# ACTING IN THE LIGHT AND ON FAYTH: RITUALIZED PLAY IN JOURNEY AND FINAL FANTASY X

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## Introduction: To Play Well, To Act Well

Play is one of humanity's most basic and enduring actions. It is to deeply consider and even to laugh at that which matters most to human existence, from birth to death and the necessities of self and society that one encounters in between. This journal explores play, especially playing well, in terms of the voracious playing of games and of finding excellence in actions, design, and criticism. This idea of excellence in play is central to games scholar and practitioner Bernie De Koven's *The Well-Played Game: A Player's Philosophy* (1978/2013). Here play is the "enactment of anything that is not for real," and playing well is to be "fully engaged, totally present" in this enactment (p. xxiv).

Playing games well is to do so in the context of the separate form of reality that are games, or "performances, like works of art… belonging to some special sphere of human activity which clearly lies outside the normal reality of day-to-day living" (p. xxiii). Games are not reality, yet as an artistic medium, they reflect it, and "what unites them with the totality of experience is not just their metaphorical quality but the manner in which they are played" (p. xxiii). Thus, to play a game well, one acts with focus and seriousness but with a spirit of immaterial exploration, both drives in such balance with one another as to obtain excellence in goals that satisfy the player far beyond the boundaries of the game.

Video games inhabit a unique place both as works of art and as vehicles of play (Caldwell, 2013). They combine audiovisual elements with a mediated form of play, one contained within highly specified and specialized boundaries via screens and input devices. Thus, even more so than traditional play, video games are necessarily experienced in a fully realized space outside of mundane life.

The necessarily established (but often permeable) boundaries between reality and digital games (i.e. the mediation of experience via a contained but related space) draw an interesting parallel with religious practice, another common form of human experience. Although religion can be defined in as many ways as there are ways to practice a religion, one might generally understand religion as a system of intertwining acts, emotions, ontologies, and organizing forces through which an individual, a group, and/or a society can establish its/their relationship to the realities of existence (Caldwell, 2014). These relationships are variously but ubiquitously established through the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane. To be sacred, an object, place, idea, or action must not be profane; that is, the efficacy of religious practices often relies upon their adherence to rules and existence within boundaries, whether of place, time, intention, or

otherwise (Eliade, 1959). Actions within those boundaries are the domain of ritual, which, as described by cultural anthropologist Victor Turner, is not just a formulaic series of actions, but rather a deliberate performance that, through prescribed or goal-oriented actions in a specific context, transforms the participating individuals or group if performed well (see 1982, 1985). Ritual, due to its role in the establishment of the sacred and the profane, has consequences far beyond the actions themselves, again mirroring the serious yet immaterial exploration of play.

Thus, questions regarding play and the realms of religious life emerge. Can play be sacred? Can ritual be playful? Can individuals, groups, and societies establish their relationship to reality and existence via play? These questions push beyond the understanding that games, particularly video games, can aptly explore and mimic religion, instead querying if play within games can be the functional equivalent to religious experience. However, wrapped in this question are many others. What forms can religious experience take, and how might they rely on internal and external motivators or conditions? How do sacrality and sacralization occur? Such questions are best considered via phenomenological, comparative study to avoid generalizations while providing grounded clarity. Thus, here I will turn to two video game case studies and considerations of comparative ritual.

These case studies approach similar themes in divergent ways, which allows a somewhat more holistic illustration of the plurality of potential experiences. *Journey* is a brief (two to three hours), nearly wordless game created by a small, independent American team. Its world is a vast desert and the ruins beneath it, both from times unknown, and its only characters are anonymous, quiet figures that skim the sand with a history of varied interpretive potential (thatgamecompany, 2012). In contrast, *Final Fantasy X* (*FFX*) runs at least eighty hours, is filled

with text and speech, and was created by a massive and famous Japanese development team (Squaresoft, 2001). The named world varies in terrain as much as the large cast varies in background, motivations, and personalities. The two games afford different focuses, but each is one of the most compelling examples yet of video games' potential as spheres of religious experience.

