneous one, and it is therefore necessary to distinguish what particular genre the game disseminated belongs to in order to chose the appropriate method of analysing its contents. Final Fantasy VII is a role playing game, whose focus is on character development and storyline enacted through the textual statements of the characters of the game. As such, it will be these statements that will be subject to the analysis, whom is accessed in the form of two separate transcriptions of the game found online, not by conducting any actual playing. The analysis will focus mainly on *game narrative*, that is the events central to the storyline of the, and the *game world*, meaning the general information of the universe that makes up Final Fantasy VII that is portioned out during the course of the game.

In part 3, I will account for the Superstory as the theoretical framework of the essay. When it comes to the way that religious world views and popular culture interacts with each other, one of

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in Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke's *The Western Esoteric Traditions – A Historical Introduction*, (Oxford University Press, New York, 2008).

the foremost studies is found in Jeffrey Kripal's volume *Mutants and Mystics – Science Fiction, Superhero Comics and the Paranormal*. The material that is researched consists of the mystical experiences of authors of science fiction novels and superhero comics. What brings the book such merit, however, is not just the material in it self, but the way that Kripal puts the presented works in their cultural context; both historical, as a development of theosophic philosophy, as well as that of the specific societal circumstances of the time of their creation. In doing this, he shows how the authors have interpreted mystical experiences through the available body of religious ideas present in their respective periods of authorship, and used these interpretations as the stuff of their creative activity, and thus provided the interpretative basis for the next generation of mystics. This is a clear indication of the role popular culture play in reproducing religious plausibility structures in the modern society, thus providing an interesting case for comparing with popular culture from the late modern society.

As for part 4, in the first three sections I will strengthen my argument regarding the relation between popular culture, religion in the late modern society and esotericism. Although both “popular culture” and “religion” are terms that are fairly problematic, I will treat them as the “lived, everyday experiences of ordinary people” and “cultural systems oriented towards the sacred” respectively. These acts in conjunction with each other, and create a loop where popular culture draws from the cultural reservoir of religious ideas of their audiences, who in turn will reinterpret and reproduce these ideas in their everyday lives. As of later years, a dominant portion of the contemporary works of popular culture have been geared towards untraditional, non-Christian religiosity. These works will be referred to as “occulture”, in that they are cultural works depicting occult themes; paganism, witchcraft, alchemy and magic just to name a few, all belonging to the domain of Western Esotericism. Western Esotericism is understood in terms of the “Grand Polemical Narrative”, formulated by Wouter Hanegraaff. This approach suggests that “esotericism” is a polemical construct used by Christian theologians to define Christianity against, a “pagan Other”. As such, Western Esotericism has spawned from the tension between the world view of monotheistic religion, where the divine is transcendent, and cosmotheistic religion, where the divine is immanent. The Grand Polemical Narrative is expressed in Final Fantasy VII in terms of “eco-enchantment”. Eco-enchantment is a religious discourse common within Paganism and New Age where nature is sacralized due the divine immanence, whereas monotheism is seen as destructive. The last two sections deals with video games in general, and Final Fantasy in particular. Although video game research is a growing field, few scholars involved with it has shown interest in the religious aspects of games, in spite of it being an important element in many games. As for those

that do conduct studies of religion in games, none have taken the perspective of Western Esotericism into account, although some authors have suggested the potentiality of such studies. This is, once again, in spite of the fact that esotericism is one of the most dominant forms of religious imagery that are present in video games and, as I intend to show, several of the studies would benefit from this perspective.

In part 5, I turn to the actual game itself. I will provide a summary of the game narrative relating to esoteric themes, as well as account for the game world, structured into *game lore*, *groups and actors* in the game, and the *locations*, that is towns and places of Final Fantasy VII.

The analysis is conducted in part 6 of the essay, where the content of the previous part will be discussed in relation to the Superstory. Here I will show how figures representing transcendent, monotheistic deities are constructed as destructive and sinister, in contrast to the immanent, spiritual qualities of nature and the Planet, which are portrayed as healing and benevolent. Likewise, modern disenchanting science is depicted as exploitive and corrupt, contrasted against spiritual awareness of the enchanted nature. I will argue that this is due to the ideological differences between the modern and late modern societies, in which a growing concern for nature, and a loss of faith in the bettering of humanity through science, has occurred.

The essay ends with part 7, where I will summarize my conclusions, as well as take a step back and discuss them from a broader perspective, and what might be gained from the further study of esotericism in video games as well as in popular culture in general.

## 2 Method

### 2.1 *Limiting the Scope and the Case of RPG's*

When setting out to do a ludologically<sup>15</sup> oriented study of religion such as this, the first consideration should be the wide diversity and heterogeneity of video games. Just as in film or literature, there are multiple genres of video games, all exhibiting radically different structures and objectives, as well as being geared towards different types of audiences. While the popular Swedish gaming web site Loaded lists eleven different genres,<sup>16</sup> scholarly typologies such as Apperley's recognizes only four: simulation, strategy, action and role playing games.<sup>17</sup> The objective of simulation games might be obvious; simulating a real world activity such driving a car or fantasy activities such as flying a space ship. Strategy games are about efficient management of virtual resources, and action games are characterized by being "intensively performative", requiring the player to "selecting the correct inputs, while in other genres of video games, the player will merely select the desired action and the computer will determine the performance of that action."<sup>18</sup> The objective of role playing games (RPG's) on the other hand, emphasizes character development, both by enhancing the player character's strength and abilities, but also in relation to an often intricate storyline. "RPG's operate intertextually, as the context of the game is often larger than the individual game".<sup>19</sup>

Final Fantasy VII falls within the last category. While the game does indeed contain both strategical as well as performative aspects, the main focus lies on story-telling and character development, mainly through dialogue between playable and non-playable characters. This is made evident by the script containing the dialogue, spanning well over 500 pages. While performative aspects related to the game play, and visual aspects related to the game aesthetics does indeed play an integral part in the experience of the game, their relevance are of secondary importance for the purpose of this study, which will consist mainly of textual analysis. It will be undertaken by reading and analysing the textual statements which make up the story-line of the game.

15 "The study of games", from the latin word *ludere*, meaning "to play". The term denotes digital games as well as traditional games and sports, and is widely used in scientific journals such as *Game Studies* when discussing the study of video games.

16 Being Action, Fighting, Music, Puzzle, Platform, Racing, Role Playing Games, Sport, Strategy, Adventure and Miscellaneous. "Loading": [http://loading.se/game\\_database.php](http://loading.se/game_database.php)

17 Thomas H. Apperley, "Genre and Game Studies: Toward a critical approach to video game genres", *Simulating Gaming* (37:6), 2006.

18 Apperley, "Game Genres", 16.

19 Apperley, "Game Genres", 18.

## **2.2 Textual analysis**

I hold that a text such that of Final Fantasy VII carries within it a representation of the world in that it is a product of discourse. According to theories of discourse, such as for example the one presented by Norman Fairclough, no word can carry meaning by itself; instead, the meaning of a term or statement is created the interplay between it and other terms or statements relating to each other through specific discourses.<sup>20</sup> By taking on an essentially normative character by using strategies of inclusion and exclusion, these discourses go on to construct a representation of the make up of the world.<sup>21</sup> As such, it is by discursive complexes that a group of religious people might be portrayed as either dangerous or harmless by describing them as either the derogatory “cult” or the more neutral “congregation”. Both alternatives carry a set of complex systems of meaning, in the end mutually exclusive to the other.

When analysing the textual statements in Final Fantasy VII, it will thus be in their relation to each other, who utters them, and whom they are uttered to. By doing this, certain actors, views and attitudes will be allocated to certain values regarding what is good or evil, and true or false, resulting in the world view presented in the game to be made clear.

## **2.3 To Play or Not to Play**

It could be argued that perhaps *the* most important method for ludological studies would be to actually play the game one is researching.<sup>22</sup> There definitely lies some truth in such a statement; researching a game without playing it might be likened to researching a film without watching it, or a symphony without hearing it. Even though some parts of a game might be accessible through, for example, written account, certain dimensions not conveyable through text is bound to be lost. While this may seem somewhat self evident to some, it does entail to a crucial problem of accessibility. The study of religion in video games is entirely limited, more or less, to the scholars with enough time and interest to indulge in the act of playing. There are few, if any, short cuts into a video game; there are no ways of skipping a seemingly uninteresting chapter as in the case of literature, and no way of fast-forwarding, such as in the case of film. A game must be dealt with in its entirety, from beginning and to end. This fact is even more apparent when considering RPG's. The games of the genre are often of considerable length in both content as well as playing time. For example, the time it takes to play through Final Fantasy VII might well exceed 30 hours, or even the double depending

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20 Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse – Textual Analysis for Social Research*, (Routledge, New York, 2003), 10.

21 Fairclough, *Analyzing Discourse*, 124.

22 Emphasized, among others, by Heidbrink et al in “Theorizing Religion in Digital Games – Perspectives and Approaches” in *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, vol. 5, 2014, and Franz Mäyrä in *An Introduction to Game Studies: Games in Culture*, (SAGE, Los Angeles, 2008).

on how thorough the player decides to be. This problem of accessibility likely plays a part in the neglect video games have met within the study of religion. Most people invested in the field simply have not got the time it takes to get to the bottom of a game.

It might be of relevance to ask whether my prior involvement with the game that is the object of study in this essay is actually beneficial for my analysis of it. It could certainly be argued that I am not approaching my material with an impartial view, in that I am already well aware of the story that unfolds within the game, have already drawn my conclusions, and have had a long time to cement my initial interpretation of it. Is it really possible for me to find anything new through this study, or will it just serve to confirm my previously held views? More so, to what extent is my comprehension of Final Fantasy VII based on outer-game sources? An important part in video game culture is that one does not only play a game, but proceeds to share the gaming experience with other players on online message boards, discussing how to play it, when to play it, what one likes or dislikes about it, as well as speculate over the meaning of certain events.<sup>23</sup> I have done just that, and so my knowledge of the game is informed by an unmeasurable amount of input from other people, and not just exclusively from the game in it self. Of course, this poses somewhat of a problem, as do all insider perspectives in qualitative research, in that my ability to be objective and critical towards the material might be put into question. While there might be a valid point in such concerns, I do believe that in the end, my prior knowledge of the game will prove to be less of a burden and more of an advantage. Although having preconceived notions that risks to result in dubious interpretations, at the same time my extensive knowledge of the game allows me to see subtleties and nuances that might pass the less well-versed scholar by. Furthermore, aside from knowing Final Fantasy VII very well, I am also very familiar with the other games of the series as well as the genre of Japanese RPG's in general. Thus I am able to distinguish the generic conventions, stylistic elements and common tropes of these type of games from those themes that are specific to Final Fantasy VII. As culture of all kinds are always made up of complex webs of references that creates meaning, all cultural studies ultimately benefits from taking the broadest base of knowledge as possible into consideration. That being said, in my analysis, I will be careful to avoid reading in preconceived meaning that might not actually be present in the game itself. The basis for the analysis remains the body of text inherent to the actual game, and the meaning conveyed through it. My knowledge whose origin is from outside the game will be used to inform the analysis, not as its basis.

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<sup>23</sup> Marcus Wiemker & Jan Wysocki, "'When people pray a god is born... This god is you!' An Introduction to Religion and God in Digital Games", *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, vol 5, 2014, 203.

## **2.4 The Final Fantasy VII Transcripts**

In spite of all this, I will, when conducting my research on Final Fantasy VII, *not* sit down to play it. While I do have played the game extensively in the past, I will be referring mainly to two transcriptions of the manuscript of the game found online. While these are in no way official releases of the script, and the authors are only known by their internet aliases, I have found them to be accurate when taken together. There For most part, it is the transcription offered by the homepage of “Letao”.<sup>24</sup> Although the website in itself suggests that “Letao” is no more than a computer enthusiast, it offers nothing more than some thoughts on Final Fantasy games and a couple of apparently home made programs, it actually contains the most accurate version of the script. This is because the text has been extracted from the files of the actual game, and then placed in chronological order by the author of the homepage. As such, no part of the dialogue is missing. Since Final Fantasy VII features several hundred non-playable characters that can be spoken to, many of whose dialogue changes at certain parts of the game, a player runs great risk of missing some of the dialogues when playing the game. Apart from that, although the game offers nine playable characters, each with their own unique dialogue options, the player is allowed to use only three at a time. As such, different combinations of characters will result in slightly different set of dialogues. Since the Letao-transcript is extracted from the game, every single dialogue option is ensured to be present.

This transcript is however not enough to fully account for the events of the game, in that it is abruptly cut short approximately three quarters into the game. For some reason, “Letao” sadly never finished it. Because of this, I turn a transcript made by “Little Chiba” when regarding the latter part of the game.<sup>25</sup> The Chiba-transcript has been made by playing the game and writing down the dialogue word by word. While such a monumental and ambitious task is to be admired, this transcript do suffer from the absence of a variety of minor dialogues options, likely due to the transcriber not being thorough enough when playing the game. There are also several spelling errors. This transcript is of course not ideal, but since only the account of the last part of the game is effected, this should only impose minor consequences for the quality of this thesis. In the end, even this transcript is accurate in regard to the major plot of them game, and thus sufficiently serves the purpose of accounting for the events.

## **2.5 Approaches to the Study of Video Games**

Since the study of religion in video games is a relatively new discipline, there are few, if any, set

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24 "Letao": <http://letao.is-a-geek.net/ff7script/>

25 "Little Chiba": <http://www.rpgamer.com/games/ff/ff7/ff7cscript.html>



guidelines for how such research should be conducted. The starting point for this essay, however, will be the approach laid out by Heidbrink et al regarding cultural studies of video games. They suggests that there are five perspectives to consider; “game narratives”, “game aesthetics”, “game world”, “game play” and “gaming culture”. These elements combine to allow for a deep immersion of the player into the game. This immersion, likened to swimming in an ocean, totally surrounded by water, refers to the state where the players fully identifies with the contents of the game, momentarily having his or hers entire sensory apparatus engulfed in the experience of playing. This, it is stated, is the objective that games try to achieve.<sup>26</sup>

*Game narrative* refers to the story-line of the game, it is constituted of several different aspects which can be analysed in relation to religious discourse. Heidbrink et al suggests that these aspects are: (1) the narrative script or plot, (2) the narrative written by the player by chosen a certain set of actions, (3) the narrative created by commercials, text on the box and reviews that convince the player to buy the game, (4) the narrative created by cut scenes introducing or following the completion of a quest, (5) the microstories told by nonplaying characters and (6) the narratives created by the players themselves when writing and talking about the game on internet forums, through works of fan fiction, or dressing up as their favourite character in *Cosplay* events.<sup>27</sup> Due to the scope of this essay, my approach to narrative will be in the first sense only, as the plot of the game.

*Game aesthetics* is defined as the “role of apperception within the process of knowledge production, including all kinds of sensory stimuli as well as the actors’ communication and mediation on the topic.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, this category concerns the visual representations of the elements of the game, such as character- and interior design as well as level layout, but also other aspects adding to the overall ambience of the game, such as in-game music. Since visual and aural elements offers a very direct way of making relations to certain cultural settings, the aesthetics plays an important role in referring to religious themes in video games. The style of a church, design of a temple, the presence of occult looking jewellery among the characters, or the utilization of religious music, such as an organ mass, are all ways that allows the game designers to tap into the cultural reservoir of the player to construct a multifaceted, coherent and meaningful world.

The aspect of *gameplay* considers the conventions and limitations of a game. These include the objective of the game, the rules for achieving said objective and the controllers. All in all, the *gameplay* is the way through which the player can interact with the game world and what actually

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26 Heidbrink et al, “Theorizing Religion”, 31.

27 Heidbrink et al, “Theorizing Religion”, 19.

28 Heidbrink et al, “Theorizing Religion”, 24

makes the game a game. While this category might seem somewhat mechanical and irrelevant for cultural studies, it does play an integrated role in the way the player is allowed to related to certain elements of the game, such as religious ones. For example, what amount of choice is the player given in relation to the story? When dealing with, say, a priest or a deity, are there multiple ways to respond, giving the player agency, or is there only one predetermined set of actions? Further, if there are several ways of playing a game, are any of these encouraged over others? If a choice is given between using magic or physical weapons in battle, does the rule set favour one over the other? The gameplay, thus, is relevant not only in merit of being the link between the game and the player, but also because the limitations provided by it tell us much about how religion is represented in the game.

*Game world*, is described to be “the result of a game’s aesthetics, its narrative and its possibilities in the communication between the player and the game.”<sup>29</sup> While a narrow view might be taken on game world, limited to the strictly spatial aspects of a game such as its level design, the geography through which the player is navigating, or the places in which the story unfolds, Heidbrink et al suggests a wider, more exhaustive view need to be taken. Aside from the spatial dimensions, a game world is constituted of “lore, stories about it[...] societies of characters can be elements of it: royal courts, fantasy tribes, space congresses, church congregations, godly pantheons, etc, of course highly depending on the setting and the story.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, all the elements that combine into the construction of a coherent universe in which the immersion of the player takes place. In this way, the game world functions as a framework under which the narrative, aesthetics and mechanics are arranged. In Final Fantasy VII, this can be illustrated by how magic is depicted. Magic is on the one hand a force that is manipulated by the player in order to gain advantages in combat, and in this way relates strictly to the objective of winning battles. At the same time, however, magic is explained to have an ontologically fundamental place in the world, connecting it to the narrative of a living nature and the sacralized Planet; that is, it has a central place in the game world. Lastly, the characters that are proficient in the use of magic are usually of a smaller, frailer physical built, creating a visual representation of the duality between the magical/spiritual and the material. Thus, the game world is where the game narrative, game aesthetics and game play converge.

*Gaming culture*, focuses on the reception of a game by its players, and the way people express their relation to a certain game, mostly in terms of fan art, fan fiction and online message boards.

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29 Heidbrink et al, “Theorizing Religion”, 30.

30 Heidbrink et al, “Theorizing Religion”, 31

Since the current study is of the textual kind, the main focus will be on the game narrative, and how certain parts of the game world relate to this. The game narrative will be treated not merely as the plot, but specifically as the central story-line, that is, the chain of events that makes the story proceed forward. The game world, on the other hand, consists of all the secondary stories, side tracks and background information provided during the course of the game that might not necessarily advance the plot, but deepening the player's understanding of it. While both the aesthetic sides of the game and the game mechanics also play an integral role in the players immersion into the game, these elements are not of textual kind and thus fall outside the scope of the study. Likewise, while the gaming culture's reception of Final Fantasy VII may indeed point to the impact the game has had, it adds little to the understanding of the religious narrative of the game from the point of the game in itself. Thus, the aesthetics, mechanics and cultural reception of Final Fantasy VII will not be dealt with explicitly in this essay. However, due to the integrated way these categories are connected to one another, questions regarding game play and aesthetics will be briefly discussed in their relation to the narrative structure of the game.

Lastly, Heidbrink et al hints that if you are a gamer-scholar, "you might be a nerd."<sup>31</sup> I guess I'll have to admit to that.

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31 Heidbrink et al, "Theorizing Religion", 42

### 3 Theory

The theoretical basis for this essay will be the typology suggested by Jeffrey Kripal, called the Superstory. This typology is developed in the book *Mutants and Mystics – Science Fiction, Superhero Comics and the Paranormal*. As the subtitle suggests, the volume deals with themes of religion and mysticism in the genres of Superhero comic books and science fiction novels. The assumption that is the basis of the book is that these themes are by no means irrelevant or superficial ornaments of the genres, but instead reflects deeply, mystical understandings of the world. The comic books and novels he deals with are not treated as mere childish fantasies, but as modern mythologies that can “be fruitfully read as cultural transformations of real-life paranormal experiences, and how there is no way to disentangle the very public pop-cultural products from the very private paranormal experiences.”<sup>32</sup> Our way of structuring reality and what we conceive of as being meaningful and true is created, Kripal argues, through a “constant loop of Consciousness and Culture”;<sup>33</sup> therefore, not only is it not uncommon for mystical and paranormal experiences to be expressed through popular culture, but popular culture will condition the way people experience the mystical and the paranormal. This relation is then explored by on the one hand analysing the mystical themes in several of the constitutive works of the Superhero- and science fiction genres, but also by putting these themes in relation to accounts of mystical and paranormal experiences of the authors of these works. This results in a typology of how mysticism is constructed within these genres which he calls the Superstory.

Admittedly, the concern of this thesis is not with mysticism, but with contemporary forms of Western Esotericism. Although Kripal himself does not explicitly places his work within the field of Western Esotericism (if any, the study he most often refer to is that of East Asian tantric traditions), many of the works he deals with actually do refer heavily to this field. The comic book series *Promethea*, for example, is centred around Kabbalah and the Tree of Life, and author Alan Moore seems well versed in this system. In one episode, Prometha discusses the meaning of the different paths of the Tree of Life; “I think the reason you're here is because the path you're holding it by is this one, route 32. It symbolizes how this path helps mankind grasp the entire system.”<sup>34</sup> The story of the Fantastic Four and Galactus came to being when author Jack Kirby wanted to write about the

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32 Jeffrey Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal*, (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2011), 2.

