RPG学研究 Japanese Journal of Analog Role-Playing Game Studies

ORIGINAL RESEARCH | 研究論文

Undead Religion: Evolution of Representation of Religion in the *Vampire: The Masquerade* Core Books and Players' Guides (1991-2003)

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Abstract

This article analyzes the evolution of the representation of religion across the first three editions of *Vampire: the Masquerade* TRPG, focusing on discourse analysis of three core rulebooks, as well as three *Player's Guides* of the corresponding editions. By taking such a narrow approach, the paper is able to elucidate small yet telling changes in representation of religion across different versions of the game and situate those changes in the context of broader culture, specifically the discussion of secularization and de-secularization of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Despite the mostly similar contents of the storyworld across different editions, changes in tone and approaches to presenting information lead to a complete reimagining of the way the game addresses the sphere of religion. Starting with the almost entirely secular paradigm of the original corebook, it changed toward offering numerous affordances for simulating religious believers and religiously meaningful interactions in the third, or Revised, version of the rules.
Keywords: Religion, representation, *Vampire: the Masquerade*, monstrosity, transgression, secularization.

要約

本稿は，テーブルトーク・ロールプレイング・ゲーム（TRPG）『Vampire: the Masquerade』の初版から第 3 版までを対象に，各版の基本ルールブック 3 冊および対応する『Player's Guide』3 冊の言説分析を通じて，宗教表象の変遷を検討する．分析対象をこのように限定することにより，版ごとの宗教表象に見られる微細ながらも示唆に富む変化を明らかにし，それらをより広範な文化的文脈，とりわけ 20 世紀末から 21 世紀初頭にかけての世俗化および脱世俗化をめぐる議論の中に位置づける．各版の物語世界の内容はおおむね共通しているものの，語り口や情報提示の方法の変化によって，ゲームにおける宗教領域の扱い方は根本的に再構成されている．初版の基本ルールブックにおけるほぼ全面的に世俗的なパラダイムから，第 3 版，すなわち改訂版（Revised）では，宗教的信仰を持つ者や宗教的に意味のある相互行為をシミュレートするための多様なアフォーダンスを提供する方向へと変化したのである．
キーワード：宗教，表象，『Vampire: the Masquerade』，怪物性，侵犯，世俗化．

1. Introduction

This article explores the history of representation of religion in the first three editions of *Vampire: the Masquerade* (VtM) tabletop RPG (TRPG), created by White Wolf (Rein·Hagen 1991; Rein·Hagen 1992; Hatch et al. 1998). These span from the game's inception in 1991 to its temporary cancellation in 2004. I exclude the two later editions, as well as spin-offs like *Vampire: The Dark Age* (1996), so the data encompass the

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Received: 14 March 2026
Accepted: 18 September 2026
Published: 27 November 2026

Reviewing editor: Björn-Ole Kamm, Kyoto University

Citation: Moyzhes, Leonid. 2026. Undead Religion: Evolution of Representation of Religion in the *Vampire: The Masquerade* Core Books and Players' Guides (1991-2003). *Japanese Journal of Analog Role-Playing Game Studies*, 7. (This is a pre-release).

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unbroken period in the history of this game that included the peak of its success. Such a choice allows one to analyze the evolution of the game step by step, assuming that later editions expanded upon the foundations established earlier.

As a game filled with imagery borrowed from historical religions while being fundamentally secular in a sense of developing outside of religious institutions or explicit religion-related goals, VtM is a vivid example of a phenomenon that Stig Hjarvard called "banal religion." He defined it as "a bricolage of decontextualized elements from a variety of sources, including institutionalized religious texts, iconography and liturgy, brought into new contexts and serving purposes other than those of religious institutions." (2020, 36). A typical example of banal religion is the frequent inclusion of imagery and narratives inspired by religious texts and practices in the entertainment media, like books, films, comics, music clips, digital games – or TRPGs.

According to Hjarvard, throughout the 20th century, media became independent from other social institutions, especially after the liberalization of laws and economic practices in the 1980s (2020, 25). In order to adapt to this situation, other institutions had to reshape themselves. While this process affected politics the most, it also impacted religious organizations, and, as such, it functions as a facet of the broader process of secularisation, in this case understood as the retreat of religious institutions from public spaces to private life (Taylor 2007, 2).

Part of this change in the relationship between religion and media is the transformation of religions, both historical and contemporary, into *repositories* (Hoover 2002) of decontextualized material – narratives, images, and new stories – consumed by the public, with media controlling its flow. While this transformation keeps religion in public consciousness, it is fundamentally driven by the logic of the media, not religious organizations themselves. As such, it may lead to new understandings of both religion as a sphere and specific traditions. TRPGs, a form of entertainment that often allows players to interact with religion by playing as religious believers, meeting religion-related characters and monsters, or participating in plots built around religious organizations, deserve special attention.

