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Religion in Digital Games Reloaded

Immersion Into the Field

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Reviews

A Digital Devil's Saga

Representation(s) of the Demon in Recent Videogames

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Abstract

This paper investigates the use of demons in videogames. It analyses how representations of demons in videogames replicate and subvert theological and socio-historic representations. While demons can be seen as 'loans' from Christianity, their representations in videogames often rely on syntheses of religious and secular sources, including Christian theology, world mythologies, conspiracy theory, and post-Miltonic literary appropriations of Satan as humanistic liberator and symbol of desire. These produce representations genealogically linked to but distinct from traditional Christian representations of demons. This paper looks at how the figuration of demons in recent videogames, primarily *DmC: Devil May Cry* (2013), and *Shin Megami Tensei IV* (2013), fit into the secular ideological legacy of the Enlightenment, in which the demon departs from purely a representation of evil and becomes recast as a polyvalent symbol capable of exploring a number of human themes, including desire, liberation, and control.

Keywords

videogames, demonology, secularism, Enlightenment, humanism, evil

1   Introduction

Study of Religions scholar Bruce Lincoln has noted that of all the fields of theological inquiry, demonology has suffered most in recent years. Seemingly discredited by the Enlightenment, systems of demonology have been viewed as naive, ridiculous and infantile, receiving only distanced and condescending attention, lest the foolishness of the beliefs somehow negatively impact upon the reputation of the researcher. Countering these perspectives, Lincoln holds that such skittish analyses lead to an impoverished understanding of religions, for, he notes, "some of the

most serious issues of ethics, cosmology, anthropology, and soteriology were – and still are – regularly engaged via demonology" (2009, p. 45).

The demon is perhaps one of the West's most enduring cultural symbols of evil. However, even within Christian demonology, the demon has multiple sources of origin and has undergone numerous historic mutations in response to social and political milieus. As a figure whose primary symbolic value is as a marker of 'evil', it has been used politically to both prop up and undermine the status quo, to foment revolution and extinguish it, and to demonise both minorities on the margins of society and ruling elites. At times, it has been used for all of these at the same time. Although demonology has diminished as a subject of scholarly inquiry within disciplines like history and religious studies, formulations of the demonic have blossomed within subsets of literature and popular culture, such as the genres of fantasy and science-fiction, religiously-themed conspiracist literature, and apocalyptic forms of religiosity. Often present as an evil foe to be overcome for the peace and security of the world (or a world) or as the crystallisation of negatively perceived societal trends that the authors wish to highlight, representations of the demonic vary widely throughout their manifestations, both historic and contemporary. The purpose of this article is to tackle several these representations as drawn from the artistic medium of videogames, analysing the ways in which they encode a variety of (sometimes antagonistic) ideologies in order to sketch out a (necessarily incomplete) picture of how the (post-)theological figure of the demon has come to be symbolically utilized in modern, secular society. For, as Armando Maggi has rhetorically asked,

> Why could we not at least try to walk through the 'senseless' maze of this folly called demonology, which posits the presences of a paradoxical 'other,' at once radically different from us and so close and similar to us, an enemy that finds in our minds its primary and most abhorred interlocutor? (2001, p. 3).

This paper sketches part of a cultural demonology, an analysis of demonic motifs in popular culture and the ways these tie into broader ideological systems and genealogies. As a form of cultural and artistic media, videogames reside within a genealogy of representations of the demon. They adopt and adapt it to ludonarrative purposes. Sometimes this is merely in using the figure of the 'demon' as a convenient cultural catchall for an evil force, a foe to be defeated in the name of righteousness; demons are evil, and thus their defeat at the hands of the player-protagonist codes the latter as a force for good. At other times, videogames utilise the symbol of the demon in more complex manners, ones bound up in its complex historical, religio-political permutations. While usually (but not always) retaining the symbolic function of 'evil', the demon (also) becomes a symbol of personal rebellion or liberation, of societal control, of loss or desire. This polyvalency is a result of a history of interpretation, which this paper examines in the context of two specific videogames,

DmC: Devil May Cry (2012) and *Shin Megami Tensei IV* (2013). However it also draws on others for broader contextualisation. The portrayals of the demon within these titles fit into a legacy of the desacralisation and fictionalisation of the demon within secular modernity, a movement from doctrine to literature through which the demon transitions from a specifically religious figure to a more general symbol related to, but distinctly disassociated from, its original religious signification(s). After a general overview analysing the main themes at work on videogame representations of demons (and related figures, such as angels) I analyse each of the two games as an example of a specific ideological trend resulting from the desacralisation of the demonic since the Enlightenment, a trend which pushed the figure of the demon away from mainline theologies and into realms of fringe religiosities and fiction. Whereas *Shin Megami Tensei IV* rests in the legacy of 'Romantic Satanism', an ideological trend beginning with English Romanticism that re-coded the Devil as a champion of human individuality and modern consciousness, *DmC: Devil May Cry* appropriates far-right religious critiques of the modern world; however, it opposes to its diabolic vision of modernity not a spiritual or religious force for good but rather a secular, libertarian humanism. While in these fictionalised settings the sign of the demon still carries the genealogy of its religious meanings – concepts like evil, sin, rebellion, possession – it becomes capable of signifying new meanings as well as encoding revaluations of its original thematic contents.