33 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 5.

34 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 10.

ancient *gnostic* theme of fighting god.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps most importantly for an understanding of these genres as expressions of Western Esotericism, is Kripal's account of how they were influenced by Rosicrucian and theosophical ideas. Not only are these considered as esoteric traditions that deals with theme such as hidden knowledge, magnetism, magic, channelling and the evolution of one's inner, spiritual potential, the spread of the ideas of these traditions were much based on fictitious literature. Rosicrucianism is in itself considered to have begun with the publication of *Fama Fraternitatis* that tells the fictive story of the occult magican Christian Rosenkreuz,<sup>36</sup> and *The Coming Race*, written by self-proclaimed rosicrucian initiate Edward Bulwer-Lytton, is about the protagonist meeting with the “Vril-ya, the coming race that is destined to supplant the human species on the surface.”<sup>37</sup> Not only is the Vril-ya highly evolved beings, they are also in possession of a “mysterious, electromagnetic-spiritual energy”, granting them physical as well as mystical and psychic powers. As for theosophy, Helena Blavatsky's, founder of The Theosophic Society, book *The Secret Doctrine* tells of the evolution of a line of human “Root-Races” imbued with special, spiritual powers, of travel of the “astral plane”, and channelling as a way of communicating with “enlightened beings who are believed to secretly rule the world”.<sup>38</sup> The fantastic works of these and other authors that were practitioners of Western Esotericism are according to Kripal the predecessors of the modern science fiction genre, of which many of these themes are still common generic tropes. Because of this, I hold that the typology holds validity not only when looking at recounts of mystical experiences in popular culture, but for the pop-cultural expressions of esotericism as well.

### **3.1 The Mythemes of the Superstory**

The Superstory consists of seven basic mythemes, which together accounts for the narrative structure in the typical Superhero- or science fiction story. A “mytheme” is the smallest thinkable building block of the structure of a myth, a theme that is bound to reoccur within a myth or set of myths that can be told in several different variations. Being a structuralist theory, individual mythemes cannot be understood in themselves, but are given meaning by their relationship to one another in the myth in its totality. To study the structure of myths it is therefore of importance to take into consideration not just one version of a particular myth, but all its variations or, in the case of Kripal, the genres of Superhero-comics and science fiction as a whole.<sup>39</sup> The mythemes of the

35 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 114.

36 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 43.

37 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 44.

38 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 50.

39 This structural approach to myths was proposed by Claude Levi-Strauss in the article “The Structural Study of Myth”, *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 68, 1955.

Superstory are called as follows: *divinization/demonization, orientation, alienation, radiation, mutation, realization* and *authorization*.

*Divinization/demonization* refers to the idea that mankind for millennia has been under the influence of “forms of intelligence that have appeared under the divine and demonic masks of local mythologies and religions.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, in the universe there exists supernatural beings, which have the powers to help, guide and teach, as well as to trick and deceive human beings. When benevolent, these beings are thought of as divine, and when malevolent thought of as demonic. Mankind has always sought to communicate and negotiate with these beings, since they have been considered to be the source of otherworldly power and protection. With *orientation* is meant the tendency, prevalent in Western cultures, to locate these beings and the source of their power to somewhere other than here; the more distant the better.<sup>41</sup> This allocation might be spatial, such as the city of Atlantis or the centre of the earth; temporal, such as Golden Age of the ancient Greeks or the Satya Yuga of the Hindus; or metaphysical, such as modern interpretations of the Kingdom of Heaven. If we once again turn to *The Coming Race*, we can see the Vril-ya as those which the divinization are oriented towards. The Vril-ya are portrayed as spiritually superior, semi-divine race living in an underground world, far away from the society of the bourgeois, English protagonist. They possess a spiritual power that are used for material as well as spiritual means, including the access of hidden knowledge. And although they are destined to replace humanity, the Englishman of the story expresses hope that humanity might be saved from extermination through “intermixture of race” with the Vril-ya.<sup>42</sup> In this way, they represent path for humans to achieve divinity.

*Alienation* is when the demonic or divine is oriented specifically into outer space. The gods and the demons, according to this narrative, turns out to be aliens descended to earth, travelling from the far reaches of space. “They now watch us. They guide the development of human civilizations. They manipulate our religious beliefs and mythologies.”<sup>43</sup> For example, in Doug Moench's *Man-Gods from Beyond the Star*, greatly influenced by pseudo-scientific conspiracy book *Chariot of the Gods*, the gods of humans are revealed to have in fact been aliens descended from above that have enslaved the humans of primitive societies.<sup>44</sup> These aliens might be benevolent, such as “the Watcher”, from the *Fantastic Four* comic books, who lives on the moon and watcher over humanity. They can also be quite menacing, as the figure of Galactus, also he from *Fantastic Four*, who travels the universe, searching for planets to devour. As for the spiritual potentials of mankind,

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40 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 26.

41 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 27.

42 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 45.

43 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 27.

44 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 117.

Superman is just what his name suggests; a super-human (another term used by Helena Blavatsky) whose physical, moral and mental powers exceeds those of ordinary humans. He also originates not from earth, but from the planet Krypton, a word that incidentally means “hidden” or “occult” in ancient Greek.<sup>45</sup> The references to esotericism are striking. Unsurprisingly, the mytheme of alienation started to arise about the same time as the earth was beginning to be completely explored and mapped. With the development of satellite technology, the surface of the earth could be easily and accurately mapped out, and there were suddenly very few unknown spaces left where people could direct their imagination to wander freely. Ironically, the same technology that had demystified the earth would also lead people to realize just how unimaginable vast outer space really was, which made it a new candidate for the orientation-mytheme. When the entire planet had become known and de-exotified, space provided the last place of mystery.

Fuelled by the discoveries of particle physics and the theory of relativity, *radiation* means the redefinition of the source of divine power as the immense amounts of energy contained within the atom. While it at first glance might be tempting to interpret it as a materialist reduction of the divine, the mytheme of *radiation* is actually quite the opposite. Rather, it breaks down the divide between the material and the spiritual. Matter is, it turns out to be, ultimately energy, “pure potency, a power that is literally everything[...] this force can serve us, transform us, maybe even save us. It can also utterly destroy us.”<sup>46</sup> Since matter and spirit is ultimately the same thing, this means that mastery of the material world can be achieved through spiritual insight. Dr. Manhattan for example, created by Alan Moore, is a seemingly invincible being with the power to end wars. Yet he rather spends his time on planet Mars, where he sits in a lotus position and meditates on the meanings of the perspectives of quantum mechanics.<sup>47</sup> Apart from him, many are the characters of the Marvel-comic books that has achieved super powers through contact with radioactive material; the Fantastic Four, the Hulk and Spiderman, just to name a few. “Indeed, it is something of a industry joke that virtually every Marvel Comics character created in the early 1960s achieved his or her powers from some kind of radioactive accident.”<sup>48</sup>

This is closely related to the next mytheme, *mutation*. Based on the discovery of the DNA-molecule, and the effect that is exerted on it by radiation, it is the way that humans, both as individuals and as a whole, may evolve to the next level of being, spiritually as well as physically. In *The X-Men* comic books, we get to follow a group of adolescents studying at the “Xavier's School for Gifted Youngster.” These are however no ordinary gifted youngsters, but mutants, each

45 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 73.

46 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 27.

47 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 129.

48 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 136.

endowed with their own unique super power. As the story goes, these youngsters all represent the next leap in human evolution through their mutation. However, because their difference makes ordinary humans fear them, they must keep their mutant powers hidden on the threat of persecution. Not only can we draw parallels to Helena Blavatsky's idea of mankind's path of spiritual evolution, but also to the emphasis of secrecy that has characterized many esoteric societies, Gnostics and Freemasons being of the more well known. The character Jean is also quoted in saying that she will study books on telekinetic research in order to “continue to study ways to utilize my mutant power.” In another installation, Professor Xavier faces off with his arch-nemesis Magneto on a “mental plane”; almost a direct reference to the astral plane of The Theosophic Society.<sup>49</sup>

Lastly, we are presented with *realization* and *authorization*. These mythemes revolves around a common conception of authors of science fiction- and superhero literature; that we are all in some ways chained down, parts of a story bigger than ourselves, a story that we “did not write and that we may not even like.”<sup>50</sup> The acts of writing and of creativity are for these people a way of taking control of their own destinies, to authorize their lives themselves. For example, Whitley Strieber's novel *Communion* is written as an account of him being abducted by “the visitors”. The book is his way of dealing with this experience, giving him control over the events.<sup>51</sup> As *realization* and *authorization*, are more oriented towards the specific author's relation to his or hers own creativity, and have less to do with the narratives of their actual works, they will not be used in my analysis of Final Fantasy VII. The relationship between creativity and religious experience is indeed an intriguing one, but since this essay aims to study the narrative content of the game in it self, these mythemes falls without the scope of the study. Exploring *realization* and *authorization* would require statements from the developers of the game, something that I do not have access to. Even if I had access to such accounts, they would not be part of the actual game.

### 3.2 Making sense of the Superstory

While this is the Superstory in a nut-shell, I believe some further points needs to be made. First of all, one might ask whether it is at all fit as a theoretical perspective, and not just a typology? A theory is usually defined as that which *explains* a certain set of facts. A typology, on the other hand, is rather is way to *structure* facts according to certain features. From this perspective, the Superstory is not a theory in that it only structures the thematics of the superhero- and science fiction genres, but offers no clear explanation of how and why they relate to religion as a whole. However, I take a

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49 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 190.

50 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 28.

51 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 296.



somewhat loser approach to theory, in that I hold that it is first and foremost something through which we can *understand* facts. To make a parallel, although for example feminist theories do offer an explanation for inequality, the subjugation of women in patriarchal social power structures, it is not this explanatory feature that makes feminist theories useful in research. What makes them useful and important as theories, are the way in which they allow us to actually understand these patriarchal power structures, and the various ways the structures are imposed. The same can be said for the Superstory. While it may not explicitly explain anything, it does allow us to see and understand how religion is constructed through the sacralizing of specific objects in certain forms of contemporary popular culture. This is done by relating these objects to notions of divinity and spirituality inherent in our culture. The first two mythemes described, *divinization/demonization* and *orientation*, are both fairly ordinary elements in religious myths regarding superhuman powers in general. Whether we look at the story of Abraham and the covenant, the tales of Zeus on top of mount Olympus or the Aztec myth of Quezacoatl, these basic tropes are present; the divine is located somewhere else than where we are. These mythemes are not exclusive to any specific genre but seems to be, if not universal, at least cross-culturally common. The following three mythemes, *alienation*, *radiation* and *mutation*, on the other hand, are instead constitutive traits of the science fiction genre in general. While they do carry strong tendencies of romanticizing natural science and scientific discourse (as already stated, they were all inspired by scientific discoveries within astronomy, particle physics and molecular biology), they do not make up for any specifically spiritual narrative on their own. They are likely to be found within any work of the science fiction genre, and are not exclusive to the Superstory. The Superstory comes into being when mythemes general to religious narratives are integrated with the mythemes of the science fiction genre. Not only do they need to coexist, as in there being both a far away deity as well as aliens in the story, but be integrated and relate to one another. We get the Superstory when the *orientation* is directed towards *alienation*, and when *radiation* and *mutation* is *divinized*. This is what sets this particular narrative apart from others either more traditional myths, or regular science fiction novels.

When taken in its entirety, the Superstory is ultimately about the sacralisation of science. Through it, we can see how divine properties are projected upon the discoveries of modern science in a reconfiguration of sacred objects. When space, atomic energy and the DNA-molecule becomes the objects of human religious endeavours, this also results in scientific theories taking on the status of religious creeds, and technological gadgets becomes the means of religious practice. Theories of quantum mechanics are reinterpreted to understand the process of spiritual transformation, such as in the above case of Dr. Manhattan. Likewise, space ships are imbued with spiritual significance in

that they becomes the way of reaching the divinized, extraterrestrial beings of outer space. In the next part of the essay, I will stake out the theoretical basis of how such reconfigurations of sacred objects takes place, and its relation to popular culture. I will also provide further examples of sacralized views of science, as well as that of sacralized nature, the dominant theme of Final Fantasy VII.

## 4 Previous Research

The aim of this part of the thesis is to provide a base for understanding the religious thematics of Final Fantasy VII, and their relation to contemporary notions of religion. This will be done by first discussing how religion can be understood orientation towards sacred objects, and its relation to popular culture. Then follows a discussion regarding the role of popular culture in spreading esoteric ideas in the contemporary society, ways of looking at esotericism, and two examples of how spiritual reconfiguration can be expressed. These sections relate to the esoteric content of Final Fantasy VII. The last two sections discusses the study of religions in video games in general, and of Final Fantasy-games in particular.

### 4.1 Religion and Popular Culture

Trying to delineate religion and popular culture into two neat, separate categories is everything but a clear cut task. Actually, finding a definition that differentiates the two in any way at all imposes something of a problem. For example, Asprem & Granholm suggests that *religion* should be viewed as a “lived, everyday experience”,<sup>52</sup> Lynch holds that *popular culture* is “the shared environments, practices and resources of everyday life”,<sup>53</sup> and Partridge claims that *culture* in general consists of the “lived experience: the texts, practices and meanings of all people as they conduct their lives.”<sup>54</sup> Making a clear distinction between culture and religion thus seems quite problematic; indeed, Fitzgerald has argued that “religion” holds no value whatsoever as an analytical concept, ought to be abandoned as an autonomous field of research, and should instead be treated as a subcategory of cultural studies.<sup>55</sup> Admittedly, there are some merits to this argument. Looking at it from a broad perspective, human beings are creatures of culture, whose activities are the products of and results in culture. Ultimately, the study of religion is concerned entirely with human activities, and is thus one of cultural activity. However, this does not, I believe, mean that we should abandon the use of “religion” as an analytical concept. While I do not intend to go into an in-depth discussion regarding the value of religion as an analytical category for conceiving the

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52 Egil Asprem & Kennet Granholm, “Introduction”, *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem & Kennet Granholm (Equinox Pub., Sheffield, 2013), 10.

53 Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, (Blackwell Pub., Malden, 2005), 15.

54 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 1*, 187.

55 Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, (Oxford University Press, New York, 2000), 235. More precisely, Fitzgerald argues that “religious studies” indicates that a distinction can be made between that which is “religious”, and that which is “secular”. Since this distinction is empirically impossible to point out, he suggests that “religious studies” should be divided between law studies, cultural studies and ethnography.

negotiations with supernatural power and entities in existential and meaning-making ways, I still hold that “religion”, in being a Western concept, is sufficient when describing Western conceptions of spirituality. It is admittedly an ambiguous term, and might or might not be universally applicable, but rather than pointing towards being unfit as a scholarly concept, this simply highlights the fact that we as scholars cannot strive towards anything more than *working definitions* regarding our object of study, and must steer away from trying to come up with definitions too exhaustive. Thus, I make no claims that my way of perceiving religion is either exhaustive nor universal. At best, it might be general enough to account for the role religion play in the popular cultural milieus of the contemporary Western world in a satisfiable way.

Of all the possible ideas of what religion is *really* about, let me start with those that I believe will *not* result in a fruitful definition for the purpose of this study. First of all, I do not assume that the basis of all religion lies in *belief*. The assumption that religion is predominantly a matter of belief might be one of the most common fallacies made when discussing the concept. That religiosity lies primarily in beliefs is usually attributed to the protestant notion of *sola fide*, and many scholars argue that it might be not be applicable to other religions than protestant Christendom. In most parts of the world, being religious is primarily about partaking in rituals and attending festivals. For many people self-identifying as religious, this is more of a communal identity, the feeling of being a part of a larger collective, and questions regarding the literal truth of myths and theologically based ontologies are of second importance.<sup>56</sup> Second, relating to the previous point, religion will not be treated as an autistic, *inner experience*. While for example William James and Mircea Eliade held that religion did originally spring from the depths of the human psyche, and that the basis of religion is the inner experience of God and the personal encounter with the Sacred, I will treat religion as something wholly constructed “through engagement with particular cultural practices and resources”.<sup>57</sup> As far as I am concerned religion is found in and made up out of specific cultural environments. Thirdly, while religion is in no way exclusively interior, neither is it an exclusively exterior, *communal function*. This view is generally held by Sociologists of Religion, Emile Durkheim comes to mind, and tends to treat religion as nothing but the glue that holds society together in the worship of communal objects. While this is undeniably *a* function of religion, it might not be *the entire* reason for the existence religion as a whole. When taking an overly functionalist stance, one risk missing the deep, sincere and complex meanings religion can carry for

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56 As do most scholars of religion agree that ritual comes first, and belief second. See for instance Robert Segal, “Myth and Ritual”, *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, 2. ed., ed. John Hinnells (Routledge, London, 2010).

57 Gordon Lynch, “What is this ‘Religion’ in the Study of Religion and Popular Culture”, *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. Gordon Lynch (I B Tauris & Co Ltd, London, 2007), 137.

individuals. That religion has an inner dimension *as well* as an outer dimension can hardly be argued against, in the light of countless of mystics that due to their mystical, inner (but still socially conditioned) experiences have went on to challenge popularly held religious views of their time. Lastly, I do not hold that religion by necessity is a *serious* conviction. It seems to be a general notion that a person needs to declare a certain level of world rejecting piousness in order to be considered as “genuinely” religious, and that the holy must be engaged in ways fundamentally different from that of the profane. Nothing illustrates this better than the case of a spiritual seeker from the New Age milieu, that went to a Buddhist monastery in order to become a monk. In the end, however, she decided to leave the monastery “because she perceived that the monks were not 'authentic' at times; they were watching the Star Trek series on television too often.”<sup>58</sup> While there is no denying that people sometimes take their religion extremely seriously, I hold that this is in no way always the case, and might not even be the norm. In fact, Rodriguez suggests that it is playfulness that lies at the origin of religion, and although this might be to grossly oversimplify things a bit, it still serves as a reminder that we mustn't always take religion too serious.<sup>59</sup> Historically speaking, the European society seems to have been characterized by a fairly lax approach to religious issues, with just the occasional outburst of piety. Priests in medieval Italy complained that people rarely visited church, and when they did, they came late and left early.<sup>60</sup> Churchgoers in sixteenth-century Britain were known to act out rightly disrespectful while they during sermon “jostled for pews, nudged their neighbours, hawked and spat, knitted, made coarse remarks, told jokes, fell asleep, and even let off guns”, as well as using their churches for entirely different purposes than praying; several bishopal demands were made to “cease using them primarily for indoor marketplaces and for storage of crops and sheltering livestock.”<sup>61</sup> While such recollections definitely point towards that the people of the middle ages and early modern period did not take religion very seriously at all, I would not, however, say that this suggests that these people lived in irreligious societies. The Church still had a given place in society, festivities were based on the liturgical year, and people adhered to a genuinely Christian world view. They simply didn't take this world view too seriously, usually having more pressing concerns than the state of their immortal soul. Rather than suggesting that people were irreligious, this tendency of taking religion less than seriously might actually point towards the integrated given role that religion had in the everyday life of people; it was something given and ordinary, something not worth creating too much fuss about, not something Other, noumenal and essentially detached from the profane. It

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58 Adam Possamai, *Sociology of Religion for Generations X and Y*, (Equinox, London, 2009), 104.

59 Hector Rodriguez, “The Playful and the Serious: An Aproximation to Huzinga's Homo Ludens”, *Game Studies* (6:1), 2006.

60 Rodney Stark, “Secularisation, R.I.P”, *Sociology of Religion* (60:3), 1999, 255.

61 Stark, “Secularisation R.I.P”, 258.

was truly a “ lived, everyday experience”.

The point I wish to make here is that in order for a video game to have significance for a scholar of religion, one must not assume that a player must believe literally in what is stated in the game. Neither must the game trigger some deep, mystical experience when played, and it doesn't have to be played within a religious social context, such as a church. Also, the player does not need to hold the game in sincere reverence, but can treat it for just what it is, a game. What do make games significant in religious studies are their role as conveyors of culturally conditioned world views. While there is no denying that religion is culture, I hold that it is a certain form of culture; a certain set of culturally reproduced ideas and practices through which individuals orders reality and create meaning in their life by relating them to “the sacred”. “The sacred” acts as an object upon which meanings and motivations of groups and individuals are projected, and “binds people into particular kinds of identities, communities and way of living.”<sup>62</sup> My understanding of “the sacred” is based on the definition proposed by Gordon Lynch.

