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Religion in Digital Games Reloaded

Immersion Into the Field

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Simulating the Apocalypse

Theology and Structure of the *Left Behind* Games

Stephen Jacobs

Abstract

This article is a structural analysis of *Left Behind*, a real-time strategy computer game that is loosely based on the best selling series of novels written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Both the books and the game are popular cultural expressions of a Christian theology that posits an apocalyptic future in which humanity will be finally judged. Drawing on both narratology and ludology, the paper suggests that the *Left Behind Game* is neither truly a narrative nor a game. Instead a maze like structure can be identified. This structure allows the player a number of choices within the game play, but only one pathway allows the player to successfully navigate the game. Furthermore, there is only a single successful resolution. The paper concludes that this game structure is homologous to the theological structure of the apocalyptic belief system.

Keywords

Computer games, narrative structure, the Rapture, dispensationalism, premillenialism

1   Introduction

Apocalyptic beliefs should not be dismissed as marginal to American culture. Amy Frykholm (2004, p.14) suggests that: "Apocalypticism shapes our stories about America itself and about the direction and meaning of the world". Post-apocalyptic worlds abound in popular cultural forms, not least in games. Mervyn Bendle (2005, p.1) states: "Popular Culture is awash with images and narratives of the apocalypse". Post-apocalyptic worlds or imminent apocalyptic events are popular settings for many games. The term apocalypse tends to be utilised in two senses – a broad and a narrow sense. Broadly speaking an apocalypse signifies a cataclysmic event that has or threatens to

destroy all or the majority of life. In its narrower sense, the apocalypse refers to a number of texts and passages, such as found in Jewish and Christian literature, upon which a theology of end-times is based. In the broad sense the apocalypse makes a good setting for games as there is a clear dualism between good and evil, and as Rachel Wagner (2012, p.191) suggests the gamer is invited "to see themselves as messianic agents of deliverance against evil". Some of these games make direct use of apocalyptic texts. For example *Darksiders*, released in 2010, is a game in which the player takes the role of War – one of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse. These games appropriate apocalyptic imagery for the sake of the game play. Conversely groups with a strong theological stance are not averse to appropriating popular cultural forms as a strategy for spreading their message. In this paper I will look at how a particular theological conception of end-times, known as premillenial dispensationalism, has been articulated in a real-time strategy game. This game is based on *Left Behind* – a very popular series of adventure books that is set during end-times that premillenial dispensationalists refer to as the Tribulation. In this paper I argue that the theology acts as a limitation to the openness of the game.

The significance of apocalypticism for American culture is clearly demonstrated by the phenomenal success of the *Left Behind* series of books, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. The *Left Behind* series begins with an event known as the Rapture, when good Christians are physically summoned to heaven, leaving chaos and confusion on earth. The books are founded in a belief that after the Rapture there is a seven-year period of terror known as the Tribulation. This period sees the rise of the antichrist, war, disease and the persecution of Christians. At the end of this period Christ will return to establish his millennial kingdom. LaHaye and Jenkins believe that there is a fundamental battle for hearts and minds. Whilst nothing can be done about God's ultimate plan for creation and the end of times, believers in a forthcoming apocalypse can be instrumental in creating a context that is more conducive to their beliefs. The world is, according to LaHaye and Jenkins, dominated by the secular humanist ethos: a world in which the majority believe that they can lead their lives independent of God. In particular, secular humanists dominate the media, inculcating an antipathy towards the truth of the Christian message. LaHaye and Jenkins critique the ethos of secular humanism through a popular cultural form. As Glenn Shuck (2005, p.80) suggests:

> The authors have found no better means to wage their imaginative campaigns against their humanist adversaries than through the suggestive pages of their best selling *Left Behind* novels.

The first book *Left Behind* was published in 1995, and was succeeded by eleven more. Rapture novels are not a new phenomenon. Crawford Gribben (2004) suggests that the novels of Sidney Watson, published between 1913 and 1916, establish many of the popular tropes found in subsequent popular representations of the Rapture and the Tribulation. However, none of the antecedents of the *Left Behind* novels achieved anything like the astonishing sales of the *Left*

Behind series. The last book *Glorious Appearing* (2004) claims sales in excess of 60 million for the series. The last six books in the series all reached number one in many of America's best-seller lists including the *New York Times* and *Publishers Weekly* (Chapman 2009, p.151). The books are readily available, not only in Christian bookstores but also from major retailers, such as Barnes and Noble and Wal-Mart. A Barna Research Group Survey suggests that almost one in nine American adults had read at least one of the *Left Behind* novels (Chapman 2009, p.151).

There were a number of spin-offs from the books including a series written for children, a radio show and three films. The novels have spawned a minor industry. In 2006 a computer game, *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*, was released based on the bestselling series of books. This was followed in 2007 by the release of *Left Behind: Tribulation Forces,* and in 2010 by a third game *Left Behind: Rise of the Antichrist.* All three games are real-time strategy games, and have similar game-play. A real-time strategy game is a game that does not involve turn taking, in which the player has a bird's eye view of the game-world, and moves multiple characters around the game-world. This genre of games is often used in military strategy games. All three games can be played as a single or on-line with multiple players. The focus of this paper is on the first game. While there have been a number of academic publications about the novels (Forbes & Kilde 2004; Frykholme 2004; Shuck 2005; Chapman 2009; Gribben 2009), some literature about the films (Hendershot 2004; Wallis 2008), there is almost nothing published about the games.

The games have not proved to be such a runaway success as the books. They have been criticised by gamers for extremely poor game-play, and by many Christians for their theological and ideological content. Nonetheless, the *Left Behind Games* reveal a great deal about the relationship between a particular and significant form of American religiousness, and popular cultural formats. I argue that the apocalyptic theology not only determines the narrative elements of the game, but also the structure of game-play. The theological limitations imposed on the game-play restrict the appeal of the games in a way that does not apply to the books.