2   Demons in Videogames: A Thematic Analysis of Some Recent Titles

Demons are common adversaries in videogames. Partly, this is because of their value as an identifiable symbol of evil in the (post-)Christian West – the creators are able to rely on a pre-existing cultural concept of the demon, which they can then proceed to subvert or adhere to depending on the function of the demon within the work. The popular role-playing game series by BioWare *Dragon Age* (2009; 2011) uses demons as spiritual entities that live in a dimension parallel to the material world, embody traits such as pride, sloth, hunger, desire, and rage, and are able to possess mortal bodies and twist them into monsters. Blizzard Entertainment's *Diablo III* (2012) chronicles battles between the angels of the High Heavens and the demons of the Burning Hells as part of an eternal war between light and darkness, with the mortal world of Sanctuary caught between them. These games utilise the figure of the demon as a generalised symbol of evil, severed from any specific religious context. However, there are others that draw directly on (Judaeo-)Christian traditions. Visceral Games' 2010 action-adventure game, *Dante's Inferno* bases itself loosely on the classic text of that name, using the original's description of the regions of hell to craft a macabre story of a crusader who descends into hell in pursuit of his beloved, culminating

in a battle with Satan himself. Vigil Games' duology *Darksiders* (2010) and *Darksiders II* (2012) have the player take on the mantle of one of the horsemen of the apocalypse (War and Death, respectively) but casts the apocalyptic horsemen not as agents of God, but as agents of the "Charred Council", a group constructed to mediate in the war between heaven and hell. In a distinctly different vein, the Japan-developed *El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron* (2011) takes its world and characters from the apocryphal text of First Enoch, chronicling the fall of seven angels, their interbreeding with humans and bestowal upon humanity of advanced technology – coded in the game as fragments of divine wisdom for which humanity was unready. Satan is present in this title as the yet-unfallen 'Lucifel', and reports Enoch's progress in quelling the rebel angels to God on a mobile phone. Another Japanese title, *Catherine* (2012), has the titular succubus involved in an ancient curse to eliminate men who entertain thoughts of infidelity so that their spouses are freed up for more worthy partners, an interesting twist on the medieval succubus myth. There are also games where entities serve demonic roles and attributes, but are known by different names, such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011), in which demonic entities known as 'daedra' inhabit a spiritual realm named Oblivion and interfere capriciously and maliciously in the affairs of mortals.

The variety of demonic portrayals in this brief selection of recent games serves to highlight that the proper place of the demon in modern society has become the realm of fantasy. Real religions, when invoked at all, provide little more than a source of inspiration and artistic license. Superficially, game franchises like *Diablo* and *Darksiders* would seem to reproduce Christian concepts of cosmic good and evil, primarily those of 'spiritual warfare', as well as a broader moral-spiritual dualism in which good angels and evil demons are at war. However, below this veneer, much of the substance of their narrative frameworks is drawn from an amalgamation of historical and religious sources. The cosmology of *Diablo* draws transparently on the Near Eastern combat myths thought to have inspired early Jewish apocalypticisms, portraying a dualistic struggle between Anu and Tathamet, two entities whose mutual destruction birthed the races of angels and demons from their respective corpses (see Cohn 2001; Peerbolte 1996; Forsyth 1989). In *Darksiders*, humanity has already been annihilated and the ultimate antagonists of the story are revealed to be several angels and the mediating council itself, who conspired to begin the apocalypse ahead of schedule in order to secure victory for heaven, sacrificing humanity in the process. A similar plotline is visited in *Diablo III*'s 2014 expansion, *Reaper of Souls*, in which the archangel Malthael actively endeavours to destroy humanity because he believes their capacity for free will makes them the greatest evil of all. In these titles, the true enemy is arguably not the demons, usually coded as a chaotic force of destruction, but rather the angels who embody an ordered destruction evil precisely because it envisions itself as necessary, and above all, righteous. While the games adopt/adapt characters and terminology from the occult and apocalyptic traditions of Western Christianities, their narratives tend away from specificities and code themselves in

generalised terms of cosmic war – a belief that "a mighty spiritual power intent on maintaining and furthering life in an ordered world is locked in struggle with a spiritual power, scarcely less mighty, intent on destroying life and reducing the ordered world to chaos" (Cohn 2001, p. 104). More than this, however, humanity often finds itself as little more than collateral damage in this cosmic war, with nobody to turn to but itself and, at times, a handful of rebels as likely to be demonic as they are angelic.

Several points may be drawn from this brief sketch of themes. One is possible disillusionment with religious and political authority, in which the forces meant to aid humanity are often the agents of its destruction, tied to a suspicion of claims to moral righteousness or the greater good as masking ulterior motives. Another, perhaps more subtle implication, however, is the symbolic shift of the demon (and, to an extent, the angel) away from being aspects of living religious traditions and into broad cultural cyphers that stand in for moral-philosophical binaries like good/evil, order/chaos, and light/darkness. This transformation, however, is not a recent shift but rather the latest iteration of a gradual marginalisation of allegedly 'irrational' elements from religious doctrines in response to the critiques of the Enlightenment. Demonology bore the brunt of these critiques. The renowned scholar of the demonic Jeffrey Burton Russell has documented that by the eighteenth-century, literal belief in Satan, Hell, and demons, had become common areas for anti-Christian writers to attack Christian orthodoxy; the Devil became a frequent topic for parody, and even those who believed in the literal truth of the scriptures invoked his existence less and less as a key article of faith (1990, pp. 127–68). Even in the latter seventeenth century those groups still holding to belief in the Devil often used him symbolically, such as the Muggletonians – who held that demons were manifest only in evil thoughts – and the Ranters – who held that the Devil was merely an embodiment of repressed desires (Schock 2003, pp. 12–14).

However, decline in the literal belief in the Devil and demons opened up space for their presence in literary rather than theological form. Such literary appropriations ranged regarding their adherence to the original material, both in letter and in spirit. Opposition to the structures of orthodox religion opened up a space for positive uses of demonic figures, notably Satan. Stemming partly from commentary on Milton's 1667 epic *Paradise Lost*, such usages frequently aligned the demonic with revolution, humanism, passion, and creativity, recasting Satan from (only) a treasonous angel to a hero of humanistic values and modern consciousness (Schock 2003, 2010; Wolfson 2013). This 'Romantic Satanism' exerted an influence on philosophers and writers to the present day, and can be found running from the Romantics via poets like Charles Baudelaire, Giosuè Carducci and Walt Whitman, philosophers and thinkers like Alasdair McIntyre and Mikhail Bakunin, to the works of recent popular novelists like Anne Rice and Philip Pullman. In recent videogames, this trend is exemplified in *Shin Megami Tensei IV*, which draws upon some of its earliest formulations in the works of individuals like William Blake.