The sacred is an object [as in the psycho-analytical object-relation] defined by a particular quality of human thought, feeling and behaviour in which it is regarded as a grounding of ultimate source of power, identity, meaning and truth. This quality of human attention to the sacred is constructed and mediated through particular social relations, and cultural practices and resources. Religions are social and cultural systems which are oriented towards sacred objects.<sup>63</sup>

Looking back at the Superstory, we can see how the sacred is directed to science through the mythemes of *alienation*, *radiation* and *mutation*. The scientific discoveries becomes the objects that people ground their notions of sacredness in, letting them represent spiritual truths and ultimate insight in the nature of reality.

Since “the sacred” is a term that does carry quite the intellectual baggage, some further remarks needs to be made. The term is probably most often associated with Mircea Eliade, who conceived the sacred to be a “basic element of the human condition”,<sup>64</sup> the way through which humanity stands in contact with a transcendent, sacred reality. This basic element is, according to Eliade, universal in that every human being carries the potential for recognizing sacredness, as well as ahistorical, in that the differences between religions separated by time and space is only due to culturally conditioned expressions of this transcendent, sacred reality. “The sacred” is also qualitatively separated from the profane; encountering the sacred is associated with deep feelings of awe, and can not be carried out in the same way as one would do mundane, ordinary chores. By now, the

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62 Lynch, “What is this Religion?”, 138.

63 Lynch, “What is this Religion?”, 138.

64 Lynch, “What is this Religion?”, 134.

problems associated with Eliade and the so-called *sui generis*-discourse of religionism have been thoroughly scrutinised.<sup>65</sup> However, the benefit of the revised definition offered by Lynch is that it allows talking about the sacred without necessarily making the essentialist fallacy. First of all, it fully recognizes the cultural nature of “the sacred” and religions; they are phenomena that emerge in specific cultural contexts, are identified in the way actors relate to these contexts, and are in no way ahistorical or *sui generis*. The nature of what is conceived to be sacred as well as its reception is bound to differ between cultures; indeed it doesn't even necessarily have to exist sacred objects at all in any given culture. In the contemporary Western culture however, there definitely exist such objects that acts as the ground for power, identity meaning and truth, making it a useful conceptual framework. Second, the dichotomy between “sacred” and “profane” is erased. Just because an object acts as the ground for power, identity meaning and truth, no demand is made that it should also at all times inspire feelings of awe that are qualitatively different from those of everyday objects.

Differentiating “culture” from “popular culture” is not necessarily any easier than trying to delineate it from “religion”. This is because, in spite of being the dominant form of reproducing ideas through culture in contemporary society, it has an Otherness about it, in that it is most often defined in contrast to other forms of culture; mainly against high culture or folk culture.<sup>66</sup> While “high culture” is seen as the product of the true artistic genius, something intellectually and culturally demanding that breeds refinement and good taste, popular culture has tended to be depicted as light, easy “pre-digested” forms of entertainment that offered easy pleasures to its audiences without requiring much intellectual or analytical effort on their part.”<sup>67</sup> Obviously, this take views “high culture” as the domain of an educated, cultural elite, while “popular culture” appeals only to the unenlightened, backward vulgar crowds. “Folk culture”, on the other hand, is the romanticized notion of a “genuine”, archaic culture of “the people”, somehow pure and uncontaminated, creative and organically developed, in stark contrast to popular or mass culture which is seen as mass produced, passive and imposed. “Folk art grew from below. It was a spontaneous, autochthonous expression of the people, shaped by themselves[...] Mass Culture is imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audiences are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying.”<sup>68</sup> Whether contrasted against high or folk culture, there lies an obvious bias against popular culture in these

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65 See for example, Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse of Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*, (Oxford University Press, New York, 1997), and Fitzgerald, *Ideology of Religion*, 2000.

66 Lynch, *Theology and Pop-culture*, 3.

67 Lynch, *Theology and Pop-culture*, 7.

68 Lynch, *Theology and Pop-culture*, 9, quoting Dwight McDonald.

views. It is seen as somewhat of an aggressor, something that corrupts and degenerates the minds of people, and has more or less entirely done away with the true, more beautiful forms of culture. While several points could be made in objection of this, the purpose of the current study is not to demand a re-evaluation of popular culture. Therefore, let's settle with stating that popular culture, even to the people that despises it, makes up the dominant cultural landscape of the contemporary West.

In defining popular culture I turn, once again, to Lynch. He defines it as the “shared environment, practices and resources of everyday life for *ordinary* people within a particular society.”<sup>69</sup> Of course, this statement carries with it a series of normative assumptions, something Lynch readily admits. What counts as *ordinary* people, for example? What are their everyday practices? While a teenage punk girl, an adolescent male hip hoper, and a middle-aged, middle class accountant are all likely to consume works popular culture, it is not likely to be exactly the same works. It might therefore be better to think in terms of popular *cultures*, thus keeping the heterogeneous nature of popular culture in mind. A point that Lynch is overlooking is that *all* everyday practices hardly can count as popular culture, other than in such broad sense that the term is rendered meaningless. Doing the dishes after supper should obviously not qualify as a work of popular culture, even though it is a cultural activity done by ordinary people. When speaking of popular culture in a more specific sense, I would say that we usually refer to a body of creatively produced works of culture, that is widely distributed through the different forms of mass media. These works together makes up several overlapping popular cultures in the sense that they are the cultural artefacts that provides a common referential frame work for a large, geographically dispersed mass of people that otherwise would have very little to do with each other.

## **4.2 Occulture and Re-Enchantment**

As noted in the Introduction, both active involvement in church activities as well as stated belief in God are in decline in the contemporary Western world, supposedly resulting in a process of secularisation. At the same time, however, there has been a surge of religious thematics and symbolism in popular culture. Not only are such themes as magic, spirits, gods and religious symbols common elements in a wide variety of pop-cultural works, but several of the works utilizing these thematics have become some of the most popular, best received and most influential in their respective genres. That the same people that are seemingly indifferent if not out-rightly rejective of traditional religiosity chooses to more or less indulge themselves in works of culture

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<sup>69</sup> Lynch, *Theology and Pop-culture*, 14.



steeped in this kind of symbolism might seem a bit paradoxical, especially when assuming that the popularity of a work of culture is due to its ability to resonate with a large number of people. Why, one might ask, would modern, secularised Westerners invest so much of their time in fictitious stories that so closely resemble the same religious myths they have so recently rejected? Partridge notes that aside from surveys pointing towards participatory rates in Christian churches, secularisation theorists tends to interpret this paradox as a result of the advanced stages of secularisation. According to this line of reason, it is due to the boundaries between religion and secular culture being blurred, leading to a trivialization of “serious belief”.<sup>70</sup>

“As long as these *mass* phenomena represent a playful and non-serious confrontation with the supernatural element[...] they then represents a possible cleansing or purging of the old fears and myths still present in our society. The more we eliminate these old fears and myths, the more we develop a naturalistic rationalism, a scientific view of the universe.”<sup>71</sup>

The logic of this reasoning is ultimately based upon the conception of religion as something that is grounded in belief, and a profound, earnest approach to this belief. I reiterate my critique of this idea, and while “belief” as well as “seriousness” are naturally modes of religious practice, they do not constitute the entire spectrum of possible religious expressions. Further, inherent in the argument lies the assumption that when the role of religious institutions diminishes, the ability of these institutions to reproduce their religious world view will also diminish and eventually fade away, replaced in their entirety by the rationalistic, mechanical world view of modern science. Such a world can be described as “disenchanted”, a term originally coined by Max Weber.<sup>72</sup> In a rationalized world dictated by science, he could see no room for magic and religion to exist. Only when enjoying an unchallenged hegemonic place in society can religious world views prosper; if challenged, they will become relativised and subject to disintegration. “Diffuse religion cannot sustain a distinctive way of life.”<sup>73</sup> While I do fully acknowledge that the Christian churches of the West have lost the interpretative prerogative they once held, I cannot help but notice a major flaw in the reasoning of said secularisation theorists; they seem to have forgotten that culturally reproduced plausibility structures is transmitted by other means than just through majority churches. There are, in fact, other forms of cultural contexts through which world views is reproduced other than that of churches and that of a “scientific community”. I'm talking of course, once again, of popular culture. Since popular culture might arguably be *the* most constitutive factor in cultural conditioning,<sup>74</sup> when

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70 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 1*, 56.

71 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 1*, 122, quoting Marcello Truzzi.

72 Fox, “Secularization”, 308.

73 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 1*, 35, quoting Steve Bruce.

74 As argued by Beaudoin, the entire Generation-X cannot be understood apart from popular culture. Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 1*, 120.

relying exclusively upon quantifiable data regarding actions and motivations of individuals, the proponents of the secularisation thesis commits a methodological fallacy common for sociologists of the behaviouristic persuasion, in that they neglect the cultural context that these actions and motivations are performed within.

Turning back to the question of why people of today seem to be so attracted to religiously themed works of culture, my answer would be that the Western world is *not*, in fact, secularised, but on the contrary in a state of re-enchantment. “Re-enchantment”, being an inversion of the Weberian term “disenchantment”, refers not so much to the tendency of interpreting one's life and the world in spiritual, religious and transcendent terms, rather than in purely mechanical, disenchanted ones, but perhaps more accurately to the scholarly acknowledgement that such interpretations are actually quite common in the contemporary West. Religiously themed popular culture is of utmost importance in the understanding of this re-enchantment. The themes that are dealt with in films, lyrics, novels and video games, as well as the symbols and metaphors provided, are becoming the basis for the way people relate to the world, and their place within it, in that they are “shaping people's identities and understanding of the wider world.”<sup>75</sup> The fictional stories made available through mass media thus “provides narratives about characters' lives that can be used as a resource for reflecting upon one's own experience and aspirations”.<sup>76</sup> What might be interesting to note about these cultural expressions, is that they seldom are of what might be seen as traditionally Christian nature. Rather than being geared towards for example redemption through belief in Jesus Christ, these works are much more likely to make positive depictions of such elements that have traditionally been seen as heretic and deviant by the mainstream church. To name but a few, we find themes of witchcraft, nature worship, paganism, alchemy, astrology, eastern spirituality and the occult.<sup>77</sup> When references to traditional Christianity are made, it is often just to demonstrate its impotence in the face of the occult.<sup>78</sup> That traditional Christianity is portrayed as weak and feeble in a time when people are losing interest in the Church might of course be expected, but the interesting question is what this fascination with the occult can tell us about the way people of today relate to religious questions. In line with Partridge, I will refer to this revaluing of deviant religious symbolism within popular culture as “occulture”. Occulture can be seen as one of the main ways re-enchantment takes place. Its significance may be evaluated in two ways; what is it that is reproduced, and why is it being allowed to be reproduced. Thus, we can look at the content of

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75 Lynch, *Theology and Pop-culture*, 55.

76 Lynch, *Theology and Pop-culture*, 55.

77 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 1*, 70.

78 Nowadays, for example, vampires in fiction have no problem visiting a church, and will laugh at any cross or holy water thrown at them. Partridge *Re-enchantment vol. 1*, 127.

occultural works, and see what narratives, symbols and metaphors are provided. How is meaning regarding, say, the cross or the pentagram constructed, where are gods found and what are their attributes are all potential questions to be asked. We may also, however, ask us why these occultural themes have become so popular. Popular culture is far from a one-way form of communication, and rather than being solely a producer of culture, the occultural body is at the same time an expression of the beliefs, desires and anxieties of a given cultural milieu.<sup>79</sup> So aside from asking what themes are reproduced through culture, we should also ask questions regarding the identity of said beliefs, desires and anxieties that resonate so well with the occultural ideas. This essay tries to give answers to both set of questions in relation to Final Fantasy VII.

Some final comments regarding occulture need to be made. First of all, although occulture might be said to reproduce certain ideas and plausibility structures, this does not by necessity means that every fan of occulture must adhere to these ideas; “Production of meaning does not ensure consumption.”<sup>80</sup> The contents of any work of culture is always valued and measured in relation to a persons broader referential framework, and although popular culture might be the dominant form of culture for Westerners, and although occulture might be the dominant form of popular cultural, there are definitive other, sometimes opposing, contexts through which to engage occulture. Whether the ideas of a work of culture are fully embraced, rejected or renegotiated largely depends on the person encountering it, and his or hers cultural conditioning.

Second, “occulture” is not synonymous with “religion”. I make no claim that the people that enjoy for example fantasy novels or vampire movies are by default explicitly religious people, nor that they hold certain beliefs or engage in certain rites. As religion is defined as “social and cultural systems which are oriented towards sacred objects”, occulture should rather be seen as means for the orientation towards the sacred, not as that which is oriented. Thus, occulture might inform religious world views, and provide the basis for religious beliefs, but is in no way a religion in itself.

### **4.3 Currents in Western Esotericism**

As noted, occulture deals with themes such as “witchcraft, nature worship, paganism, alchemy, astrology, eastern spirituality and the occult”, thus placing it firmly within the frames of Western Esotericism. When setting out to study contemporary esotericism, Asprem & Granholm suggests that there exists three main approaches one can take; that of von Stuckard, that of Hanegraaff and

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<sup>79</sup> Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 1*, 123.

<sup>80</sup> Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 1*, 125.

that of Partridge.<sup>81</sup> As the Partridge-approach has already been covered above, this section will consider the merits of the other two. First of all, however, I will briefly discuss the ideas of the man often regarded as the founding father of the study of Western Esotericism; Antoine Faivre.

The by now classic, and often contested, definition of esotericism offered by Faivre in *Access to Western Esotericism* consists of a typology of four fundamental, “intrinsic” components, as well as two relative ones of secondary importance.<sup>82</sup> These components, being ideas of *correspondences*, the concept of *living nature*, the importance of *imagination and meditation*, the *experience of transmutation, praxis of concordance and transmission*, together amounts to what Faivre regards as a “form of thought”.<sup>83</sup> This form of thought underlies all the movements and practices that are regarded as the referential corpus that we as scholars refers to as “Western Esotericism”. Alchemy, astrology, theosophy, *Naturphilosophie* and certain forms of freemasonry are all part of this corpus. Since the many problems of *Access to Western Esotericism* have by now been thoroughly scrutinized, I do not intend to criticize Faivre yet another time. Instead, I will mention just one of these criticisms, since it highlights one of the issues in conducting a study such as this. All other criticisms aside, the perhaps most problematic aspect of the way Faivre conceptualises esotericism, is his understanding of it as a “form of thought”. This implies that esotericism is ultimately a matter of inner conviction, that it is a way of relating to a certain set of truth claims via *belief*. While there might be some merit to this view of esotericism, such as when studying the doctrines and practices of certain esoteric orders, it might not be as fitting when trying to grasp esoteric currents within popular culture. If thinking and believing is what constitutes ideas as esoteric, this would presuppose that it is first and foremost the intent of the author, and secondly the reception of the reader (or, in this particular case, player) that decides whether a work of fiction is of esoteric nature or not. The work can be deemed esoteric only if the author has an explicit agenda of promoting esoteric ideas, or if the reader interpret the material in a distinctly esoteric way. This, however, is not the way in which occulture works. As already noted, the actual beliefs of consumers of religious popular culture are, maybe not irrelevant, but at least of secondary importance. What I am concerned with is the broad cultural reservoir of ideas that form the basis for beliefs. Thus, since this study treats religion as a “lived, everyday experience”, esotericism will be dealt with as something which is *communicated* through discourse, not necessarily intended or “believed in”.<sup>84</sup>

von Stuckard's treatment of esotericism is entirely discursive. Actually, for him there exists no

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81 Asprem & Granholm, “Introduction”, 23.

82 Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, (State University of New York Press, New York, 1994).

83 Faivre, *Access*, 10.

84 The approach of focusing on communication rather than intent is suggested and discussed more thoroughly by Asprem & Granholm, “Introduction”, 11.

object of study called “Western Esotericism”, but only the “esoteric” as an “analytical framework that helps to identify genealogies of identities in a pluralistic competition of knowledge”.<sup>85</sup> The esoteric is here understood as a product of the tension between the truth claims made by on one hand proponents of Christian orthodoxy legitimized by unwavering faith, and on the other hand proponents of rationalized, material science legitimized by observational evidence. The esoteric thus becomes the middle ground occupied between these two extremes, and legitimises knowledge through referring to *gnosis*, an inner experience of truth that is not strictly empirically verifiable, but can still challenge doctrinal notions. As is the case with Faivre, although the discursive approach of von Stuckard holds some merit, it is not suited for analysing esotericism in popular culture. This is because von Stuckard, quite naturally, presupposes that a direct knowledge of the nature of the divine is not communicable. The experience of the sacred is always personal and non-empirical, and can therefore not be directly transferred to other people by simply showing it to them, as would be the case with any material phenomena. This is all good when dealing with the world we all live our lives in, but does not seamlessly transfer to the fictitious worlds of the fantasy-genre. This genre usually present us with universes of quite different ontological conditions than our own. These are stories where gods and demons are literally very real, and takes on roles as active agents. There is no need to legitimize knowledge as *gnostic* by nature in fantasy fiction, since anyone interested in the motives of a divine being can just ask it face to face, preferably in front of an audience in case anyone would be in doubt. There is nothing hidden or unspeakable about the sacred in these genres. This does not mean that such stories can not convey esoteric ideas, in the sense of ideas and beliefs regarding the nature of divinity and the world that are influenced by historical, esoteric movements. The idea of alchemical transmutation, for example, would be just as esoteric when depicted as literally real in a fantasy film, as it is when it is described in a book concerning renaissance philosophy. That transmutation in the former case is no longer inaccessible and tentative does not deprive it of its esoteric nature, but places it within an ontological framework in which this nature becomes a literal reality.

As for Hanegraaff, while his method of seeing esotericism as part of an epistemological discourse is fairly close to von Stuckard's, his basic understanding of it is historiographic. Rather than merely seeing discursive, epistemological struggles, he argues that esotericism consists of a historical current stemming from the exclusivistic tendencies within monotheistic religious systems. Monotheism, according to Hanegraaff, construes its identity through the Othering of “the pagan”.<sup>86</sup>

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85 Kocku von Stuckard, *Locations of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe – Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities*, (Brill, Leiden, Boston, 2010), 64.

86 Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Forbidden Knowledge: Anti-Esoteric Polemics and Academic Research”, *Aries* (5:2), 2005, 232.

Since there is only one True God, every alternative religious world view must necessarily be false. While this might seem fairly uncontroversial to propose, what today is known as esotericism arose when, in this process of Othering, protestant theologians homogenized all beliefs and traditions not deemed to correspond with Christian orthodoxy, lumping them together under the category of “paganism”. If there is only one Truth, there can only be one False it was argued, and there was thus no reason to differentiate between the worship of nature, rituals of clairvoyance, or communicating with spirits; all were deemed to be false, and therefore pagan. The coming of the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution can be seen as simply a continuation of this process, which “defined its own rational and scientific identity against the same adversary, but no longer granted it the dignity of an intellectual 'tradition’”.<sup>87</sup> In other words, while the polemical discourse did shift from one of “heresy” to one of “irrationality”, the target remained the pagan Other. This process of Othering has been fundamental for the construction of the Christian as well as the European identities, and Hanegraaff thus calls it the “Grand Polemical Narrative”.<sup>88</sup>

Next, I turn to what is perhaps the most crucial aspect for my understanding of esotericism in relation to Final Fantasy VII. This regards the world view that the monotheistic one has tried to distance itself from through the Grand Polemical Narrative. One might intuitively suggest that what opposes monotheism is polytheism. This is however, according to Hanegraaff, not quite accurate. Rather than polytheism, the opposite of monotheism is *cosmotheism*, “the religion of the immanent God”.<sup>89</sup> While the transcendent God is by definition apart from the world, cosmotheistic deities are found within it and are of it. As such, communication with divine agents is done through nature; praying to a lake, making an offering to a tree etc. As such, cosmotheism represents an all throughout enchanted view of the natural world. Monotheism on the other hand, holds that although the world is a creation of God, God is not of the creation, but separate. The divine is exclusively located in a spiritual realm, and turning to the objects, creatures or places of the material world in order to communicate with God is utterly futile. Because of this, monotheism results in an altogether disenchanted world view, bereft of all that is divine or holy.<sup>90</sup> This implies that the rise of empirical science during the Enlightenment was not so much a reaction against Christian religion, but rather the next step in the processes of monotheizing the Western religious imagination. Rather than actually questioning the existence of God and a spiritual reality, the Enlightenment simply resulted

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87 Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012), 373.

88 Hanegraaff, “Forbidden Knowledge”, 230.

89 Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 371

90 Monotheism taken to its logical extreme that is. Obviously, there has always been holy places and relics invested with religious significance within all of the major monotheistic religions. However, while generally being accepted as legitimate parts of doctrine, these practices are occasionally being put into question precisely for sacralizing the Creation, thus suspecting them of idolatry.

in pushing God further and further away from the natural world which was increasingly conceived of as mechanical and instrumental.