2   The ambivalence of popular culture.

Computer and video games are not only big business[1], but are now a significant aspect of popular culture. The Entertainment Software Association suggests that seventy two percent of American

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1   According to John Kirriemuir (2002) the game industry generates between 18-25 billion dollars per year. According to the market research group DFC intelligence the estimated value of the world market in games in 2007 will reach 30 billion dollars. Cited in Buckingham (2006, p. 1). The Entertainment Software Association (2011) claims that the bestselling game of 2007 Halo 3 took more in revenue in its first day of sales ($ 170 million) than the opening weekend for the Hollywood blockbuster Spiderman 3 ($151 million).

households play video or computer games (Entertainment Software Association 2011). Many evangelical Christians perceive computer games to be morally pernicious, pointing out that many games include graphic scenes of sex and violence. In a review of the third *Grand Theft Auto* game on *Christian Answers.Net* the writer suggests that the game "is assured a place in infamy thanks to its incredibly immoral gameplay". However, all forms of popular culture can be appropriated to further the cause.

Evangelical Christianity has an ambivalent attitude to new media forms and popular culture. As Heather Hendershot (2004, p.28) observes evangelicals are paradoxically both technophilic and technophobic. Media and popular cultural forms are the products of, and therefore promote the values of, secular society, yet evangelical Christians perceive the proselytising potential of the media. The Jimmy Swaggart Ministries' web site (2011) proclaims that:

> The Gospel presented over television is the single most effective means of bringing the message of Christ to millions of people.

In other words new media and popular cultural forms have the potential for both good and evil. Nowhere is this ambivalence more marked than in attitudes towards popular music. For example various forms of popular music are frequently characterised as the devil's music by evangelical Christians[2], and yet at the same time there is a tradition of Christian popular music.

> Christians have entered the musical marketplace with a vengeance, staking a claim for rock-and-roll's wholesome potential (Hendershot 2004, p.52).

This ambivalence is marked in the *Left Behind Games* by musicians, whose special singing ability raises the 'spirit level' of good allies, and if powerful enough can transform an evil character. On the other hand the performance of rock music by evil musicians will revitalise other evil units, and deplete the spirit of good forces. One of the characters early in the game warns the player:

> Beware the evil musicians. If you get too close they will play their screaming guitars and influence you to their side (*Left Behind: Eternal Forces* 2006).

The *Left Behind* novels and games fundamentally articulate an anxiety about the present situation rather than expressing a fear about future times. The cyber-streets of New York through which the player has to guide the characters are in fact a representation of how many evangelical Christians view the contemporary situation, and not some mythical future time. The streets of contemporary

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2   See for example The Devil's Music <http://www.jesus-is-savior.com/Evils%20in%20America/devils_music_no_effect.htm> (accessed 05/04/11).

America are regarded as replete with hostile anti-Christian forces, and the only way to make the world safe for true Christians is, as in the game, to convert as many people as possible to the true path. In other words, the struggle between the forces of good and evil is happening now, and popular culture is one of the major battlegrounds for this conflict over the soul of the world.

In a message of endorsement on the *Left Behind Games* web site Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins suggest that: "you'll find this new game a breath of fresh air and a great evangelistic tool to win our youth and gamers for Christ. We are lending our full support to this outreach and encourage everyone to join us".[3] However, as Heather Hendershot (2004, p. 31) argues, Christian popular cultural products cannot simply be perceived in terms of evangelising, but must also be considered as a means for evangelicals "of staking a claim for themselves as modern consumers". While many evangelical Christians are alienated by secular popular culture, not to engage with popular culture may contribute to the representation of evangelical Christianity as anachronistic. Consequently, evangelicals need to engage with popular culture, but in a form that is more consonant with their beliefs.

3   The theology

The books and their various spin-offs are based on a theology sometimes referred to as premillennial dispensationalism, or simply dispensationalism. Its origins are often attributed to John Nelson Darby (1800 -1882), a Church of Ireland Priest, who became disillusioned with the Church's close relationship with the state and became a founder member of the schismatic group the Plymouth Brethren. Many of Darby's ideas have become "widely spread and culturally pervasive especially in the USA" (Sweetnam 2010, p.191). Darby's ideas were not immediately popular. However, the debate about slavery and the subsequent American Civil War instigated a crisis in American society and culture, which contributed to a context where the rather pessimistic ideas of dispensationalism had greater resonance (Kilde 2004, 55-56).

The concepts underlying dispensational theology really entered mainstream America with the *The Scofield Reference Bible*, first published in 1909 and later revised in 1917. Cyrus Scofield, a Congregationalist minister, annotated the King James Bible with explanatory notes at the bottom of each page.

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3   It is difficult to see if the *Left Behind Game* will actually be an effective evangelical tool. The game has had very poor reviews in the gaming literature. For example *Gamespot* suggests 'Don't mock Left Behind: Eternal Forces because it's a Christian game. Mock it because it's a very bad game.' (Todd, 2006) Consequently it seems unlikely that it will attract gamers.

It sold extremely well, selling over three million copies within fifty years. Michael Williams (2003, p.19) observes:

> Because they appeared on the same page as the inspired word of God, Scofield's notes took on an authority second only to the words of Scripture itself for many of its readers.

While Scofield's interpretation of the Bible was not universally accepted, it did make many dispensational ideas normative amongst American evangelical Protestants. The fact that the Oxford University Press published it also gave the *Scofield Reference Bible* a certain respectability.

