University of St Andrews

Comparative Literature | MLitt Dissertation

From the 'Selva Oscura' to Paradise

Reimagining the Pilgrim's Journey through the Transmedial Realm of Role-Playing Video Games

Abstract

This dissertation was written for the purpose of displacing the negative stereotype of video games being deemed as 'lowbrow' entertainment within critical and academic circles, when in actuality the medium has the ability to tell a captivating story through a unique lens unlike the narratives that are traditionally found in a film or a novel. Most of the criticism that games have received in the humanities come from literary scholars who have denounced the medium's attempts to adapt seminal pieces of literature such as Dante's *Divine Comedy*. To counter this assumption, I will be engaging with a video game that has not been marketed as a direct adaptation of the *Comedy*, but rather uses Dante's writing as a source of inspiration to enhance its own ludonarrative experience. The game I will be examining in close proximity to the *Comedy* is the Japanese role-playing game *Shin Megami Tensei III: Nocturne* released by the studio Atlus in 2003. *Nocturne* is an incredibly viable case study for this investigation because it exemplifies how, through the unconventional adaptation process of transmediality, a distant text like an RPG can transform the material of a medieval poem to best fit its digital stage while still referencing its source material. In this context, I intend to establish a methodological basis for the transmedial analysis of literature and video games through the creative insight of the *Comedy* and *Nocturne*, so that new meaning can be uncovered from both texts and further research can thus commence on relative instances of ludic adaptation.

Keywords: Dante studies, game studies, adaptation, transmediality, comparative literature

Introduction

Video games as a cultural artifact occupy a peculiar place within the humanities. One reason for this is that scholars in the humanities are largely unaware of the extent to which games have progressed since their early days as a 'gimmicky' arcade novelty and into an established digital medium with the ability to tell a captivating story through a distinct lens unlike any novel or film. Despite this prevalent unfamiliarity, the humanities nonetheless have a strong presence in the fledgling discipline of game studies because many of its contributors have a background in literature. This interdisciplinary engagement from literary scholars tends to focus on examining games that have been marketed as adaptations of seminal pieces of literature such as Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which received a ludic adaptation in 2010 with the release of EA's *Dante's Inferno* to resounding scholarly discontent. Most of this criticism centered on the developer's choice to warp the *Comedy* to fit 'a violent, militaristic, and typified gameplay engine' in service of the game's 'lone-hero-saves-woman' narrative that was a genre standard for action video games at the time.[1] Dante scholar Teodolinda Barolini explains that this type of narrative is especially incompatible with the *Comedy* because it discards the charming nuances of the poem's characterization, so that an important female character like Beatrice can be demoted from her role as Dante's guide to become yet another damsel in distress who relies on a hyper-masculine force to save her.[2] In Barolini's own words, 'she [Beatrice] is not to be saved by him, she is *saving* him. That's the whole point!' and as a consequence of this fundamental point's absence, *Dante's Inferno* has a far more insensitive and cliché narrative than the medieval text it was attempting to adapt for a contemporary audience.

Outside of the context of Dante adaptation, this criticism of *Dante's Inferno* reads as a continuation of video games being seen as 'lowbrow' entertainment that are mass-produced to appease a target audience of teenage boys who are tantalized by depictions of excessive violence and sex on-screen. When these assumptions are compounded, they predominantly account for famed critic Roger Ebert's controversial and widely discussed views that games 'can aspire to

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[1] Lorenzo Servitje, 'Digital Mortification of Literary Flesh: Computational Logistics and Violences of Remediation in Visceral Games' *Dante's Inferno*', *Games and Culture*, 9.5 (September 2014), 368-388 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412014543948> (p. 369, 371).

[2] Teodolinda Barolini, 'An Ivy League Professor Weighs In', *Entertainment Weekly*, 26 February 2010, p. 79.

artistic importance [...] But for most gamers, video games represent a loss of those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized and empathetic.'[3] Ebert's denunciation of video games for being a mimicry of artistic expression appears to be a rather broad generalization when one considers that the medium is a collective of individual games that differ greatly from one another in terms of their aesthetic and gameplay components. Not to mention, studies have shown that 'gamers' are not a homogeneous group because people from a variety of different backgrounds play video games and care deeply about the medium.[4] To be specific, in a study that was conducted in 2016, researchers discovered after investigating hundreds of comments posted to an online gaming forum that its users would frequently comment on how the video games they played contributed to an improvement in their lives such as revising a negative aspect of their 'attitude or personality' by convincing them to adopt 'divergent perspectives and/or new beliefs'.[5] These findings illustrate that, contrary to Ebert's beliefs, video games do indeed offer their players something of substance and function similarly to Kenneth Burke's concept of 'equipment for living' because they present players with 'specific problems, dilemmas, and situations in life' that they must resolve.[6] In other words, some video games will have harmful messages, as exemplified by *Dante's Inferno*, but this one game cannot and should not be used as evidence to prove that the entire medium should be critically condemned. Players have the freedom to choose from a wide-ranging spectrum of options, and will pick games and narratives that resonate with them.

In the wake of Ebert's original remarks about games, which ignited a heated online debate that set the early 2000's Internet ablaze, the critic's final words on the matter were:

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[3] Roger Ebert, Why did the chicken cross the genders?. In *RogerEbert.com* [online]. [cited 14 June 2021]. Available from: <https://www.rogerebert.com/answer-man/why-did-the-chicken-cross-the-genders>.

[4] Minh Tue Le Ngoc, Newzoo's Diversity & Inclusion Study: Half of Players Want More Diverse Characters in Games; Gamers Want Publishers to Take a Stance on Societal Issues. In Newzoo [online]. Updated 30 November 2020 [cited 14 June 2021]. Available from: <https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/newzoos-gamer-sentiment-diversity-inclusion-gender-ethnicity-sexual-identity-disability/>.

[5] Jeroen Bourgonjon, and others, 'Players' perspectives on the positive impact of video games: a qualitative content analysis of online forums discussions', *New Media & Society*, 18.8 (2015), 1732-49 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815569723> (p. 1740).

[6] Gerald Voorhees, 'The Character of Difference: Procedurality, Rhetoric, and Roleplaying Games', *International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 9.2 (November 2009), <http://gamestudies.org/0902/articles/voorhees> [accessed 9 July 2021].

I was a fool for mentioning video games [...] I would never express an opinion on a movie I hadn't seen. Yet I declared as an axiom that video games can never be Art. I still believe this, but I should never have said so. Some opinions are best kept to yourself.[7]

In this statement, Ebert refuses to acknowledge the multitude of comments he received that petitioned him to reconsider his position after conducting further research and his refusal underscores how even respected critics can become averse to changes in the art world. While I partly agree with Ebert because there are games in existence that are acutely deficient in artistic value the same criticism can be made for the medium of film for its uninspired B-movies and 'schlock' knock-offs. For this reason, critics and academics should develop their awareness to be able to distinguish 'good' games instead of fixating on the 'bad' and even 'ugly' side of the medium and express views based on knowledge rather than stereotypes.

I would like to clarify before unpacking the objectives of this dissertation, that these past debates on video games' relations to literature and art are not ones that should simply be ignored but rather used as a starting point to guide future inquiries. It is also pertinent that my investigation concentrates on Dante to dispel the notion that EA's adaptation of the *Comedy* is the only significant instance of games engaging with Dante's writings. To explain, adaptations for games do not always follow a concrete process that results in a specific product being made, as is the case for when a popular novel is turned into a film series. Instead, video game developers usually prefer to take inspiration from a number of other works to enhance the ludonarrative experience of their games to tell a similar yet remediated story. It should be noted that this process of remediation is one that is inherently transmedial because if a scholar is to compare a video game to a piece of literature, all of the game's entangled components such as its visuals, sound, and even the haptic sensation of play, must be taken into consideration when analyzing the final output of the video game adaptation. For the purposes of this dissertation, my method of remedying the daunting aspects of this investigation is to emphasize not only similarities that can be observed in both works but to also provide an analysis of how, through a game's unique mechanics, images and text are given a new meaning that was not present in the

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[7] Roger Ebert, Okay, kids, play on my lawn. In *RogerEbert.com* [online]. [cited 9 July 2021]. Available from: <https://www.rogerebert.com/roger-ebert/okay-kids-play-on-my-lawn>.

source material. For example, many video games borrow Christian visual motifs of heaven within their 'Game Over' screens which in this context signifies to a player that they have 'died' and must try again. Most of this meaning that can be uncovered is due to video games being an interactive medium that players use to experiment with their identities by 'behav[ing] and represent[ing] themselves in distinctive ways that are free from immediate and direct real-life consequences'.[8] In view of this, my research must be cognizant of the lasting impact that a game has on its playerbase long after they have completed its last level not unlike the *Comedy*, which in Dante's words, was written 'in pro del mondo che mal vive'.[9] Both poetry and video games have the potential to change the perspectives of their audiences which may result in them living differently as a result.