Alongside this positive appropriation, however, was another trend that cast the Devil in a more traditionally adversarial and corruptive form. This also flourished in fictional quarters, sensationalised in gothic novels and the works of early horror and science-fiction writers such as H. P. Lovecraft – though many of these texts can also be read against themselves, with Satan adopting the mantle of liberator of marginalised groups like women and people of colour within a narrative of social collapse fuelled by the fears of the (white, male) writers (Faxneld 2010; 2014; Faxneld and Petersen 2013). Fear of demons – and those who served them – as agents of the collapse of 'traditional' society, however, stretched beyond fiction and into fringe religiosities and modern conspiracy theory (Barkun 2003). The late nineteenth-century hoax of the Palladist Order put the idea of a Satanist conspiracy to achieve world domination into public consciousness (Hartland 2004), and it became a recurring theme in religiously-inflected conspiracy literature throughout the twentieth century (Barkun 2003; Cook 2008; Filiu 2011; Fuller 1995; O'Leary 1994). This discourse figures demons as agents of subversion, attempting to disrupt cosmic order – a cosmic order that is always instantiated in the interests of a particular group or nation (Dittmer and Sturm 2010, pp. 1-23; Lahr 2007; Lincoln 2009, 2012, pp. 31-42; Runions 2014). It is within this legacy that *DmC: Devil May Cry* takes an uneasy and parodic place.

Yet it would be a mistake to view this second, more seemingly traditional, version of the demonic as either wholly traditional or wholly separate from the radical Romantic re-valuation. The two are intertwined. The Romantic utilisation of Satan as a symbol of humanist revolution relied on his traditional alignment with a material, fallen world and his role as a treasonous rebel, adapting that treason and materiality as part of a challenge to an established religious and political system viewed as corrupt and tyrannical. Similarly, alignment of the Devil with the ideologies of the humanist and liberationist themes of modernity allows individuals opposed to them to use their symbols to challenge a modern, secular order now construed as demonically inspired. What emerges from these dual narratives is a sense of the fluidity and polyvalence the sign of the demon has come to adopt in contemporary culture, such that even when seen as 'evil' it is able to encode a multiplicity of (sometimes conflicting) ideological concepts.

3   Progress, Chaos, and Human Nature in *Shin Megami Tensei IV*

Shin Megami Tensei IV (*SMT4*) is the latest instalment in the long-running *Megami Tensei* series, by Japanese game developer ATLUS, released in English in 2013 on the Nintendo 3DS. While the fourth numbered entry, *SMT4* is the latest in a franchise of thematically connected titles, including the *Digital Devil Saga* duology, the *Devil Summoner* series, the *Persona* series, the aforementioned

Catherine, and a number of other titles. It is a sequel to the 1992 *Shin Megami Tensei*, the 1994 *SMT2*, *SMT if ...* (also 1994), *SMT: Nocturne* (2005) and *SMT: Strange Journey* (2010), making it the sixth main entry. All titles in the franchise draw heavily on world mythologies, folk tales, and living religions. Within the games' cosmology, it would not be amiss to see Christian archangels positioned alongside figures drawn from Norse or Sumerian mythology, Hinduism or Buddhism, Native American traditions or Japanese folklore. However, even within this eclectic blend of mythical and folkloric entities, the figures of the Christian God and Devil play key ideological and ludonarrative roles. While God is often presented through angelic emissaries, the Devil often plays more direct roles in the ludonarrative. *SMT: Nocturne*, for example, was restyled *Lucifer's Call* in Europe in reference to the Devil's role in bequeathing unique powers to the protagonist, and one of the game's endings has him lead Lucifer's demonic armies against Heaven. Usually coded as a sexless, archetypal entity, Lucifer often appears initially disguised as a human and going by transparent pseudonyms such as "Louis Cyphre" (when male) or "Louisa Ferre" (when female). Regardless of guise, Lucifer is presented as a potential ally for the player-protagonist either explicitly or implicitly, or as a potential enemy if the player chooses a path antithetical to its desires. In the following section, it is these desires that I concentrate upon. They tie into a genealogy of Satan as humanistic liberator against an oppressive heavenly order, but problematise this in taking the ideological structure to its extreme.

The cosmology of the SMT franchise is complex, nuanced and difficult to summarise, however its key aspect focuses on the cyclical destruction and recreation of the world. The games often take place close to or even during these destructions, in a time where the world is in chaos and its next form is still undecided. In the games, this form is dictated according to the player's alignment with specific factions, each of which seeks to create a world according to its ideological paradigms. With the exception of *Nocturne*, which contains more complex ideological structures, the fate of the future world is decided according to three broad ideological paradigms, coded within the games as 'Law', 'Chaos', and 'Neutral'. Angelic beings such as God and his angels are aligned with Law, while more traditionally demonic beings like Lucifer and Beelzebub are aligned closely with Chaos. Between these poles lies Neutral, usually representing a recreation of the world as it was prior to the apocalypse and thus a return to normalcy. This return to the status quo is the ending most frequently presented as the true ending of each game, yet because it merely returns the world to its prior state it also represents a refusal to solve the issues that ultimately lead to the apocalyptic destruction and thus keep the cycles repeating in perpetuity.