#### 4.4 Eco-Enchantment and Sacred Science

After having accounted for how religious notions in society are reconfigured through popular culture and oriented towards more esoterically influenced understandings of the sacred, I will now give two examples of how this reconfiguration takes expression in contemporary culture. The first is called “eco-enchantment”, and relates to the religious world view in Final Fantasy VII. The second I call “sacred science”, and relates to the world view of the Superstory.

Closely related to the opposition between monotheism and cosmotheism are the tendencies to, within certain forms of contemporary religious discourse, sacralize nature and the environment, so-called “eco-enchantment”. While most Western people of today probably would agree that concern for environmental issues are important, it is not uncommon among the more spiritually inclined environmentalists to place the responsibility of mankind's exploitation of nature upon the dominance of monotheism and Christianity in particular. This is motivated with the privileged place mankind is given in the judeo-christian myth of creation as the pinnacle of creation, invested with the right to rule the land and all the creatures of the world. Historian and environmentalist Lynn White puts monotheism in stark contrast to the intimate, spiritual relation that “pagan” cultures is supposed to have had with Mother Nature.

...Christianity, in absolute contrast to paganism and Asia's religion... not only established a dualism of man and nature, but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploits nature for his proper ends[...] *By destroying Pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference of the feelings of natural objects...*<sup>91</sup> (original italics).

Within the discourse of eco-enchantment, transcendent monotheism is thus rejected in favour of a sacralization of nature itself, which is seen as a conscious, spiritual entity that deserves to be treated with respect, love and care. Where monotheism views the creation as degenerate and qualitatively separated from the divine, in which the only flickers of spirituality are the souls of human beings, eco-spirituality acknowledges that every living animal and plant are spiritual beings originally sprung from the Soul of the World. Reminiscent about East Asian concepts of the soul, the belief state that we all ultimately strive to return to the World Soul and once again be part of the Source.<sup>92</sup> We can call this discourse “Gaiaism”. While the Gaia-hypothesis, stating that the entire earth might

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91 Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Volume 2 Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*, (T & T Clark International, London, 2004), quoting White. 51.

92 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 2*, 50.

be understood as one big superorganism, was originally a scientific suggestion, it can likely be said that it nowadays mostly is associated with neo-paganism and the New Age. To quote Partridge, “It is now difficult to move in the world of alternative spirituality without tripping over references to Gaia.”<sup>93</sup> Gaia is usually depicted as the Earth Mother (once again contrasted with God the Father of Christianity). Eco-feminist Carolyn Merchant describes the Earth Mother as “nurturing, sensitive, alive and responsive to human action”,<sup>94</sup> but now being in peril of being slaughtered by her own children; humanity. If humans are not careful, Gaia will, in order to save herself, need to dispose of them, “cleansing herself of human poisoning.”<sup>95</sup> Natural disasters, such as earth quakes, tsunamis and pandemics are in this discourse interpreted as Nature's way of striking back at humanity for exploiting it. In order to survive, mankind must therefore mend its ways and “relearn what their ancestors knew so long ago[...] to walk in balance on the Earth Mother, use the earth's natural resources in a sensitive and sensible manner, without adding chemicals to everything, and pesticides, and all other things which destroy the planet's delicate web of life.”, as argued by Native American teacher Sun Bear.<sup>96</sup> Making said change, however, is not merely a question of changing our worldly behaviour. In order fully make the transition that enables us to live in harmony with nature, a deep, inner change must take place within every person; a “transformation from the egoistical self to the larger ecospherical Self” that is “nothing short of a 'mystical' union with the totality of the cosmos.”<sup>97</sup>

The other example of reconfigured spiritualities is that of “sacred science”. Sacred science arises as a product of two separate discourses; the scientification of religion, and the sacralization of science.<sup>98</sup> The first relates to the scholarly influence on several new strands of religions. Theosophy, as well as witchcraft, paganism, Western shamanism and part of the New Age movement are all construing their identities on historical research, as well as drawing heavily upon academic theories of religion.<sup>99</sup> As for the second, in the recount of the Superstory we have already seen how esoteric concepts are clad in a scientific language. Nowhere is this more apparent than in UFO-cults. In such movements, obviously heavily influenced by science fiction literature, science and religion is fused

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93 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 2*, 61.

94 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 2*, Quoting Merchant, 63.

95 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 2*, 65.

96 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 2*, Quoting Sun Bear, 65.

97 Joseph Christian Greer, “Deep Ecology and the Study of Western Esotericism”, *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem & Kennet Granholm (Equinox Pub., Sheffield, 2013), 303.

98 Following Hanegraaff reasoning in *Esotericism and the Academy*, one might object to this delineation of two separate discourses of science and religion. He argues that the distinction between the two is nothing other than a polemical concept invented during the enlightenment, and that in reality, scientific and religious ideas have always fed of each other.

99 Kocku von Stuckard, “Discursive Transfers and Reconfigurations: Tracing the Religious and the Esoteric in Secular Culture”, *Contemporary esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem & Kennet Granholm (Equinox Pub., Sheffield, 2013), 233.



in the belief that science can be augmented by spirituality, that “science's ability to explain reality has been surpassed in UFO encounters.”<sup>100</sup> And on the other way around, the proof that the visitors from outer space are spiritually superior to humans is the fact that they have managed to develop their advanced technology; “their superior 'science' is perceived as more advanced than ours, because, unlike contemporary earthly science, the science of the extraterrestrials incorporates a recognition of spiritual 'truth'.”<sup>101</sup> In the ontology of the Aetherius Society, the divide between matter and spirit is further broken down. While the society do practice both meditation and prayer, they are of the belief that they, through a process of telepathy, can transfer and store their psychic energy to “prayer batteries”, which can then be released into the world in times of crisis and unrest.<sup>102</sup> It is the mytheme of *radiation*, put into actual practice.

I would argue that these two quite different reorientations of sacred objects are due to the cultural shift that has occurred as the Western world has progressed from a society of modernity to one of late modernity. This cultural shift affects the views people have of religion, and is mirrored in the popular culture of its time. If we were to simplify it some, the formative period of superhero of the comic books can be said to have been located roughly between the end of the 1930's to the end of the 1970's.<sup>103</sup> The science fiction genre might be argued to pre-date this time line with some four decades, two of its most defining moments being the release of H.G Wells novel *War of the Worlds* in 1898,<sup>104</sup> and the advent of the modern flying saucer in 1947.<sup>105</sup> While these time lines may of course be debated, the point is that they both coincide with the pinnacle of both the age of modernity as well as the global dominance of the Western world. This implies that the thoughts, dreams and desires of that era are present as conventional narrative tropes in the genres, such as the merits of freedom and individualism and, perhaps most notably, an almost unshakable belief in the bettering of mankind through rationality and science. What is also present, however, are the anxieties and fears of the modern era. These include the nagging bad consciousness of colonial sovereignty, the fear induced by World War 2 and, most important of all, the mind numbing terror of possible nuclear annihilation during the cold war. Aside from working as a backdrop for mystical experiences, the novels and comic books from this period also provided means to cope with these anxieties. Both Superman and Captain America were created to provide the United States with saviour figures during the second World War,<sup>106</sup> and the greater part of the Marvel-cast, such as

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100 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 2*, 168.

101 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 2*, 179.

102 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 2*,. 185.

103 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 24.

104 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 56.

105 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 108.

106 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 73.

Spiderman, the X-Men and the Incredible Hulk, received their superpowers from being exposed to radioactivity, linking them to the technology of nuclear power and the atom bomb.

While these concerns were indeed very real to the people of the mid-twentieth century, they might seem somewhat less relevant for the people of today. While the Western world does indeed still retain some of its global dominance economically, the former colonies have regained their autonomy, and are in some cases even challenging the Western hegemony. The world is no longer polarized between two competing military super-powers, and the threat of nuclear winter seems far off. And, less dramatically but perhaps of more significance in the long run, people are losing the unquestioned faith in the idea that scientific progress and human progress necessarily go hand in hand. The conditions of the late-modern society is thus fairly different from those of the high-modern one. The role of science and technology have increasingly been put into question, partly because of the destructive effect these have had on the environment, and partly because the moral aspects of for example genetic engineering are coming off as more and more dubious. Likewise, the collapse of the Soviet Union did not bring an era of democracy and global stability, but instead resulted in the unchallenged hegemony of Western, American capitalism and consumerism. Not only is the world moving in a direction many people are anxious about, but also does the possible alternatives to this development seem further away than ever before. This is the period in which *Final Fantasy VII* was created, and thus it reflect concerns regarding environmental exploitation, the hegemony of capitalism and a lose of faith in science.

To summarize the research that has been accounted for this far, we have established that esotericism is constructed as the homogenization of beliefs and practices deemed not to fit in with the orthodox doctrine of the Christian church. This body of deviant practices has been portrayed either as heretic or irrational, and generally shunned by mainstream society. Curiously enough, however, during the twentieth century we have witnessed a shift, or even an inversion, of how these practices are valued. While their Otherness to traditional Christianity remains, the tables have turned, and it is now Christianity that is popularly held to be irrational, impotent and even false. The ideological body that scholars refers to as esotericism is being increasingly employed as symbols for meaning making and truth within contemporary society. When the ideas of esotericism are expressed in fictional, pop-cultural works, we refer to them as “occulture”. Occulture is considered the main way in which esoteric ideas are given visibility, credibility and acceptance. Through occulture, esotericism is also contributing to the formation of the popular, cultural referential framework, and by doing so it challenges, if not replaces, the hegemonies of traditional Christianity as well as that of rationalized scientism. My approach to esotericism thus takes into account both

the perspective of both Hanegraaff and Partridge. Next, I will turn to look at the available research regarding video games and Final Fantasy.

#### 4.5 The Study of Religion in Video Games

Even though the presence of religious motifs in video games are slowly gaining recognition amongst scholars, it is a field of study that until fairly recently has gone neglected. This neglect has been committed by scholars of religion as well as ludologists. For example, while a few of the articles published in *Game Studies*, the oldest scientific journal concerned with video games, does indeed contain the word “religion”, it does not occur as a key word in any of these articles, since none of them deals explicitly with religious issues. Likewise, the *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, though admittedly being of relatively recent origin, has not published any single article on video games. This comes out as all the more odd since video games can arguably be said to be the most dominant form of pop-cultural media of today. As for the field of Western Esotericism, there are several scholars that acknowledge the importance of the study of video games. Hanegraaff suggests that video games are a valid source for contemporary esotericism, along with comics, films and the Internet.<sup>107</sup> Partridge notes that, “replete with occultural baggage”, video games offers an especially interesting case in that they “puts the elusive powers sought by occultists *literally* in the hands of the player.”<sup>108</sup> However, none of these authors have actually conducted any game-related research themselves, and the field is still largely unexplored.

Regarding the research that actually has been done, the *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* offers one of the more ambitious contributions to the field, devoting an entire issue exclusively to video game studies. Apart from the methodological outline provided by Heidbrink et al, discussed in part 2 of this essay, two noteworthy articles are those of Lorentz and Wiemker & Wysocki.

Lorentz discusses the role of video games in the process of re-enchantment. She assesses that since video games acts as spaces wherein players can deal with and process information, these players will proceed to “bring the input and outcome of their gaming experience into their out of the game life.”<sup>109</sup> When engaging with games with religious and magical themes, this would lead to finding a “way in which to believe again in the so-called impossible and therefore re-enchant their rationalized world.”<sup>110</sup> Lorentz thus adds support to Partridge's theory that popular culture plays a

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107 Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism – A Guide for the Perplexed*, (Bloomsbury, London, 2013), 181.

108 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 1*, 183.

109 Pascaline Lorentz, “Socialisation of Teenagers Playing the Sims. The Paradoxical Use of Video Games to Re-enchant Life”, *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* vol. 5, 2014, 289.

110 Lorentz, “Socialisation of Teenagers”, 279.

part in re-enchanting the Western imagination.

Wiemker & Wysocki have studied how gods are represented in video games. They notice that gods are seldom portrayed in the traditional Christian sense in that they, while being powerful, usually are not omnipotent.<sup>111</sup> They conclude with posing the question whether exposure to these images of deities are likely to cause a shift in society's general image of God. While Wiemker & Wysocki does make an interesting case, I can't help but think that they are missing an important piece of the puzzle they are out to solve. Their study would, in my opinion, be greatly informed by taking the perspective of esotericism into consideration. First of all, they hold that there are three ways in which religion can be used in a game. It can be used merely as ambience, such as including a church in the scenery of the game, without relating its religious function to the game narrative; it can be used as relevant to the plot of the game, such as in *God of War*, when Kratos sets out to battle the entire pantheon of Greek mythology to take revenge on the gods; lastly, the games can be used as platforms with the aim of teaching, educating or convincing players about beliefs, doctrines and practices of certain religious groups.<sup>112</sup> The last type of representation is seen as a form of propaganda, and the authors claim that such games are usually commissioned by religious factions. What I believe that Wiemker & Wysocki misses is that in the end, all games, as well as all other forms of culture, are working to educate and convince the player of a certain world view, whether it is the intent of the producers of the game or not. That some games, mostly produced by Christian or Islamic developers, are seen as actively propagating for their world view, rather tells us that the views of these groups have become marginal enough to draw attention to them. Instead of being the dominant cultural mode they are seen as anomalies, in stark contrast to the occultural themes that Wiemker & Wysocki investigates. This adds to the understanding of occulture as quite dominant in contemporary culture. Secondly, the authors mentions that gods can be depicted negatively as well as positively in video games. In *God of War*, the gods are portrayed as a petty, scheming bunch that use mortal human beings as pawns for their own selfish desires. In *Okami* (2006), on the contrary, celestial beings are instead portrayed as altruistic healers of the land, upholding a close connection with nature. Wiemker & Wysocki tentatively asks whether these different representations of the nature of gods are due to the cultural differences between the American and Japanese game developers.<sup>113</sup> Although I fully agree that there are differences between American and Japanese cultures, let's not forget that both people still share a significant body of cultural frames of references; that of global popular culture. The esoteric and pagan ideas that are transmitted via

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111 Wiemker & Wysocki, "When people pray", 217.

112 Wiemker & Wysocki, "When people pray", 206-207.

113 Wiemker & Wysocki, "When people pray", 215.

occulture is, I believe, a candidate just as valid for explaining said differences than nationally based cultural variations. As noted, at the heart of esotericism lies the opposition between transcendent monotheism and immanent cosmotheism. The esoteric ideas that occulture is made up of represents “a shift of the locus of sacred authority towards the natural world and, in some cases, nature religion.”<sup>114</sup> Okami and God of War each represent the respective ends of this spectra; the gods of Okami that heals nature and fight of evil spirits is contrasted to the selfish gods of God of War, that are unconcerned with the well being of mortal creatures, and quite literally lives are apart from the world of men upon mount Olympus. Taking perspectives of esotericism into consideration when analysing the cultural content of video games would thus greatly deepen the understanding of some of the themes commonly present in such games that deals with religious issues.

## 4.6 Final Fantasy

Although the research of video games is a growing field, there has been few studies dedicated specifically to the Final Fantasy-series. Of the studies that actually has been made, none deals explicitly with the religious thematics present in the games.

Regarding Final Fantasy VII, Smith has analysed how the storyline of the game progresses through the individual bits of dialogue. Much in the likeness of films, the narrative of Final Fantasy VII is goal-oriented in that it “defines a central objective for the protagonist to achieve, and it makes the protagonist's progress difficult by setting up a series of obstacles to overcome.”<sup>115</sup> However, because of the somewhat different structures of the two media, these plot-related obstacles are considerably more sparsely dispersed in video games than they are in conventional films. To progress a story, a sense of urgency needs to be created, a way of instilling a forward motion to keep the viewer or player interested. In film, this progression is achieved mainly through dialogue. A fairly large amount of background story is given at the beginning of the film, and as the plot develops, the dialogue works to continuously remind the audience of the hero's objective in order to keep them interested. In Final Fantasy VII however, the forward motion is achieved by fighting battles and gaining experience points, which are used to make the characters stronger. Since fighting battles is the main mechanism of motivating the player to further interact with the game, the dialogue can take on a pretty different role than in film. At the beginning of the game, the player is told virtually nothing about what is happening, or who the presented characters are. The information that is given is just enough to understand the initial mission, and to give the player the impression

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114 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 1*, 130.

115 Greg M. Smith, “Computer Games Have Words Too: Dialogue Conventions in Final Fantasy VII”, *Game Studies* (2:2), 2002.

that there is a lot going on that he or she is not aware of. Information about the plot and the game world is then slowly unravelled through the dialogue during the course of the game, successively increasing our understanding of what is actually going on. The role of much of the dialogue is thus to provide background story, not push the chain of events forward. To provide for this backstory, the game uses several narrative strategies, the foremost being what Smith calls the “outsider's ignorance”.<sup>116</sup> When entering a new area, such as a town, the outsider must be educated about the town, of who's in charge, and whatever has recently happened there. The townspeople gladly volunteer this information if the player chose to speak to them. Other strategies to convey background information include the characters telling each other things they should already know about, such as Cloud when asks to be briefed on his current mission in the middle of executing it.

Regarding research made on the relation between the Final Fantasy-series in general and its sociocultural context, I turn to the works of Hourigan<sup>117</sup> and Voorhees.<sup>118</sup> Both of these scholars are writing in an apologetic fashion, wanting to make a case for video games in the light of debates regarding their supposed negative impact on children. Hourigan argues that Final Fantasy VI, VII and VIII all deals with the estrangement, rootlessness and feelings of vulnerability that troubles youth in the modern society. He notes that the cast of the Final Fantasy games usually consists of troubled outcasts, rejects and misfits who bands together in order to save the world. The main characters are often confused, restless and weakened due to being severed from their original family and betrayed by society. Typically, the “characters must overcome their personal demons and character flaws to achieve their goals”,<sup>119</sup> and this rehabilitation is conducted through the supportive function of the group. The player's party thus “represents a social group based on horizontal ties of common interest in resisting the status quo, that provides a unique sense of socially provided well-being.”<sup>120</sup> Hourigan also stresses that a game must be understood within its cultural context, and that the previous research done on games have failed to acknowledge this, as well as the heterogeneous conventions of different genres of games.<sup>121</sup>

Voorhees has analysed the way RPGs functions as coping mechanisms for dealing with the ambiguities of the multi-cultural society. Since the battle-system of Final Fantasy makes the player utilize characters with complementing strengths and weaknesses, he argues that the games can be

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116 Smith, “Video Games Have Words Too”.

117 Ben Hourigan, “You need love for this mission! The Final Fantasy-series as Social Education for Japanese Youth,” *Reconstruction* (6:1), 2006.

118 Gerald Voorhees, “The Character of Difference: Procedurality, Rhetoric and Role Playing Games”, *Game Studies* (9:2), 2009.

119 Hourigan, “You need love!”, 38.

120 Hourigan, “You need love!”, 62.

121 Hourigan, “You need love!”, 18.

understood as “toys that allow players to experiment with different responses to cultural difference.”<sup>122</sup> He also maintains that the system of character development in the series over the years has evolved from the utilization of characters with a set of predetermined abilities, towards one that allows the player to customize and maximize the development of the characters in any way s/he wants, reflecting the ideals of a “liberal humanist ideology”,<sup>123</sup> something he is fairly critical of.

I have my reservations towards both of these studies. Voorhees, I believe, comes out as somewhat overenthusiastic when he ascribes an great deal of relevance to an isolated area of gameplay, without putting it in context with the games he discusses in their entirety, or for that matter providing any empirical evidence in support of his claims. The vague ground of his analysis aside, I believe that he, to put it bluntly, is simply wrong when he describes the evolution of the character development system catering to a liberal humanist ideology. In order to reach this conclusion, he misinterpret elements of several games, as well as deliberately ignore certain games of the series that does not fit with his thesis. While one might say that the characters of later games are somewhat less specialised than those of earlier, this development has not occurred in a linear fashion. Final Fantasy IX is for example far more rigid in the way the characters of the game are allowed to develop, and although Final Fantasy X allows for the possibility to customize the characters to ones own liking, this takes an incredible amount of time, is extremely tedious and thus something only the most hardcore gamers will attempt. The same can be said for Final Fantasy VI and VII. The game that most easily lets the player customize their characters is in fact Final Fantasy VIII, something that is not at all acknowledged by Vorhees. As for Hourigan, my main objection regards his selection of games to analyse, or rather the reason for this selection. The reason for looking specifically at Final Fantasy VI, VII and VIII is that they are set in worlds of so-called “science fantasy”, i.e. worlds that mixes the magical elements of fantasy with the technological elements of science fiction, as opposed to other games of the series which are set in more traditional “pure” Fantasy environments. As far is Hourigan is concerned, the fantasy-genre is meaningless if not outright destructive due to its “non-cognitive” nature (“cognitive” in this sense refers to elements of a genre being perceived of as not impossible within the cosmological and anthropological norms of the author's epoch).<sup>124</sup> Being non-cognitive, the fantasy-genre lacks the necessary elements to allow its readers (or, in this case, players), to relate its contents to them selves and their lives in any way at all. In the end, the genre is nothing but a “sub-literature of mystification”. While science fantasy is viewed as a degraded form of proper science fiction, it still

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122 Voorhees, “Character of Difference”.