This introduction briefly mentions the claim that video games have engaging narratives and in order to examine this parallel engagement it is essential to consider how a game's story differs from those traditionally told in a film or novel. In response to this quandary, game studies pioneer Espen Aarseth, explains that digital mediums like video games belong to a category of ergodic literature known as a 'cybertext' which he defines as a type of narrative that requires a level of participation from its readers if they desire to advance further into its storyline.[10] Aarseth's emphasis on participation is thought-provoking because while many art forms use different methods of expression in their storytelling, such as image and text, video games are unique in that they allow for a player to take part in the narrative that is unfolding before them. This means that another key characteristic of the cybertext is that no two players' experiences will be entirely the same. Following this reasoning, fellow game studies scholar Ian Bogost, proposes that a player's enjoyment of a game's narrative is the outcome of them being fully immersed in the games they play. For Bogost, immersion in a video game is dictated by the 'procedural rhetoric' of its ludonarrative that enforces a series of rules a player must follow if they desire to complete the game successfully.[11] It is through this rhetoric that the player learns

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[8] Bourgonjon, and others, p. 1740. More info can be found in: Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York City: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

[9] Dante Alighieri, *Commedia. Purgatorio*, ed. by Giorgio Inglese (Rome: Carocci, 2016), canto XXXII. 103.

[10] Espen J. Aarseth, Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 1-2.

[11] Ian Bogost, Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), p. 2-3.

what they can and cannot do, insofar as the more they play the more they become acclimated to the vast workings of a game's virtual world that they are now a contributing part of.

      With the interest of exploring how a video game in critical terms might transmediate the *Comedy*'s narrative of a pilgrim who traverses through the afterlife, this investigation will center on the Japanese role-playing game *Shin Megami Tensei III: Nocturne* that was released in 2003 by the studio Atlus.[12] The reason why *Nocturne* is especially viable as a case study for this dissertation is that according the leads of its development team, creative director Kazuma Kaneko and head writer Kazuyuki Yamai, one of the game's main sources of inspiration was Dante's *Comedy*, so that a player could truly feel as though they had set forth on 'a journey through hell'.[13] Possibly corresponding to the adversity of its narrative, *Nocturne* was made during a particularly unstable period in Atlus's history where, burdened by financial hardships, the small studio became dependent on the game's worldwide success if they were to remain open.[14] Interestingly, *Nocturne* was primarily the sole creative vision of Kaneko who as an artist was more so concerned with the game's aesthetic appeal than its technical functions or marketability, which most major studios tend to prioritize in order to ensure that their games generate a substantial profit. Despite his unorthodox methods, Kaneko's art is what makes *Nocturne* a fascinating text that is, not unlike the *Comedy*, highly intertextual in its influences, owing to how the game's creative direction incorporates aspects of religion from tradition and popular culture to devise a gaming experience that is incomparable to any other.

      With this background organized, I intend to establish a methodological basis for the transmedial analysis of literature and games through the creative insight of Kaneko and *Nocturne*, so that new meaning can be uncovered from both texts and further research can begin on relative instances of ludic adaptation.

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[12] Hereafter the *Shin Megami Tensei* series will be referred to as *SMT* and its third installment as *Nocturne*.
[13] DoubleJump, *Shin Megami Tensei - Nocturne: The Official Strategy Guide* [online]. DoubleJump, updated 23 February 2013 [cited 26 June 2021]. Available from: <https://megatengaku.wordpress.com/readings/interviews/nocturne-guide-interview/> (p. 386).
[14] Chris Carter, Shin Megami Tensei III HD director: 'Dante was part of our original project proposal' [online], *Destructoid*, updated 21 May 2021 [cited 9 July 2021]. Available from: <https://www.destructoid.com/shin-megami-tensei-iii-hd-director-dante-was-part-of-our-original-project-proposal/>.

Chapter 1: Contextualizing Religion in RPGs and Intertextuality

One could speculate that if a game was to adapt the spiritual journey of the *Comedy*, most of its self-reflection and religiosity would be removed in favor of completing these procedural tasks that usually deviate from a linear narrative at the whims of the player. Scholars have uncovered that this assumption does not hold true for RPGs because it is a staple of this genre for games to draw inspiration from real-world religions in the fashioning of their own eclectic pantheon of religious icons and representations. To give an example, in the formative RPG series, *Final Fantasy*, a player is expected to hear Christian choir music, battle *djinn* from Arabian folklore, and summon powerful deities such as Shiva all within the canonized lore of the game.[15] As a result of this hybridization, each game in the *FF* series is like a ludic myth with a cast of spiritual figures playing archetypal roles as either heroes who aid the player on their quest or as villains who obstruct it. To clarify, while religion is present in the series it is remediated through a game's creative decision to separate these figures from their religious origins to become independent characters within *FF*'s overarching narrative. Meaning that when a game introduces a character like Shiva as being an almighty goddess, she is not intended to be an authentic depiction of her sacred namesake. Nonetheless, even when RPGs stray from this path of religious authenticity, the genre's attention to storytelling and world building make it so their narratives, which typically follow a hero on an exhilarating adventure, are far more consistent with the teleological structure of a pilgrim's journey than to a non-RPG that does not offer its players a cohesive story or a sense of personal growth beyond finishing a level or receiving a high score.

What separates the *SMT* series from its contemporaries is that these games strive for accuracy in their depictions of religion all while maintaining this narrative teleology of a spiritual journey. To begin, each *SMT* game takes place, not in a fictional universe like *FF*, but rather in modern-day Tokyo after the city has been destroyed in the apocalypse. This post-apocalyptic scenario is unusual because in *SMT* the apocalypse is the consequence of a war that has suddenly

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[15] Hereafter the *Final Fantasy* series will be referred to as *FF*. Lars De Wildt and S. D. Aupers, 'Eclectic Religion: The Flattening of Religious Cultural Heritage in Videogames', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 27.3 (April 2020), 312-330 <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2020.1746920> (p. 1).

broken out between heaven and hell, a war that the game's protagonist witnesses as one of the few remaining survivors of humanity. These blighted remains of Tokyo are deemed to be the afterlife, in the wake of how most human life has been eradicated from the city and in its place dwells a new Tartarean domain where the boundaries between fiction and reality, sacred and damned, are obscured as a player is besieged by visual stimuli in-game that is simultaneously familiar and alien to them. Moreover, the war that arises is not one that only concerns a monotheistic Christian God as the protagonist will encounter supernatural entities from both sides, referred to simply as demons, whose origins are from a variety of diverse myths and religions. As for the objective of the player, in *SMT* the protagonist is prophesied to escape from the clutches of this dismal wasteland by embarking on a spiritual journey that upon its triumphant completion will reward them with the power to rebuild society. This objective corresponds to the series's curious, yet mystical title that roughly translates to 'True Goddess Metempsychosis' on account of how if the protagonist 'dies' the player must restart their progress from the beginning in an endless cycle if they continue to fail.[16] This mechanic however, should not be thought of as a shiftless narrative patch inserted into *Nocturne* to reconcile the differences between its gameplay and story, because through death a player learns from their previous actions which they will make amends to once they have been reincarnated back into the game's world.

According to Kaneko, who also served as the series's lead character designer from 1990 until his retirement in 2009, all of the gods, goddess, and demons alike that are found in an *SMT* game are designed to be 'faithful' representations of said figures with their ties to religion kept intact. Kaneko explains that his creative process begins by examining the profiles of various 'Gods and demons' through their legends and folklore, due to how he has discovered that these characters 'greatly reflect the environment, culture and customs of the area they originate from'. After this research is complete, Kaneko concludes that his last step in creating a character design is to give the demons a 'new form, sometimes in accordance with their traditional image, and at other times giving them a modern interpretation'.[17] Through this process, Kaneko has designed a

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[16] DoubleJump, *Shin Megami Tensei - Nocturne: The Official Strategy Guide*.
[17] Ed Moore, Interview: Behind the Scenes of Shin Megami Tensei [online], *The Escapist*, updated 11 November 2010 [cited 26 June 2021]. Available from:

wealth of awe-inspiring characters that breathe new life into the traditions and stories of the past to be retold in a new digital format. Scanning through Kaneko's *oeuvre*, a brilliant example of the artist's ability to blend old and new material is featured in his design of the archangel Gabriel. Figure 1 is a compilation of art edited by *SMT* fan blogger, EirikrJS with the purpose to compare a traditional depiction of Gabriel shown in Paolo de Matteis's notable painting *Annunciation* (center) to Kaneko's design (right) and a later depiction of the angel commissioned from an artist outside of Atlus, Keita Amemiya, for *SMT IV* after Kaneko's retirement. From a brief glance, it is apparent that Kaneko's Gabriel compliments this momentous biblical scene that Matteis wished to illuminate on his canvas, whereas if Amemiya's design was removed from the context of the painting it would be difficult to identify it as the archangel.[18]

Figure 1: Paolo de Matteis's *Annunciation* (center) edited to show Keita Amemiya's design (left) and Kazuma Kaneko's (right) of the archangel Gabriel, notice the white illy that appears only in Matteis and Kaneko's versions.[19]

This design more closely coincides with the video game trope of the foreboding 'Boss' enemy that a player, in most cases, is challenged by in the climatic moments leading up to the game's

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<https://megatengaku.wordpress.com/readings/interviews/the-escapist-interview-behind-the-scenes-of-shin-megami -tensei/>.