The narrative of *SMT4* takes place in an interstice between rebirths. Set within a post-apocalyptic Japan, the game's world is divided into two kingdoms: Mikado in the east and Tokyo in the west, sealed within a dimensional barrier known as the Firmament which forms the cradle for the world's inevitable rebirth. Demons run rampant, preying on humans who survived the

cataclysm, and the protagonist Flynn is a member of Mikado's elite demon-hunters, known as the Samurai. Flynn is aided by three main allies, also Samurai: Isabeau, Jonathan, and Walter. While Isabeau is a voice of moderation as a representative of Neutral, Jonathan and Walter embody Law and Chaos and the conflict between them forms the crux of the narrative. This conflict is made clear early in the story: Jonathan is kind-hearted but naïve; a member of Mikado's ruling class, he believes that society as it is benefits all, a view that clashes with Walter. The son of a poor fisherman, Walter has been forced to fight his way up through Mikado's rigid societal structure and his opinion of it is far less favourable. This conflict escalates over the course of the game until they find themselves on opposing sides of a cosmic war, fighting for radically different visions of the world's future. Ultimately, they sacrifice both their humanity and their individuality in service to their beliefs. In order to explicate on the intricacies of this struggle, however, it is necessary to examine the narrative in more depth.

Jonathan and Walter's conflict comes to its head at the mid-point of the story. The Samurai are dispatched to Tokyo on a mission to eliminate the demon Lilith, who acts as the leader for a revolutionary group undermining both Mikado and Tokyo. However, Lilith reveals that issues are more complicated than they appear, and that the ruler of Tokyo, a man named Tayama, is the 'face of true evil'. Directed to a hidden facility, the Samurai discover that Tayama is keeping the people of Tokyo safe by processing human dissidents into a drug used to keep the demons sedated and preventing them attacking his other, loyaler subjects. Shaken, the Samurai are then recalled to Mikado and introduced to the true rulers of the Eastern Kingdom: the archangels Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, and Raphael, who created Mikado in the wake of the apocalypse in an effort to create the Millennial Kingdom. The angels reveal their revulsion with the people of Tokyo, seeing them as impure and unworthy of life, and restate the Samurai's mission to eliminate Lilith. Believing both Tokyo and Mikado to be ruled by selfish dictators who care little for humanity, Walter defects, declaring that he will ally with Lilith to bring the whole system down and stating that "It matters not that I am a Samurai. This is my stance as a human being."

The world Walter attempts to create is a form of social Darwinist meritocracy, one in which an individual's power and ability determines who rules, not the position they are born into or other structural forces. Horrified by a world in which the 'strong' dominate the 'weak', Jonathan vows to stop him, pledging to uphold order and try and return to the status quo before Lilith disrupted the fragile peace of the two kingdoms. Both surrender themselves to become avatars of higher powers. Walter gives up his body to Lucifer, who proceeds to wage war on the angel-ruled Mikado to bring about a world of 'freedom' where humanity is unchained by laws. To stop Lucifer, Jonathan merges with the four archangels, transforming into Merkabah, the Chariot of God. By doing so, Jonathan's wish for a peaceful and harmonious society becomes twisted into a desire for a world of total equality, in which all individualism is stripped away in the name of the greater good. Flynn, guided

by the player, is given the choice of assisting either Walter or Jonathan realise their respective visions, or indeed of opposing both.

While alignments of demons with chaos and angels with order are not novel, the specific ways in which *SMT4* codes these alignments bears analysis. The specific rhetoric—free will, individualism, equality, and social Darwinism—which the game's narrative employs is one entrenched in the paradigms of secular modernity. Moreover, its usage of Lucifer in the role of a rebel against tyrannical authority who champions libertarian autonomy and personal strength (even, and perhaps especially, to the point at which it brings harm to others) is part of the specific genealogy of Miltonic re-interpretation that I identified earlier as 'Romantic Satanism'. Specifically, the trend can be identified in a particular phrase which, while it never appears in *Paradise Lost*, is often used to encapsulate the character and motives of the Miltonic Satan: the Latin *non serviam*, or "I will not serve." The *non serviam* is often seen as a statement of both rebellion and autonomy. Georges Bataille called it "the motto of the devil" (in Surya 2002, pp. 420), while philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre notes that it "marks not merely a personal revolt against God, but a revolt against the concept of an ordained and unchangeable hierarchy" (2003, pp. 97). Following its sentiment, Mikhail Bakunin's categorised of Satan as "the eternal rebel, the first free-thinker and the emancipator of worlds" whose temptation of Eve he refigured from a sin into a political injunction (in Booker 1997, pp. 41). Within SMT4 this mentality is best encapsulated in a statement Lucifer makes before his fusion with Walter, in which it describes itself as one who "seized selfhood by opposing God".

Within the Romantic Satanist paradigm, the Devil shifted away from his place solely as the architect of evil and became what Ruben van Luijk has termed the "archetypal embodiment of rebellion" (2013, p. 45). Part of this included his alignment within subsets of the Romantic movement with particular philosophical, political, and psychological characteristics – "imaginative principles, critique, subjective anguish, exile, and alienation" (Wolfson 2013, p. 120; see also Schock 2010, p. 507). Scholars such as Susan Wolfson, Peter Schock and Neil Forsyth have connected these with ideas of modern consciousness and subjectivity (Forsyth 2003; Schock 2003; Wolfson 2013). Forsyth in particular links the subjectivity of the Miltonic Satan to his subjection under God, realising in the moment of his fall. He writes:

> He [Satan] is a 'subject' in our contemporary theoretical sense (the 'humanist subject'), and certainly his troubled 'I' is prominent in the poem. But he is a "subject" also in the more literal, root sense of the term (*sub iectus*, thrown under): he discovers at the moment of his rebellion just what it means to be subject to God. Subjection is the origin of his subjectivity. And he doesn't like it at all. The result is that he is thrown out and down and under, into Hell … [Later, he] explores himself, and finds he is exploring what it means to be in Hell … God and Heaven are what is high and unitary, while 'depth'

is that 'profoundest Hell,' and himself. The oppositional war with God continues in these new terms, and this depth is now not only his refuge, but also the site of the battle he now wages: he appeals to Eve's own inner image of herself, and when he succeeds, Adam and Eve join him in this newly invented, Hellish interiority (2003, pp. 150-51).