Hjarvard's work has been criticized for over-emphasizing the power of media to shape religious messages and behavior (e.g., Lövheim 2011). His critics pointed out that while control over the presentation of religion in the media has escaped religious institutions, it does not necessarily mean a decrease in the importance of religious beliefs. Elements of religion that reach the public could still function as part of individual spiritual life. They may also reflect individual views of content creators, raising the question of exactly where the boundaries of "religious institutions" are. *Dungeons and Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974) presents an interesting case of the latter. The game itself was created in a seemingly secular context and even raised a moral panic and accusations of promoting Satanism (Appelcline 2013, 79). However, both of its original creators (Peterson 2012, 239), as well as a number of their colleagues, were staunch believers, with the game reflecting their worldviews (e.g., 2012, 267).

Such examples call for an analysis of religion in TRPGs, in order to understand how this medium uses its unique traits to present this sphere of culture. In this article, I show that initially VtM presents a clear case of banal religion, including its secularizing undertones. But throughout the following 10-year run, it shifted to providing players with the possibility of assuming identities of different types of religious believers and to gain corresponding experience.

2. Choice of Game

I choose VtM as my main case for three interconnected reasons. First of all, the game itself is extremely popular. In his book, Shannon Appelcline reiterates the rumor that at some point during the '90s, White Wolf outsold TSR, meaning that VtM approached the status of the most successful RPG of its time (Appelcline 2014, 387), thereby influencing the industry's design conventions. The popularization of metaplots, the proliferation of splatbooks detailing factions of the game world, attention to socially driven conflict, the popularization of urban fantasy as a setting, and a shift toward more mature themes – none of these ideas started with VtM, but the game turned them into trends. Even today, the TRPG industry is affected by the legacy of this 1990s project.

In the context of my research, this first reason is supplemented by another: the amount of religious imagery in VtM. While religious references have been part of TRPGs since the emergence of the industry, VtM still stands out. From the very beginning, the core part of its setting referenced the Abrahamic religions, with Caine presented as the first vampire, and the faction within the Catholic Church – as one of the archetypal antagonists. And I aim to demonstrate that the presence of religion in VtM only grew in scope and variety.

This brings us to the third reason, combining the previous two: despite both the popularity of VtM and its use of religious imagery, academic research on religion in VtM is scarce. In fact, the game remains an understudied topic in general. Usually, articles featuring VtM either do so in the context of LARPs (e.g., Stenros and Sihvonen 2019) or digital games based on the franchise (e.g., MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2007), in a discussion of the franchise itself (Ciancia 2019), or simply use it as one example of the way TRPGs handle issues like disability (Henry 2015) or queerness (Stenros and Sihvonen 2019). Still, there is some research focusing on VtM specifically, for example, addressing its construction of politics (Fielder 2020) or analyzing the game as a potential safe space for players experimenting with their own sexuality (Spencer 2023).

The last research corresponds with Cooper's work on RPGs as a space for identity experimentation (2016). Indeed, there has been research on digital and analog role-playing games as a way of engaging with religion, either by playfully participating in theological debates (Aupers, Schaap, and de Wildt 2017) or by gaining experience acting out religious rituals (Sarah L. Bowman 2023; Cohen 2023). Researchers consistently found out that games can affect players' understanding of this sphere, for example, increasing their cultural literacy or understanding of different beliefs. And this calls for more studies into how religion is constructed by popular games like VtM.

3. Short Overview of VtM

Created by Mark Rein-Hagen in 1991, VtM is an urban fantasy game allowing players to assume the role of vampires hiding in what could be best described as a grimmer version of our modern world, the so-called World of Darkness. Similar to older projects like *Cyberpunk 2020* (Pondsmith 1990), the game is filled with references to its chosen segment of popular culture – vampire fiction and films. At the moment of its release, it was characterized by a bigger focus on politics and social conflicts in comparison to many games of the era, as well as an attempt to touch upon the more mature themes of trauma, evil, and individual redemption.

The game depicts vampires as torn between destructive impulses called the Beast, and remnants of their human conscience, simply called Humanity. The game creates an internal conflict by highlighting the importance of maintaining Humanity while also introducing narrative and mechanical elements that compel characters to commit inhumane acts.

Potentially, it allows players to focus stories entirely on this topic, for example, through the notion of Golconda – a supposed state of vampiric salvation. However, usually this internal struggle is supplemented, mirrored, and even overshadowed by external conflicts, like those between younger and older generations, particular clans with their own cultures and powers, and vampires and vampire hunters. The most iconic of those is the struggle between two factions: the more "default" Camarilla, which prefers to hide among the humans and maintain Humanity, and the Sabbat, which seeks domination over humans.

As a heavily supported game, it accumulated more than a hundred supplements during its original run from 1991 to 2004, distributed across three editions. Those greatly expanded the game, introducing new clans, powers, and additional information about the Beast, Golconda, etc. Still, despite numerous changes across editions, it retained its basic traits, like a complex metaplot spread across numerous books, an importance of social challenges, and rules for simulating internal conflict.