[18] See Figure 1.

[19] Eirikr J.S., Shin Megami Tensei's Identity Crisis (Part 3 of 3): False Reincarnation. In *Stealing Knowledge* [online]. Updated 1 September 2015 [cited 27 June 2021]. Available from: <https://eirikrjs.blogspot.com/2015/09/SMT-identity-crisis-final.html>. Paolo De Matteis, *Annunciation*, 1712, oil on canvas. Available from: <https://www.slam.org/collection/objects/7082/> [accessed 27 June 2021]. Atlus, *Shin Megami Tensei II* (1994), Super Famicom and subsequently other platforms. Ibid., *Shin Megami Tensei IV* (2013), Nintendo 3DS.

end. By contrast, Kaneko's design imparts further meaning on its viewers, demonstrated by how its seemingly mundane details like the white lily, which both Kaneko and Matteis's Gabriel hold in their hands, is a well established motif of Christian visual culture that is associated with the Annunciation and Marian purity.[20] Curiously, if one examines the archangel's other hand only Kaneko's Gabriel is equipped with a sword and I interpret this design choice as a means to say that while *SMT*'s Gabriel can be an intimidating opponent, they will never be reduced to the likes of a brutish monster with no interrelatedness to art and culture. Amemiya's design is certainly fit to strike fear in a player but looking beyond the defeat of this Gabriel lies no remaining story to be told, because the archangel has been disparaged as a monstrous abomination who must be eliminated at the behest of a video game's standard challenge-ergo-reward procedure. On the contrary, the Gabriel of Kaneko's creation disengages from this repetitive drill to fulfill the demands of ludology while being a work of art in itself. Gabriel is but one of Kaneko's hundreds of designs that he created over the span of his career at Atlus, with each design opening a new channel of communication between different visual cultures to produce a medley of *SMT* games that are highly intertextual in their make-up. In the humanities, intertextuality is generally seen as a literary device that an author employs to create meaning in their work through referencing another. Examples of intertextuality include allusion and quotation of a prior text in addition to it being transformed into something completely new, as is epitomized by how a video game like *Nocturne*, converses with its influences one of which being the *Comedy*.

Pertaining to adaptations of Dante, this conversation between the two texts is noteworthy because similar to *Nocturne*, although on a far greater level, the *Comedy* is regarded as an immensely intertextual work that Dante scholars have dedicated a significant amount of research into analyzing. Some intriguing additions to this body of research include digital humanities projects like the University of Virginia's *World of Dante* which is an online edition of the *Comedy* that allows for readers to search through the poem to find various characters and places, and to a more specialized degree Columbia University's *Intertextual Dante* which provides a reader with a similar experience but in service of highlighting the numerous Ovidian allusions

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[20] Annette Stott, 'Floral Femininity: A Pictorial Definition', *American Art*, 6.2 (1992), 60-77 <https://doi.org/10.1086/424151> (p. 61).

that can be found in the *Comedy*'s poetic language.[21] Both of these projects' goals, regardless of their scope, is to trace the complexities of the *Comedy*'s afterlife, described aptly by scholar Lino Pertile as an 'all-inclusive construction, which combines the different philosophical, theological, literary, and psychological strands of Dante's high cultural inheritance with the desires and fears of popular culture'.[22] The strength of this type of research is that it facilitates the reading of the *Comedy* for a larger audience of non-academics who can visit each site and explore its contents to their liking. The accessibility of *WOD* and *ID* is attributed to their clear and concise site designs which display the medieval poem on a simple light-colored page with legible font. Readers are also given annotation tools such as a highlighter, footnotes that appear with a click next to the line in question, and links to extra sources like illustrations for the particular canto they are reading. This tool that pairs Dante's words with imagery is commented upon further in University of Texas at Austin's multimedia study companion to the *Comedy*, *Danteworlds*, in which the project's research team commissioned contemporary artists to create illustrations of the poem's many visually-striking scenes and characters.[23] These new illustrations appear on *DW*'s main site page alongside the artwork of notable creatives such as Sandro Botticelli, William Blake, and Gustave Doré.[24] Altogether, projects like *WOD*, *ID*, and *DW* are testaments to how intricate facets of the *Comedy*, like its characters, setting, language, and intertextuality, can be expounded upon through diverse methods like designing a website or in the case of my research through the enjoyable experience of playing a video game.

    Nocturne's interface functions similarly to *WOD* and *ID*'s because the game stores additional information about its characters in a feature known as the 'Demon Compendium', which a player can access to learn more about a specific character and the religion, legend, or culture they are derived from. Figure 2 is an example of what an entry in the Demon Compendium looks like, notice to the left how Cerberus's page is dedicated to only the Greek guard of the underworld and no other entity and how this is replicated to the right in *ID*'s

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[21] Hereafter *World of Dante* and *Intertextual Dante* will be referred to as *WOD* and *ID*, respectively.
[22] Lino Pertile, 'Introduction to Inferno', in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. by Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 67-90 <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521844304.005> (p. 74).
[23] Hereafter *Danteworlds* will be referred to as *DW*.
[24] Guy P. Raffa, *Danteworlds* [online]. University of Texas at Austin, [cited 27 July 2021]. Available from: <https://danteworlds.laits.utexas.edu/>.

highlighted passage for the monster. In both examples, the character is kept apart from the rest of the text so that a reader can focus on one aspect of the narrative at a time, which is to their benefit if they were previously confused and searching for a supplementary explanation.
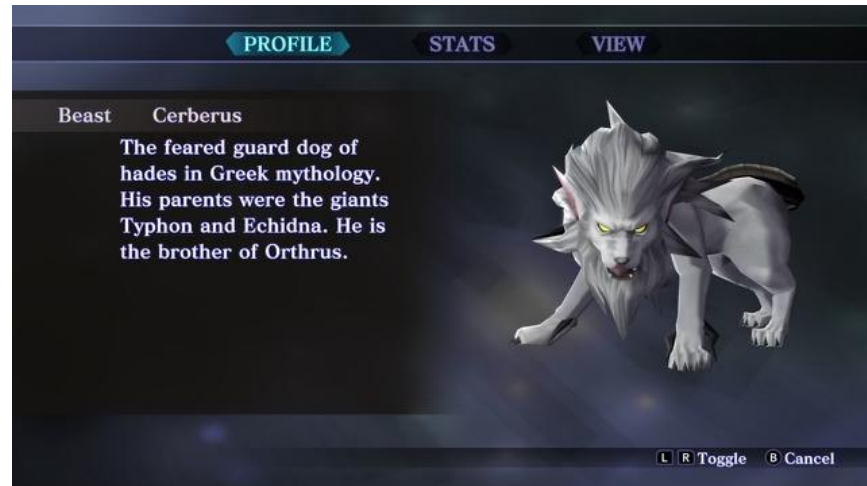
13 Cerbero, fiera crudele e diversa,
14 con tre gole caninamente latra
15 sovra la gente che quivi è sommersa.
16 Li occhi ha vermigli, la barba unta e atra,
17 e 'l ventre largo, e unghiate le mani;
18 graffia li spirti ed iscoia ed isquatra.

Figure 2: Cerberus's Demon Compendium entry in *Nocturne* (top) compared to the monster's highlighted passage in *ID* (bottom).[25]

There are approximately 185 demons that can be encountered in a single playthrough of *Nocturne*, and the game's compendium ensures that the knowledge of each of these characters and their backgrounds will be made available for a player through its proper organization of this informative material. By peering into the interior mechanics of the Demon Compendium, one will see that demons are organized within its files based on their specific race or clan, this is comparable to how online editions of the *Comedy*, like *WOD*, have search terms for characters

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[25] *Shin Megami Tensei III: Nocturne*, personal screenshot taken by Serafina Paladino. Julie Van Peteghem, *What is Intertextual Dante?*, Intertextual Dante, Digital Dante, updated 2017 [cited 26 June 2021]. Available from: <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/intertexual-dante/>.