The components of this particular trend are exhibited distinctly in *SMT4*'s narrative. In addition to Lucifer's declaration of how he 'seized selfhood' through opposition, his dialogue frequently aligns his plans with notions of progress, freedom, human potentiality and desire. Moreover, Lilith in earlier sections closely aligns the demons with humanity, even intimating that they are one and the same—demons, she claims, are just the repressed desires of humanity, given form through the application of wisdom and knowledge, things denied to them by the forces of heaven in pursuit of a harmonious but sterile and repressive social order.

The association of the Devil, and demons generally, with this particular cluster of ideological traits – progress, individual freedom and desire, humanity and human potential – place *SMT4*'s representations of them firmly within the Romantic Satanist model. As noted previously, this genealogy encompasses a number of disparate poets, writers and philosophers. While beginning mainly with English Romantics like Blake, Byron, Shelley, Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and Wordsworth (Schock 2003, pp. 5-40), its ideas filter down through a number of artistic and literary works to the present. On mainland Europe, for example, Charles Baudelaire's *'Les Litanies de Satan'* positions Satan reposing near the tree of knowledge, whose bows spread out to form a new Temple (2008, pp. 269–70), while Giosuè Carducci's *'Inno A Satana'* envisions Satan as modernity itself, as the avenging force of reason and progress (1996, pp. 461), while in America Walt Whitman's 'Chanting the Square Deific' makes him the "brother of slaves" who stands with the "sudra", lowest of Hindu castes (Eiselein 1998, pp. 113).

While *SMT4* sits in this genealogy, it draws most clearly on early formulations of 'Romantic Satanism' such as those found in the works of William Blake. Blake's iconoclastic and contentious mysticism has evoked much analysis and been the source of much inspiration. His *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790–93) and the *Bible of Hell* are notable in their radical re-appraisal of Satan as a mythic personage and the role of hell, fitting it into a cosmology driven by forces of energy and desire. This is perhaps most visible in his prophetic poems, *America* (1793), *Europe* (1794) and *The Song of Los* (1795) in which Blake reconfigures the Devil in the figure of Orc, the "son of fire" who operates as "the mythological vehicle of desire and energy, embodying a moral and political rebelliousness" (Schock 2003, pp. 42). He opposes this infernal creativity with a celestial power that is sterile and controlling, aligned with the cold forces of reason embodied in the figure of Urizen. In the *Marriage*, Blake plays with the binary opposition good/evil and re-encodes it as one of passivity and activity, writing:

> Good is the passive that obeys reason. Evil is the active springing from energy.
>
> Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell.

He later concludes the *Marriage* with a declaration of Satanic liberation akin to global revolution:

> … the son of fire in his eastern cloud, while the morning plumes her golden breast,
>
> Spurning the clouds written with curses, stamps the stony law to dust, loosing the eternal horses from the dens of night, crying
>
> Empire is no more!

Blake's juxtaposition of a restrictive, ordered heaven set against a chaotic, energetic hell is one of the more enduring aspects of the Romantic Satanist paradigm, though it is one which Blake himself moved away from in his later writings, recasting Orc in a more traditionally adversarial and tyrannical role (Schock 2003, pp. 67-73). Nonetheless, the aligning of the Devil with human desire and human potentiality was a stark departure from negative correlations drawn on their shared experience of fallenness and radically recast the demons' common associations with sin and materiality into a celebration of vivacity and the natural world (Forsyth 1989, 2002; Maggi 2001, 2006; Russell 1986, 1987, 1990). The ideologies of emancipation offered fertile ground for this revaluation, allowing the Devil and his demons to adopt new, liberatory roles keyed to humanity's experience of and aspirations in modernity, roles that became exemplified more in fictional literature than religion (Faxneld 2014; Forsyth 2002). This ideological legacy is presented in full force in SMT4, which takes the Romantic Satanist conceptualisation of Satan as the archetype of rebellion as its primary representation, though it is at pains to indicate the horror that could come into being from following such an archetypal schema to its logical conclusion: a world order dictated by primal violence and narrow notions of strength, one which presumes that the natural (and so correct) state of humanity is a war of all against all: a championing of self-centred individualism stripped of compassion and any notion of community.

4   *DmC: Devil May Cry* between Human and Demonic Secularisms

While *SMT4* utilises the Romantic Satanist alignment of demons with passion and creativity against a celestial order of regulation and homogenisation, *DmC: Devil May Cry* (*DmC*) utilises the demonic in a fashion far closer to modern apocalypticists who use it to critique and condemn cultural-political institutions and persons antagonistic to their worldviews. The manner in which it does so, however, is profoundly secular, casting its demons not as enemies of a god or even really

an angelic host, but of a humanity whose freedom they curtail in the service of spiritual and ideological corruption. *DmC*'s usage of the demon therefore stands in clear opposition to *SMT4*'s, casting the demons in the role of the tyrant rather than the liberator. In order to examine the nuance and intricacy of its scenario, however, it is necessary to analyse both the game's narrative and the ideologies it simultaneously parodies and supports. Much of this hinges on modern interpretations of the Christian apocalyptic scenario and the figures of Babylon and the Antichrist, particularly those emanating from conservative America (McGinn 1994; Runions 2014).