123 Voorhees, “Character of Difference”.

124 Hourigan, “You need love!”, 30

contains the “injection of cognition” which make possible a “close and critical engagement with social problems ”.<sup>125</sup> This line of reasoning is, in spite of employing the term “cognitive”, based not so much upon any empirical evidence from the field of cognitive psychology, but rather on a normative positioning regarding the value of supernatural myth and scientific progress respectively. I, for one, can see no *a priori* reason for why tropes of the science fiction genre, such as travelling past light speed in a space ship, meeting humanoid aliens or achieving super-human strength after being exposed to radiation are more “cognitively” plausible than travelling through time by magic, meeting humanoid elves and dwarves and achieving super-human strength through a magical amulet, which are common tropes of the fantasy-genre. Why the engagement with social problems is better explored through one particular form of fantastic fiction is never accounted for, other than that the other form “descends into the banal”.<sup>126</sup> The error of Hourigan, I believe, lies not so much in devaluing one cultural genre over an other, but rather in devaluing the mythic, the religious and the occult, in favour of a romanticized rational scientism. Elements of fantasy are just that, nothing but a fantasy, irrational and thus meaningless for any truly modernized individual, whereas science fiction, although practically impossible, are fantasies fuelled by science and thus rational and meaningful. It is, once again, the of the discourse of the Grand Polemical Narrative, this time applied to literary genres. This leads me to conclude this section with saying that in some ways I actually agree with Hourigan, in that fantasy is sub-literature of mystification. There is, however, no “nothing but” about it; its role in mystification, as occulture, is the whole of the thing, the thing that makes it so compelling. Final Fantasy VI, VII and VIII are not cultural outlets that deals with social problems *in spite* of containing mystifying elements. Rather, these elements offer yet another dimension through which to explore social and existential anxieties. Disregarding the occultural setting limits our understanding of the complex story of Final Fantasy VII, as well as the way people can relate to fictional works of popular culture.

## 4.7 Concluding Remarks

I wish to make some concluding remarks regarding the research accounted for before going into my analysis of Final Fantasy VII. Religion is understood as the way cultural orientation towards sacred objects. In contemporary society, such sacred objects are expressed in popular culture, as well as being reinforced by these representations. This makes the study of such representations relevant for the scholar of religion that studies spirituality in the contemporary society. A dominant form of religious representations in the popular culture of today is that of Western Esotericism.

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<sup>125</sup> Hourigan, “You need love!”, 71.

<sup>126</sup> Hourigan, “You need love!”, 71.



When looking at the religious themes in Final Fantasy VII, I will take into account two different discourses of sacred orientation; that of eco-enchantment, in which nature is sacralized, and that of sacred science, in which science and technology is sacralized.

Regarding video games, as research has been done that takes the perspective of Western Esotericism into account, I intend to do just that. The strong presence of esoteric themes in certain video games makes Western Esotericism an important part of understanding the way these themes relate to ideas regarding religion in the contemporary Western society, and valuable insights might be overlooked without this perspective.

## 5 The Game

As the name implies, Final Fantasy VII is the seventh in a series of, at the time of writing, fourteen main titles, in addition to various spin-offs and sequels. All the main titles are stand-alone, in that they have nothing to do with each other story-wise, meaning that no knowledge of the previous releases are necessary in order to enjoy any one of the games. The only way the different games relate to each other are the various stylistic trademarks of the series, such as the recurring healing items Potion and Elixir, creatures such as the Chocobo and the Moogle, and the names of weapons and magic spells such the Masamune and Thundaga respectively. The gameplay usually revolves around exploring a world, visiting places, finding items and talking to Non-Playable Characters (NPCs) in order to figure out what to do next. While the battle system tends to differ from game to game, its emphasis is on strategy rather than intensively performative operation. In describing the nature in the Final Fantasy games, I turn to Hourigan:

The general narrative formula in an RPG that draws on the representational genre of fantasy is as follows: a group of PCs [Playable Characters], who operate within a variably Manichean opposition to a evil force or character that (usually) plans to destroy or enslave a world, must undertake a journey and pass a series of trials in order to defeat that evil force or character. The RPG novum is often politically and visually modeled on an idealized European medieval period which is pre-industrial and feudal in its political relations, in which magic is a powerful force, and monsters roam the land[...] is typically opposed to the dehumanizing effects of technologized capitalism, which explains Fantasy's preference for nostalgically medieval settings[...] From their beginnings, Japanese RPGs have also included images of post-feudal technologies, juxtaposing them in their imaginary worlds in a way that brings them into the hybrid sub-genre of science fantasy.<sup>127</sup>

While being broadly representative of the series, Final Fantasy VII differs from this description in that it is not set in an “idealized European medieval period”. Admittedly some elements might remind the player of typical, medieval-inspired fantasy stylistics, such as swords being the weapons of choice, in general the game draws more considerably from the aesthetics of steam-punk.<sup>128</sup>

As already mentioned in section 4.5, the story of Final Fantasy VII is exposed gradually during the course of the game, and more often than not the player will not be entirely informed of the nature of several occurrences, places and characters until afterwards. In this summary presented

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127 Hourigan, “You need love!”, 30.

128 A style characterized by a fusion between futurism and 19th-century industrialism.

below, I have tried to provide information regarding the development of the actual story-line under the heading *Game Narrative*. I have intentionally tried to keep this section as free of the surrounding backstory as possible; this information is instead accounted for under *Game World*.

Worth commenting on is the way certain names and terms are written all in capital letter, such as AVALANCHE, or SOLDIER. This is likely due to the translation of the game from Japanese to English. Written Japanese utilizes at least three different syllabaries interchangeably, namely “hiragana”, “katakana” and “kanji”. While hiragana is used to form the indigenous Japanese words, and kanji is an adaptation of Chinese symbols used to represent whole words rather than sounds, katakana is a separate set of characters that directly corresponds to the syllabary of hiragana, but is used mainly for writing out loan words, transcribing foreign words into Japanese, adding emphasis to a word or for representing onomatopoeia (i.e. the sound that something makes). When translated to the roman alphabet, katakana is usually transcribed in capital letters. Thus, when a word is written out in only capital letters, such as AVALANCHE, this would mean that the use of the word is specific enough for the creators to use katakana, in this case referring to a rebel group named “AVALANCHE”, while the use of lower case letters refers to the regular Japanese word for “avalanche”.

Lastly, the story of Final Fantasy VII is very nuanced and complex. Due to the limited scope of this essay, I cannot account for story-line in its entirety, and must therefore leave out certain sections, some of them being of utmost importance to fully comprehend the story. The account presented below will focus mainly on the esoteric part of the narrative of the game, and the way it relates to contemporary notions of spirituality.

## **5.1 Game Narrative**

The story of Final Fantasy VII is centred around a young man named Cloud. At the beginning of the game, Cloud is working as a mercenary for the eco-terrorist group AVALANCHE, hired to assist in the bombing of a power plant in the city of Midgar. Little is known about Cloud's background besides the fact that he used to belong to SOLDIER, an elite military unit of the Shinra Corporation, the very same company that runs the power plant AVALANCHE is about to bomb. While the first mission is a success, the second goes wrong, and Cloud becomes separated from the group. Finding himself lost in the slums of the city, he befriends Aeris, a flower girl, who volunteers to help him reunite with AVALANCHE. In passing, she tells Cloud that she is in possession of a piece of materia that does absolutely nothing. The materia is white, and we are told little else about it for now. Aeris is, however, no ordinary person; she is the last survivor of a people called “the Ancients”

and soon gets kidnapped by the Shinra, who wishes to use her in their evil schemes of finding and exploiting “the Promised Land”. Together with Barrett and Tifa, both members of AVALANCHE, Cloud sets out to rescue Aeris. They succeed in this, but in the midst of trying to escape, the Shinra staff is attacked and killed by a mysterious man named Sephiroth, who states that he is not going to let them get their hands on the Promised Land. While this leads Barrett to think that Sephiroth “is a good guy, then”, Cloud assesses the situation to be more complex. “[Cloud]:A good guy? No way!! It's not that simple!! I know him! Sephiroth's mission is different!" The party then escapes Midgar, and retreats to a nearby town, where the relationship between Cloud and Sephiroth is further explained.

Cloud and Sephiroth were both enlisted in SOLDIER. Being a military fighting unit during a previous war, the main role of the organisation during Clouds stay is said to mainly have been putting down any resistance to the Shinra Corporation. While Cloud was a rookie recruit, Sephiroth was the experienced veteran, and conceived of as a war hero. His strength is said to be “unreal. He is far stronger in reality than any story you might have heard about him.” One day, five years prior to the beginning of the game, the two are sent to the town of Nibelheim, the childhood home town of Cloud, on a mission. When investigating a malfunctioning reactor outside of town, they learn that it is not simply for producing energy, but also a place where Shinra is conducting secret, genetic experiments on humans, turning them to monsters. Cloud and Sephiroth retreats back to the town, but Sephiroth begins to have a dawning realization; that he himself was created in the same way. “[Sephiroth]: ...Was I created this way too? [...].I've always felt since I was small... That I was different from the others. Special, in some way. But... not like this...” After secluding himself in the library of the town, Sephiroth finds evidence that this is indeed the case. He is revealed to have been produced with cells from the dead body of the Ancient Jenova. “ The Jenova Project wanted to produce people with the powers of the Ancients[...] ...I am the one that was produced”, he tells Cloud. “ In my veins courses the blood of the Ancients. I am one of the rightful heirs to this planet!” The realization that he is the result of a genetic experiment to produce human weapons turns Sephiroth mad, and he then goes on to torch Nibelheim, kill the townspeople, and head for the reactor where the body of Jenova is stored. Struck by grief of the destruction of his his home town, Cloud follows Sephiroth, and confronts him. Then the screen flashes white, and the recollection ends. Apparently, Cloud has no memory of the outcome of the confrontation, or what happened afterwards.

The objective of the heroes is thus set. Both the Shinra and Sephiroth must be stopped from finding the Promised Land, and the party sets out on a chase to find Sephiroth. This chase takes

them all across the world of Final Fantasy VII, and on the way they are joined by the talking lion Red XIII, the ninja Yuffie, Caith Sith the talking cat, Vincent, who is yet another example of the genetic experiments of the Shinra Corporation, and Cid, the chain smoking pilot. Indeed, a set of heroes as fine as any.

At first, we are given little reason of why Sephiroth must be stopped, other than him being a bad guy in general, and Cloud having a personal vendetta with him. Several hours of game time passes before we are given further insight into the evil master plan of Sephiroth. This is when, after having followed him through three continents of the world, the party finds themselves within the “Temple of the Ancients”. The design of the temple draws from the imagery of ancient Maya-aesthetics; both in its pyramid form, and in the style of the murals within it, depicting the end of the world. We see pictures showing a civilisation cultivate the land, build the temple and prosper, and then go under in a sea of flames when hit by an object falling from the sky, a meteor. With this as the background Sephiroth reveals his intentions.

[Sephiroth]: I am becoming one with the Planet.

[Aeris]: How do you intend to become one with the Planet?

[Sephiroth]: It's simple. Once the Planet is hurt, it gathers Spirit Energy to heal the injury. The amount of energy gathered depends on the size of the injury. ...What would happen if there was an injury that threatened the very life of the Planet? Think how much energy would be gathered! Ha ha ha. And at the center of that injury, will be me. All that boundless energy will be mine. By merging with all the energy of the Planet, I will become a new life form, a new existence. Melding with the Planet... I will cease to exist as I am now. Only to be reborn as a 'God' to rule over every soul.

[Aerith]: An injury powerful enough to destroy the Planet? Injure... the Planet?

[Sephiroth]: Behold that mural. The Ultimate Destructive Magic... Meteor.

In short, Sephiroth's plan is to use magic to summon “[Aeris]: The Ultimate Destructive Magic, Meteor. It finds small drifting planets with its magic. And then collides with them.” By threatening the life of the Planet, he will steal the Spirit Energy of the earth in order to transform himself into a new God. An evil villain indeed.

Upon leaving the temple, Cloud suddenly has a breakdown, loses control of himself and attacks Aeris. The other party members stops him by knocking him unconscious. While unconscious, he dreams of speaking to Aeris in a forest. She tells him not to worry about what happened, and that she from now on must go on alone. “[Aeris:] This forest leads to the City of the Ancients... and is called the Sleeping Forest. [...]I'm going to protect it. Only a survivor of the Cetra, like me, can do

it[...] It feels like I'm being led by something. Then, I'll be going now. I'll come back when it's all over." When Cloud wakes up, he is told that Aeris has disappeared. The party sets off after her, after all, Sephiroth is still on the loose, and begins searching for the City of the Ancients, located on the northernmost continent of the game world, covered in perpetual snow. When they arrive, they find the ruins of a city. The style of the city is aquatic; the houses are made of giant sea shells, and the furniture and tools lying spread about looks to have been crafted from various fish bones. Cloud has a feeling that everything is not right. "[Cloud:] Aeris is here. ...and so is Sephiroth." They make their way down to the sub-level of the city. There they find Aeris, kneeling in front of an altar, surrounded by an underground lake. She seems to be in prayer, but when she notices Cloud's approach, she looks up at him, and smiles. At this moment, Sephiroth drops down from the ceiling, and in one of the most dramatic and unexpected plot turns in video game history, he drives his sword through the back of Aeris, killing her on the spot. She slumps forward, and as she hits the ground, her special piece of materia, the white materia that does nothing, falls off her person, bounces down the altar, and drops into the water. In this moment of triumph, Sephiroth proclaims "Do not worry. Soon the girl will become part of the Planet's energy. All that is left is to go North. The 'Promised Land' waits for me over the snowy fields. There, I will become a new being by uniting with the planet. As will this girl." Cloud, on the other hand, is devastated. "...Shut up. The cycle of nature and your stupid plan don't mean a thing. Aeris is gone. Aeris will no longer talk, no longer laugh, cry.....or get angry.... What about my pain? My fingers are tingling. My mouth is dry. My eyes are burning!" But Sephiroth is impervious to Cloud's sorrow. In fact, he won't even acknowledge it. "Ha, ha, ha..... Stop acting as if you were sad. There's no need to act as though you're angry either. Because Cloud, you are.....a puppet." Sephiroth then leaves without us getting told what is meant by this. The remaining party proceeds by carrying Aeris's lifeless body out in the middle of the lake, which is to be her burial place. As the water envelops her, a faint glow of light surrounds her as she sinks to her final rest.

After all this has transpired, the heroes are even more convinced that Sephiroth needs to be stopped. They press on, journeying through snowy fields, over a vast glacier, and up a chilly, steep mountain, finally arriving at the Northern Crater; a gigantic crater formed when something "[Cloud]: fell out of the sky and crashed down here..... Leaving a scar on the Planet." At about the same time as the heroes, the Shinra also arrive at the crater. They have followed Sephiroth by airship, hoping he would lead them to the Promised Land. When Cloud and the rest reach the centre of the Northern Crater, they suddenly stumble into what looks just like Nibelheim, Cloud's home town that was burnt down by Sephiroth. Everybody is confused except Cloud, who calmly says "This is an

illusion Sephiroth made up. He's trying to confuse us. It'll be all right. As long as we know it's an illusion, there's nothing to be afraid of." Here, we are once again shown scenes from the Nibelheim-flashback, with one big difference. Cloud are not in them, but has been replaced by another person. When once again standing amidst the flames of the burning town, Cloud call out to Sephiroth. "[Cloud]: Sephiroth! I know you're listening! I know what you want to say! That I wasn't in Nibelheim five years ago. That's it, isn't it?" In a flash of light, Sephiroth instantly appears.

[Sephiroth]: I see you finally understand.

[Cloud]: What you are trying to say is that you want to confuse me, right? But...even making me see those things won't affect me. I remember it all. The heat of the fire...the pain in my body... and in my heart!

[Sephiroth]: Oh, is that so? You are just a puppet... You have no heart...and cannot feel any pain... How can there be any meaning in the memory of such a being? What I have shown you is reality. What you remember, that is the illusion.

Now, the true nature of Cloud is revealed. He was never really in Nibelheim, never really anywhere before the events of five years ago, when he was "[Sephiroth]: ...constructed by Hojo, piece by piece, right after Nibelheim was burnt. A puppet made up of vibrant Jenova cells, her knowledge, and the power of the Mako." All his memories are fake, constructed by the Jenova cells within him merging with Tifa's memories of a childhood friend named Cloud. In the end, he turns out to be nothing but a failed clone of Sephiroth created by Hojo. After this, chaos breaks lose, and the heroes are forced to escape as the Lifestream rushes in and floods the place. The devastated Cloud is left behind.

A few weeks later, the world is a different place. Sephiroth has summoned Meteor, which hangs in the sky as an ominous, ever growing red dot. People are in a state of resigned terror. Cloud has disappeared, and the party sets out to search for him. Knowing he was swallowed by the Lifestream, they search the places where the Lifestream is known to gush out through cracks in the ocean floor. When they finally find him, he is in a delirious, autistic state unable to communicate. Tifa now decides to stay as his nurse until he gets better. At first, Cloud shows no signs of regaining sanity, but it is not long until the Lifestream once again gushes up, creating an earthquake that swallows the village they are staying in, and Cloud and Tifa with it. The Lifestream, being no ordinary river but a materialization of consciousness and the souls of the departed, apparently has some special properties. After waking up, Tifa finds herself within the subconsciousness of Cloud. She meets several different aspects of him, and together they go through the suppressed memories of his childhood. In the end, he is able to regain his memory, that he was in fact never a member of

SOLDIER but constructed that memory, but also that he was not created by Hojo, but a real person that was experimented on. In the end, this allows his diffused personality to be reintegrated. Cloud and Tifa then reunites with the party, and Cloud sums his story up with “ I'm..... Cloud. ....the master of my own illusionary world. But I can't remain trapped in an illusion any more..... I'm going to live my life without pretending.”

Now, when all the friends are together again and Cloud has finally come to terms with himself, there still remains some vital things to. Sephiroth is still out there, holed up in the Northern Cave, and Meteor is on its course of collision with earth. Not really knowing what to do from here, Cloud turns to the old and wise Elder Bugenhagen for advice. Bugenhagen instructs him to look into his own heart for guidance. “There's always something in the deepest reaches of our hearts. Something buried, or something forgotten. Remember it.. Whatever that is, must certainly be what you are all looking for..” What Cloud finds when searching his inner feelings, are thoughts of Aeris. Being the last of the Cetra, she was the only one that could stop Sephiroth, and whatever she was trying to achieve before dying must be the key to victory. To find out what this was, they bring Bugenhagen with them, and return to the City of the Ancients. When they arrive, Bugenhagen speaks. Being more spiritually attuned than the rest, he is able perceive the knowledge of the Ancients that floats around the place.

[Bugenhagen]: The planet's in a crisis... A crisis beyond human power or endless time. It says, when the time comes, we must search for 'Holy'. Holy... the ultimate White Magic. Magic that might stand against Meteor. Perhaps our last hope to save the Planet from Meteor. If a soul seeking Holy reaches the planet, it will appear. [...]Meteor, Weapon, everything will disappear. Perhaps, even ourselves. It is up to the planet to decide. [...]What is best for the planet. What is bad for the planet. All that is bad will disappear. That is all. Ho Ho Hooo. I wonder which we humans are?

Holy is summoned with the white materia that Aeris carried, and as the party watches the lake in which it fell, they see that it emits a pale green glow, indicating that Aeris has already prayed for Holy, and that her wish has reached the Planet. But how come Holy isn't moving? Why hasn't it already risen and erased all that is evil and destructive? The only explanation is that something, or someone, is getting in its way. “[Cloud]:.....Him..... He's the only one that could do it. ...Sephiroth.” And so, all that is left is to once again face Sephiroth in the depths of the Northern Crater, and this time defeat him. Although there are at this point several hours of game time left, there is not much more to say about the following events other than that this is exactly what occurs. When the heroes encounter Sephiroth, he descends in the form of a one-winged angel, but is defeated in the end. After this, when the party must flee the crater as it collapses in on them, Cloud



slips into unconsciousness. We are once again taking inside his mind, where Sephiroth appears for the last time in the game. Cloud faces him alone, one final time, and in defeating him frees himself from Sephiroth's influence once and for all. He then wakes up, and together they all escape unscathed. Now, Cloud says, "isn't the rest up to the Planet?"