related to their roles as either 'deities' or 'creatures' so that readers will easily find what they are looking for.[26]
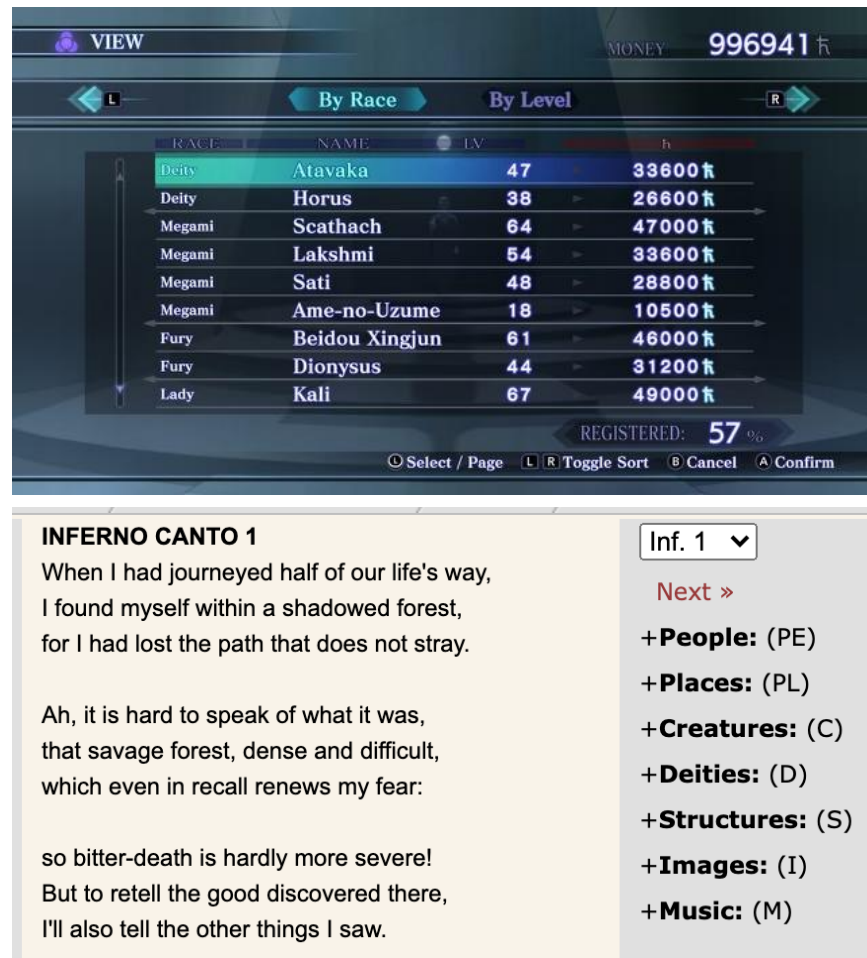

Figure 3: The Demon Compendium's organization of demons (top) and *WOD*'s character search terms (bottom).[27]

The Demon Compendium is also an immensely visual mechanic of the game because, like the multimedia interface of *DW,* every compendium entry receives its own illustration and 3D model designed by Kaneko to complete a page that melds text and images aesthetically for a player's enjoyment. Considering these three editions of the *Comedy*, *Nocturne* utilizes their distinct attributes and combines them into one unified experience for its players that does not require them to access multiple resources to understand the nuances of its narrative. With this in mind,

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[26] See Figure 3.
[27] *World of Dante* [online]. University of Virginia, 1996 [cited 4 August 2021]. Available from: <http://www.worldofdante.org/>. *Shin Megami Tensei III: Nocturne*, personal screenshot.

despite the past failures of video games to properly adapt the *Comedy*, *Nocturne*'s ludonarrative is ideal for disentangling the obfuscations of a dense work of fiction for a sizable audience just as these online editions of the poem are envisioned to. That being said, *Nocturne* is its own creative work and not purely a guide for reading the *Comedy*, and so these facets must be examined within the context of the game. For this reason, *Nocturne* warrants a full analysis to be conducted on its literary dimensions, from narrative arcs to characters, because as an adaptation of the *Comedy* the game transforms its Dantean influences rather than solely providing an exposition for them.

Chapter 2: The Structure of the Afterlife in the *Comedy* and *Nocturne*

It may seem perplexing that a video game with its modern and unconventional methods of telling a story would have its developers choose a medieval text like the *Comedy* as their game's main source of inspiration when the poem is not the first or only notable work to depict a pilgrim's *katabasis*. Despite the *Comedy* not being entirely *sui generis,* the poem is nonetheless unique because of Dante's 'world-making' ambitions that he actualizes through the text by creating a systematic and comprehensible representation of the afterlife that was unparalleled to anything that had been done before. The *Comedy*'s cosmic design is innovative because of the span and detail of its topography which was structured to answer the many questions Christian believers had during Dante's time, like where God's vast array of saints and sinners were to reside in his kingdom after their departures. [28] The poet, however, does not address the reader directly to provide them with this knowledge due to how the meaning of the *Comedy* is intended to be explored through the narrative frame of the pilgrim's journey. By experiencing the pilgrim's trials vicariously the reader becomes engrossed in the poem's discourse on morality as they envision themselves to be the pilgrim who absolves their past sins to live with virtue in the present.

This moral study of the *Comedy* applies to *Nocturne* because many of the game's characters ruminate about the wrongdoings they committed while alive and if they will ever be forgiven for them after death. To clear up any misconceptions, it may come across as erroneous to equate these conceptions of self-reflection and improvement to a Japanese video game when more often than not Dante, in the *Comedy,* is referring to a specific period in Italian history. I view this perceived limitation of Dante's work as not being proof of the *Comedy* and *Nocturne*'s incompatibility, but rather more evidence to support the claim that *Nocturne* can be regarded as a continuation of the poet's original endeavor by including insight from Eastern religions. Nevertheless, as a companion project, *Nocturne* maintains some of these 'Italian' notions of the

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[28] George Corbett, 'Moral structure', in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante's Commedia*, ed. by Zygmunt G. Barański and Simon Gilson, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 61-78 <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108367769.007> (p. 61).

afterlife due to how there is a long-standing cultural tradition for Italian creatives, including the likes of Dante, to depict hell as an 'immediate reality' and heaven as an 'elusive hypothetical'.[29]

To start, this conviction about hell is peculiarly befitting for the mechanics of a video game because when games are set here, this infernal environment becomes real for a player and not merely an assortment of fearful images conjured with the purpose to dissuade someone from living a life of sin. All three parts of the *Comedy* play with this awareness of a reader's believability since some of the pilgrim's experiences are easier to visualize than others, for example, the poem begins with these celebrated lines:

> Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
> mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
> ché la diritta via era smarrita.[30]

In which, by means of clear and concise language the reader learns that the pilgrim is lost in a dark forest that he must face alone, without guidance. This opening scene has various interpretations, one being that the 'selva oscura' is intended to be a symbolic representation of Dante's life after his exile from Florence, however without this background information the pilgrim's distress might be deciphered by a reader as the character enduring an unspecified hardship that they are more likely to relate to.[31] Thus, the pilgrim functions as a blank canvas for the reader to impose aspects of their lived experience on, and this emotional connection is intensified once the pilgrim and reader enter hell proper and confront together the horrors of eternal damnation.

What makes *Inferno* an incredibly tangible literary experience is that Dante describes hell as resembling a human city with familiar architectural features such as walls, bridges, and gates that an audience, regardless of time and place, is able to vividly picture as if they were there themselves. The tangibility of purgatory approaches that of hell's but in place of a harrowing cityscape is an impressive mountain lit by the warm rays of the sun that contrasts with the

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[29] Daniel V. Sacco, '"Living Hell": Fulci's Eternal City', *Studies in the Fantastic*, 7 (2019), 76-88 <https://doi.org/10.1353/sif.2019.0006> (p. 84).
[30] Dante Alighieri, *Commedia. Inferno*, ed. by Giorgio Inglese (Rome: Carocci, 2016), canto I. 1-3.
[31] Pertile, p. 68.

all-encompassing darkness of *Inferno* to instead evoke imagery of one embarking on a beautiful yet demanding hike through nature.[32] In heaven, these common structures and their essence of humanity is replaced by Dante's intricate descriptions of the light and shapes that form the cosmos, in so far as scholar Rachel Jacoff describes these moments in *Paradiso* as being an 'imaginative collaboration' between the reader and the words of the poet.[33] In practice, a collaboration like this is undertaken in *Paradiso*'s first canto when the pilgrim attempts to describe the movement of the heavens which Jacoff views as requiring the reader 'to perform a mental version of time-lapse photography in order to translate these temporal motions into spatial forms'.[34] However, in doing so it becomes apparent that the reader's capacity to grasp the nature of heaven is limited compared to the pilgrim who beholds these wonders first-hand, as the the comprehensive imagery of the *selva oscura* has been scrapped for the glorification of a realm that is beyond the understanding of mortals. The visual composition of *Nocturne*'s hell is analogous to the *Comedy*'s in that Tokyo becomes like Dante's infernal city after its desolation in the apocalypse. Not to mention, as stated by the game's developers, prior to the making of *Nocturne* they chose to research the inner workings of varying institutes in contemporary society like those of schools and corporations so that these hierarchies could be integrated into the game's simulation of hell, engineering it to be more believable for its players.[35] In other words, a player of *Nocturne* is not bombarded by senseless imagery because the hell that they encounter is not far removed from the logic of their everyday lives, which may compel them to inquire further as to what the game is trying to communicate with them.

Like Dante the pilgrim, the protagonist of *Nocturne* sets forth on his journey after being awoken in a mysterious location, which for the game is an abandoned hospital room shrouded ominously in darkness. This opening scene establishes that moments prior, the entire city of Tokyo was destroyed in an enigmatic apocalyptic event known as 'The Conception' which the

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[32] Sharon Harwood, 'Moral Blindness and Freedom of Will: a Study of Light Images in the "Divina Commedia"', *Romance Notes*, 16.1 (1974), 205-221 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43801296> [accessed 11 February 2021] (p. 211).
[33] Rachel Jacoff, 'Introduction to Paradiso' in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. by Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 107-24 <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521844304.007> (p. 107).
[34] Ibid., p. 122.
[35] DoubleJump, *Shin Megami Tensei - Nocturne: The Official Strategy Guide*.

protagonist discovers he survived after being spontaneously transformed into the Demi-fiend, a half-human, half-demon hybrid. As a part of his transformation, Demi-fiend acquires a full-body tattoo that glows in the dark along with a horn at the nape of his neck that Kaneko explains is an organ that demons use to communicate with one another.[36] Due to his hybrid status, Demi-fiend is not only ostracized from human society, but many of the demons that he meets in the ruins of Tokyo behave with hostility towards him as well. Thus, as an exile, the player's objective is to find a place for the Demi-fiend in this new world that he has been estranged from.