4. Methodology

Since research on religion in TRPGs is relatively scarce, we must use methods drawn from the study of digital games. My methodology builds upon Kathrin Trattner's (2017) adaptation of critical discourse analysis to the study of religion in videogames, who, in turn, draws on Jäger's (2001) account of CDA. Trattner's offers a comprehensive, step-by-step, question-driven method for analyzing games as interactive texts, including procedural statements, and for conceptualizing this analysis against broader culture. In my research, I address the question of how a selected set of rulebooks, understood as a material basis for games of *Vampire: the Masquerade*, represent religion.

Still, unique traits of this medium, like its freeform nature and dependence on social agreement and recognition of each other's behavior, necessitate additional modifications, once again inspired by studies of digital games. Specifically, I would like to borrow Gordon Calleja's work on narrative involvement. He approached interaction between the player and the game's narrative by highlighting the duality of *scripted narrative*, embedded in the game by its developers and *alterbiography*, created by the player in the process of playing the game (2011, 113–135).

Alterbiography exists at the intersection of narrative elements introduced in the game, the rule-based behavior of in-game entities, and players' own interpretation of those, influenced by connections between the game and the player's cultural context. While games provide players with flexibility in terms of creating alterbiographies of their characters, participants are still bound by what is provided by the game, making it possible to analyze what kind of alterbiographies are more likely to appear, and how those alterbiographies present phenomena included in them. The same logic can be applied to TRPGs, for example by studying how D&D's presentation of violence in the rulebook incentivizes players to seek violent solutions to problems (Albom 2021), despite the theoretical possibility of creating alterbiographies completely devoid of violence.

Understanding TRPGs as supporting some narratives at the expense of others allows me to introduce the concept of *affordances*. Initially developed as part of the ecological psychology of James Gibson (1986), affordances were used in game studies by numerous authors (e.g., Linderoth 2011; Shaw 2017), denoting the possibility of performing actions, with games affording realization of different actions to different degrees. Those actions may include objective ones, like increasing or decreasing the numerical parameters of your character, as well as subjective ones, like interpreting a scene in a certain way. For example, by including a metatextual reference that connects an in-game faction, like the vampire clan Toreador, with well-known pop-cultural imagery, like that of the artistic, tortured vampire, the game offers an affordance for interpreting the Toreadors in a certain way – and withholds affordances for interpreting them differently.

Affordances depend on both the environment as the one containing them, as well as on the subject's training and familiarity with the said environment. In this case, the "environment" is established by both the rules of the game itself and what Daniella Kirby called the fantastic milieu (2013), a set of images, narratives, and references permeating modern culture. A more experienced, media-literate, or imaginative player can offer more interpretation than a novice player, while a player lacking any information about the fantastic milieu may misread or overlook parts of the game.

For the sake of analysis, I categorize affordances into three types: *algorithmic*, *narrative*, and *interpretative*.

Algorithmic affordances denote possibilities for utilizing them to attempt discrete actions governed by the game's mechanics. The combat system, with its strict separation of individual rounds, predetermined and algorithmised difficulties, and the economics of actions, blood and health, represents a set of interconnected algorithmic affordances. Another such set is character creation, a process consisting of assigning numerical ratings and strictly defined tags. The process of play itself is constantly supplemented by the utilization of affordances of this type, regulating the use of dice to determine success and failure, or affording interaction with the game resources. Still, outside of combat, it may be hard to untangle algorithmic affordances from the two other types.

Narrative affordances describe possibilities for taking actions objectively affecting the state of the game world, but without clear algorithms governing them. From an outsider perspective, those affordances constitute most of the game, as participants utilize them each time they describe what their character says, does, or thinks. As such, they are closely tied to the so-called shared imagined space (Sarah Lynne Bowman 2018, 390) – a speculative construct describing the entirety of the alterbiographies of player characters and the game world as established by the Storyteller, which are acknowledged by all participants in the game.

Narrative affordances offer more freedom than algorithmic ones – but they are still provided by the rulebooks. The description of the world – both factual and aesthetic – affords the introduction of certain characters, actions, and locations while limiting the introduction of others. Illustrations encode the visual style of the world and the fashion of characters. In-game fictional texts act as examples of aesthetically and ethically appropriate behavior, "permitting" player characters to replicate the same style of speech, thought, and action. We are mostly tracing the evolution of this type of affordance in connection with religion, supplementing it with much less widespread algorithmic affordances, mostly used to support narrative ones, for example, by providing a vampiric clan with powers that enforce their narrative image. However, there is still the third type – interpretative affordances.