The next scene is played out over Midgar. Meteor is about to fall right on top of the city, and is so close that its heat have begun to scourge the land. Just before impact, however, Holy rushes in as a great flood, a wall of protective, bright light. It engulfs Midgar, shielding the city and tries to push Meteor away. Meteor is too strong though, and as it slowly starts to break through, Holy's glow turns to a crimson red. When all seems lost, tiny specks of green, shining light is seen in the horizon. The specks soon appears to be coming from every direction, and one after on converge to larger, thicker lines of light. It is the Lifestream that pours out of the earth, filling the view with green light. It pours over Midgar, fed from strands emanating from all over the Planet, covering it in a brilliant, green light, and keeps Meteor at bay as it is being dissolved. The Lifestream shines so bright that the heroes who are watching are seen to shun away, covering their eyes. Then, the screen goes black. The End.

Almost the end, that is. After the credit reel, accompanied by one of the classic Final Fantasy theme songs, has faded, we are treated with one last scene. The text "500 years later" appear on screen. We see a valley. No humans are in sight but Red XIII (who is said to be of a species of extreme longevity) is running across the valley, followed by two cubs. The trio jumps up a series of stone platforms, and stops at the edge of cliff. Beyond the cliff, lies the remains of Midgar. It is overgrown with lush green grass and trees, and above sails a flock of geese. All is still and peaceful, as the city has finally been retaken by nature.

## **5.2 Game World**

The second part of this chapter will cover the game world of Final Fantasy VII. The game world is the back drop on which the story unfolds, and provides the basis for the player's immersion into the game. Of the various contents that this world is made up of, I will focus upon *Game Lore* (such as the nature of magic), *Groups & Actors* (meaning characters, monsters and deities present in the game world) and *Locations* (such as towns, caves and mountains central to the esoteric narrative of the game).

## 5.2.1 Game Lore

### *Magic, Materia and Mako*

Crucial to the understanding of the game world is the three concepts of *magic, materia and mako*. As in most works of the fantasy genre, magic is an integrated element in the world of Final Fantasy VII. The most obvious function of magic lies in its role in the battle system of the game. During the course of the game, the player gets access to a wide array of spells that can either be used offensively to damage enemies, supportively to increase certain attributes such as the speed or the defence of the game characters, or for healing purposes. What sets the magic of Final Fantasy VII apart from other fantasy games, however, is the specific ontological ground that is given to explain its presence. This way of integrating the game mechanics with the story-line helps the player's immersion into the game world, thus adding to the depth of the experience of the game.

The concept of *Mako* is introduced in the very beginning of the game. Cloud is working as a hired mercenary for the environmental terrorist organisation AVALANCHE. Their mission is to bomb a "Mako reactor". AVALANCHE's leader, Barret, provides some background information. "[Barret]: The planet's full of Mako energy. People here use it every day. It's the life blood of the planet. But Shinra keeps suckin' the blood out with these machines." We are given to understand that the reactors produce electricity, and is the basis for the energy consumption of the society. Further into the game, residents of the small town Kalm tells us "'Thanks to Mako energy, life's pretty darn convenient. Thanks to Shinra. Don't you think?" If the player chose to not agree with this, the person answers "Hmnm. But I hate to think of what life'd be like without Mako energy." Although Mako seems to be important to the people of Final Fantasy VII, there appear to be some problems connected to it. Another person in the same town voices the following concerns: "Mako energy's made things a lot more convenient.... But seems like a lot of plants and animals have been disappearing at a rapid pace. I think the old life was better. Don't you think so?" The environmental consequences of Mako energy such as this is expressed several times in the game. When visiting Nibelheim, the inn keeper tells Cloud:

A lot of monsters have been appearing in the last 12 months[...] It was all right when they were building the reactor... while they were still building it. But once it was completed, it's been bad. Within a few years, all the trees on the mountain withered away. I don't know if the reactor was good or bad... I mean it's easy to say that it was a bad idea now. But now, what can you do about it...?

When entering the village of Gongaga, the player is met by a town in shambles, accompanied by

a sombre musical theme. Overlooking the view is the ruins of an ruined Mako reactor. The villagers tell the story of the tragedy of an reactor explosion. “This is Gongaga Village. Many people died here in a Mako reactor explosion. The Shinra people told us that everyone would be happy once the reactor was built. But, all it brought us was sadness...” Apparently, all is not well with Mako energy.

Magic spells are accessed through the use of *materia*; shiny, colourful orbs which are either bought in stores, found in various locations, or acquired as reward from completing certain quests. While an explanation of *how* to use materia is given fairly early in the game, its connection with magic and Mako is revealed somewhat later, when the player has already become quite accustomed to its use. This occur when Cloud and Sephiroth, during the mission in the mountains of Nibelheim, stumbles upon a Mako fountain inside a cave.

[Cloud]: ...And what's this?

[Sephiroth]: A Mako fountain. It's a miracle of nature[...] Materia. When you condense Mako energy, materia is produced. It's very rare to be able to see materia in its natural state.

[Cloud]: By the way... Why is it that when you use materia you can also use magic too?

[Sephiroth]: You were in SOLDIER and didn't even know that? ...the knowledge and wisdom of the Ancients is held in the materia. Anyone with this knowledge can freely use the powers of the Land and the Planet. That knowledge interacts between ourselves and the planet calling up magic..... or so they say.

[Cloud]: Magic..... a mysterious power.

Magic is thus an “interaction between ourself and the planet”, made possible through the access to “the knowledge and wisdom of the Ancients”. This knowledge is inherent within the materia, a condensed form of the same energy that is used to produce electricity. Final Fantasy VII utilizes two separate discourses to refer to this energy, one materialistic and one spiritualized. Throughout the game, the term “Mako” generally refers to the materialistic discourse. This usage of the term is mainly connected to representatives of the Shinra corporation, the producers of mako energy. Mako is something to be exploited for material gain and worldly power. When revealing his master plan, president Shinra explains his reasons for searching for the Promised Land.

[President Shinra]: It's been said the Promised Land is very fertile. ...If the land is fertile...

[Barret]: Then there's gotta be Mako!

[President Shinra]: Exactly. That is why our money sucking Mako Reactor is a necessity. The abundant Mako will just come out on its own. That is where Neo-Midgar will be built. Shinra's new glory...

[Barret]: @\$#^%! Quit dreamin'!

[President Shinra]: Oh really, don't you know? These days all it takes for your dreams to come

true is money and power.

Further, “Mako” is utilized when speaking of the energy for military means, such as in the “Mako cannon” Sister Ray, a gigantic canon located at a military base that is powered through a reactor, or that members of the military unit SOLDIER are “showered with Mako” to enhance their combat abilities. Lastly, “Mako” is used in junction with technology and science. When Cloud calls magic a “mysterious power”, Sephiroth laughs.

[Sephiroth]: Ha, ha, ha!

[Cloud]: Did I say somethin' funny?

[Sephiroth]: A man once told me never to use an unscientific term such as mysterious power! It shouldn't even be called magic! I still remember how angry he was.

[Cloud]: Who was that?

[Sephiroth]: Hojo of Shinra, Inc. ... An inexperienced man assigned to take over the work of a great scientist. He was a walking mass of complexes.

The scientist Hojo, in a similar fashion, refers to “Mako” when discussing his genetic experiments. “[Hojo]: He's a Sephiroth-clone I created after the real Sephiroth died five years ago. Jenova cells and Mako, with my knowledge and skills, have been combined with science and nature to bring him to life." On another note, after having been submerged in the Lifestream, a medical doctor diagnoses Cloud with Mako poisoning. “I'll say it again, he's got Mako poisoning. I've never seen a case this bad... An immense amount of Mako-drenched knowledge was put into his brain all at once..... No normal human could have survived it..... It's a miracle he did!"

The spiritualized discourse has already been somewhat hinted at, in Mako being explained to be “the life blood of the planet”, and that “the knowledge and wisdom of the Ancients” is accessed through Mako's condensed form of materia. During the early stages of the game, this aspect of the energy is merely hinted at, and the term “Mako” is consistently used. However, at a specific point in the game, when the player's party visit Cosmo Canyon, a place where "people from all over the world gather[...] to seek the Study of Planet Life", the true, spiritual nature of Mako is revealed.

[Bugenhagen]: Eventually... all humans die. What happens to them after they die? The body decomposes, and returns to the Planet. That much everyone knows. What about their consciousness, their hearts and their souls? The soul too returns to the Planet. And not only those of humans, but everything on this Planet. In fact, all living things in the universe, are the same. The spirits that return to the Planet, merge with one another and roam the Planet. They roam, converge, and divide, becoming a swell, called the 'Lifestream'. Lifestream.... In other words, a path of energy of the souls roaming the Planet. 'Spirit Energy' is a word that you should never forget. A new life... children are blessed with Spirit energy and are brought into the world. Then, the time comes with they die and

once again return to the Planet. Of course there are exceptions, but this is the way of the world. I've digressed, but you'll understand better if you watch this.

[FMV sequence: The camera zooms in on model Earth. We see trees and humans being born, then die. Their bodies becomes masses of swirling light, then streak across the surface of the Earth, merging. On the other side of the planet, the energy forms into a new being. Streaks of energy cover the planet, glowing many colors. Bugenhagen floats over to the planet.]

[Bugenhagen]: Spirit energy makes all things possible, trees, birds, and humans. Not just living things. But Spirit energy makes it possible for Planets to be Planets.

[FMV sequence: The energy begins to converge at a point near Bugenhagen's hand.]

[Bugenhagen]: What happens if that Spirit energy were to disappear?

[FMV sequence: The energy is all drawn into Bugenhagen's sleeve. When it is all gone, the planet turns jet-black, and crumbles, huge chunks floating off into space. The camera returns to the party.]

[Bugenhagen]: .....These are the basics of the Study of Planet Life.

[Cloud]: If the Spirit energy is lost, our Planet is destroyed...

[Bugenhagen]: Ho Ho Hoooo. Spirit energy is efficient BECAUSE it exists within nature. When Spirit energy is forcefully extracted, and manufactured, it can't accomplish its true purpose.

[Cloud]: You're talking about Mako energy, right?

[Bugenhagen]: Everyday Mako reactors suck up Spirit energy, diminishing it. Spirit energy gets compressed in the reactors and processed into Mako energy. All living things are being used up and thrown away. In other words, Mako energy will only destroy the Planet...

From this point on the heroes will speak exclusively in terms of “Spirit energy” rather than “Mako”. Note that while the discourse here has shifted from materialistic to spiritualized, Spirit energy does in every way have a material existence. Aside from being processed into Mako energy, we are told that Spirit energy can have direct impact on the world in the form of the Lifestream. While it usually is located deep within the earth, Red XIII tells us "The Lifestream sometimes gushes out to the surface from cracks in the ocean floor. I heard that such a place exists." This is apparently the cause of earthquakes in Final Fantasy VII.

### *The Promised Land*

Both the Shinra and Sephiroth are in pursuit of “the Promised Land”. The Shinra seeks it in order to exploit its abundant reserve of make energy. Sephiroth aims to use this same energy to summon Meteor. For both of these parties, the Promised Land is a literal, geographical place, that can be accessed and used for their respective purposes.

For the protagonists, however, the Promised Land is somewhat more complex. When discussing

it, Aeris seems to be unsure of what is really meant with it.

[Tifa]: Does the Promised Land really exist?

[Aeris]: ...I don't know. "All I know is... The Cetra were born from the Planet, speak with the Planet, and unlock the Planet. And..... then..... The Cetra will return to the Promised Land. A land that promises supreme happiness. Someday I'll get out of Midgar... Speak with the Planet and find my Promised Land. ...That's what mom said

To find the Promised Land, one must be able to speak with the Planet, but Aeris is also hinting that it might be something of a more individual place, in saying that she will find “my Promised Land”. When speaking to the Elder Hargo, whose “job is to gather all the legends and the knowledge of the planet”, he tells us that he does not believe there to be such a place at all. It does exist, but not as a place.

[Elder Hargo]: The Promised Land is the resting place of the Ancients. The life of the Ancients is one continuous journey. A journey to grow trees and plants, produce animals, and to raise Mako energy. Their harsh journeys continued throughout their lives... The place they returned to after their long journey... Their burial land is the Promised Land. Huh? Supreme Happiness? I believe that, for the Ancients, it was the moment that they were able to return to their Planet. At that moment they were released from their fate, and gained their supreme happiness... At least that's what I believe.

Here, rather than an actual place, the Promised Land is seen as more of a state of being, when the moment of death diffuses the boundaries between the self and the Planet, when separation is ended and a state of Oneness with nature is achieved.

## 5.2.2 Groups and Actors

### *The Ancients*

“The Ancients” was a race of highly spiritual humans that went extinct several thousand years before the events of Final Fantasy VII takes place. At first, we are given little else than vague references to their special powers. “[Tseng]:...you're a very special child. You are of special blood. Your real mother was an 'Ancient'. The Ancients will lead us to a land of supreme happiness. Aeris will be able to bring happiness to all those in the slums.” Aeris, being the only survivor of the race, is a part of the Shinra Corporation's dubious scheme to find the Promised Land and exploit it for their own benefits. “[President Shinra]: She's the last surviving Ancient... Don't you know? They called themselves the Cetra, and lived thousands of years ago. Now they are just a forgotten page in history. Cetra, or the Ancients will show us the way to the 'Promised Land.' I'm expecting a lot out of her.” While little else is revealed at first, successively a story is told about a people with an

intimate, spiritual relationship with nature and the Planet. “[Sephiroth]: This Planet originally belonged to the Cetra. Cetra was a itinerant race. They would migrate in, settle the Planet, then move on... At the end of their harsh, hard journey, they would find the Promised Land and supreme happiness.” The mission of the Cetra was to cultivate the land, tending to the land, and by doing that raising Spirit Energy. “[Elder Hargo]: The life of the Ancients is one continuous journey. A journey to grow trees and plants, produce animals, and to raise Mako energy.” Their close relation with the Planet would allow them to harness the Spirit energy in order to heal and protect. Their journey, however, would come to an abrupt end when they encountered the creature known as Jenova.

### *Jenova and the crisis from the sky*

"[Sephiroth]:....an organism that was apparently dead, was found in a 2000 year old geological stratum. Professor Gast named that organism, Jenova... X Year, X Month, X Day. Jenova confirmed to be an Ancient..." After finding what seems to be the preserved body of a dead Ancient, the Shinra launched to Jenova-project; its purpose was to “produce people with the powers of the Ancients.” Of course, being a sinister corporation, this had less to do with creating a new race of spiritually, ecologically aware humans, but was instead aimed at producing a new breed of powerful soldiers to be used for military purposes. After injecting an unborn foetus with cells from Jenova, the project is realized in the birth of Sephiroth. Although at one point referred to as “he”, Jenova is mostly depicted as female. Not only in being called the mother Sephiroth, her appearance is that of a smooth and slender, but at the same time eerily alien woman.

At the mid-point of the game, however, it is revealed that the Shinra was mistaken, and Jenova is in fact not a Cetra; quite the contrary. We are told that, thousands of years ago disaster struck the Planet when “something fell from the sky making a large wound.” When the Cetra gathered to heal this wound, the “crisis from the sky” appeared.

[Infalna]: That's when the one who injured the Planet... or the 'crisis from the sky', as we call him, came. He first approached as a friend, deceived them, and finally..... gave them the virus. The Cetra were attacked by the virus and went mad... transforming into monsters. Then, just as he had at the Knowlespole... He approached other Cetra clans..... infecting them with... the virus... The one the Professor mistook for a Cetra... was named Jenova. That is the 'crisis from the sky'. The Planet knew it had to destroy the 'crisis from the sky'..."You see, as long as Jenova exists, the Planet will never be able to fully heal itself.

Here we get to learn of the true nature of Jenova. She is a creature from the sky, crashing down on the planet, injuring it, and finally wiping out the people trying to heal it.

## *The Shinra*

The Shinra is something as unusual as an electric company bent on world domination. Being the only supplier of Mako energy, they have in Final Fantasy VII established a world wide monopoly. Therefore, people everywhere are dependant on them for their need of electricity. At the beginning of the game, Shinra is run by a person known simply as President Shinra. He is the archetypal corporate cat that sports a blonde moustache and smokes cigars, and while he has no qualms in destroying an entire town together with the people in it if he believes it will get rid of some anti-Shinra faction, he is classy enough to enjoy opera music when watching the destruction. Although President Shinra believes that “these days all it takes for your dreams to come true is money and power”, his wealth is not enough to save him from Sephiroth, by whom he is killed early on in the game. From that point on, Shinra is run by the president's son, Rufus. According to Rufus himself, he has a somewhat different strategy of running the world than his father, who “tried to control the world with money”. “[Rufus]: Work at Shinra, get your pay. If a terrorist attacks, the Shinra army will help you. It looks perfect on the outside. But, I do things differently. I'll control the world with fear. It takes too much to do it like my old man.” He is cold towards his employees, and when Meteor has been summoned, he decides that Tifa and Barret are to be publicly executed for it, simply because “[Rufus]: people are ignorant. They'll feel better as long as someone is punished.”

Before the events of the game however, the Shinra's main occupation was as a weapon manufacturer. During this time, they developed “a lot of technological gadgets”, including a space rocket. They also conducted secret, genetic experiments in order to produce the perfect, human weapon. These experiments first resulted in Sephiroth, and after he was thought to have died, a series of Sephiroth clones, of which Cloud was a part of. Their ability to enhance the fighting abilities of humans were also used on the members of SOLDIER, an elite military band employed by the company. During the war, SOLDIER was used in combat, but after the war ended and Shinra switched to being a Mako producer, SOLDIER's chief role became to “[Cloud]: put down any resistance against the Shinra.” As such, the villagers of Nibelheim are worried that Cloud and Sephiroth has not come just to investigate a malfunctioning reactor, but that “[Zangan]: The Shinra showed up to eliminate any information that could be an embarrassment to the company...” We also get to know that when an explosion occur at the Mako reactor at Corel, the Shinra torches the town. “[Barret]: Shinra blamed the accident on the people. Said it was done by a rebel faction.” All in all, the company does not shun away from anything to make money and build their power.



### 5.2.3 Locations

#### *Midgar*

Midgar is the biggest city in the world of Final Fantasy VII, and the starting point of the game. Being the power base of the Shinra Corp., it is a gloomy place of grey machinery and metal, shrouded in perpetual night. Employing as many as eight Mako reactors, the terrain surrounding the city is barren, rocky and bereft of anything growing. The city of Midgar is built upon a plate, elevated high above the ground. This is explained early in the game when, on the way home after completing the first mission, Cloud gets to look at a map of the city. "This is a complete model of the city of Midgar. It's about a 1/10000 scale. The top plate is about 50 meters above ground. A main support structure holds the plate up in the centre, and there are other support structures built in each section..." Thus, not only is Midgar depleting the land of life force; its citizens are literally out of contact with the planet and nature, in a powerful demonstration of the subjugation of nature by technology. Further, the city is divided in eight sectors. "[Jessie]: Each town used to have a name, but no one in Midgar remembers them. Instead of names, we refer to them by numbered sectors. That's the kind of place this is." While life upon the plate is reserved for the middle class, the poor lives a life in the slums down on the ground, below the actual plate.

[Cloud ]: A floating city... Pretty unsettling scenery.

[...]

[Barret]: The upper world... a city on a plate... It's 'cuz of that &^#\$# 'pizza', that people underneath are sufferin'! And the city below is full of polluted air. On topa that, the Reactor keeps drainin' up all the energy.

[Cloud ]: Then why doesn't everyone move onto the plate?

[Barret]: Dunno. Probably 'cuz they ain't got no money. Or, maybe... 'Cuz they love their land, no matter how polluted it gets.

[Cloud]: I know... no one lives in the slums because they want to. It's like this train. It can't run anywhere except where its rails take it.

It is in the misery and poverty of the slums, however, that we find the first of two churches in the game. This church is also where the player first meets Aeris. While it is run down and in need of restoration, the church offer the first link between spirituality and nature, as is demonstrated in being the place where Aeris cultivates flowers. "[Aeris]: The flowers here are quite resilient because this is a sacred place. They say you can't grow grass and flowers in Midgar. But for some reason, the flowers have no trouble blooming here. I love it here." The church is also stated to be the only location where Aeris is able to hear the voice of the planet.