It must be stated, however, that not all of Tokyo is a hellish nightmare because the game indicates that somewhere in its vast expanses exists a heavenly realm presided over by a god named Kagutsuchi. The player becomes aware of the god's presence through his association with light because depending on the amount of steps Demi-fiend takes an icon in the far corner of the screen will show that Kagutsuchi has entered a new phase such as full, half, or new. These phases align with the Dantean motif of light as, similar to the scenery of the *Comedy*, the game's graphics begin to steadily brighten when Demi-fiend climbs the purgatorial tower of Kagutsuchi which he ascends to enter heaven and leave behind the darkness of hell. Demi-fiend's ascent is marked by Tokyo fading over the horizon and upon reaching the tower's topmost floor this infernal city is consumed fully by the direct light of Kagutsuchi whose design bares likeness to Dante's vision of the heavens in how his corpus is comprised of an assemblage of perfect shapes which move across the game's screen at a hypnotizing pace. Illustrated in Figure 4, even when Kagutsuchi imitates the human form by constructing an imposing visage his heavenly geometry is left in one piece which shows that unlike the crumbling infrastructure of Tokyo, Kagutsuchi is truly an immortal being immune to material decay.

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[36] Nich Maragos, In Character: Kazuma Kaneko. In *1UP* [online]. Updated 2 March 2013 [cited 9 July 2021]. Available from: <https://megatengaku.wordpress.com/readings/interviews/1up-2004-in-character-kazuma-kaneko/>.
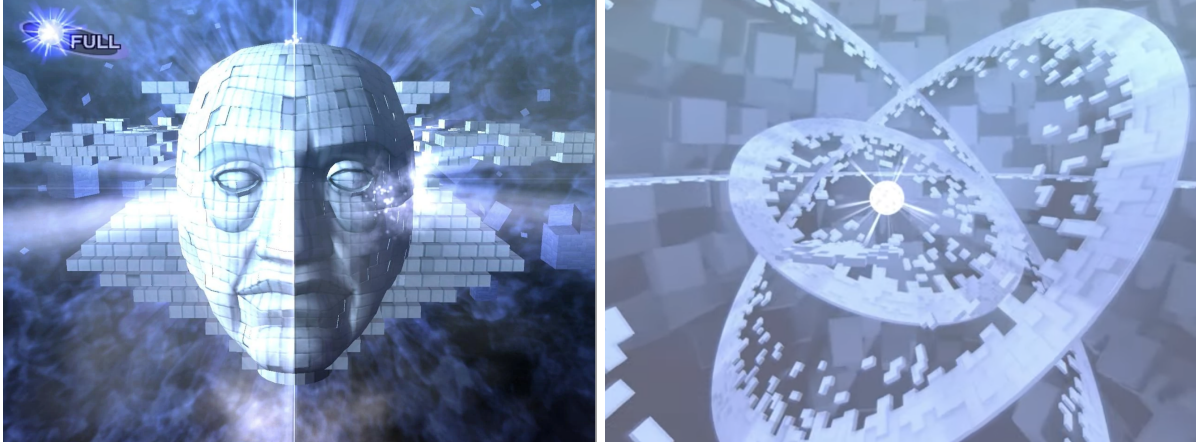
Figure 4: The perfect geometry of *Nocturne*'s heaven. Notice how the small icon in the top left corner displays the phase of Kagutsuchi.[37]

After a deeper reflection, these visual similarities, while intriguing, denote that in heaven the *Comedy*'s pilgrim is at times unable to adequately relay information to his readers, whereas in *Nocturne* due to the multi-track nature of video games, the player and protagonist are able to gaze upon the cosmos simultaneously as one. Meaning that *Nocturne*'s adaptation of the *Comedy* has the creative prowess to alleviate the shortcomings of the poem's original narrative that may hinder the player's feeling of immersion.

   Nocturne's willingness to embrace the elaborate imagery of the *Comedy* and Christian visual culture seems related to how Kaneko has spoken of wishing to create a 'universal myth' through his art. Kaneko loosely defines a universal myth as being a reflection of one's understanding of religion which they develop by being exposed to popular culture and sacred traditions. For instance, Kaneko believes that watching a film that is an adaptation of a Greek myth is not entirely dissimilar from placing offerings at a Shinto temple because both are 'in touch with current life' regardless of their intended purposes in a given culture.[38] With respect to the making of *Nocturne*, Kaneko's insight shines light on the game's openness to combine Eastern and Western religions to strengthen its overall universality. This joining of East and West becomes most evident when Demi-fiend travels to the lower levels of *Nocturne*'s hell. In the game, this underbelly of the afterlife is separated from the upper surface by a tangled series of

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[37] *Shin Megami Tensei III: Nocturne*, personal screenshot.
[38] dijeh, Demons Bible Kaneko Interview. In *dijehtranslations* [online]. Updated 8 August 2016 [cited 9 July 2021]. Available from: <https://dijehtranslations.wordpress.com/2016/08/08/demons-bible-kaneko-interview/>.

mazes known as the 'Labyrinth of Amala'. This labyrinth consists of five individual circles or 'Kalpas' that lead a player lower and lower into its abyss until they come into direct contact with Lucifer in its final domain, not unlike the ending canto of *Inferno*. However, before confronting Lucifer, the player must navigate through the Fourth Kalpa's 'Maze of Hell' which is a split network of paths and puzzles that upon completion grants Demi-fiend with the opportunity to free two notable souls he had previously met on his journey, from imprisonment. The souls Demi-fiend can liberate belong to the game's fictional prophet, Futomimi and his mortal enemy the bloodthirsty killer, Sakahagi. Like Demi-fiend, Futomimi and Sakahagi survived The Conception by relinquishing their human forms, although instead of transforming into demons they became an ephemeral being known as a 'Manikin'. Manikins are described as human souls who, due to unresolved conflicts in their past lives, were reincarnated as sentient mannequins with bodies made from the debris of Tokyo. Futomimi is like a messiah for the Manikins because he protects them from the likes of demons as well as Sakahagi, who disregards Futomimi's preachings of peace to live selfishly and attack any Manikin he views as lesser than himself.

Eventually, the two Manikins' material bodies perish and their souls are sent to the Fourth Kalpa, however when Demi-fiend speaks to them here they are not who they were in the upper levels of hell but who they used to be while still alive as humans. In Futomimi and Sakahagi's Fourth Kalpa dialogues, the player learns that the former humans behaved in complete opposition to how they do in the afterlife. For instance, Futomimi as a human was a remorseless murderer who killed for his own pleasure not unlike Sakahagi as a Manikin. Whereas, human Sakahagi was an orderly businessman who adhered to the rules of society. The reason for their change in character, is that in humanity's last moments the two regretted their paths in life with Futomimi wishing he could be someone 'who everyone wants around' and Sakahagi voicing his displeasure with societal expectations. After listening to these souls, Demi-fiend can ring a special bell which will allow for them to be reborn as Manikins again in harmony with their idealized selves.[39]

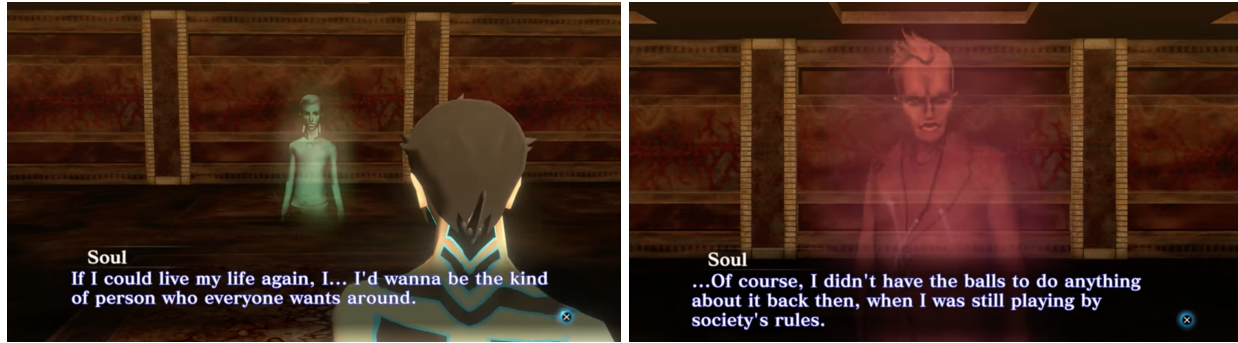[39] See Figure 5, the quote from Futomimi comes directly from these screenshots.