While on the surface dispensationalism appears to be a simple, if not simplistic doctrine, Sweetnam (2010, p.192) warns that it is more theologically nuanced than most scholars suppose. It is also "very far from being a monolithic system of belief" (Sweetnam 2010, p.193). Nonetheless we can identify certain dimensions, or what Sweetnam terms 'stresses', that characterise dispensationalism. Each of these stresses, taken on their own, is not exclusive to dispensational theology, and "none on its own constitutes Dispensationalism" (Sweetnam, 2010, p.198). Sweetnam firstly identifies dispensationalism as inherently imbricated with evangelicalism[4]. Dispensationalists also adopt a literal interpretation of the Bible. This denies that the Bible should be understood in allegorical terms. Scofield's introduction to his *Reference Bible,* referring to the Books of the Prophets, asserts that, "this portion of the Bible, nearly one-fourth of the whole, has been closed to the average reader by fanciful and allegorical schemes of interpretation" (cited in Sweetnam 2010, p.201).

Dispensationalism adopts a premillennial perspective. Premillenialism is one of the two main strands of millennial thought, the other being postmillenialism. Millennialism is a utopian vision that history will end with a thousand-years of peace and righteousness. Postmillennialism is a positive and optimistic perception, which suggests that humans are capable of self-perfection. This ability for perfection establishes a thousand years of justice and righteousness, which will precede the return of Christ. Postmillenialists perceive humanity as potential agents of change, and this perception underpinned much of the social reformist agenda of nineteenth century America. Charles Finney (1792-1875), a revivalist preacher and active abolitionist, evokes the ethos of postmillennial thinking, when he argued that, "the great business of the Church' is to 'reform individuals, communities and governments" (cited in Williams 2003, p.14).

Premilenniallism is more negative, and suggests there is no possibility for human perfection without Christ's intervention. According to premillennial thought there is no point in a reformist agenda: only Christ can redeem humanity, and he will return to rid the world of evil and evildoers

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4   Evangelicalism is itself problematic to define, and Sweetman (2010, p.197) refers to David Bebington's concept that Evangelicalism has four dimensions: Biblicism, Crucicentrism, Conversion and Activism.

and to establish the millennium. Premillennialists look for "signs that society is so corrupt that Christ must surely appear soon to set things right" (Kilde 2004, p.50). Society cannot be reformed, and the only possibility is to seek one's own personal salvation, and to spread the gospel.

Premillennial Dispensationalism suggests that God directly intervenes in history. There are different epochs, referred to as dispensations, characterised by different relationships between God and humanity. Linked to this concept of different dispensations is the idea that both Israel and the church have unique and distinct roles in the Divine plan for humanity. The Jewish people are represented as God's earthly people, whereas Christians are represented as the heavenly people. We are currently in the church age, where God turns his attention from his chosen people – the Jews, to those who have accepted Christ. However, Darby believed that God had not finished with his earthly people, as the prophecies in the Bible have not been fulfilled. Furthermore, Darby wondered why God had not revealed the formation of the church to the Old Testament prophets. Consequently the church age, which began with the Pentecost, is regarded as a sort of hiatus in the prophetic chronology outlined in the Bible. This hiatus would end, and the prophetic chronology would restart with Christ summoning up the true church to heaven.

It is believed that the period before the second coming of Christ will be marked not only by escalating corruption, but also increasing natural disasters. Premillennialists, such as John Darby, wondered why true Christians would have to suffer the torments of end times. Darby found his answer in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, which states:

> We who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

Darby interpreted this as indicating that true Christians would be literally and physically transported to heaven prior to the worst apocalyptic horrors of the end-times. Darby called this 'the secret rapture'[5]. Darby was critical of the established church, and therefore true Christians constitute a hidden church: many of those who are formally Christians, including ministers will be left behind.[6] While it is unclear whether Darby was the originator of this idea, it does seem that he and the early Plymouth Brethren coined the term 'Rapture' (Kilde 2004, p.53). Designating a name to a particular idea facilitates the dissemination of that idea, and enables it to be more readily fixed in peoples' minds. The Rapture not only marks the restarting of the prophetic chronology, but also marks the beginning of a seven year period prior to the second coming, known as the Tribulation. This period

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5   Darby derived the term from the Latin Vulgate translation of Greek text of 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Where the English translation suggests 'caught up', is in the Latin version *rapiemur*, which is derived from the verb *rapio*. The noun form *raptura* becomes the English word 'rapture' (Frykholm 2004, p.16).
6   Bruce Barnes, a major character in the earlier books, who also appears in the games, is a pastor who is not taken in the Rapture, suggesting that while he was an official within the church, he was not a true Christian.

is marked by ever increasing corruption, the rise of the Antichrist and the wrath of God in the form of plagues, earthquakes and freak weather conditions. This view is known as pre-tribulation rapture. Williams (2003, p.112) suggests that the idea of pre- tribulation rapture[7] creates a "lifeboat mentality".

Dispensationalists represent society as increasingly corrupt and this entails that, although ultimately destined to be saved, they consider themselves to be ever more marginalised. Consequently, this reinforces an expectation that the Rapture is imminent. However, as Darby suggested that the church age is a kind of hiatus in prophetic chronology, no specific event in the world is indicative of the actual timing of the Rapture. This avoids the cognitive dissonance of predicting an actual date for the final judgement, as with Harold Camping, the pastor who was convinced the final judgement would occur on 21st May 2011.

The *Left Behind* books and various spin offs posit a theology that is based on both premillennial dispensationalism and pre-tribulation rapture. However, LaHaye and Jenkins also add a third dimension to the theology, which is the concept that people can still be saved during the period of the tribulation. It is "this refinement of the pre-tribulationist position that allows for the dramatic story told in the *Left Behind* series" (Kilde 2004, p.60). The books are based on a series of characters who realise the truth after the Rapture, and dedicate their lives to Christ. These characters set up a group called the Tribulation Force to combat the evil of the Antichrist and provide support during the Tribulation for all those who have realised the truth.