## *Wutai*

The town of Wutai is located at the westernmost point of the map of Final Fantasy VII. Borrowing its name from the Chinese sacred mountain, it is a place clearly modelled after an East Asian fashion. More importantly, it bears several references to East Asian religiosity, as well as to the polemical discourse of materialism as opposed to spirituality. The town is overlooked by a pagoda on one side, and a mountain with gigantic, carved out statues, called Da-Chao on the other. Wutai is portrayed as being considered poor and somewhat unimportant. This is attributed to a lack of materia. “[...]there's almost no materia left anywhere in Wutai. Listen, this is just a backwoods town. We don't have much to do with Shinra, and besides... If we had a lot of materia, Wutai would be a much more exciting town, but we don't...” Something it does have, though, is belief. A man tells us:

Hey. Did you hear? There used to be a Water God here in Wutai. They say the Water God was a huge snake! Now we live in a world filled with Mako. Not many people would believe in something like that now. But some in the world, and here in Wutai, still believe. Believe in the scales of the Water God and in materia that has its power in it.

This Water God, together with the pagoda and the mountain, are considered patron deities of Wutai. In the words of another citizen: “That five-storied pagoda over there is called the Pagoda of the Five Mighty Gods... The Five Gods are Power, Speed, Magic, War and Omni, who has the best characteristics of everything. Since ancient times, we in Wutai, have worshipped Da-chao and the Water God.” Religion in Wutai thus depicted as ancient and traditional. However, concerns about its current role is expressed. “Legend has it that the village has been protected by Da-chao, the Water God, and the Five Mighty Gods. But in the last battle, we didn't fare so well... I guess our beliefs were based on nothing more than legends.” Somewhat later, Yuffie reflects further upon the tension between the backwardness of Wutai and its lack of materia and worldly power. “Before I was born, Wutai was a lot more crowded and more important... You saw what it looks like now, right? ...JUST a resort town... After we lost the war, we got peace, but with that, we lost something else. Now look at Wutai... That's why... if I had lots of materia I could...”

The visit to Wutai is optional; it is by no means necessary to conduct in order to finish the game, and is therefore not crucial to the overall narrative. However, it offers a noteworthy case, since the anxieties of the modern world, connected to the demands for modernisation on at the expense of traditional values, are explored and expressed in this location.

### *The Northen Crater*

The Northen Crater is the northernmost point on the World Map in the game. It is, in fact, the point where Jenova fell when she struck the planet 2000 years prior to the events of the game, wounding it. A crater of humongous proportions, it is surrounded by steep cliffs created by the collision, and so deep that it reaches down to the centre of the Planet. It is a place where Spiritual energy is constantly leaking from the ground, the result of the Planet trying to heal itself. The crater is surrounded by a land covered in perpetual snow that never melts. This is due to the Spiritual Energy consumed in the healing process. “[Infalna]: ...the energy that was needed to heal the Planet withered away the land...then the Planet...”

The Northen Crater is the place where both Sephiroth and the Shinra believes the Promised Land to be located, due to the high levels of mako energy. When exploring it, Rufus is in awe. “The outside is rich with Mako energy. The inside is a treasure trove of Materia. This truly is the Promised Land.” Sephiroth, on the other hand, is out to use the vast amounts of energy in order to summon Meteor. This is because in order to summon Meteor “[Aeris]: You need great spiritual power to use it[...] One person's power alone won't do it. Somewhere special. Where there's plenty of the Planet's energy...” In other words, the Mako abundant Northen Crater.

### **5.3 Summary**

To sum up, the religious world view presented in Final Fantasy VII is one where nature is sacralized in the form of the living Planet and the Lifestream. These are the objects for meaning and truth in that they represent the good and benevolent forces of the universe, as well as that which the heroes fight for. They also represent power, in that they have the ability to nurture and heal, as well as in the end save mankind from the destruction of Meteor. The antagonists of the game are all in one or another out to hurt the Planet, either by exploiting it for profit as the Shinra does, or by trying to steal the Spirit energy in order to ascend to godhood as Sephiroth does. Present in the game is also an obvious duality between spirituality and the exploitation of nature. Midgar is a bleak place where nothing can grow, except for the spiritual haven of the church in sector 5. In Wutai on the other hand, there is no Mako energy, but people still keep their faith in the old gods. The duality is also seen in the two separate discourses referring to the energy of the Lifestream; either the sacralized discourse of Spirit energy, or the materialistic discourse of exploited Mako energy. In the next part of the thesis, I will compare the orientation of sacred objects in Final Fantasy VII with those of the Superstory.

## 6 Analysis

Final Fantasy VII, as every other Final Fantasy game, is littered with religious and esoteric references, tropes and objects. While this in itself might at first sight make an analysis of the game alluring to scholars with an interest of religion and popular culture, I do propose that such an analysis should be conducted with some caution. Just because there are elements from traditional religions present, i.e. a god, does not mean that this presence in itself tells of a religious world view being mediated through the game. As an example, a recurring character in the Final Fantasy-series is a being called Shiva. This does not mean, however, that the series is making references to Hinduism, or Hindu culture. The Shiva of Final Fantasy actually has very little to with her Hindu namesake; apart from being female, she is not really a god at all but an ice elemental. In fact, beside the name, her only likeness to the Hindu god of creation and destruction is the chilly, blue hue of her skin. Further, although having a role in almost every game, Shiva is usually given little or no back story, and plays an insignificant role in the story-lines of the series, if any at all. Her function is solely an ornamental one; she is one of the trademarks of the series, and she does indeed contribute to the mystical, fantastical atmosphere of the game world, but does not add anything to the esoteric narrative of the game. Thus, only such elements that relates to and reinforce this narrative will be dealt with in this analysis.

### 6.1 *The Superstory in Final Fantasy VII*

Below follows an account of how the five mythemes of the Superstory are expressed within Final Fantasy VII, in what way they resemble each other, and in what way they differ.

#### *Divinization/demonization.*

The objects for divinization and demonization in Final Fantasy VII are the Cetra and the Planet, and Sephiroth and Jenova respectively. The Planet, always written with a capital P, is continuously referred to as a sentient being, as well as the source of the fantastic powers of magic. The Cetra lived their lives to cultivate the land and by doing that raising Spirit energy. This energy let the Cetra use the power of the Planet through magic, in order to further nourish it, as well as for their own benefit. The connection between spirituality and nature is subtly hinted at through the church of Midgar's Sector 5. Although Midgar is the place where the most intense exploitation of Mako energy takes place, draining the land around the city of life, Aeris remarks that she can grow

flowers in the church that are “quite resilient because this is a sacred place.” It is the one pocket within in a barren, industrialized waste land where the spiritualized nature is allowed to flourish.

Jenova is instead the demonic, malevolent entity. She is the one that tries to harm the Planet, exterminates the Cetra, and whose cells Shinra uses to produce monsters and human weapons. She is also the being that deceives Cloud, and construct his false memories for him.

### *Orientation*

The source of spiritual power is oriented within the Planet, quite literally. In the deep recesses of the earth flows the Lifestream, the “path of the energy of souls”. This stream of Spirit energy is the source that all life of the Planet originates from, and the source to which everything living will once again return. The Spirit energy of the Lifestream is what nurtures and heals the Planet when it is wounded, and even what “makes it possible for Planets to be Planets.” When the energy is taken away, a Planet will not only become barren and lifeless, but actually crumble to pieces. The grounding of spirituality in the earth is reinforced when Aeris's mother, Elmyra, recounts how Aeris once told her that a loved one had died, and returned to the Planet. “[Elmyra]: I didn't know what she meant. I asked if she meant a star in the sky. But she said it was this planet...” All in all, that which is good and true for the living beings of earth originates from the Planet. Regarding that which originates from outer space, it is a whole other story.

### *Alienation*

The mytheme of alienation is most literally embodied in Jenova and Meteor. Jenova is said to have fell from the sky in the distant pass, an alien life form that travelled the vast darkness of space before crashing down on earth, wounding the Planet in the process. Her head and torso is that of a beautiful woman, but lacks any defining, personal features. Her lower body is all the more alien, a fleshy mass that, if anything, reminds one of a bizarre evening gown. Add to that her cold, eerily smile, the total impression is that of something that has tried to come across as human, without actually being it. Considering that Sephiroth explains that “ability to change one's looks, voice, and words, is the power of Jenova”, this just might have been Jenova's intention. When she fell from the sky, the planet was wounded; the purpose of summoning Meteor is to finish off what Jenova started. When Aeris speaks of Meteor, she speaks as though it is in some way conscious when saying that it “finds small drifting planets”. Whether this is the case or not, the alien entities in Final Fantasy VII are both threatening the life of the Planet, and all things living on it.

The alien quality of Jenova is further reinforced in how she and Sephiroth can never return to the Lifestream. When the living organisms of the Planet dies, their Spirit energy is said to return to the

Planet. Jenova, however, is not part of this cycle of nature. Instead, we are told, if her body is ever dismembered, “it will eventually become one again”. All the cells of Jenova will, if separated, strive to reassemble. When the heroes first arrives to the Northern Crater, they encounter countless numbers of Sephiroth clones, people injected with Jenova's cells, that mindlessly journey towards the centre of the crater. There, the “Jenova Reunion” will take place. Their sole purpose are as vessels for the cells of Jenova to reach their destination, the place where they will be part of the body of Jenova once again. Being separate from the Planet goes for Sephiroth as well, who is said to actually have died at one point. However, this did not made him return to the Planet. Instead, he became a “traveller of the Lifestream”, taking part of its knowledge, and journeyed to the Northern Crater, where he waited for the Reunion to happen. Because of his strong will, he could never return to the Planet. As such, Jenova is separated from the Planet and the source of all souls, and she also hinders those that are injected with Jenova cells to return to this source. Lucrecia, another one of the humans that were experimented on, explains that she many times wished she had die, ”but the Jenova inside me wouldn't let me die.”

Once again returning to *Mutants and Mystics*, I will point to the parallels between the story of Jenova, Sephiroth and Meteor, and the story of Galactus and the Silver Surfer from the Fantastic Four comic books. Kripal presents this pair as one of many examples of alienation, that is the god that comes from outer space. Galactus is a gigantic, god-like being that sustains himself by feeding on the life force of life bearing planets. His helper is the Silver Surfer, who travels through the universe looking for suitable planets for his master to devour. Comic book author Jack Kirby allegedly created the duo with inspiration from the Bible, wanting to tell the old gnostic tale of fighting God.<sup>129</sup> I have no idea whether the creators of Final Fantasy VII were Fantastic Four-fans, but the similarities are striking. In the game, we see how Meteor travels through space, looking for “small drifting planets” to smash. Jenova has travelled through space as well, and found earth, whereas Sephiroth is the one that through the summoning of Meteor is planing to transform himself into a new god by feeding on the Planet's life force. The big difference between the Marvel-comic and the Square-video game is that in Final Fantasy VII, there is a benevolent counterpart to the sinister threat from outer space; the enchanted Planet. In the comic book, Galactus stands as the only representation of the divine, and it is up to the superheroes of the Fantastic Four to save mankind from destruction. In Final Fantasy VII, Jenova and Sephiroth are never truly divine, but simply tries to steal the spiritual power of the Planet. Also, although Cloud and his friends plays a key part in defeating Jenova and Sephiroth, they are not doing this just because humanity needs a place to live, but because the Planet needs to be protected for its own sake, regardless of the fate of

<sup>129</sup> Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 114.

mankind. And in the end, their efforts are not enough on their own, but it is the Planet in conjunction with Holy that actually stops meteor and saves the day.

### *Radiation*

The force that can “serve us, transform us, maybe even save us. ...[and] also utterly destroy us” is the one that has been referred to as “magic, mako and materia”. This is the ultimate source for power in the world of Final Fantasy VII, as well as the ultimate truth of reality. Whether this force turns out to be destructive or benevolent is, however, tied to how it is contextualized as either “Mako” or “Spirit energy”.

“Mako” represents the destructive use of the energy. When employed to serve humanity, it does so by draining the land of its life force, making plants and animals alike to die out. When used as a weapon, it lays waste to anything that comes in its path. The most sinister aspect of it, however, is likely to be how it is used in genetic experiments to produce monsters. Normal members of SOLDIER gets their physical abilities enhanced by being exposed to Mako radiation. When the dose of radiation is increased, the person mutates into a monster.

The positive use of the energy is represented by the term “Spirit energy”. While “Mako energy” is always employed as means to achieve an end, Spirit energy exists for itself, and is a product of the Planet's well being. The most dramatic aspect of how Spirit energy is a saving force, is in the ending sequence, when Meteor is about to crash down on the Planet. When the force of Holy is not enough to stop it on its own, the Life Stream rushes forward from the depths of the earth, converging at the point of impact, and pushes Meteor back, saving the Planet from destruction. Even though Spirit energy is a healing force, at the time it does have the power to utterly destroy mankind. If Holy is summoned, it will erase everything that is bad for the Planet; “[Bugenhagen]: Meteor, Weapon, everything will disappear. Perhaps, even ourselves. It is up to the planet to decide. [...]What is best for the planet. What is bad for the planet. All that is bad will disappear. That is all. Ho Ho Hooo. I wonder which we humans are?” In the end, the Planet is not something which is to be used for human ends. In order to live on it and receive its protection, humanity must be deemed good for it, else they will perish.

In many ways, Mako and Spirit energy resembles “vril”, the electromagnetic-spiritual energy of the Vril-ya in *The Coming Race*. Vril is said to be used for both mystical and mechanical purposes; “[...]to cut out rock and build cities, power vehicles, control 'automaton figures', power mechanical wings, light lamps” and even end all wars due to its terrifying destructive potentialities. It is also used to induce trances, mystical states and to achieve telepathy, as well as to “zap the body and

render it superconductive to its own natural healing energies.”<sup>130</sup> Just as in Final Fantasy VII, the orientation of vril lies in the depths of the earth, albeit not as something resembling the Lifestream, but as a power used by the Vril-ya. Both forces have material as well as spiritual uses, but in the case of vril, however, it is no where hinted that this power can be misused and exploited, whereas in Final Fantasy VII, Spirit energy is construed as spiritual and benevolent and Mako as exploitative and destructive. The usage of vril, at least in the account given by Kripal, is neutral. As a final note, while vril has ended all wars due to its destructive power has rendered warfare “absurd and suicidal”, the Shinra doesn't hesitate to use Mako energy for military purposes. The destructive potentialities of Mako are definitely not making them think twice of using it in war; rather, it is used in such way *because* of its immensely destructive powers.

### *Mutation*

Mutation in Final Fantasy VII is enacted through the Shinra's genetic experiments through Mako energy and Jenova's cells. The hideous monsters in the Nibelheim reactor are explained to be ordinary human beings exposed to a high degree of Mako, resulting in “[Sephiroth]: mutated living organisms produced by Mako energy. That's what these monster's really are.” However, it is the injection of Jenova's cell into the mix, as is the case of both Sephiroth and Cloud, that provides the most important piece to this puzzle. Creating humans with the power of the Ancients through the cells of Jenova in Sephiroth, and later clones of Sephiroth in Cloud, is the peak of the human experimentation of the Shinra. They are so to speak the combination of nature and the divine, Mako and Jenova cells, that through the powers of science results in humans with god-like abilities. “[Hojo]: Jenova cells and Mako, with my knowledge and skills, have been combined with science and nature to bring him to life.”

This is far from the way the mutation-mytheme is represented in *Mutants and Mystics*. As pointed out, the mutants of the X-Men are considered the next step in human evolution. The adolescents in Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters are gathered because they do *not* wished to be seen as monsters, but as ordinary people that happens to have extraordinary powers. They are also educated and sophisticated. When the character Jean is about to move away from the school and attend a more conventional college, one of her fellow mutant friends reflects on this by quoting Shakespear; “Shakespear expostulated that parting is sweet sorrow... I wonder if the bard might have been a mutant!”<sup>131</sup> Likewise, not only the X-Men, but Spiderman and the Fantastic Four are all using their powers for the good of humanity, not for destructive purposes. There are of course

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130 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 44.

131 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 191.



mutant characters with more evil intent. Most mutant superheroes also have a mutant super villain arch nemesis bent on destruction or world domination, as the already mentioned Magneto. However, their villainous are never tied to their mutation, but other circumstances. Magneto hasn't turned evil because of him being a mutant, but because he was harassed for his special powers, and now seeks vengeance on normal people. As such, mutation in superhero- and science fiction literature is if not inherently good, then at least something neutral.

In contrast to Mako mutation, Spirit energy is on the other hand never discussed as something that “serves” or “transforms”. Rather, it is the healing and saving aspects of the radiation-mytheme that is emphasized in regard to this discourse. Spirit energy is what the Ancients would try to raise when the Planet was wounded. It is by falling into the Life Stream, the underground river that is made up of Spirit energy, that Cloud is able to descend into his subconsciousness and regain his repressed memories. This makes him stronger, no longer divided and confused, but he is not fundamentally changed. When he proclaims that “I can't remain trapped in an illusion any more..... I'm going to live my life without pretending”, Barret responds ”That means there ain't no difference from before!” Cloud has been healed, but not transformed.

## **6.2 Discussion**

In this last part of the analysis, I will discuss the religious themes of Final Fantasy VII and the Superstory in relation to *monotheism, science, eco-echantment, esotericism* and *late modernity*.

As shown, the mythemes of the Superstory are all present in Final Fantasy VII. They are, however, presented quite differently than they are in the science fiction literature that is the base of Kripal's analysis. In fact, they mainly exists in conjunction with the antagonists of the game. Final Fantasy VII contain two sets of antagonists that are opposed both to each other, and to the heroes; Jenova and Sephiroth on the one hand, and the Shinra on the other.

### *Final Fantasy VII and Monotheism*

The duo of Jenova and Sephiroth provides us with the probably most apparent symbol of the process of divinization as well as that of transcendent monotheism present in the game. By now, any reader with a general knowledge of esotericism should have reacted to the name of Sephiroth. Indeed, this character is named after the ten nodes of the Tree of Life in Kabbalah, that forms the path to knowledge of the divine.<sup>132</sup> Likewise, less conspicuous but still fairly easy to spot, is the

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<sup>132</sup> In jewish Kabbalah, the ten sephiroths each represents an expression of God, through which the universe exists as a manifestation of. The sephiroths are structured in a cosmological system called the Tree of Life, and through a system of correspondances the Tree of Life links the letters of the Hebrew alphabet with angelic beings. By communicating with these beings, the Kabbalist can gain mystical insights regarding the nature of the cosmos and

close resemblance of the name “Jenova” with the old mistranslation of the name of the Lord of the Old Testament, “Jehovah”. Although having cautioned against reading in too much into mere names, I would say that the function of Jenova and Sephiroth in the plot of the game suggests that these names does indeed carry a whole lot of symbolism. Jenova, being not of this world but descended from above to hurt and exploit it, represents the monotheistic transcendent God. Sephiroth, on his hand, is the physical embodiment of mankind's endeavours to reach this transcendent deity. In that he is not only the son of Jenova, but has actually died and risen again through her powers, he does in many ways take on the role of a dark Jesus. This is underlined even more in that he several times during the course of the game is seen standing with his arms held out to his sides, a pose that resembles the crucified body of Christ. It is clear that as a divine being, Jenova is an imposter. As such, she has been given the role of the gnostic *demiurge*. She deceives the Cetra, posing as a friend, in order to inflict them with a virus. 2000 years later, she is mistaken for a Cetra by the Shinra. The goal of the Jenova-project was to create people with the inherent, spiritual abilities of the Cetra, and as a result of this project, Sephiroth is born. As a person, he symbolizes a spiritual journey, literally being the attempt of humanity to gain godly powers through science. This attempt is fundamentally misguided however, as Jenova is not truly of the natural, spiritual world, and the purpose of the divinization is to produce weapons, not nurturing, healing forces. The result is one of destruction and annihilation. The story of the imposter-alien is found within the Superstory as well as within UFO-cults. One of the most famous theories of UFO-religionists is that of the “Ancient Astronaut”. This originates from the book *Chariot of the Gods*, and states that God and the angels of the Old Testament were actually space travellers visiting earth whom the primitive, unscientific people that encountered them mistook for divine beings.<sup>133</sup> These aliens are now long gone, but still lives on in our myths and legends. The difference between this story and that of Final Fantasy VII is that while in both instances an alien is mistaken for a spiritual being, the Ancient Astronaut-story places the blame entirely at humans that cannot understand that they are simply encountering a creature with access to extremely advanced technology. Jenova on the other side actively deceives and betrays the people she come across, showing only a sinister intent. In fact, many times, the aliens of the UFO-religiosity are benevolent and well meaning. A record of a contactee's meeting with a “Venusian master” tells that not only are “the ones you call Jesus Christ, Buddha and Muhammed are all Venusians who volunteered to come to Earth to help you in a time of need”, but the reason for the more recent visits from UFOs on earth are to warn

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the Divine. During the renaissance, this system was adopted by Christian esotericists. Goodrick-Clarke, *Esoteric Traditions*, 43.