For video games, and in many ways for ritual, content necessarily follows form, but form is often tied inextricably to content through mechanics, or as specified by James Paul Gee (2012), "all that a player must do or decide in order to succeed" (p. xvii). To better analyze the full experience of my case studies, I draw upon Drew Davidson's (2011) stages of involvement, immersion, and investment, which will also be used for presenting ritual practices.

Before diving into my case studies, I need to first qualify the latter usage of Davidson's stages, which work somewhat differently in a ritual context. Naturally, some rituals do progress as linearly as games like *Journey* and *FFX*, and some video games have more fluid or less structured progression. However, for many rituals, the chronological connotations of involvement, immersion, and investment stages may be problematic. Instead, a thematic alternative for framing the experience of ritual participation may be more appropriate: actions, setting, and symbolic narrative, in respective correspondence. These themed experiences will be explored in greater depth in the appropriate sections below.

**To Act: Involvement**

Davidson's first stage, *involvement*, is the player's introduction to the game, from first interactions through learning the control system (2011). This stage continues through the player's decision to continue the game with the mechanics presented, thus

focusing involvement around the utility and enjoyability of the actions themselves.

*Journey* moves swiftly through Davidson's stages due to its brief length, which affords the additional immersive power of single-sitting playthroughs. As such, the involvement stage is swift but effective. A nonplayable sequence opens the game, showing what seems to be tombstones rising out of sand that glitters under a burning sun. An orb of light flies to a humanoid figure who sits on the sand until a translucent controller appears on the screen, prompting the player to swivel the camera and move the figure forward (see Figure 1). During the next five minutes of play, *Journey* presents the mechanics through explicit but simple instructions that can immediately be applied to further gameplay, a tutorial technique that proves highly effective in the quick understanding of control systems, especially with the simple system of *Journey* (see Gee, 2005). Soon the player is able to activate the figure's robes and matching but separate and seemingly living cloth pieces in the environment, causing both to glow and float upwards. The animation and feel for this action is graceful and serene, with a catharsis derived from the transcendence of limitations in this mediated space. Like many action games, the player's direct control of the figure creates a different connection between mind and body, centered on the mediation of the controller and the avatar. Thus, as the figure further explores the world of *Journey* by running, walking, faltering, and flying, the player achieves a mindfulness and presence that transfers from the real to the digital and in so doing mimics meditative practices that seek to separate the mind from the physical body and blur the distinction between what is internal and external.

*Figure 1. Movement instructions in Journey.*

Meanwhile, in *Final Fantasy X*, the involvement stage is expanded, lasting closer to six hours than six minutes, drawing players in more slowly than in *Journey*. This allows players to become used to the more complex though less direct system of interaction that is a hallmark of the game's genre, the Japanese-styled, turn-based role-playing game (RPG). Most of the player's actions in *FFX* are limited to movement through the field and battle management via the selection of equipment, character abilities, and actions to be taken during combat (see Figure 2). Game designer Darby McDevitt (2013) suggests that games of this type provide *"destiny mechanics,"* which limit player interactivity in favor of telling a rich, non-variable story focused on characters and world-building. Thus, the mechanics are closely linked and even subordinate to the narrative; for example, some mechanics only become available when a new character is introduced. Thus, it is not until after much of the main cast is introduced that the game moves into the *immersion* stage, which carries more of the game's weight.


*Figure 2. Battle system of Final Fantasy X.*

Much like someone playing a game, a ritual participant must learn and perform the requisite actions of that ritual, a form of involvement that continues throughout via the physical actions themselves. However, actions such as moving from one place to another or clapping one's hands together are not sacred on their own; rather, they need the setting and a symbolic depth to reach full efficacy, as will be explored below, and as involvement needs immersion and investment to transmit a fuller experience.

**To Explore: Immersion**

*Immersion* is the stage in which players have learned the controls and can use them to explore the world created within the game (Davidson, 2011). Much of a game exists within this stage, during which the player is interested enough not only in the mechanics, but the game's whole ecosystem, including characters and settings. These are often the primary motivations for continuing to play throughout this stage, so world-building is crucial during immersion. World-building is done in large part through the audiovisual elements, as in the real world.