4   The Left Behind – Eternal Forces Game

The opening animated sequence of the first *Left Behind Game* begins with an image of earth from space with streams of light emanating from the surface. A short scene of two angels carrying a body follows this image of the earth. The opening sequence clearly signifies the Rapture. The player is then shown an image based upon Michelangelo's renowned painting of God creating Adam. In other words there is a representation of both the beginning and end of humanity. This suggests the Rapture, and the subsequent events of the tribulation are implicit in the very beginning of creation. The unfolding of history is illustrated with images of people who represent different ages and a spinning calendar.

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7   Others suggest that rapture occurs in the middle of tribulation (mid-tribulation rapture) or at the end of the tribulation period (post-tribulation rapture).

The sequence continues with a portentous voice which announces:

> Throughout history men and women have chosen one of three paths: to seek a relation with God, to ignore God, or to reject God.

These three distinct paths are signified by images of two people kneeling and praying, an ordinary street scene, and a group of leather-clad men with tattoos and short-cropped hair gathered under a bridge. The narrator then announces:

> At some point in time, as the Prophets predict, God will come to take his people.

This is illustrated with an image of an hourglass spinning through space. Following these disappearances, the narrator suggests, will be a time of terror and confusion:

> For those left behind the apocalypse has just begun.

This apocalyptic time is represented by the skylines of Paris, London and New York with palls of smoke, and a number of landmark buildings clearly in ruins (*Left Behind: Eternal Forces*, 2006)[8]. Here, in a nutshell, is a popular rendition of dispensationalist theology, with its emphasis on history, individual choice, prophecy, judgement and the approach of end times.

After the opening animation there is an introductory full motion video sequence that sets the narrative for the game itself. There are a number of short scenes with actors illustrating the shock and chaos that people experience as true Christians literally disappear before their eyes. Of course very few people really know what has happened. Eighteen months later the player is informed, in a scene that portrays a newscast, that Nicolae Carpathia[9] has risen to power, and restored peace to the world with his Global Community Peacekeepers, a clear allusion to the United Nations. The newscaster informs the player that Carpathia "has freed us from the bondage of religion". There is then a short scene in which a small group of people at prayer are rounded up by the heavily armed Global Community Peacekeepers. This is followed by a shot of Nicolae Carpathia, who looks at the camera and declares: "This is my time"(*Left Behind: Eternal Forces*, 2006). The implication is obvious: Nicolaea Carpathia is not all he seems, and readers of the series know of course that he is the antichrist.

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8   This opening animated sequence can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZGmSUO8M4g.
9   Carpathia is represented in the novels as the business person par excellence, who personifies the capitalist spirit that denies God, and is therefore aligned with Satan (Shuck, 2005, p.101).

The game-play begins with Leonard, who knows the reason behind the disappearances, and has just returned to New York. The player is informed that Leonard wants to tell friends and neighbours the truth, and is told that they have to guide Leonard through the city to talk about the disappearances. There are three types of characters: those like Leonard who know the truth (the Tribulation Force), those on the side of Nicolae Carpathia (the Global Community Peacekeepers), and finally neutral characters. The player can only control those characters who are on, or have been converted to, the side of the Tribulation Force[10], described in the *Left Behind Game* as "formed by worldwide believers who unite their efforts in the struggle against the Antichrist". The player therefore has a godlike control over those who know the truth. The aim of the game is to successfully complete a number of missions entailing avoiding defeat by the Global Community forces, building up resources such as housing, money and food to sustain the Tribulation Forces, and to recruit both neutral characters and hostile characters to the cause. The game manual explicitly states that the goal is to:

> Save as many people from the clutches of the antichrist as possible. Your purpose is absolutely NOT to wipe out the enemy forces! Remember those are PEOPLE he has deceived and can be recruited (*Left Behind: Eternal Forces Manual* 2006, p.26).

The player has, or can transform characters under his/her control into, recruiters. Recruiters have the ability to persuade neutral and hostile characters to join the Tribulation Force, or in the words of the manual – 'combat the lies of the antichrist with God's truth'. To do this the recruiter has an icon in the command panel, which the player clicks on when the recruiter character is in the vicinity of a neutral or evil character. A representation of a shaft of light descending on the character turns him/her from evil red or neutral grey, to good green.[11] The centrality of recruiting throughout the game parallels the significance of evangelism for dispensationalists. In all there are 40 levels, or missions, to complete in the first game. All of these levels follow a very similar structure, which requires the player to build up the Tribulation Force. As in the book series, it is important to obtain sufficient physical resources. So the player must build banks and cafés to maintain the Tribulation Force. It is also imperative to maintain the spirit level of the Tribulation Force, this is primarily achieved through praying. The player also can train his/her characters to become influencers – these are musicians who sing the praises of the Lord to raise the spirit level of characters under the player's control. They also have the ability to turn Global Community Peacekeepers units into neutrals, making them easier to recruit. The player quickly finds out that if the spirit level of the

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10 Although, controversially, in the multi-player version it is possible for players to take the side of the Global Community.