Figure 5: Excerpts from Futomimi's (left) and Sakahagi's (right) dialogues in the Maze of Hell.[40]

These dialogues cannot be skipped, and if a player chooses to not reincarnate the two souls the game seemingly punishes them by stripping the player of a beneficial alliance that is to form between the protagonist and the Manikins later in the journey. The game, therefore, indirectly urges the player to listen to these souls and above all forgive them for their sins.

This ritualistic aspect of gameplay is peculiar because it contradicts one of the most fundamental framing principles of *Inferno*, which prohibits souls from leaving their circle of hell unless under special circumstances, as is the case for Dante's guide, Virgil. Scholar Sukehiro Hirakawa explains that Christian conceptions of hell differ from those in Buddhist thought because 'in Christianity it is futile to pray for those who are cast down in Inferno, as they cannot be saved ever' compared to how 'in Buddhism [...] there remains the possibility that the prayers of the living may help save souls condemned to Hell'.[41] In light of this, it could be argued that *Nocturne*'s hell is a more accurate representation of Dante's purgatory but when these chthonic interactions are inspected further they exude an intensity of emotion that is largely only found in *Inferno*. For example, the player is conflicted by Futomimi because while he admits to committing serious crimes worthy of damnation in Dante's moral scheme, one cannot help but feel remorse towards him who, like Demi-fiend, is an outsider and only wishes to belong. Dante the pilgrim is not exempt from feeling conflicted about the shades he speaks to on his journey, as one of his notable encounters culminates with him fainting out of pity after listening to the

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[40] *Shin Megami Tensei III: Nocturne*, personal screenshot.
[41] Sukehiro Hirakawa, 'The Divine Comedy and the Nô Plays of Japan:An Attempt at a Reciprocal Elucidation', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 33.1 (1996), 35-58 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40247037> [accessed 9 July 2021] (p. 49).

mournful speech of Francesca da Rimini from her place of torment in the Second Circle. Many scholars have in fact theorized that the pilgrim's emotional reaction to Francesca is attributed to the poet's own feelings of guilt for being swept up in the overpowering emotions of lust in his life just as she had fallen prey to.[42] Sakahagi can thus be classified as an extreme case of one becoming consumed by their negative emotions because all that remains of his personality is a feeling of unbridled rage. The emotions of the shades imprisoned in Dante's hell also do not dissipate after death as illustrated in how when crossing the river Styx where the wrathful are punished, the pilgrim is accosted by the soul of one of his fellow Tuscans, Filippo Argenti, who scholars believe harbored ill-will towards the poet while still alive.[43] From this selection of the pilgrim's differing exchanges with shades, the *Comedy*'s construct of the afterlife is given additional characterization as not just being a bleak place of misery where sinners are tortured without end. The damned souls of *Inferno*, in particular, hold onto a semblance of human agency and emotions which is what *Nocturne* as an Eastern text fuses with the influences of its origins to tell its distinct narrative.

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[42] Teodolinda Barolini, 'Dante and Francesca da Rimini: Realpolitik, Romance, Gender', *Speculum*, 75.1 (2000), 1-28 <https://doi.org/10.2307/2887423> (p. 27).

[43] G. A. Borgese, 'The Wrath of Dante', *Speculum,* 13.2 (1938), 183-193 <https://doi.org/10.2307/2848400> (p. 188).

Chapter 3: Dialogue and Characterization of Cutscenes

While narrative similarities can be found between the *Comedy* and *Nocturne*, it should not be overlooked how video games in general rarely tell a linear story that is the same for each player. This variability is the result of games having narratives that are defined by a player's experience which is affected by their skill level, prior knowledge, and decision-making. *Nocturne* is primarily concerned with the last item on this list because the game is renowned for its multiple endings that a player receives based on the actions and decisions that they made throughout its duration. Being that *Nocturne* takes place after the apocalypse, one might deduce from playing other post-apocalyptic RPGs that in the game players would be predominantly preoccupied with performing survival tasks, such as foraging for food or building shelter in order to ensure the well-being of its protagonist. *Nocturne*'s objective, in actuality, is far more opaque than fighting for survival because Demi-fiend is first instructed to embark on his journey after Kagutsuchi implores him from the heavens to 'Go forth! And discover yourself!' The meaning of Kagutsuchi's message becomes clear once the player realizes that at the end of Demi-fiend's journey he is expected to present this almighty deity with an ideology that the new world, freed from chaos, is to be made in accordance with. It is the responsibility of the player to learn about these ideologies, referred to as 'Reasons' in-game, if they desire to be well-informed about the world they choose to create.

According to the game's lore, demons are forbidden from forming their own Reasons and this restriction even applies to half-demons like the protagonist, thus the details of a Reason's ideology are communicated to the player by a separate character outside of their sphere of control. There are three main Reasons a player can select from and their ideologies are influenced by a combination of spiritual and pragmatic philosophies such as those that relate to Social Darwinism, Nihilism, and Zen Buddhism amongst others. The refinement of these three Reasons makes it so none of them are inherently just or reprehensible supports Kaneko's belief that playing an *SMT* game is special because 'the player is forced to make decisions, just as people do in real life when they come to crossroads. As a result, [...] every player will create

their own story'.[44] This quote points to the fact that Demi-fiend does not adhere to the typical RPG character tropes of a 'legendary warrior' who is suited for a fantasy story nor is he the lone survivor archetype of the apocalypse, because his purpose is to become the player's avatar that they will use to ponder different moral dilemmas. From this description alone, *Nocturne* may come across as dour and not 'fun' in the traditional sense of a video game, but for many players games are enjoyable for the immersive experiences they offer. Psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi developed the notion of 'flow' in the cognitive sciences to explain the mental phenomena of how, when one becomes fully absorbed in what they are doing, temporal concerns such as time and self-care are ignored. Csíkszentmihályi goes on to theorize that people are at their happiest when they are in a flow state, and that this feeling is best achieved when a balance is formed between the skill of an individual and the challenge they are assigned with.[45] This process of reaching an equilibrium while an individual actively performs a task is one that has been a topic of interest in game studies due to how oftentimes video games distort this notion of balance between a player's skill level and the obstacles they must overcome so that some games appear to be easier or more difficult than others.

The difficulty of a video game is fluid and changes throughout its duration. For example, in many horror games this imbalance between skill and challenge increases with the player's progress as a means to preserve their initial anxiety and discomfort. *Nocturne* is an intriguing case for this discussion, because the game has a reputation for being 'brutally difficult' but such a bold assertion of the RPG does not account for what this difficulty is trying to tell a player.[46] To specify, the first major battle in *Nocturne* commences when Demi-fiend is challenged to a duel by a pompous demonic swordsman by the name of Matador. What makes Matador a formidable opponent is that he can decimate Demi-fiend and his allies with ease due to the game's sudden rise in difficulty for this battle. Typically, in RPGs early confrontations like this can be won

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[44] 1UP: "Shin Megami Tensei Nocturne" [online]. 1UP, 2004, updated 3 April 2004 [cited 31 July 2021]. Available from: <https://megatengaku.wordpress.com/readings/interviews/1up-shin-megami-tensei-nocturne/>.
[45] Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi, Sami Abuhamdeh and Jeanne Nakamura, 'Flow', in *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology*, The Collected Works of Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi (Claremont, CA: Springer, 2014), pp. 227-38 <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9088-8_15> (p. 232). Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi, 'Enjoyment and the Quality of Life', in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2008), pp. 43-70.
[46] RetroUnion999, 'Why is Nocturne considered brutally difficult?', reddit, 26 May 2016 <https://www.reddit.com/r/Megaten/comments/4l3em4/why_is_nocturne_considered_brutally_difficult/> [accessed 31 July 2021].

through the brute force of the protagonist alone, however if the player is to do the same in *Nocturne* they will be swiftly defeated and forced to try again. This cycle of failure can only be broken by the player's increased awareness of the rules which guide *Nocturne*'s ludonarrative as Matador's defeat is dependent on the player constructing a diverse team of spiritual beings to support Demi-fiend in his efforts. The time spent dueling Matador, also indicates how significant death is in *Nocturne* since it occurs not when a player simply falls off a platform but when they have failed to grasp a crucial aspect of the game's world as each battle is like a test to measure their knowledge and abilities.