The absence of text in *Journey* highlights the power of its audiovisual presentation. Light is the most important visual element; its shifts in color and saturation mark the player's progression and the game's tone. Early in the game, the desert dunes shimmer in warm, pastel colors that encourage the player to explore. Later, the cool blues of a dark cave give the impression that the figure is underwater, softly gliding through the air while jellyfish-like creatures beckon the player onwards. Near the end, the light fades into a deep gray as frost overtakes the figure, who is no longer able to fly. Each alteration of the light brings one of sound. The music is carefully composed and played back to enhance the affect evoked by the light and the player's interaction with it. The player can further interact with light and sound by emitting a communicative glowing glyph that is accompanied by a chirp, which can be reciprocated by animated cloth pieces that are found throughout the game. These cloth pieces help the player navigate the ubiquitous ruined architecture (see Figure 3). Although these ruins are not fully explained, part of *Journey*'s efficacy is that its world is not otherwise alien. The connections between the ruins' sandstone buildings and Mughal Indian palaces, the complex geometric patterns in the windows and Iranian mosques (see Figure 4), and between the communicative glyphs and kufic script (an Islamic tradition of imbuing Koranic phrases with precious materials in a deliberate calligraphic style; see Figure 5) lend *Journey* the cultural associations of their real-world counterparts, especially from the practices of Sufism, a mystical, esoteric Islamic sect practiced amongst architecture similar to that cited above. These associations are those of the sacred and otherworldly, and as *Journey*'s world is built around them, the player is primed to explore *Journey* much as one would act within sacred space.