Developed by the Cambridge, UK-based studio Ninja Theory*, DmC* serves as the fifth entry in the *Devil May Cry* franchise, originally created by the Japanese developer Capcom. It is, however, a reboot of the franchise, intended to re-envision it for a Western market. This point is important because it both severs any significant connection to the earlier entries in the series, as well as establishing the themes which Ninja Theory believed would speak to a Western audience. Earlier entries in the series were more overtly fantastical, taking place on mysterious islands and nameless gothic cities. Their themes were ones of familial revenge and ancient evil, but their contexts made any direct correlation to the real world tenuous. By contrast, *DmC* draw explicit parallels to contemporary society. In a loosely veiled parable of modern social ills, *DmC* presents the player with Limbo City, a metropolitan hub from which demonic entities secretly control the world through the media, banking, fast food, and even networks of social work and foster care. The game's story follows Dante, a half-demon, half-angel 'nephilim', who lives a life of meaningless hedonism from his dilapidated trailer by the waterfront. Able to see the demons by virtue of his unique heritage, Dante is thought unstable by the human populace; moreover, his constant battles for survival against the invisible demons is coded by the media as the actions of a violent thug and vandal. As the narrative progresses, Dante is drawn into a war between the demon-controlled state and an underground 'hacktivist' collective called The Order, run by Dante's estranged twin, Vergil. The Order evoke clear parallels with WikiLeaks (through their leaking of information to expose the demon-led reality of the social order) as well as the real-world hacktivist collective Anonymous in their methods and styling, including white masks reminiscent of the *V for Vendetta* masks used by members of Anonymous.

Opposing The Order is the demonic state apparatus and its rulers. Foremost of these is the game's central antagonist, Mundus. A powerful demon, to the citizens of Limbo City Mundus is known simply as Kyle Ryder, a wealthy investment banker. At the start of the story, Mundus/Ryder is portrayed closing a call with the 'President', having essentially brought what is inferred to be America under his control, and his office's walls are coated in photographs of him shaking hands with global religious and political leaders. These present a clear visual message to the player that Mundus is in control, and are geared (alongside the cultural coding of The Order) to encourage the player to see the game as taking place in (a form of) our own world and to connect Mundus'

demonic empire with contemporary debates of corporate control. Mundus is not alone, however. Alongside this central antagonist are the demons Lilith and Bob Barbas: the former runs a series of popular clubs in which the citizens drown themselves in hedonism and substance abuse, while Barbas is the anchorman for the demon-run Raptor News Network, the primary news network of the city and the main outlet of the propaganda against the efforts of Dante and Vergil. Alongside these are minor demons, including a succubus whose bodily fluids form the hallucinogenic core of the popular energy drink, Virility. In its foundational plot elements *DmC* draws heavily not only on contemporary social issues (corporate oversight, fast food, media bias, hacktivism, and terrorism), but on apocalyptic scenarios used by the Christian Right in the contemporary United States, notably those dealing with the end-times rule of Antichrist and the sign of Babylon as metonym for a demonically-controlled (and therefore illegitimate) society. The confluence of these two trends is important in considering how *DmC* adopts and subverts them both.

While apocalypticism has been part of Christianity since its early phases, the form that apocalyptic religiosity takes in contemporary America – that most presented in *DmC* – is influenced by a number of recent geopolitical turns, such as the Cold War and globalisation. As such, it is necessary to examine these in order to sketch a clearer picture of what *DmC* is attempting to represent. The bipolarity of Cold War politics is particularly formative here, since the political rhetoric employed within it lent itself readily towards appropriation by apocalyptic forms of Christianity. As the theologian Reinhold Neibuhr wrote in 1960, "we [America] are embattled with a foe who embodies all the evils of a demonic religion" (2005, pp. 21), encapsulating many of the sentiments that followed, from Ronald Reagan's binarisation of a 'free world' against an 'evil empire', to the distinctly secular visions of apocalypse arising from nuclear proliferation (Lahr 2007; Stein 2000; Weigert 1988; Wójcik 1996. Angela Lahr has noted that the construction of an American identity during the Cold War fused (usually Protestant) Christianities with eschatology and nationalistic anti-communism in a chimerical ideology that allowed "evangelicals [to adapt] millenarian thought to a Cold War world", enabling the subculture to utilise "prophetic politics to renegotiate their national identity" (2007, p. 4). Evangelicals like Jerry Falwell, Billy Graham, and Pat Robertson capitalised on the instability of the Cold War by presenting current events as foretold by scripture, overlaying a veneer of order and sensibility onto a culture wracked by anxiety: atomic bombs were God's pre-ordained method of destruction, Russia was the Gog of Revelation that would invade Israel in the end-times, and the Antichrist would rise as head of the newly-formed United Nations (Boyer 1992). The Soviet Union was identified as fulfilling a religiously demonic role in history, and a paradigm emerged wherein a nationalism composed of equal-parts capitalism and religion (here coded primarily as Christianity) was counter and remedy to 'godless' communism. As Lahr notes, the discourse "provided a 'villainous' foe and a 'righteous' cause" (2007, p. 199).