Curiously, even if a player is able to 'get into the zone' and achieve a flow state, the experience of playing *Nocturne* is not one that is entirely dominated by action because at certain points a non-playable event, known as a cutscene, will transpire. Cutscenes are in-game cinematics that are used to frame an important dialogue between characters that the player is not to interfere with but instead, watch attentively as if it were a brief scene from a film. This formula is slightly altered in *Nocturne* because when Demi-fiend is present in a cutscene he does not engage in conversation with the other character, rather he stands in place emotionlessly while the adjacent party speaks to him without interruption. Corresponding to the game's background and setting, the characters featured in these cutscenes are all spiritual beings who use this time to share pieces of information with the player about their journey and the overlapping themes of *Nocturne* as a whole. For instance, prominent figures from the Book of Revelation such as the Four Horsemen, the Whore of Babylon, and the Seven Trumpeters accentuate in their orations the moral quandary that it is for Demi-fiend to be a demon who was once human and how his fate has been forever changed.
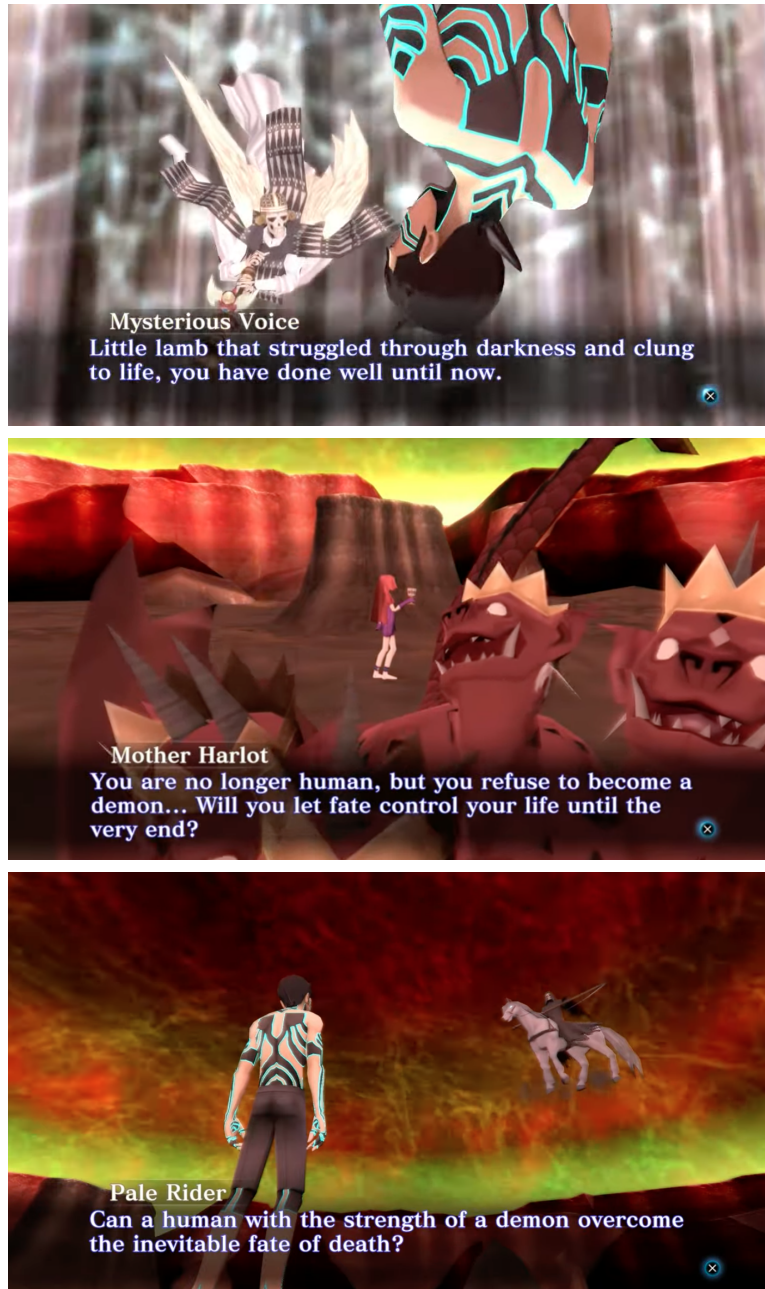
Figure 6: Speeches given to Demi-fiend by notable figures from the Book of Revelation including: the Trumpeter (top), the Whore of Babylon (middle), and the Pale Rider (bottom).[47]

Despite the uniqueness of *Nocturne*'s cutscenes which separate its visual pacing from other games, this creative flair could be criticized for attempting to deliver profound messages in a stiff and unconvincing manner. Although, after carefully examining the stylistic peculiarities of these

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[47] *Shin Megami Tensei III: Nocturne*, personal screenshot.

scenes they appear to be mirroring the medieval structure of the *Comedy*. Scholar Laurence E. Hooper writes that

> The pilgrim's encounters with characters follow an identifiable pattern with a number of stages [...] First there is a moment of recognition or acknowledgement. Next, it follows an initial dialogue that explores the historical identity and context of the shade in question.[48]

Hooper continues by explaining that these encounters differ in length and intensity from abbreviated exchanges that resemble a character sketch or *effictio*, to ones that evoke further commentary from the pilgrim, his guide, or the shade in question in which they receive a more elaborate description in the form of a *notatio*. Finally, some characters speak uninterrupted within the poem for many lines in the style of rhetorician's *sermocinatio*.[49] It is important to recognize the characteristics of these encounters because they are not isolated to the pilgrim's journey in the *Comedy* and can be compared to *Nocturne*'s many character interactions. While terms like *effictio*, *notatio*, *sermocinatio* are certainly more applicable to the circumstances of Dante's pilgrim, this template of characters speaking at varied lengths for different purposes is not lost in *Nocturne* and comes through in the game's collection of cutscenes. To illustrate, some characters exchange only a few words with Demi-fiend like when a player stops to converse with Atlus's quirky mascot, the fairy Jack Frost, who is known for his humorous catchphrase,'Hee-ho!'. Jack Frost, of course, does not contribute much to the greater story of *Nocturne* but his appearance does signal to a player that he is there in the afterlife like the passing *effictio* of a shade in Dante's hell. *Nocturne*'s version of a *notatio* then could presumably be the transaction dialogue and animation that plays every time Demi-fiend buys an item from the 'Junk Shop' Manikin, as this routine conversation is a defining trait of the shopkeeper's minor character role.[50] The pattern of these cutscenes is also what ultimately allows for the

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[48] Laurence E. Hooper, 'Characterization', in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante's 'Commedia'*, ed. by Zygmunt G. Barański and Simon Gilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 43-60 <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108367769.006> (p. 51).
[49] Ibid., p. 47.
[50] See Figure 7 below for details.

terrifying demons of Revelation to deliver their momentous speeches as the rhetoricians of the game's world who present the player with the deeper themes of Demi-fiend's journey.
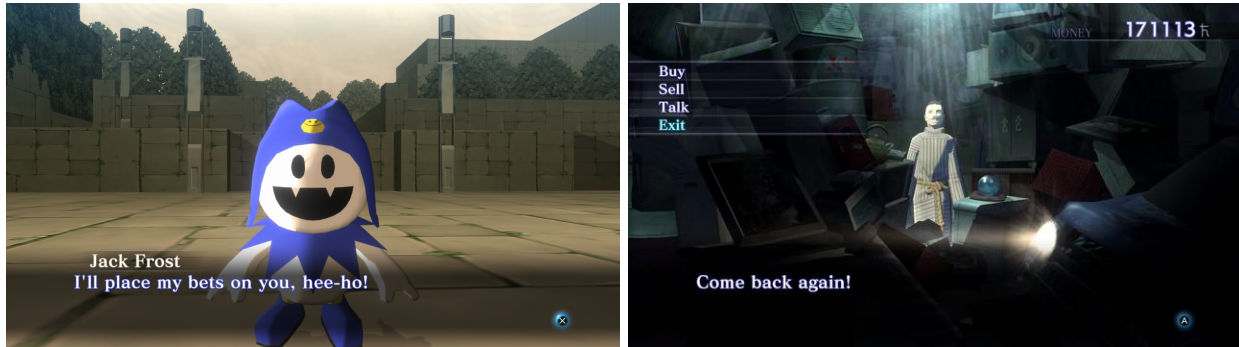

Figure 7: Short lines of dialogue delivered by Atlus's mascot Jack Frost (left) and the Junk Shop Manikin (right).[51]

I theorize that these dialogues in the *Comedy* and *Nocturne* are motivated by both narratives' aspirations to see their pilgrims better themselves for the world they are returning to, or in regards to *Nocturne*, the world Demi-fiend will help create. Meaning that, while these interactions seem static, the character development of Demi-fiend and the pilgrim are not. For one, the player's performance in the game improves over time in addition to them becoming more confident in their chosen Reason akin to how Dante's pilgrim learns from his past sins to return from his journey as the enlightened poet of the *Comedy*.

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[51] *Shin Megami Tensei III: Nocturne*, personal screenshot.

Chapter 4: The Pilgrims' Guides

Secondary only to the pilgrim, an analysis on the *Comedy* would be incomplete without considering the roles of Dante's guides and the characterization they bring to the narrative through their connections to a specific realm in the afterlife. As previously noted, while *Nocturne* takes creative liberties when adapting parts of the *Comedy*, these modifications are not severe enough to cut all ties to the original poem and the same applies to the roles of Demi-fiend's guides in the game. To begin, I will discuss the similarities between the pilgrim's first guide, the classical poet Virgil and how his character relates to the cameo appearance made by the action video game protagonist, Dante from the *Devil May Cry* series as it pertains to *Nocturne*. In a recent interview on the game's development, *Nocturne*'s lead writer Kazuyuki Yamai states that Dante's appearance in third installment of the series was a part of its 'original project proposal' as Atlus wanted a 'stylish hero' like Dante to appeal to players as an active participant in *Nocturne*'s overall story in lieu of being only a minor detail in its ludic collage.[52] It is probable that this crossover was also financially motivated, since unlike Atlus, which at the time had yet to release a game outside of Japan, the *DMC* series had already been established as a respected gaming franchise that sold well in both Western and Eastern markets.[53] For this reason, while English-speaking players were presumably unfamiliar with the obscure and tonally dark *SMT* series, they were expected to give *Nocturne* a chance because of its association with *DMC*.