*Figure 3. Architecture in Journey.*

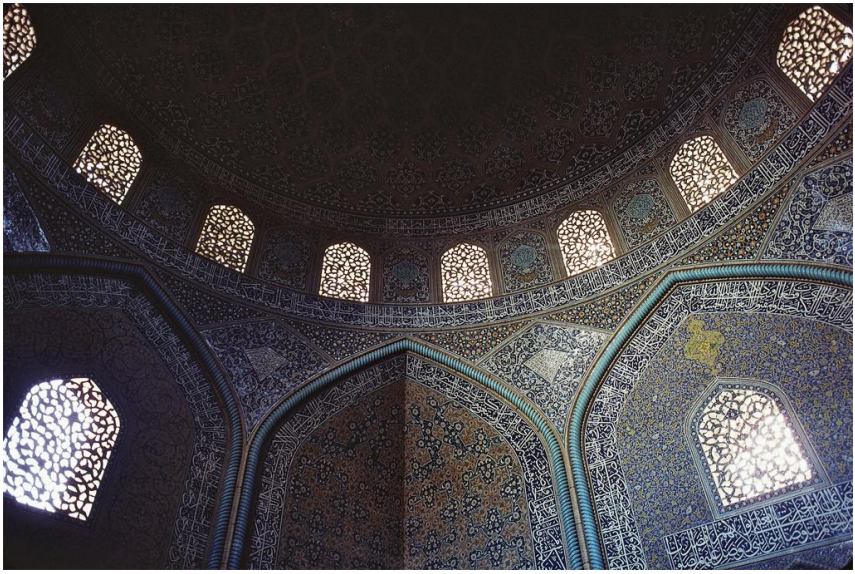

*Figure 4. Architecture of the Mosque of Shaykh Lutfallah in Isfahan, Iran.*

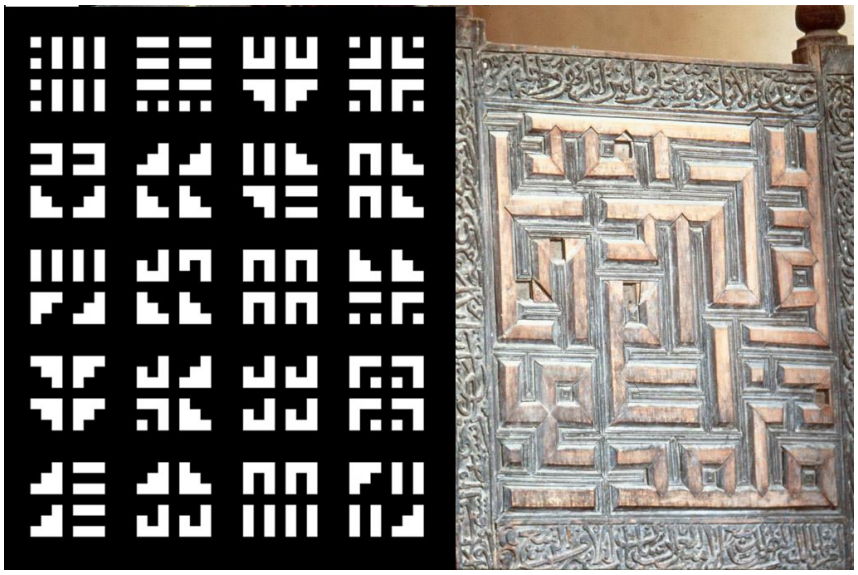

*Figure 5. Comparison: Left, Journey script. Right, kufic script from Beysehir, Turkey.*

Sacred space in *Final Fantasy X* is more explicitly defined than it is in *Journey*. The temples of Spira, the world of *FFX*, are designed to be specifically and exclusively sacred. However, this is not their only claim to sacrality. Each temple opens into a dim, high-ceilinged rotunda with side chambers and a staircase to an area called the Cloister of Trials, which itself precedes the deepest, most sacred chambers. In the rotunda are statues of accomplished Spiran clerics and a large mandala on the floor inscribed with runes, a script separate from Spira's common one.[1] Upon entering the temple, a song can be heard, sung slowly by a chorus and then repeated by a solo vocalist in the innermost sanctuaries. These elements, replicated with small variations in all of Spira's temples, are precedented in real-world places of worship. The temple plan, statues, and hymn recall Catholic

1. The visual comparisons between real-world ancient and modern scripts and the in-game text run quite deep, as one player explored in an online blog. The sources are difficult to verify, but the writer contributed intriguing connections with abundant evidence from the game. See Helluin. (n.d.) Final Fantasy X symbols and glyphs. Squidoo. Retrieved from http://www.squidoo.com/final-fantasy-x-symbols-glyphs

cathedrals (see Figure 6), while the runes resemble a classical Sanskrit script used in several Japanese and Indian Buddhist traditions that invoke deities through their Sanskrit initials (Bogel, 2002, p. 49; see Figure 7). These Spiran temples are thus digital reproductions of sacred space in the real world, including how the characters interact with that space. The sacrality of other spaces in *FFX* is fluid, which is also congruent with real sacred space. That is, other spaces can be made sacred by the actions, the rituals, of those entrusted with the temples' sacrality, namely the summoners. Summoners are clerics who undertake pilgrimages to purge the world of Sin, the massively deadly manifestation of Spira's past transgressions. The main cast of *FFX* is one such summoner and her companions, the guardians that provide emotional support and physical protection during summoners' pilgrimages. Thus, a large portion of the game features the main characters traveling from one sacred location to the next, performing rituals along the way.

*Figure 6. Besaid Temple in Final Fantasy X.*

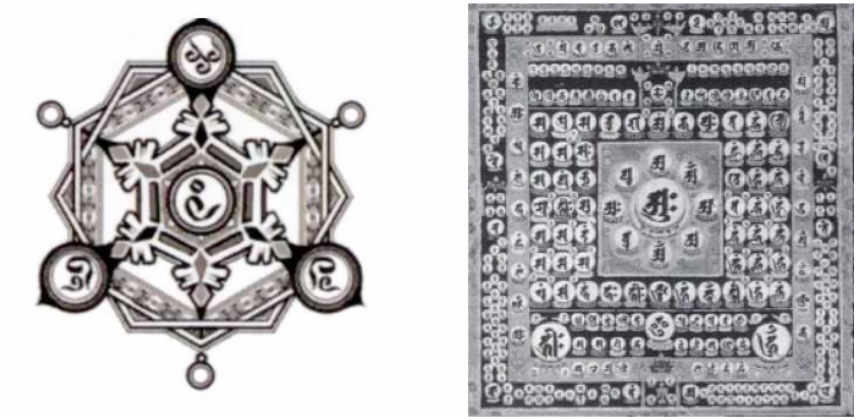

*Figure 7. Comparison: Left, Glyph of Macalania Temple in Final Fantasy X. Right, Japanese Buddhist seed syllable mandala.*