11 The recruiter can always convert neutral characters, but must have a higher spirit force than the evil character to be successful.

characters under their control is not maintained, they will succumb to the power of the Global Community Peacekeepers, and the current mission will be lost.
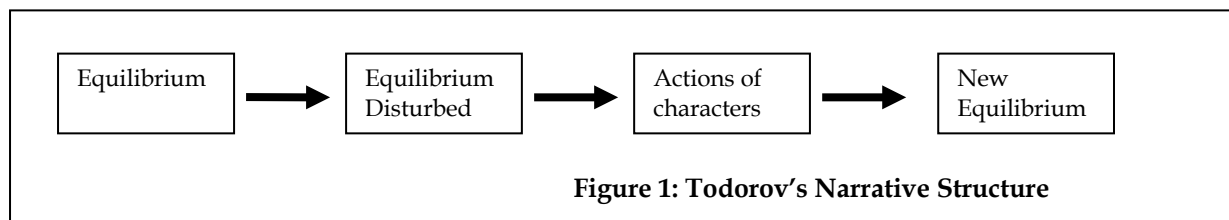
The player also has to build up enough military strength to withstand the attacks of the Global Community Peacekeepers. Consequently, although spiritual defence and influence are significant aspects of the game, in appearance and game play *Left Behind* is not very different to other real time strategy games, and in particular war strategy games. Although the game stresses the importance of 'spiritual warfare' in the struggle between good and evil, physical combat is a fundamental dimension of the game play. The player, as in any other war strategy game, has to build up military strength, as well as spiritual strength, in order to defeat the enemy forces. In fact many levels of the game are most effectively completed through building up military resources such as tanks and annihilating the Global Community forces. In each level the player has to perform specific tasks, such as training a builder in order to make a café or bank, or find a specific person – such as Bruce (who is also a major character in the earlier books).

5   Novels, games and mazes.

One of the reasons for the phenomenal success of the books is that the narrative is exciting. The theology of the books, which suggests a time of increasing corruption, war and natural disasters in end times, and providing one last opportunity to be saved from evil, gives the books a dramatic tension. One would imagine that this apocalyptic scenario would also be a basis for an exciting game, but this is not the case. One of the reasons for this failure is that games, while having a narrative dimension, are not narratives in the same way as novels: the strategic non-diegetic aspect of a game is more significant than the narrative dimension. While the theology is apparent in the books, it does not detract too much from the narrative pace. On the other hand the theology does have a direct impact on the non-diegetic aspect of the game-play. Immersion, which is defined by Janet Murray (1997, p.98) as 'having the experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place", in the novel is contingent upon various aspects of the narrative. However immersion in games, and in particular real-time strategy games, is more contingent upon the game-play.

There are major structural differences between novels and games. Frasca (2003) suggests that traditional media forms, such as the novel and films, are narratives. These narratives are primarily representational, and structured by a sequence of events, which normally have an ending of some type. Novel and film narratives can be understood primarily in terms of the structure posited by Tzvetan Todorov who indicated that narratives might be understood in terms of "a movement

between two states of equilibrium" (cited in Andrew 1984, p.84). In a diagrammatic form this can be represented as in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Todorov's Narrative Structure

The first book of the *Left Behind* series begins with the pilot Rayford Steele flying above the Atlantic. He is vaguely dissatisfied with his life, and fantasises about making a pass at the younger and very attractive flight attendant Hattie Durham. A hysterical Hattie dramatically disrupts this when she informs the incredulous Rayford that some of the passengers have simply vanished from the plane. The reader then discovers that "the simultaneous disappearance of millions all over the globe had resulted in chaos far beyond imagination" (LaHaye and Jenkins, 1995, p.24). Rayford and a number of the other characters quickly realise the significance of these disappearances, and set out on a quest to find out what they can effectively do, given this new set of circumstances. At the end of the first book the core characters form The Tribulation Force dedicated to surviving the seven-year tribulation, battling the forces of the Antichrist and achieving redemption. In the last book the faith of the Tribulation Force, despite all their suffering detailed in the intervening ten books, is vindicated with the defeat of the Beast and the False Prophet which heralds the Millennium of Christ's reign on earth and the damnation of all those who failed to accept Christ. In other words a new equilibrium is restored at the end of the narrative. This new equilibrium is of course determined not only by the theology, but also by the very structure of the novel.

However, the novel reader is clearly not a totally passive consumer of texts. The reader constructs the text: passages can be glanced over or perused; reading can be linear or a skipping back and forth; and meaning is constructed at the interface between reader and text[12]. The reader of a novel can explore the text – he/she does not necessarily have to read the text in a strictly linear sequential order. Furthermore readers can interpret and understand the actions of the characters and the final outcome of the narrative in ways that differ from both the intent of the author and other readers[13]. Whilst the reader of the novel might imagine different scenarios for the end of the book, might skip to the end to 'find out what happens', and might even speculate on what happens to characters after the end of the text, the new equilibrium at the end of the text is primarily
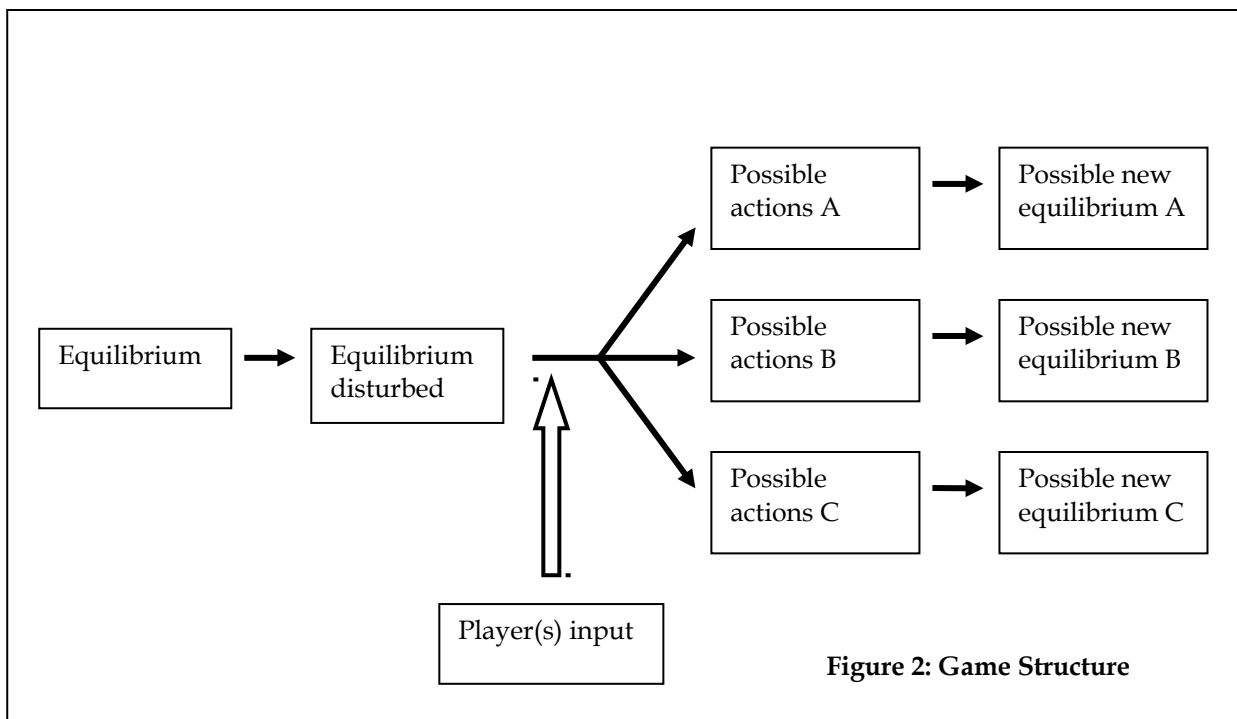
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12 See for example Roland Barthes (1976) *The Pleasures of the Text*.
13 See Amy Frykholm (2004, 68-74) where she discusses various resistant readings of the *Left Behind* novels.