Cold War rhetoric exerted a strong influence on later apocalyptic paradigms, not only in the construction of a people of god against an atheistic other but also in constructing a broader discourse that juxtaposed individualism with enforced equality. Conservative philosopher Paul Rahe has argued that since the Cold War the United States has abandoned the principles of self-governance in favour of a homogenisation that reduces all people to an infantilised state concerned solely with personal pleasure. He proceeds to quote Alexis de Tocqueville, writing: "I see an innumerable crowd of like and equal men who turn about without repose in order to procure for themselves petty and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls" (Rahe 2009, p. 187). This idea of the strong individual against a homogenising force of 'equality' feeds into political and religious discourses, echoing not only Cold War impressions of Soviet Communism but also Christian apocalyptic notions of Antichrist, whose coming kingdom became closely associated with international bodies such as the United Nations, European Union, and with broader discourses of globalisation, forms of a 'one world government' that will ultimately abolish nations and thus US hegemony (Boyer 1992, pp. 283-4, 328–30; Fuller 1995, pp. 71-3, 136-60). In fiction, this trend is perhaps best represented by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins' bestselling *Left Behind* series, in which the Antichrist becomes the Secretary-General of the United Nations. However, it is also present in other fictional works dealing with a particular Christian vision of the end-times, such as James BeauSeigneur's *Christ Clone* trilogy. Outside of the fictional arena, evangelical leader Lou Engle reportedly referred to pro-abortion and pro-gay marriage legislation in California as "antichristic legislation" (Posner 2008), with the written call for the day of prayer adjuring "*This is not a time to be hiding in caves. This is a time to resist mightily the spirit of peaceful coexistence and apathetic resignation in the face of this prevailing darkness*" (in Runions 2014, p. 202; emphasis in original. See also Corbett 1997; Froese 1997; Kjos 1997). The Mormon television and radio personality Glenn Beck frequently draws on the same rhetorical paradigm, part of which has been charted by Erin Runions. Drawing on the image of the tower of Babel, she summarises Beck's critique of modern America as follows:

> Beck tells his viewers that they are being offered a choice under impending duress, between the 'yes we can' communist model (as Babelian bricks) and the 'yes I can' individualist model. People must retain their individuality, agency, and belief in God. Beck declares, 'I can reach out to my community… and I can help. And together a collection of strong eyes [sic] will make the strongest "we" the world has ever seen.' For Beck… God-ordained social distinction (over and against equality) is the key to unity (2014, p. 66).

The homophony here between eyes and 'I-s' here is clearly deliberate, linking sight to individuality. This is a connection that feeds into the narrative that *DmC* attempts to construct, through which humanity's awakening to its own enslavement is a clear vision that returns their individuality,

releasing them from the innumerable crowd of "like and equal men" filled only with "petty and vulgar pleasures". The demonic state apparatuses reduce humanity to docile bodies, conditioned to obey and care only for personal pleasure while ignoring the world around them. In these ways, the narrative of *DmC* reflects the conservative critique of 'equality' that they saw first in Soviet Communism and then later in movements of globalisation. It's 'antichristic' system encodes the qualities of an early Reaganist vision Communism as affiliated with "totalitarianism, repression, orthodoxy, tyranny, controlling political forces, the subordination of the rights of individuals to the collective, and it stifles human freedom and muzzles self-expression" (Martin 2014, p. 4).

Yet *DmC* is a product of the twenty-first, not the twentieth-century, and this is noticeable in the way it portrays its world, as well as the ideological solutions it presents for that world's problems. While it takes the model of demonic society from that which evolved in the Cold War – where individualism is crushed in the service to a totalitarianism system – its presentation in *DmC* is unmistakably one designed to tie closely to social issues deeply enmeshed in a worldview of neoliberal capitalism: Mundus is a powerful corporate banker with the world's leaders in his financial pocket, the citizens have retreated into a hedonistic lifestyle of junk food and thrill seeking which dulls their minds to reality, all the while they are watched by CCTV cameras and taught by the media to fear and despise those fighting to liberate them. In a more direct comparison to the real world, the demonic Raptor News Network is an ill-disguised parody of the conservative American Fox News Network, using an almost identical colour scheme, while its anchorman Bob Barbas is an amalgamation of figures like Bill O'Reilly and the aforementioned Glenn Beck. On the human side of the conflict, The Order is a more vigilante version of WikiLeaks or Anonymous. Its leader Vergil – the charismatic, white-haired face of a faceless organisation – evokes comparisons to WikiLeaks' founder, Julian Assange. The game's message is also reinforced several specific scenes. During his battle with Barbas, for example, Dante will be drawn into a parallel world reminiscent of black-and-white CCTV footage and forced to fight against lesser demons while Barbas offers a running commentary, recasting Dante's struggle as the actions of a dangerous lunatic and terrorist. Another moment occurs while infiltrating the facility which produces the energy drink Virility: the advertisements alter to read "Stupidity" or "Obesity". The least subtle, however, occurs in Mundus' towering corporate headquarters: Dante reaches a room filled with the shadowy souls of the bankers who work in the complex, and Vergil remarks that such people are barely human. In using such simple comparisons and imagery, *DmC* is perhaps too readable, its message too readily discernable. *DmC*'s Limbo City is Babylon, the ancient city frequently coded as the hub of the antichristic world order (Runions 2014). Yet the game's solution to its Babelian totalitarianism is enmeshed in the same neoliberal ideologies system it tries to defy.

Where *DmC* differs radically from the conservative religious critiques of the social order is not in its depiction of the corrupt, demonic society but in its solution to that society, one far more