133 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 2*, 186.

mankind not to experiment further with nuclear weapons.<sup>134</sup> The main difference between the aliens of Final Fantasy VII and the Superstory is however that regardless of being good or evil, real or fake, the visitors in the latter are the only representations of divinity. Either they are good and true, and mankind should rely upon them, or they are evil and false, and humanity is on its own. In game, when Jenova is found out to not be the good-natured, divine figure, this is because sacrality has been allocated to nature and the Planet instead.

### *Final Fantasy VII and Science*

While Jenova and Sephiroth gets to represent transcendent monotheism, the Shinra represents rationalized scientism fuelled by capitalism. The Shinra seeks control over the world through technology and money, quite literally, as president Shinra says “These days all it takes for your dreams to come true is money and power.” Likewise, the townspeople of Kalm stays obedient due to their dependence on the company's services: “Yeah, well either way, as long as we're using the reactor, we can't stand up to Shinra.” The Shinra shun away from nothing, including ruthless exploitation of nature and even murder, as long as they can, as Barret puts it “line their own damn pockets with gold.” The villainous nature of the Shinra in itself could be read as a critique of modern capitalism. Regarding rationalized scientism, the critique towards it is voice by the Shinra-personnel themselves. This is done mainly through ridicule of Shinra's head scientist Hojo, the director of the inhuman genetic experiments. While Hojo himself rather smugly speaks of his own scientific genius, Sephiroth calls him “an inexperienced man” that was “a walking mass of complexes” in relation to Hojo angrily claiming that one should not use unscientific terms as “magic”. When Hojo dryly remarks that “There is no such thing as the Promised Land. It's a legend...an old wives tale ...it's utterly ridiculous”, Rufus rebukes him with saying “It is that kind of dullness that makes you a second-rate scientist.” The two scientists in the game that are portrayed in more sympathetic ways, Bugenhagen and Professor Gast, have both parted ways with the Shinra. Of Bugenhagen is revealed little else than that he once was a “pretty handy Shinra worker”. Why he left the Shinra is never elaborated on, and all that is told is that he now lives in an observatory where he studies the life of the Planet. Bugenhagen's is very much the opposite of the dry, positivist attitude towards science that Hojo boasts. In saying “I can feel the workings of the Planet in the smell of the wind. I also feel the greatness of man's wisdom and the knowledge in the smell of machinery...”, he is the one character that hints that naturism and science can coexist. He is also the one that teaches Cloud about the true nature of Spirit energy, and who first hear the cries of the Planet. Professor Gast is the man that discovered Jenova, and identified her as an Ancient. While he

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134 Partridge, *Re-enchantment* vol. 2, 176-177.

initially was the leader of the Jenva Project, he later realizes that he has made a “terrible mistake” and defects when he learns of the error of his ways. Out of the heroes, only Cid, also he a former Shinra-employee, expresses positive notions about science. This occur when the party is about to be launched into outer space in a rocket.

[Cid]: I don't give a rat's ass whether it's science or magical power. No. I guess if I had to choose, I'd rather put my money on the power of science. Humans who used to only roam around on the ground are able to fly now! And finally, we're about to go into outer space. Science is a "Power" created and developed by humans. And science just might be what saves this planet. I was able to earn my living thanks to science. So to me, there's nothing greater!

However, just moments later, when the rocket has taken off, he changes his mind. “[Cid]: I know what I said a minute ago. But maybe all that I really wanted was just to go into outer space.” In the end, all that science meant for him was a way to achieve his dreams and desires. As such, science is portrayed as corruptive and destructive in the case of the mutation-mytheme, as intellectually inhibiting in the case of Hojo, and as something egoistical in the case of Cid. In order to become in touch with ones spirituality, one must reject the disenchanting world view, as is the case of Bugenhagen and Professor Gast. This is of course the polar opposite of the discourse of sacred science inherent to the Superstory, and discussed in section 4.4. In this discourse, science is *the* way to spiritual enlightenment. The proof of alien spiritual superiority is their advanced technology, because such technology could not be developed without great spiritual insights.<sup>135</sup> In *X-Men*, professor Xavier has constructed a machine named Cerebro that augments his psychic powers. Through it, he “follows, guides and instructs his X-Men telepathically, and much of his work involves finding and tracking new mutants around the globe with the help of Cerebro.”<sup>136</sup> In other words, not only is his sacralized mutant power enhanced through this technological gadget, it also helps Xavier to work for good. Aside from this, Kripal also mentions the pop-scientific books *The Tao of Physics* and *The Dancing Wu-li Masters* in which parallels are drawn between quantum physics and East Asian mysticism, both claiming that the two have pointed towards the same direction all along.<sup>137</sup> I believe that the reason for Final Fantasy VII to exclaim such a different view of science from that of the Superstory is because the game constructs science as being in opposition with nature. Science is that which seeks to control, manipulate and exploit nature. It is what separates human beings from their relationship with the Planet, quite literary represented by the grey and black Midgar not only draining the land on Spirit energy, but actually being located on top of a plate, elevated of the ground. As nature is sacralized, science becomes one half of a demonic

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135 Partridge, *Re-enchantment* vol. 2, 179.

136 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 207-208.

137 Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, 129.

duo together with transcendent monotheism, represented by Jenova and Sephiroth.

### *Final Fantasy VII and Eco-enchantment*

As such, there are parallels between the narrative of Final Fantasy VII and the narrative of eco-enchantment. The Planet is perceived of as a living, conscious entity, with whom those that are attuned to can communicate. Bugenhagen lets the heroes hear the cries of the Planet, and when Jenova struck the Knowlespole, the Planet tried to make the Cetra leave the area before they would encounter her. Also, when Holy is summoned, everything that the Planet decides is bad for it will be made to disappear. This resembles the rhetoric of for example the Earth Communications Office. “‘She is the Earth, and there is a reason we call her mother.’ But because of us, she is suffering; she is being raped; she is crying out for help.”<sup>138</sup> This, it is reasoned, must come to a stop, if anything because the earth will eventually retaliate against humans if we do not learn to live in harmony with it. This retaliation will, however, will be of a much more violent kind than it is in Final Fantasy VII; instead of a magic spell, it will come in terms of earthquakes, floods and pandemics. The most striking similarity is however between the Lifestream and gaiaism. As explained in section 4.4, gaiaism holds that the earth constitutes one big super organism, imbued with a soul. This soul is the source of all life, and the place to where it seeks to return. In Final Fantasy VII, this World Soul exists as a material phenomena as the Lifestream, the “path of energy of the souls roaming the Planet”. This path of energy of the souls is the basis of all life, and in the end the basis for the Planet to exist. As such, it corresponds to gaiaism almost to the word. The Lifestream is also a place of knowledge. It is the place where all the wisdom of the Ancients exists. In fact, the knowledge is of such enormous quantity that whoever is exposed to it will be rendered beyond his or her senses. This resembles the awestruck state of mystical union with the divine.

### *Final Fantasy VII and Esotericism*

The relationship between on the one the Planet and on the other hand the two sets of antagonists likewise corresponds to the Grand Polemical Narrative in how the cosmotheistic word view has been considered opposed to the monotheistic one. First of all, Jenova comes as an outsider to the Planet, injures it and proceeds to deceive and kill the nature worshipping Cetra. 2000 years later, her human incarnation Sephiroth once again seeks to harm the Planet and tries to wrest its Spiritual energy in order to transcend into godhood. This structurally resembles how Christianity is portrayed within eco-enchantment as an institution that has been forced upon pagan animists all over the world, has labelled the worship of nature as heretic and punishable by death, and transferred the source of the divine to beyond this world. Second of all, although being rivals, Jenova and

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<sup>138</sup> Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 2*, 64.

Sephiroth are intimately linked to the Shinra. Not only are they both out to exploit the Spirit energy of the Planet for their own, selfish needs, but they reinforce each other throughout the game. It is the Shinra that excavates the apparently dead body of Jenova from her place of confinement. It is the Shinra that instigates the Jenova-project of which Sephiroth is ultimately the result. A bit more cryptically, the bond between the two sets of antagonists are hinted at when it is mentioned that the Jenova-project is approved the same date as the first Mako-reactor is put to use. This is underlined at the end of the game, when it is revealed that it is Shinra head scientist Hojo that is the biological father Sephiroth. The main antagonist that burned down the heroes home town, that threatens the earth, that has summoned Meteor to rain down destruction on everything living on the Planet, is the physical embodiment of the union of alien monotheism and science. Turning back to eco-enchantment, we find the similar notion that Christianity and science works in liaison to destroy the earth, due to natural science being viewed as the logical consequence of monotheism. The scientific revolution is seen as having been theologically driven by Christians that wanted to understand and master the increasingly disenchanted creation, to the point where, as sociologist Bronislaw Szerszynski puts it, technology in itself “is *the* desacralization of nature.”<sup>139</sup> As mentioned above, in the Superstory extraterrestrials are the only representation of the divine, regardless of them being benevolent or malevolent. There exists no alternative objects for the grounding of sacrality. This is because the narrative of the Superstory is ultimately of monotheistic nature. Although it is a story that re-imagines divinity through the objects of modern science, its structure is still that of monotheistic conceptions of God; she divine is not of the earthly world, but separate from it as well as separate from humanity.

### *Final Fantasy VII and Late Modernity*

To summarize the analysis this far, I have showed that Final Fantasy VII contain a “dark version” of the Superstory. The mythemes of *alienation*, *radiation* and *mutation* are all portrayed as destructive, and is mainly used in conjunction with the antagonists of the game. The two sets of antagonists are each tied to either transcendent monotheism or modern scientism, and in the end, this is what the Superstory is really about; the orientation of structurally monotheistic notions of the sacred towards science. The objects that are sacralized in Final Fantasy VII are instead those of nature and the Planet, resulting in what is structurally cosmotheistic notions of the sacred. The opposition between these two contending world views can be understood through the Grand Polemical Narrative.

I would argue that the reason for the different ways the mythemes of the Superstory are

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139 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 2*, 47.

portrayed in the literature that is the base for Kripal's typology and Final Fantasy VII, is because they represent the ideas of religion and spirituality in the respective cultural periods of their creation; the modern and the late-modern cultures respectively. As pointed out in section 4.4, the Superhero- and science fiction genres arose during the peak of modernity. This was a time of optimism and belief in rationality and scientific progress. It was the time when the foundations of the welfare states were laid down as societies based on rationalistic planning. It was a time where technological innovations and industrial expansion led to drastic economical development and improvement of the standards of living for the people of the Western world. And it was a time when the huge leaps in scientific discoveries led people to believe that soon, really soon, anything would be possible to achieve. As reason, technology and science were held in such high esteem, the religious notions of the time, the ideas that were regarded as the source of “power, identity, meaning and truth”, became oriented towards science and technology, thus sacralizing them. However, although being reconfigured, these still retained their basic structure, namely that of monotheism. These religious ideas were expressed by creative people of the time in the genres of Superhero comic books and science fiction novels.

Final Fantasy VII was created in a somewhat different cultural context, that of late modernity. This is a time where science has, at least partly, lost its previously unchallenged interpretative prerogative, partly due to post-modern critiques regarding the prerequisites for knowledge, but also because of the destruction technology has wrought upon the environment; rational science was, it turns out, not that rational. Through this thesis, we can see how Final Fantasy VII mirrors the concerns of late modernity, in how the sacralized objects are shifted from sacred science to eco-enchantment. We also see how the structures of religious notions are shifting from monotheistic to cosmotheistic ones. This can be understood as an expression of the so called “subjective turn” contemporary spirituality has taken.<sup>140</sup> With this is meant the subjectivization of religious authority, that spirituality is something that is found within oneself, and not from outer sources. This entails that people in the contemporary West become less and less inclined to subject to the relatively hierarchical structures of the monotheistic religions, and rather chose more loosely composed movements with flatter hierarchical structures, such as the New Age. This is reflected in Final Fantasy VII, where the representations of monotheism are portrayed as inherently evil and destructive.

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140 Partridge, *Re-enchantment* vol. 2, 6.

## 7 Conclusion

The purpose of this essay was to study the way that esoteric, occultural ideas are represented and reproduced in video games, and by doing so adding to the understanding how popular culture influences the way religious conceptions are changing in contemporary society. The video game that was subject to my analysis, Final Fantasy VII, was chosen not only for its success and ability to remain relevant among gamers even today almost twenty years after its initial release, but also because its complex and intricate story relies heavily upon religious and esoteric motifs and ideas. The question asked was “How does the mythemes of the 'Superstory' correspond to the occultural, narrative content of Final Fantasy VII, in relation to the late-modern society?” The Superstory is modelled after a literary corpus that was created mainly from the early to mid-twentieth century, i.e. during the peak of modernity. Because of this, I argued that if popular culture does indeed reflect the religious ideas that permeates the *zeitgeist* of its creation, the ideological structure of Final Fantasy VII would be bound to differ some from that of the Superstory in that the spirituality of the late-modern society is different than it was in the high-modern one. This was found to be the case, although there were of course similarities as well. The Superstory revolves around the re-imagining of divine entities and the source of spiritual power as beings from outer space and atomic power respectively. This, in turn, results in a discourse of sacralization of science and technology, which I referred to as “sacred science”, reflecting the optimistic belief in science that was generally held during the modern era. Whereas the Superstory is present in Final Fantasy VII, it is in no way optimistic. It is framed in the light of destruction, corruption and exploitation when regarding both the divine visitors from space and techno-science, thus leading to a much darker, more sinister version of this narrative. However, there is a positive alternative to the dark Superstory, namely the sacralized, living nature. In the game, the Planet turns out to be a sentient being whom all other forms of life on earth are part of. This being nurtures, protects and in the end save mankind from the destructive power of science and the visitor from above. The sacralization of nature in Final Fantasy VII closely corresponds, sometimes to the letter, to the discourse of eco-enchantment that is prominent within contemporary notions of spirituality, not least in Paganism and the New Age. Likewise, the opposition between the on the one hand cosmotheistic world view of the sacred, living nature, and on the other hand transcendent divine beings that are not of this world as well as disenchanting science, is one of the aspects of how the topic of esotericism is constructed. Although several leading names in the fields of Western Esotericism and popular culture has pointed out the



potential of studying video games, no such study has been conducted up until now. As such, this thesis demonstrates not only that esoteric themes can indeed play a central role in the narratives of video games, but also that the perspective of Western Esotericism is crucial when setting out to understand representations of contemporary religious ideas in video games, as well, I believe, when dealing with other works of pop-culture on the topic of the tension between modernity, traditional religions and nature spirituality.

Eco-enchantment is, as has already been mentioned, a quite dominant topic in contemporary spiritual discourse. Regarding video games that deals with this theme, *Okami* has already been mentioned. Another example is *Breath of Fire IV* (2000), in which there are seven elemental dragons, representing nature as wind, grass, mud, sand, tree, sea and rock, that acts as protectors of the world. As for films on this theme, one of the many works that can be mentioned is *Princess Mononoke* (1997), which tells the story of the guardian spirits of a forest that rises up against an exploitative mining company that tries to cut the forest down. The list can certainly be made longer, but the point to be made is that a seemingly great portion of the works that depicts this spiritually infused environmentalism originates from Japan. Although there are of course Western creations on the same theme, the 2009 blockbuster *Avatar* being the most obvious, they are hardly as numerous or have achieved the same general cultural impact as their Japanese counterparts. As mentioned in section 4.4, Wiemker & Wysocki poses the question whether the nature oriented god-images of *Okami* was due to certain values inherent in Japanese culture. I stand by my objection that it might not be as clear cut as that the culture of the Japanese game developers by default is more inclined towards the worship of nature than that of the American ones, and that there is indeed an (oc)cultural overlap because of global pop-culture. There can be no denying, however, that Japan seems to provide an excellent soil for these kind of representations of eco-enchantment. However, what might be a more interesting question to pose is not of the difference between Japanese and American cultures, but rather what makes the Japanese authors emphasize certain aspects of this global culture. And perhaps even yet more interesting; since Japanese authors are major contributors to this global culture, how is the Western world being influenced by these ideas? Is there any merit to speak of popular culture and occulture as a “Western” phenomena at all, or are the lines that separates the “West from the rest” being blurred more than ever before?

Of course, one might ask whether it is anything contemporary with this spiritualized discourse regarding nature at all? Already in the poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, written by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1798, the moral is that “he prayeth best who loveth best, all things both great and small”, and that we must abstain from killing animals since they are all part of God's creation.

Also, *the* defining work of the fantasy-genre, J.R.R Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, arguably presents the forest dwelling elves as semi-divine beings, and ends in what has often been interpreted as an explicit critique of industrialism. Since this book was published already in 1954, can we really claim that eco-enchantment deals with the concerns of late-modernity? Admittedly, the spiritual reverence of nature has its roots in nineteenth century Romanticism, and has been a part of Western thought ever since.<sup>141</sup> Although this might be true, I do hold that the sacredness of nature in Final Fantasy VII is constructed somewhat different than is usually the case in classic romantic thought. Colridge's poem is, for example in making the case that since God loves all beings of his creation so must mankind, ultimately Christian in essence in that God remains separate from this creation. Likewise, although the natural world of Tolkien is enchanted as in sentient, the divine beings that populate it are not of Middle Earth, and the story ends with all of them sailing off over the sea. They are just as separate from the world as the transcendent God of Christianity, although not in the same way. On the contrary, in Final Fantasy VII, the source of spirituality, consciousness and life itself is located within the Planet. The living beings on the Planet are merely extensions of the Spirit energy, not separated from it, and all in all the Planet is seen as an autonomous, divine being. All attempts to separate this spiritual force from the Planet ends in corruption and destruction, and the moral of the story is that human kind must learn to live as a part of nature, not apart. This is a thoroughly cosmotheistic world view. The narrative of Final Fantasy VII is thus structurally different from those of Colridge and Tolkien, and bears much closer resemblance to the more recent current of thought that was discussed as Gaiaism. The game is one of the many indicators of how the religious interpretative framework of the West has begun to shift from traditional Christianity towards esotericism.

One of the interesting aspects of Final Fantasy VII that might not relate so much to religion, but well to the late-modern society, is its take on imperialism. Imperialism is a trope that is so common in the fantasy-genre that it seems almost mandatory. In most of these stories, there is usually an evil kingdom, empire or other sort of state that is out to expand its territories on the expense of its good-natured, freedom loving neighbours, and the small rebel faction of the hero is the only thing that stands between freedom and tyranny. The Final Fantasy-series is definitely full of such imperialist themes; in *Final Fantasy VI*, the enemy is named simply "the Empire"; in *Final Fantasy VIII* it is the dictatorial republic of Galbadia; *Final Fantasy IX* (2000) displays the power hungry kingdom of Alexandria, and in *Final Fantasy X* (2001) we have the theocratic supreme state of Yevon. In Final Fantasy VII, this theme is enacted by a global corporation. There are no kings or presidents that strives to further their power, but instead a CEO of an electric company. In fact, the political actors

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141 Partridge, *Re-enchantment vol. 2*, 48.

of Final Fantasy VII are all subject to Shinra; Godo, the leader of Wutai, admits that he hides his power in order to not provoke the Shinra, and the mayor of Midgar not only has his office in the company's headquarters, but is listed as a "Level B employee". This certainly relates to modern concerns with late-capitalism and the rise of consumerism, where power is increasingly allocated to transnational corporations. Indeed, Rufus says that his father "tried to control the world with money. It seems to have been working."

Lastly, I would like to conclude with saying that although it might be tempting to read Final Fantasy VII as an outright critique of institutionalised religion, of the hegemony of global capitalism and of how the disenchanting tendencies of natural science has legitimized environmental exploitation, some caution should be taken before doing this. This is because such interpretations too readily assumes that the creators of the game have had an agenda besides just wanting to make a really enjoyable game. Without interviews quoting the authors clearly affirming any underlying message (and such interviews are hard to come by, partly because not everybody is fluent in Japanese, partly because game journalists rarely are interested in asking such questions), there is really no way of verifying any such agenda. Also, as pointed out by Tuckett & Robertson, can we really call a video game a critique of something if the people that play the game are not aware of this?<sup>142</sup> As already mentioned in section 4.3, this essay has not set out to deal with neither the intention of the authors, nor the reception of the audience. While both of these makes up interesting and valuable topics worthy of attention in their own right, my aim was to study that which is communicated through the game, understood in relation to occulture. The task of demonstrating how games with occultural content influences the actual religious beliefs and practices of players still lies ahead of us. To fully understand this influence, however, we must continue to map the spiritual terrain these players are navigating through; the occultural landscape.

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142 Jonathan D. F. Tuckett & David G. Robertson, "Locating the Locus of Study on 'Religion' in Video Games", *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* vol. 5, 2014, 99.

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