determined by the author. Furthermore, the way in which the reader interacts with the novel is fundamentally noetic, purely a mental act. This limitation is primarily determined by the very structure of the novel's narrative form. In other words the novel is a relatively closed narrative form.

Espen Aarseth (1997, p.1) argues that reading a cybertext, which he defines as "any system that contains an information feedback loop" of which computer and video games are important exemplars, is a radically different experience to reading a book or watching a film. The way in which the reader of a cybertext interacts with the narrative is quite different, as it not purely noetic. Aarseth (1997, 4) suggests that the difference between reading a book and reading a cybertext is comparable to the distinction between watching a game of soccer and playing the game. The spectator will in all probability conjecture on the outcome, at times watch intently and other times be distracted, but never really has an *influence* on the actual game. Like the soccer player, the reader of the cybertext has an extra-noetic input into the text, and therefore influences the end result. This results in a much more open narrative form in comparison to a novel. Cybertexts might be considered as a type of game. While, as Wittgenstein has observed, it is problematic to define what a game is, it is reasonable to suggest that games involve a certain input from the player, which influences the way in which a sequence of events unfolds. In Todorov's terms these extra-noetic inputs will impact on both the nature of subsequent actions and the nature of the new equilibrium. In diagrammatic form the structure of a game can be represented as in figure 2.

Figure 2: Game Structure

For example, in a game of football the referee blowing his/her whistle disturbs the equilibrium of the opposing teams facing each other at the beginning of a match. The players then have a range of possible actions open for them, and these actions will have a direct effect on the nature of the equilibrium at the end of the match – team X could be the winners, losers or the match could be a draw. Games are therefore characterised by player input and the indeterminacy of the end result. Frasca (2003, 227) argues:

> Games always carry a certain degree of indeterminacy that prevents players from knowing the final outcome beforehand. To paraphrase Heraclitus, you never step in the same video game twice.

The outcome or restored equilibrium at the end of a game is indeterminate due to the player's extra-noetic input. However, Roger Caillois points out that there are certain games that are determined not by player input, but by chance. For example the spin of the roulette wheel, the throw of a die etc. So whilst player input might be attenuated to such a point as to be almost non-existent, the outcome is uncertain. In fact it is the very uncertainty of the outcome that makes games of chance so appealing. So the minimal requirement for a succession of events to be considered as being a game, rather than a narrative, is the indeterminacy of the outcome. Play is "an uncertain activity" and "doubt must remain until the end, and hinges upon the denouement" (Caillois 2001, p.7).

Espen Aarseth (2004, p.47) suggests that a cybertext must have three dimensions: rules, a semiotic system (the game-world) and the game-play (the application of the rules to the game world). The reader of the cybertext, like the player of the game, is instrumental in determining the final equilibrium at the end of the text. While the cybertext author determines the rules and the semiotic system, the cybertext reader determines how the rules will be applied. It is the *application* of the rules, determined by the cybertext reader input, which creates the indeterminacy, which enables most computer and video games to be classified as games. In other words games might be considered as very open narratives.