Unlike the previous types, these are fundamentally subjective. Their utilization occurs when players perceive the information obtained from other participants and make sense of it before acting upon their interpretations through narrative and algorithmic affordances – and offering the material for a new cycle of interpretations. To give a short example, algorithmic affordances allow players to make their character's appearance at 4 out of 5. Narrative affordances allow players to describe said character as, for example, a beautiful male with long black hair and gray eyes. Interpretative affordances are utilized by other participants as they imagine that character or otherwise make sense of both the description and game mechanics.

Obviously, interpretative affordances are the least transparent of the three types – yet, they are also grounded in rulebooks, through the notion of *resonance*. Thomas Apperley introduced this term to describe the feeling that some element of the game is connected with something outside of the game (Apperley 2010, 2). Continuing the previous example, we can state that resonance connects VtM to horror and noir genres – and those connections frame the player's interpretations by offering more affordances for imagining characters described as beautiful in one way at the expense of others.

In practice, interpretative affordances are inherently connected to both narrative and algorithmic ones, as decisions to invoke certain algorithms or to describe actions in a particular way depend on the player's interpretation of the already established shared imaginary space. In fact, during the playthrough, it is hard to distinguish between perception and utilization of specific affordances, yet for analytical purposes their division is fruitful.

5. Engagement with Religion and the Simulation of (Anti) Religiosity

The first image that springs to mind in a discussion of religion in TRPGs is the player's character participating in a religious activity: attending Mass or Friday prayer, debating the role of the undead in God's plan, or investigating the influence of vampires on ancient religions. We call those *simulations of religious interactions*, following Frasca's claim that "to simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains to somebody some of the behaviors of the original system" (Frasca 2004). Parts of the game session may act in ways that resemble religious practices, studies of religion, or even anti-religious propaganda, which, in that case, still involve interaction with religion.

Of course, the affordances that enable the introduction of such simulations are part of my analysis. However, it also includes affordances for engagement with religion provided to players directly, without the simulation of religious interaction on part of their characters, though, obviously, still in connection with their alterbiographies. For example, the Storyteller may decide to situate an important fight in a church, feeling that it provides an appropriate aesthetic backdrop to the scene because of its symbolism,

striking visuals, or the aura of tranquility associated with a religious building, which contrasts with the violence of a fight.

Players could avoid simulating religious interaction, while still utilizing interpretative affordances to recognize the building, its significance, and its connection to their culture. Such recognition would make the entire scene an implicit statement about religion, for example, by reinforcing the contrast between the religious as eternal and sublime and the secular as temporary and mundane, or by referencing the imagery of religious conflicts.

Of course, such statements need not be made consciously. They simply express procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007) embedded in the game, or discourses and myth (Barthes 2006) of religion referenced by the aesthetic and narrative elements of the game. Still, their unconscious or semiconscious nature is what makes research on the game itself so important, as it provides affordances that influence the direction of players' autobiographies and the claims about religions that emerge in the process.

6. Choice of Rulebooks

As I have said before, the original run of VtM included more than a hundred books – an exact count depends on the criteria used to distinguish one separate book from another. Among those, there are at least six rulebooks focused on the subject of religion. *Book of Nod* (Chupp and Greenberg 1993) and *Revelation of Dark Mother* (Brucato and Udell 1998) present themselves as holy texts existing as part of VtM's fictional universe. *Sins of the Blood* (McCoy et al. 2001) and *State of Grace* (Dansky et al. 2002) deal with religious organizations, while *Chaining the Beast* (Kiley, Chase, and Bennett 2003) addresses numerous philosophical and mystical teachings of vampires. Finally, *The Inquisition* (Estes 1995) sourcebook discusses the religious vampire hunters.

More importantly, for the reasons I will discuss later in this article, the presence of religion-related topics steadily grew across almost all the material related to the game. Books describing specific clans, especially Lasombra, Assamites and Follower of Seth, splatbooks on internal structure and philosophy of the Sabbat, supplementary material like *Gilded Cage* (Marmell and Mearls 2001) that discuss the way vampires function in the cities – all of those feature some consideration of the subject. This makes a qualitative analysis of all the material related to religion impossible in a single article, forcing us to choose what rulebooks to include. I try to focus on transparency of comparison between different editions, to make the evolution of representation of religion more visible, even at the expense of covering some interesting material that could be addressed in an article of its own.

Corebooks of all three editions, released in 1991, 1992, and 1998, are natural choices. Unlike some other games, all editions of VtM are supposed to be playable using only the main rulebook, and the relatively similar structure of all three texts makes their comparative analysis more transparent. We supplement those with an analysis of three *Players' Guides* belonging to the corresponding editions (Rein·Hagen et al. 1992; Rein·Hagen et al. 1993; Achilli et al. 2003). A broad book aiming to provide players with more gameplay options without any clear focus, a *Players' Guide* is a prototypical supplement, signaling the direction of further expansions or summing up material from previous editions. Even more importantly, it is the only rulebook to feature across all three editions, making it a productive material for comparative study – something that couldn't be achieved, for example, with different clanbooks, as those started appearing only in the second edition. While the third edition *Players' Guide* made a big step away from the goals and logic of the previous two, it still represents a continuity – something I would like to focus on in this study.