In real world religious practices, sacred space and sacred actions are intertwined, to the point that it is unclear which comes first: does sacred space sacralize actions, or do sacred actions sacralize space? Arguably, both occur at different times. For example, medieval Christian pilgrims traveled great distances to arrive at sacred spaces, cathedrals, in order to perform small, often personal rituals within. The space was sacralized by the presence of relics, bodily remains of saints that bridged the saints' presence in heaven to their presence on Earth, in turn connecting the pilgrim to heaven via this intermediary (Brown, 1981). In the Hindu practice of *pûja*, the family home welcomes the invoked deity as a guest, treating the deity as one would treat a profane guest and thus sacralizing an otherwise profane place and occurrence (Huyler, 1999; see Figure 8). Therefore, due to shifting causality, the sacrality of space is fluid across and even often within traditions, much like it is in *Final Fantasy X*. Yet, once a space is considered sacred, especially when sustained in a building like a church or mosque, then nearly all actions within tend to be upheld to that same sacrality, as in *Journey*. The crux of what the practicing community holds sacred often lies in the

overarching narrative of a place or object or action, a concept to which I will turn next.

*Figure 8. Hindu pûja worship in Nepal.*

**To Transform: Investment**

In Davidson's *investment* stage, the player is nearing the end of the game, having mastered the controls and being intrigued enough by the game's world to continue towards the end. This stage relies strongly on the game's narrative, whether that is linear or not. However, I would add that investment can also incorporate earlier parts of the game, more specifically anywhere the narrative changes directions and launches the player deeper into the game world, as both a part of immersion and of investment in continuing to see where things end up. With that in mind, I will look closely at passages from *Journey* and *Final Fantasy X* to illustrate how narrative compels players' actions, rather than describing each whole narrative.

In *Journey*, the narrative at first is no more than the presence of a mountain that lies in the distance, yet seemingly within reach. It is set as a vague but inarguable goal immediately and remains always before the player as he or she continues through the game. At one point nearly halfway through the game, the player finds his or her avatar surfing down a billowing slope of sand. This segment employs a control scheme that is related to but controls slightly differently than the rest of the game, due to the nearly constant downwards momentum. Like the rest of the game, the player can move left to right, jump into the air, and emit conversational chirps, all of which are easily discoverable as the figure slides and the involvement stage is again set and concluded. Here the setting sun blazes across the ruddy sand, filling the screen with a fiery, glistening gold that overwhelms nearly everything in sight, excepting the mountain and the silhouette of the figure. This immersion feels nearly literal, bathing the player in the golden sunlight and melting away any complexity of control as the figure surfs onwards. The narrative in this passage is subtle, balanced on those controls and the game's forced camera perspective. The figure surfs down the sun-drenched dunes to two cliffs. At the first cliff, the player is merely pushing the figure via the analog stick towards the cliff. At the edge, any jump or even inaction catapults the figure up and forwards, aligning its silhouette with that of the mountain. The figure drifts slowly down from the cliff edge, surrounded by fluttering, butterfly-like cloth pieces. After a short, simple environmental puzzle, the player is lifted up again to another cliff, and the surfing continues. The exhilaration from the simply controlled but symbolically powerful jump from the first cliff primes the player for the second one. However, at this second cliff, the jump does not take off, despite the player's attempt to mimic the first one. The figure falls downwards with the player's sudden loss of agency (see Figure 9). The mountain quickly rises out of sight, and the bright gold and red tones fade away into a cool blue surrounded by darkness.

*Figure 9. Falling away from the mountain of Journey.*

This passage not only shows off the impressive visual design of the game, but it also highlights *Journey*'s potent non-verbal storytelling. Instead of being told that something has gone wrong, the player feels it. There is a shift in the control's responsiveness and thus player agency that abruptly ends the positive feelings connected to the surfing and the presence of the mountain. That shift in both mechanics and audiovisual tone spurs the player onwards towards the restoration and resolution of the serenity established in the early parts of the game. Yet, from then on, the player's further actions are tempered by the trepidation elicited by the controls' momentary failure and the newly established possibility of further failures.