A further dimension of a game, as indicated by Caillois, is that it requires some form of resolution or denouement. The resolution might be determined on a purely arbitrary basis by the player(s), by a time limit, or by the rules of the game. Consequently, in the strict sense of the term *The Sims* or multi role playing activities such as *Everquest* are not games, as there is no denouement as such. However, most real-time strategy games qualify as games because they do have some final end point determined by the game design. For example in *Sid Meier's Civilization*, the player might lose, or might win by: destroying all other civilisations, getting to the end of the modern era with the highest score, or by winning the space race.
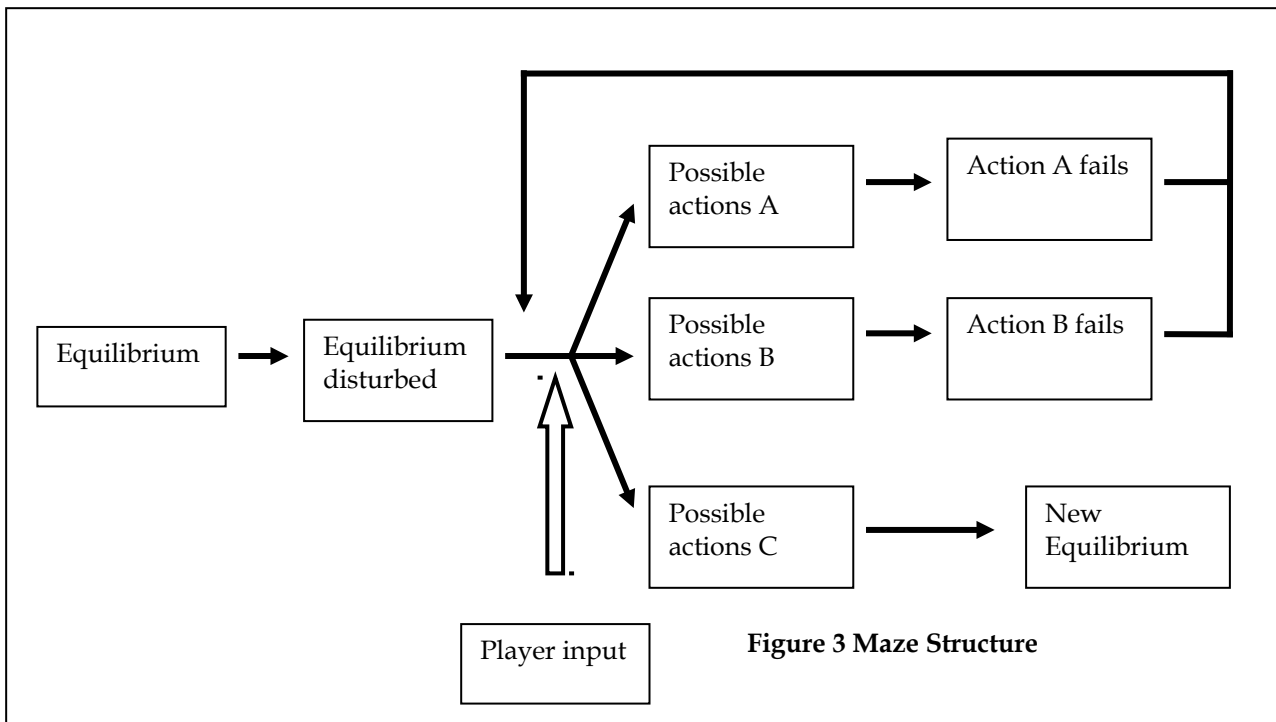
In summary games are characterised by three dimensions: player extranoetic input, uncertainty and some sort of ending or closure. Immersion in games is generated by the

indeterminacy of the outcome, until the very end, when the new equilibrium has been determined by the player(s) input. However, how can we understand the *Left Behind Game* in which there is no indeterminacy and the outcome is determined not by player input, but by dispensational theology? Dispensational theology and the narratives of the popular series of the *Left Behind* books, both suggest there is a clearly defined end. At the macro level there is no indeterminacy in this worldview. According to dispensationalism there can only be one possible end namely, the glorious appearance of Christ and the final apocalyptic confrontation between good and evil, in which evil will be ultimately defeated. In the final book of the series, despite the vast army that confronts the small remnant who have accepted Christ, there is no possibility of the true believers being defeated. At the individual level, there are really only two possibilities: salvation or damnation. In particular there is only one route to salvation, or in the term utilised in the introduction to the game "to seek a relationship with God".

As a result of this predetermined end and single prescribed path to salvation identified in dispensationalist theology, the *Left Behind Game* is not structured like a game. Furthermore, because of the extra-noetic nature of the player input the *Left Behind Game* is not structured as a novel. However, this is not to say that the *Left Behind Game* does not have a narrative dimension, nor do I claim that the *Left Behind Game* does not have a gaming aspect. The relationship between a game and a narrative is highly contested. While a game can be considered as a form of narrative it has a very open structure. Conversely a novel has a much more closed narrative structure. In Wittgensteinian terms the *Left Behind Game* is a distant cousin of both novels and games. The narrative of the *Left Behind Game* is more open than a novel, but more closed than a game. Rachel Wagner (2012, p.7) suggests in her analysis of the online interactive site *Stations of the Cross* that "the goal here is pious consumption with rather prescribed limitations on human interactivity and very low agency". Similarly, I suggest that the goal of the *Left Behind Game* is 'pious consumption' and this limits its game play to such an extent that it cannot be really defined as a game.

In a game there must be choice. There clearly is some choice for the player in *Left Behind*. The player can choose to move the characters under his/her control to various points within the game environment: choose to train converted friends to become musicians or soldiers, choose to acquire a building and convert it into a hospital, military base or church. However, although this seems to be a considerable choice, it is not in fact the case. Failure to make the right choice leads to defeat, and the player has to begin the mission again. Consequently there is effectively only one successfully prescribed course through the game, and only one possible resolution.

Diagrammatically the structure of the *Left Behind Game* can be represented as in figure 3.