7. Secular Vampire

Unfortunately, the length of an article does not permit detailed exploration of individual mechanics and discursive strands (Trattner 2017, 34), forcing us to focus directly on my findings. For that, I have to defy the chronological order and first compare the representation of religion in the first and third editions, also known as Revised, emphasizing their contrast. Then I shall add a discussion of the second edition as a link between them, illustrating the dynamic across the decade.

The first edition offers three sets of affordances for engagement with religion that could be dubbed vampire-oriented, human-oriented, and mythological. The first two denote the already-described affordances for simulation of religious interaction and for engaging with religion without the mediation of a player character. The third one includes affordances for interacting with game elements that reference religions in both our primary world and the game's secondary world, mostly Judaism, Christianity, and Gnosticism, while lacking the potential to frame those interactions as a simulation of religious interactions.

Human-oriented affordances are provided, mainly, by the numerous references to religion scattered across the texts and illustrations, inviting Storytellers and players to include references to religious sites and practices in their games. The most illustrative claim of this type is: "*The Church is stronger because people always turn to the Church in times of crisis, and enough people have been touched by the Vampires to make a difference*" (1991, 167). This statement gives permission, even incentive, to include the Christianity as an aesthetic image and a background in particular games. Simultaneously, it distances religious practices from player characters, using religiosity as a broad characteristic of the World of Darkness itself. In general, human-oriented affordances represent an exoticizing approach in lieu with the banal religion concept of Hjarvard: religion is used as a source of aesthetic imagery, signaling to players the gothic style of the game, without offering a lot of affordances for actually interacting with it.

Vampire-oriented affordances represent the possibility for assuming the role of a vampire following some sort of religion or participating in an interaction imbued with religious meaning, including role-playing a consciously anti-religious stance. For the purpose of this study, religion itself is understood as "a set of practices designed to mediate the transcendental, spiritual, or supernatural, making these aspects accessible to believers" (Meyer 2005, 6). Transcendentality is distinguished according to the point of view of individual characters as part of the game, in line with a phenomenological approach (e.g., Fiadotau 2017).

In the first edition, vampire-oriented affordances present a consistent understanding of religion as a sphere revolving around the contrast between individual religious pursuits, presented as ethically good, and organized religious practice, presented as ethically dubious. Generally speaking, vampires are not supposed to be religious, with the corebook openly stating: "*Certainly, for the Vampire, the concerns of faith and nation are as dead as ever*" (1991, 178). However, the corebook and, especially, the *Players' Guide* present a number of exceptions. Sabbat's description briefly mentions the theme of devil-worshipping (1991, 183), while two clans introduced in the *Players' Guide* point to different religions. Assamites reference Islam by including the term *fidāʾī*, associated with the Hashashin's tradition, and Followers of Set are explicitly connected with the Egyptian god. Additionally, the corebook's description of Golconda offers interpretative affordances to frame the search for it as a personalized mystical journey. This fact is further augmented by the description of the Salubri bloodline in the *Players' Guide*.

Taken altogether, vampire-oriented affordances create a three-part statement about religion. "Default" vampire characters created using basic rules are supposedly non-religious. They are contrasted with, on the one hand, religious clans and factions, like Sabbat and Assamites, and, on the other hand, with decentralized Salubri and individual Golconda seekers. Notably, the religious part of this spectrum provides more affordances to be interpreted as evil, even in comparison with default vampires. Sabbat, Assamites, and Followers of Set are technically playable. Still, the first edition offers more narrative, interpretative, and even algorithmic affordances, in the form of their unique abilities, to include them in games as antagonists. Even while playing as members of those groups, it is easier to continue highlighting their destructive nature, turning such an alterbiography into another way of presenting those factions as evil, and not as an opportunity to engage with their ideology. At the same time, Salubri and Golconda seekers are, obviously, presented as moral.

Such a configuration tends to align the mindsets of typical player characters with that of the typical player – a young, secular, middle-class Westerner. Furthermore, it recreates a *religion vs. spirituality ideology* (Heelas 2005). This approach to the religious sphere, popular in the West, contrasts spirituality, an individualized, subjective practice aimed at achieving individual well-being without a socially proclaimed commitment, with organized religion, viewed as restrictive and, potentially, dangerous to

both the followers and wider society. As such, the religion vs. spirituality division represents a type of compromise between religion and secularism, completely relegating religion to the private sphere and presenting this relegation as a religious act in itself, as it, supposedly, frees the "true essence" of religion from political and social additions.

Additionally, vampire-oriented affordances continue the logic of human-oriented ones by using religion as a sign of exoticism. In this case, religion exoticizes not the World of Darkness itself but specific factions, pitting "default" Western-oriented and secular player options against religious vampires hailing from different regions.