As *Final Fantasy X* is a much longer and text-based narrative experience, its narrative is more explicit and can feature more tonal shifts. There are several appropriate passages for how this occurs, but one of the earliest ones revolves specifically around ritual. Tidus, the game's main character, is transported suddenly from his sparkling career as a star athlete in the bustling metropolis of Zanarkand to the villages and wilderness of Spira,

a world one thousand years in Tidus's future. Due to his displacement, Tidus finds himself outside of Spiran society and confused by its customs. These "social facts," or as defined by seminal sociologist Émile Durkheim (1895), "ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that present the noteworthy property of existing outside the individual consciousness," are "endowed with coercive power… independent of [the] individual will" (p. 2). However, he befriends an island villager named Wakka, who helps Tidus adjust to these customs (see Figure 10). Wakka is in a particular position to do so as the guardian of a budding summoner. Tidus is completely and controversially unaware of the teachings of Yevon, the god or institution (not to be made clear until much later in the game) that is the heartbeat of Spiran society. Wakka sends Tidus to the village temple to learn more about Yevon; however, here Tidus transgresses against the customs he has come to learn. Wakka's novice summoner has not emerged from a what can be a dangerous ritual in the depths of the temple. Rather than respecting the taboo (that is, a prohibition that preserves social facts and sacrality; see Durkheim, 1912) of entering the temple's deeper chambers, Tidus forces his way in to lend help to the summoner. Here he encounters the Cloister of Trials, an environmental puzzle that the player must solve for Tidus to advance. Here the player's focus shifts from combat management to the manipulation of magical spheres that can open doors and unlock objects within the Cloister. The completion of the Cloister seems to be a purification ritual; it is only through the psychosomatic actions taken and decisions made that Tidus (and thus the player) and other characters can proceed to the inner sanctuaries of the temple. The Cloister separates the profane world outside the temple from that which is held most sacred, including in this case the summoner herself, who Tidus reaches after completing the Cloister as she did before him. Thus, the narrative in FFX has a strong effect on both the player's actions and the space in which

they occur, which is made especially apparent in this passage of the game

*Figure 10. Wakka (right) showing Tidus the Yevon blessing.*

The two different ways in which *Journey* and FFX explore the relationship between actions, space, and narrative are similar to those used by various religious traditions. Referring again to medieval Christian pilgrimage and Hindu puja, the actions taken by practitioners and the sacralization of the relevant spaces would make little sense without the conceits upon which they are built. These traditions are somewhat more explicit, but some, like the practice of zazen or sitting meditation in Zen Buddhism, suggest that ritual can occur everywhere, making anywhere sacred with or without a determinable narrative cause (see Suzuki, 2003). Ritual, space, and narrative are all still connected, but with far less specificity and far more fluidity.

## Conclusions

Comparative studies are extremely useful in humanities scholarship and especially in studying the slippery and diverse nature of human experience. Coming to understand the differences between versions of similar systems is also an

exercise in understanding the similarities between such versions and thus what emerges as the most important throughout such systems. In this case, the comparison of ritual practices and game design is an unusual but fruitful one. Religion is one of the keys areas of humanistic research and has been for as long as such research has existed. In contrast, games studies is a much newer branch that is quickly rising to meet a large part of today's popular culture. By relating established humanistic fields such as religion or art history to game studies, the popular cultures represented by games and play are taken seriously, and through using established humanistic methodologies like those within comparative studies, this new medium can be "read" appropriately and effectively for an accurate (and thus applicable) understanding of contemporary human experience.

Yet, this work and others in this journal or elsewhere can be useful not only to academic research but also to the creation of games as cultural artifacts with the power to entertain, inspire, and educate. The "games for impact" or "serious games" movement revolves around the idea that play and designed experiences can be transformational (see Squire, 2006) in ways similar to ritual, as posited here. In order to build richer, more compelling games for the sake of education or even play itself, game designers can and often do draw from the vast corpus of human experience seen in the domains of the humanities. Not only can games have elements of these experiences, but they can become a new sphere for them, allowing more effective education on the importance of such experiences as well as greater access to them for those outside of cultural traditions. It is my hope that by playing well, players can connect to others through a deep appreciation of the intricacy and diversity of potential experiences so that playing well can also mean to live well.

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