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                          ┌──────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
                          │                                                        │
                          │        ┌──────────────┐      ┌──────────────┐          │
                          │        │ Possible     │ ───► │ Action A fails│ ─────────┘
                    ┌─────┴──┐     │ actions A    │      │              │
                    │        │     └──────────────┘      └──────────────┘
 ┌───────────┐   ┌──┴──────────┐   ┌──────────────┐      ┌──────────────┐
 │Equilibrium│ ─►│ Equilibrium │─► │ Possible     │ ───► │ Action B fails│ ─────────┘
 │           │   │ disturbed   │ ● │ actions B    │      │              │
 └───────────┘   └─────────────┘   └──────────────┘      └──────────────┘
                    ▲               ┌──────────────┐      ┌──────────────┐
                    ║               │ Possible     │ ───► │ New          │
                    ║               │ actions C    │      │ Equilibrium  │
                    ║               └──────────────┘      └──────────────┘
                 ┌──╨────────┐
                 │Player input│         **Figure 3 Maze Structure**
                 └───────────┘
```

The player explores the game world, but the choices that are available to him/her either lead to a wrong path, in which case the player has to repeat that level, or the right path, in which the player progresses through the game. The only possible resolution indicated in figure 3 is to take path C. This structure is similar to that of a maze. In other words, the player has a number of critical choices, but only one path will lead to success. Playing the *Left Behind Game* does feel like being stuck in a maze. On the bottom left corner of the screen, the player is provided with a map. At the beginning of the game no details on the map are shown, just as someone entering a maze has no knowledge of the possibilities ahead. Details of the game world (the streets of post-Rapture New York) are only revealed as the player navigates his/her characters around the streets. In level two, for example, the player has to recruit eight neutral characters and find a builder, whilst resisting the attacks of the Global Community Peacekeepers. This takes a great deal of navigation around the game environment, ensuring that the spirit levels of the characters are sufficiently high to resist the attacks of the Global Community Peacekeepers. It is possible to take a number of wrong turnings, and not find the builder or neutral characters that the player needs to convert in order to progress to the next level. Once the player has found the builder and converted eight neutral characters, these have to be guided to the church, the metaphorical centre of the maze, where the new equilibrium is restored, allowing the player to progress to the next level. Whilst the final mission of the game does

not portray the final judgement, it does require the player to build up a base with sufficient resources for the Tribulation Forces to defeat the Global Community Peacekeepers.

The maze like structure of the *Left Behind Game* represents how dispensationalists perceive the world today. The world is a maze in which it is very easy to take a wrong turning and become lost. The consequences of a wrong turn are potentially eternal. However, there is a single right path which leads to salvation. The intent is that through playing the game the player is made aware of the consequences of their actions in the here and now. On a promotional video available on *You Tube* the makers claim that the game "remains one of the only games produced to show gamers the consequences of poor decisions"[14]. For example, failure to maintain one's spirit level or to recruit will lead to inevitable defeat, not only in the game, but also in the world. On the *Left Behind Game* web pages the chief executive of LB Games Inc., Troy Lyndon cites a comment by a leading member of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association who suggests:

> One of the geniuses of the Left Behind game is that it gives gamers a chance to see the consequences of poor decisions … we're pretty excited to see that the *Left Behind Games* were designed to provide positive moral input to a youthful generation which would otherwise not hear it. (Lyndon 2011)

However, this is rather an overstatement. Although the player has the option to pray for and convert enemies rather than simply annihilate them, defeat at different levels is more often caused by failure to build sufficient banks or cafes to resource the Tribulation Force, rather than through any moral choice.

6   Conclusion

The *Left Behind* phenomenon represents an important development in the relationship between religion and popular culture. The sales figures of the books have entailed that popular cultural forms have become a far more significant battleground for the 'soul' of America than ever before. Nicolas Guyatt (2006, p.16) suggests, "with nearly 65 million books sold, *Left Behind* has influenced the whole entertainment industry". Christian popular cultural forms have been fairly marginal, and have been primarily consumed by the faithful. In other words these have been popular in form, rather than in terms of the more dictionary definition of the term having "an appeal to or favoured by many people" (Brown 1993, 2292). The sales of the *Left Behind* books have indicated that Christian fiction can have a mass appeal, at least in the USA.[15] With computer games

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14   Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TH9US35NOsA.

15   The success of Mel Gibson's 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ* is also indicative that religion can be popular, in

becoming an increasingly significant form of popular culture, it is critical to understand how individuals and groups with a specific religious agenda utilise what is essentially perceived as a form of entertainment. Consequently although in terms of sales the *Left Behind Game* has not been particularly successful[16], an analysis of the game itself provides some clear indications of how a very strong theological belief has a significant impact not only on the game content, but also on the game design.

A structural analysis of the *Left Behind Game* suggests that whilst it has a narrative dimension, it also has, as with other computer games, "a hidden structure of simulation" (Aarseth 2004, p.52). These simulations are characterised by "a bottom up hermeneutic" in which "knowledge and experience are created by the player's actions" (Aarseth 2004, p.52). The game-world is doubly important in the *Left Behind Game*. The game world not only represents dispensational beliefs about the end of time, post-Rapture and pre-Armageddon, but also represents current anxieties about the present – namely the dominance of secular humanist values that are perceived as being inherently hostile to the Christian worldview. Consequently, navigation through the game world can be considered as experiential learning in which the player learns not only the truth about the final days, but also about how to act in the present. For example, the two most significant actions in the *Left Behind* game play are to pray in order to keep up characters' spirit strength to resist the power of the Global Community Peacekeepers, and to recruit new members to the Tribulation Forces. These clearly parallel the centrality of prayer and proselytising amongst those who adhere to a dispensationalist worldview.

The analysis of the *Left Behind Game* also demonstrates that although it has a ludic dimension, in that player input is of a different order to that required of the reader of a narrative text, it does not have the structure of the game. The outcome of a game must have a certain degree of unpredictability. However, the dispensationalist worldview posits a predetermined end, and whilst the *Left Behind Game* does not take the player to the final defeat of evil, the Tribulation Forces must win the final mission to complete the game. Consequently I suggest that the structure of the game is akin to a maze. This mazelike structure is clearly homologous to the theological structure of dispensationalism, namely that there are only right and wrong moves. Choices in the game will either lead to success or failure, just as choices in this world will either lead to salvation or away from God. Although there are many choices that the player can make within the game world there is only one path to complete the game. Similarly dispensational theology suggests that although there are many possible choices in life, there is only a single path to salvation. The structure of the *Left Behind Game*, therefore is analogous to the structure of dispensational theology, in terms of a clearly defined binary opposition between right and wrong paths.

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all senses of the term.

16 In February 2007 Left Behind Games reported over that they had lost over $4 million dollars. (Jenkins 2007).

Acknowledgement

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Biography

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