Finally, the mythological set of affordances primarily concerns two in-game narratives that play a major role in the fictional world of VtM: the story of Caine as the progenitor of all vampires and the prophecy of Gehenna, an upcoming apocalyptic event. Unlike human-oriented affordances, mythological affordances are fully diegetic – player characters are allowed, even encouraged, to pay attention to vampire legends and prophecies, and to participate in simulations of historical and archaeological work. However, unlike the vampire-oriented affordances, the mythological ones are not supposed to be perceived as permitting either religious or anti-religious behavior.

While the game states that a lot of vampires doubt the existence of Caine and Antediluvians, legendary progenitors of the vampire clans (1991, 172), in its player-oriented parts it clearly frames them as real, even including Antediluvians in the examples of rules and treating the story of Caine as history, not mythology. Thus, for player characters, this story does not function as an argument for practicing religion – perhaps even an argument against it, since religion could be interpreted as a distortion of historical truth, similarly to the positivistic view of mythology of the 19th century (e.g., Tylor 1920).

Therefore, the mythological set of affordances complements the two others in following Hjarvard's theory. Religion serves as a source of decontextualized aesthetic imagery intended to fulfill instrumental roles, such as strengthening the gothic atmosphere of the game or encoding some factions as "alien," without offering affordances for interacting with it beyond individualized spiritual seeking aimed at achieving practical results. This implicitly naturalizes a secular approach to religion, sometimes making problematic claims like presenting institutionalized religion of the Middle East as an anti-Western breeding ground for extremism. This is not surprising in itself, since a number of other games, both digital (Bosman 2021) and analog (Moyzhes 2024), follow the same pattern. However, it is important to notice how sharply this approach changed by the third edition.

8. Vampiric Religions

Despite the similar setting, rules, and even structure of information in its corebook, Revised offers a very different approach. At first glance, the only significant difference is the inclusion of clan Lasombra in the corebook. One of the two founding clans of the Sabbat, hailing from the Western Mediterranean, it is portrayed as having strong ties with the Catholic Church, continuing the established trend of exoticization: connecting peripheral (for USA) ethnicities and religions with antagonistic factions. In a way, Lasombra expand on this trend, since they directly mention an active religion, unlike the implicit, if transparent, references to Islam in the case of Assamites or the use of a fictional religion for Followers of Set. Notably, religious references in the description of Sabbat are also more prominent.

However, there are two striking differences in the presentation of religion in general. First of all, the third edition collapses the difference between the mythological and vampire-oriented sets of affordances. Stories of Caine and Gehenna are presented as texts existing inside the storyworld and influenced by its cultural and historical conditions, including in-game religions, as opposed to being framed as player-oriented truth. While the game provides few affordances to frame those narratives as fictional from an in-game perspective, it does offer affordances to doubt the factual truth of any detail, including the role of Caine, to both players and characters. As such, it provides affordances for simulating the process of having doubts and offers the possibility of interacting with the story of Caine as with a religious myth "inside" the game, with all implications of that possibility, instead of presenting a simple binary opposition of possessing or lacking information about the origins of vampires. This draws

attention to religion as a social phenomenon, offering players a more nuanced set of affordances for simulating religious interactions: from consciously rejecting the entire Caine myth as a falsehood to treating it as a factual historical truth to accepting it as part of adapting Abrahamic religions to vampiricism. Any of those options can be presented as potentially correct using the game's affordances.

This last part becomes even more important, since Revised denaturalizes the secular ideology of the first edition. While the Camarilla is still presented as secular, this is framed as a political choice on the part of its creators, not as a reflection of the natural condition of the world. The inclusion of independent and Sabbat clans alongside the Camarilla ones in the corebook highlights the presence of religion as a sphere of culture, offering narrative affordances to play as a religious character and interpretative affordances to view the Camarilla's secularism as a political project. This is augmented by the more complex ethical stance of the edition, with Camarilla depicted as just as unethical as their opponents, stripping away its moral superiority and, with it, the moral superiority of its politics.

Even aside from in-game factions, the rules highlight the presence of religion and its complicated status. For example, while the game retains the idea that the World of Darkness is more religious than the current world, this difference is explained not by the presence of vampires, but by the grim nature of the world itself – thus serving as a narrative affordance supporting religious vampire characters. The same change is illustrated by the idea of the vampire as a cult leader: when previous editions offered this option, they described cults as instruments of control over humans, wielded by cynical vampire leaders. Revised introduced the idea of blood cults, small religious organizations uniting humans and vampires in sincere belief in the approaching Gehenna.