entrenched in the sphere of secular politics than in religion. In much apocalypticism found in contemporary America the fate of the United States has become inextricably intertwined with the fate of all; in Runions' words "political threats to the nation become spiritual threats to the destiny of humanity" and thus the good of the nation becomes recoded as the good of humanity at large (2014, p. 189). *DmC* contains a similar structure, but only goes halfway in its commitment to this because it severs religious aspects from one side of the conflict. As noted before, both Dante and Vergil are hybrids – half-angel, half-demon – yet beyond their maternal heritage angels are absent from the narrative, playing only a historical role. A god, Christian or otherwise, is never even mentioned. Vergil informs Dante that the angels and demons have always been at war, but this war is never depicted, and if anything the narrative seems to suggest that the angels have abandoned humanity entirely to their demonic subjugators. By relegating divine powers to a largely forgotten history, the conflict of the story becomes framed solely through humanity's struggle against its demonic oppressors. Dante and Vergil's otherworldly heritage plays only a tangential role, serving as the ludonarrative reasoning for their superhuman abilities, while the story aligns both strongly with humanity and its plight. This heritage emerges partly in the game's conclusion: after defeating Mundus, Vergil proposes that Dante and they should become the leaders of the new world, leading humanity on a new path. Dante rejects this, arguing that humanity should be free to rule itself. The ultimate message of the game becomes one in which humanist anarcho-individualism is placed in opposition to an authoritarian demonic, reinforced by the final conflict over who should lead humanity: a divine/demonic entity, albeit one deeply entrenched in the human world, or humanity itself, unchained from all supernatural and structural authority. Dante's victory over his brother frees humanity from the bonds of its unknowing servitude, and the game closes over a sequence of text messages and posts on social media the catalogue humanity awakening to reality as it is: able to see the demons who enslaved them, humanity begins to reclaim their lost personhood. *DmC*'s appropriation/subversion of far-right Christian apocalyptic narratives creates an intriguing lens onto the de-sacralisation of the demon in the modern Western world. While maintaining many of its symbolic values – evil, tyranny, pride, corruption, excess – the demon becomes figured as opponent to an ostensibly godless humanity, and the theme of rebellion against a demonic society that has lost its way becomes the staging ground not of a return to prelapsarian paradise but the charting of a distinctly humanist world. The demon in *DmC* can thereby be construed to represent not (only) the theological 'demon', but rather a cipher for authoritarian structures *in toto*, against which Dante occupies the site of the Romantic Lucifer in declaring to his oppressors '*non serviam*'.

5   The Face(s) of the Demon

SMT4 and *DmC* represent two distinct but intertwined faces of the demon in modern society, both of which draw on the ideological legacy of the Enlightenment. While *SMT4* draws on a literary tradition stretching from the Romantic Satanist commentary on *Paradise Lost* through to novelists like Anne Rice and Philip Pullman and presents the Devil as a champion of human nature against celestial suppression, *DmC* draws inspiration from the apocalyptic conspiracist Christianities of contemporary America, an apocalyptic framework that draws first from Cold War bipolarity and then post-Cold War unipolarity, orienting itself around conspiracies of antichristic one-world government and societal malaise around the apparent triumph of neoliberal capitalism. In these scenarios we see the demon as represented on opposite sides of an order/chaos binary opposition. In the former, the demon symbolises a force of chaos (or, properly, Chaos)—they are the unfettered force of the human psyche, stripped of all restraint and thrust into a war of all against all in which only individual supremacy assures survival. In the latter, the demon is a controlling force of order— a tyrannical system of both overt and subtle violence that suppresses humanity's potential and its spirit. In one the demons act to disrupt a status quo, while in the other they are the very status quo that must be disrupted. Both, however, are constructed as necessary for humanity. While the trajectories exhibited in *DmC* and *SMT4* may initially seem at odds, both arise from an alignment of the demon with humanity, specifically with an idea of humanity in a state that the narratives construct as natural, liberated from the artificial constraints of government or culture. The demons of both games—to appropriate Armando Maggi's words—represent that "paradoxical 'other,' at once radically different from us and so close and similar to us", the enemy (or, indeed, the ally) that "finds in our minds its primary and most abhorred interlocutor" (2001, p. 3).

The complexities of this order/chaos binary also encode one of the main ways the polyvalence of the sign of the demon has come to be constructed in modernity, one tied closely to the patterns of secularisation and the de-sacralisation of the public sphere. This shift is represented in the primary sources drawn on by the two games in the construction of their narratives. *SMT4* draws on the intellectual genealogy of Romantic Satanism, a counter-cultural movement in which the Miltonic Satan became reconfigured as an embodiment of modern human consciousness and humanist values against an existing religio-political orthodoxy. By contrast, *DmC* draws inspiration from the contemporary West in which religion has become mostly privatised and state institutions are distinctly secular. It is important, however, to note that these are two halves of the selfsame genealogy of the demon's symbolic relationship to humanity. While the Romantic Satanist appropriation of Milton's Satan opposed itself to societal orthodoxy, the success of the process of secularisation within the West transformed the Satanic rebel into another form of status quo, one which found itself easily coded into pre-existing apocalyptic frameworks. While *DmC* attempts to

mock parts of its apocalyptic/conspiracist influences through its overt parodies of conservative outlets like Fox News and individuals like Glenn Beck and Bill O'Reilly, as well as its subtler championing of movements like WikiLeaks and Anonymous, it cannot help but adopt the conventions and critiques of that apocalyptic-conspiracist discourse. Its demonic world is unmistakably a secular one, and its dilemmas are carefully styled to reflect a narrative of our own: apathy and hedonism, surveillance and corporate greed. While it opposes demons to humanity, the demonic world it presents is all too human.

It is the multiplicity of this human aspect that marks the faces of the demon in secular modernity. Shorn of much of their religious specificity, the sign of the demon has become one capable of symbolising a plurality of human ideologies and emotions. This transition, which can be charted in a variety of artistic media, is also present in a number of videogames. Even in those games where demons are present merely as shallow archetypal foes to cement the righteousness of the player-protagonist, these demons are not the demons of Christian demonologies. Rather, they are constructs that draw on a variety of religious and secular sources. *Diablo III* drew on Babylonian mythology as one aspect of piecemeal appropriation of demonological traits, while *Darksiders* and its sequel draw only the loosest inspiration from the Biblical sources. In our specific case studies, *SMT4* drew on a specific Romantic literary model of the Devil, while *DmC* drew on secular conspiracy discourses and contemporary narratives of societal ills. In these works, while demons retain a certain symbolic value as 'evil', they are able to simultaneously encode a variety of sometimes conflicting ideological and psychological concepts: freedom and control, rebellion and oppression, the depths of human potential and desire and the horror that can result from it. This makes the demon a potent and enduring cultural symbol, one whose demise within mainstream Christianities may have given them more power and freedom than any war in Heaven ever could.

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