Factually, the storyworld of Revised is roughly similar to that of the previous editions in terms of religion: the same factions, the same mythology, the same conflicts, the same possibility of achieving Golconda. But it differs in its approach to religion itself. Instead of naturalizing a secular ideology by presenting players with affordances to play as either members of a secular organization or experience religion as either followers of destructive factions or individual seekers chasing personal salvation, it supports a much broader spectrum. From portraying a religious character, coded as ethical while still being a member of an institutionalized religion, to a conscious atheist or skeptic working to debunk Caine's myth, to a vampire following historical, non-vampire-oriented religion without any incentive from their clan, the game offers more varied options for including religion in the game while drawing much more attention to this sphere of culture in general.

The constant mention of religion as an idea, much more frequent than in the original edition, leads to human-oriented affordances being subsumed into vampire-oriented ones as well. Since the game provides a lot of affordances for framing vampires as entities with religious meaning, and those affordances are provided not only to players, but also to their characters, all associations available to players shift from being part of their perception of the storyworld "from outside" to potentially becoming part of their character's worldview. The above-mentioned example of a fight in a church is much more likely to elicit a comment from one character or another, considering the amount of attention the game draws to religion.

9. Quantity into Quality

To understand this change, we need to include the second edition in my analysis. Both the corebook and the *Players' Guide* of the second edition were released only a year after the first, sometimes repeating original text verbatim, and the new version does not introduce a lot of original material. However, small changes and additions are very helpful for grasping the direction that the game took.

The first step happened already during the first edition. The original corebook lacked mentions of independent clans, thus offering a simple picture of the secular Camarilla against the Sabbat, described as a "Devil-worshipping cult". The addition of independent clans in the *Players' Guide* started to change the situation, offering more possibilities for simulating religious interactions. This addition followed the typical logic of expansion, widespread among TRPGs in the '80s and '90s, that constantly sought to increase sales by introducing new content on top of the core rules. Such content, however,

would start a feedback loop, prompting the reevaluation of the old material. For example, whether Assamites and Followers of Set were encoded as evil or not, they still complicated the secular paradigm of the original corebook by offering affordances for including religious characters in games. In doing so, they incentivize players to reflect upon the religious views of characters belonging to other clans as well, at least during ideological clashes.

In turn, the second edition did away with "devil-worshipping" claims in the Sabbat description, which was instead described as "*The Sabbat worships at the places of the dead – cemeteries, tombs, and charnel houses*" (1992, 44) without specifying who is being worshipped – with later rulebooks claiming that the Sabbat follows its version of Christianity. This small change, nonetheless, preceded the later reevaluation of the Camarilla vs. Sabbat conflict as "good versus evil", though the second edition in general retained this notion.

The second *Players' Guide* continued the trend of using religion as a marker of exoticism, for example, by including a new religious-coded bloodline – Voudou-inspired Samedi. More importantly, it also offered the notion of Paths – moral systems acting as alternatives to Humanity. One of them, the Path of Typhon, associated with the already-mentioned Followers of Set, is explicitly religious, while the Path of Paradox, connected with clan Ravnos, offers references to religious and mystical ideas.

However, the notion of Paths is more important than specific religious references. The mechanic solves the problem of explaining how cruel vampires outside the Camarilla could retain their sanity while constantly violating the rules of Humanity. To do so, it offered possibilities for role-playing characters with poignantly strange worldviews. While Paths were openly coded as evil, they still made Followers of Set or Ravnos more appealing by providing them with extra content unavailable while playing as a member of the Camarilla. They also made them more "playable" by circumventing the moral restrictions of Humanity and, therefore, providing players with the possibility to behave in accordance with the clans' description. Finally, the notion of Paths implicitly motivated a reevaluation of Humanity itself – not by criticizing it, but by denaturalizing it as the only possible option, in favor of portraying it as just one option among many, if ethically preferable.

Revised, thus, continues older trends, making its implicit affordances more clear and pronounced, but remaining faithful to the same ideas of affording players the possibility of assuming different worldviews, including religious ones, without signaling their epistemological status in-game, and broadening the inclusion of religious imagery. Taken together, those two trends provide affordances for a very different portrayal of the storyworld itself: religious topics shifted from the periphery to the front, while clear secular schema disappeared.

An important result of this is that Revised appears less encyclopedic. The original edition presented the world of VtM as a place ruled by materialistic causality, including the sphere of religion: vampire presence increased religiosity, the actions of Caine and his offspring inspired vampire mythology, and Set was a powerful vampire. But the need to include more and more content and to offer different worldviews without discouraging players from assuming them by clearly signaling which of those worldviews is "correct" led the developers to present the World of Darkness as an unknowable place.

This was not just a question of the availability of information on the metaplot and the true nature of vampires – in fact, the amount of information only grew from corebook to corebook. Instead, this effect had to do with the positioning of data. Revised corebook and the *Players' Guide* framed details they provided as versions, myths, and hearsay, offering characters constant affordances for role-playing doubt and uncertainty. In that sense, the World of Darkness of the Revised edition represents a step away from simulating the epistemic overconfidence of modernity (Josephson-Storm 2020, 43) and attempts to provide affordances for exposing players to so-called *enchanted world* – a hypothetical construct of pre-modern worldviews (Taylor 2007), characterized by its skepticism toward humans' ability to truly know and control the world around them.

10. Discussion and Conclusion

All of this leaves one important question – why, exactly, VtM's representation of religion developed in this way? Of course, to answer it fully, my textual analysis needs to be supplemented with developer interviews on the subject that, unfortunately, couldn't be conducted as part of this study. However, I would like to point out the consistency of this trend across numerous editions written by numerous individuals. This consistency becomes especially noticeable if we include the last, fifth, edition. With two supplements dedicated specifically to vampiric religion, the Inquisition as one pillar of world-building, and the religious organization called the Church of Caine framed as one of the core player options, it appears to follow the same direction. In fact, one reason V5 is excluded from this analysis is the sheer volume of data it presents on its own, despite boasting fewer supplements than the second or Revised editions.

Coupled with the success of the game, it suggests that VtM's treatment of religion reflects some broader cultural process, and I would like to offer three hypotheses connecting this game with theories on the current position of religion in society: secularizing, de-secularizing, and post-secularizing.

A secularizing explanation would follow Hjrvard's reasoning and point out that VtM, despite everything, still develops in the logic of banal religion. It is an entertainment product, made outside of religious institutions and treating religion as a source of material for its mechanics and worldbuilding, bending and reimagining it whenever necessary, even if specific examples are more nuanced and, as is the case of changes with the Assamite clan, less offensive than they were originally. It could be said that VtM presents a case of actual expansion of secularizing tendencies, as not only religious imagery, but experience of being a religious believer or staunch atheist become commodity of be encoded in the rules and sold – an important feat, considering the history of clashes between conservative Christians and role-playing games across the USA and the West (Brooks 2024).

Still, the weakness of this explanation lies in the fact that it does not address the reason why it was religion, and not anything else, that slowly shifted to the forefront of the game. This prompts a second hypothesis: VtM represents a process of desecularization (e.g., Berger 1999), a return of religion to the public sphere, examples of which could be found across numerous societies. We could speculate that many people long for a religious experience and unconsciously turn to TRPGs as a safe space for corresponding identity experimentation unburdened by commitments. As I said before, the possibility of using TRPGs as a venue for exploring spirituality has been studied by several authors, including Sara Bowman. However, this explanation itself strongly depends on our agreement with desecularization theory itself, which has been criticized (e.g., Taylor 2007), especially when addressing the topic of individual religious and quasi-religious practices.

An explanation I find to be most promising connects this process not with the notion of desecularization, but with the idea of postsecularization (e.g., Habermas 2008). According to its proponents, the modern world is not characterized by either the continuing disappearance of religion or its return, but by the redrawing of the boundaries of the spheres of human lives that influence such a process: between public and private, religion and non-religion, belief and the lack of it, reflecting the broader skepticism toward approaching the world as a discrete and classifiable space (e.g., Latour 1993), skepticism that is evident, for example, in queer theory (e.g., Butler 2007).

In this context, I would like to draw attention to the fact that VtM, unlike many other games, focuses on providing players with affordances to play as monsters – vampires. As Jaroslav Švelch pointed out in his work on monsters in games, monstrosity is fundamentally associated with transgression, with breaking categorical boundaries (2023, 11). Thanks to that trait, monsters are able to focus our attention on themselves, gaining a sublime quality. However, during the early decades of the TRPG industry, in the '70s and '80s, this trait of monsters was partially abandoned by game designers in favor of so-called "contained monstrosity" (Švelch 2023, 14): predictable, numerically defined, and lacking the ability to draw attention to itself.

Still, the transgressive potential remained, and as VtM developed more and more, gaining its own identity, a better understanding of its appeal and its fan base, as well as a better grasp of game designers' tools, it started paying more and more attention to highlighting monstrosity – and, therefore,

transgression. Vampires cast doubt on established categories by highlighting the unclear boundaries between living and the dead, humans and beasts, and, finally, between humanity and vampires – a recurring theme across the game. It is not a coincidence that the aesthetic of transgression against the norm of American society in the 90s has been part of the game from its inception, with each edition getting bolder and bolder in that regard.

I propose that the increase in the presence of religion is, at its core, a reaction to the secularization that made overt and public displays of religiosity transgressive, and the game uses this effect to highlight the monstrous quality of vampires. As such, it should be framed as part of a broader trend of skepticism toward modern Western neoliberal society and the categorization of the world that makes it possible, which can be observed in TRPG design as well, especially in the indie sphere, with its growing interest in queerness and non-human actors, inspired, among other things, by *Vampire: the Masquerade*.

Disclaimer

As a non-native English speaker, after completing and editing the article, I have used an LLM to check it for purely orthographic mistakes or issues such as missing articles. It has not changed my article in any other way.

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