Early in his journey, the pilgrim of the *Comedy* expresses self-doubt in his worthiness to set foot in heaven by comparing himself to venerated paragons such as Aeneas and Saint Paul who achieved similar feats. The pilgrim's worries dissipate when he is informed that heaven supports his venture and that his beloved poet, Virgil, will accompany him.[54] Dante's cameo in *Nocturne* is analogous to Virgil's guidance in this respect because he too must bring legitimacy to the hesitant pilgrimage of the unestablished protagonist, Demi-fiend. Not to mention, in accordance with Virgil primarily guiding the pilgrim through *Inferno*, Demi-fiend receives

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[52] Louis Bedigian, Devils May Cry when Dante Enters the World of "Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne". In *GameZone* [online]. GameZone [cited 31 July 2021]. Available from: <https://web.archive.org/web/20100224070228/http://www.gamezone.com/news/07_29_04_09_56AM.htm>.

[53] Hereafter the *Devil May Cry* series will be referred to as *DMC*.

[54] *Inferno*, canto II. 32.

Dante's support after completing the final Kalpa of the Labyrinth of Amala where the hero awaits him. In the same manner as Virgil, Dante's guidance has its limitations as he cannot depart from these lower levels of hell to assist Demi-fiend in his negotiations with Kagutsuchi in heaven. The waning importance of Dante in *Nocturne* suggests that, by following the narrative trajectory of the *Comedy*, Demi-fiend as the pilgrim will reach salvation, whereas his first guide must return to hell, or more specifically limbo, where he is to reside for an entirety. Limbo for *Nocturne*'s Dante corresponds to how he cannot complete a journey of his own because that is not the goal of the action-based video game he is from, hence the role of *Nocturne*'s pilgrim is for Demi-fiend alone to claim as an *SMT* protagonist. Additionally, on an extratextual level, a second *DMC* game was released close to *Nocturne* and due to its chaotic development schedule which involved an onslaught of production issues, *DMC 2* was a technically incompetent project that fans detested and the franchise's developer, Capcom, contemplated if the series should even receive a third installment.[55] From a player's perspective, it may seem unjustly tragic that *DMC*'s Dante is expelled to a place in limbo that he cannot escape from in both *Nocturne* and his own game, but it should be recognized that for the Virgilian guide hope for this character is expressed through the pilgrim successfully completing their journey. This journey in *Nocturne* is naturally one that relies on the player's hands-on engagement to complete it through their shared identity with Demi-fiend.

The pilgrim's second guide, Beatrice, who leads him through the upper portions of purgatory into heaven, is not another famed poet but a woman that Dante had once loved in life before her death at a young age. *Nocturne* provides little information as to who the protagonist was before The Conception, although it is implied that he was an average high school student with a juvenile 'crush' on his favorite teacher, Ms. Takao. I view Ms. Takao as an exceptional match for the character of Beatrice because despite her not surviving the apocalypse, the protagonist's feelings of endearment for his former teacher persist through the game's harrowing levels of hell, much like the affection the pilgrim has for Beatrice throughout his journey. In fact,

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[55] Andrew Rockett, Devil May Cry 3 devs were going to quit if the original game wasn't a "huge success". In *Nintendo Enthusiast* [online]. Enthusiast Gaming, updated 20 February 2020 [cited 31 July 2021]. Available from: <https://www.nintendoenthusiast.com/devil-may-cry-3-devs-quit/>. Heather Alexandra, Devil May Cry 2 Is Out On The Switch So Here's The Deal. In *Kotaku* [online]. G/O Media, updated 19 September 2019 [cited 31 July 2021]. Available from: <https://kotaku.com/devil-may-cry-2-is-out-on-the-switch-so-heres-the-deal-1838261597>.

Demi-fiend converses with the spirit of Ms. Takao throughout the game and in these brief rendezvous she will commend the player and share with them helpful gameplay tips, explicitly acting as a guide for their pilgrimage.

Another principle female figure for Demi-fiend is his classmate, Chiaki, who in the afterlife becomes one of the three Reason-holders, however if the player chooses to reject her Reason she becomes an antagonistic force in their journey instead of a positive one like Ms. Takao. Kaneko remarks that when designing the female character of *Nocturne* he desired for them to be written with a 'dual nature' so they could openly express their femininity while also being 'scary'.[56] I perceive the 'scariness' of women in *SMT* to be comparable to the awe-inspiring presence of a goddess. The character of Chiaki is then a wrathful goddess who refuses to be subservient to Demi-Fiend as the male protagonist of the game, which is a reversal of gender roles that rarely occurs in the medium. Chiaki is a fascinating example of a multi-dimensional female character because of her turbulent disposition towards the protagonist. She cannot be bound to him as a romantic partner or damsel in distress.

Within the *Comedy*, a similar moment transpires when Virgil's promise to the pilgrim that he will joyously reunite with Beatrice at the summit of purgatory proves to be untrue when instead, she rebukes him bitterly for the sins he committed after her death. From this reprimand alone, the coding of Beatrice's gender in her introduction is startlingly abnormal, and even more so when coupled with how Dante first describes her as entering the scene in a chariot where she stands before the pilgrim like an 'ammiraglio' encouraging the men aboard her ship.[57] It can thus be interpreted that in this moment Beatrice has commandeered imagery that is predominantly associated with men to demonstrate her authority over the pilgrim, as she will neither console him like a gentle mother nor passionately embrace him as a lover. In fact, Beatrice's criticism of the pilgrim is a part of her duty as a guide that she will not veer from to accommodate his desires. It should also be considered that in the Christian hierarchy of the afterlife, Beatrice, as an agent of God, far exceeds the spiritual and moral understandings of the pilgrim who has lost his

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[56] dijeh, Shin Megami Tensei III Nocturne – Dengeki Online Release Interview (Okada Cozy & Kaneko Kazuma). In *dijehtranslations* [online]. Updated 5 September 2020 [cited 31 July 2021]. Available from: <https://dijehtranslations.wordpress.com/2016/08/08/okada-and-kaneko-smt-iii-nocturne-interview-for-dengeki-online/>.
[57] *Purgatorio*, canto VI. 46-8. Ibid., canto XXX. 58.

way in life. The unorthodox depiction of Beatrice in the *Comedy*, from the power she wields to the speeches she gives, has historically befuddled the mostly male commentators of the poem, yet as scholar Joan Ferrante explains, in Dante studies Beatrice has nonetheless been:

> Accepted as a symbol of theology by most critics, even as a Christ figure by some, and that she is also recognized by most as a real historical woman Dante knew, yet no one has questioned Dante's use of a real woman, rather than an abstraction, to teach theology, in flagrant defiance of Paul's injunction, frequently echoed in the thirteenth century, against women teaching.[58]

Under these definitions, Beatrice has obtained for herself a place within fiction and even society that no other woman could feasible achieve, and it is through this extensive tradition of critical praise that she has become like a goddess whose authority the pilgrim must abide to.

Chiaki subverts femininity like this icon of Beatrice and appropriates the series's title 'megami', meaning goddess, by behaving as though she is this eponymous omnipotent deity who can obstruct the protagonist's journey from above as she sees fit. Chiaki's standing as a 'pseudo' goddess is further validated by how she is not an accessory to Demi-fiend nor is she an object that he must save. Once Chiaki establishes her Reason she becomes fully estranged from the protagonist to become her own independent voice within the narrative. In addition to being confined to secondary roles, when female characters do receive attention in games it is usually to emphasize their sexual appeal over defining their personalities and motivations. In many cases, this hypersexuaization bleeds into the advertisement of video games with studies reporting that when a female character is depicted on a game's cover they are typically shown being scantily clad, in sexually provocative positions, and bearing exaggerated proportions such as unrealistically large breasts.[59] Interestingly, following Chiaki's character development, as she gains more strength and confidence her appearance mutates into that of a grotesque demon.

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[58] Joan M. Ferrante, *Dante's Beatrice: Priest of an Androgynous God*, CEMERS Occasional Papers, 2 (Binghamton, NY: CEMERS, 1992), pp. 3-32.
[59] Melinda C. R. Burgess, Steven Paul Stermer, and Stephen R. Burgess, 'Sex, Lies, and Video Games: The Portrayal of Male and Female Characters on Video Game Covers', *Sex Roles*, 57 (2007), 419-433 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-007-9250-0> (p. 428).

Figure 8: Chiaki in her demonic form as a 'pseudo-goddess'.[60]

Chiaki is unmoved by her metamorphosis and she embraces her newfound power as a fearsome demon and goddess who is no longer burdened by the obligation that she is to be physically attractive to the player. Thus, Chiaki has the agency to rebuke the protagonist and ultimately the player for being a part of and supporting games that demean women in this way. The sentiment of Chiaki's criticism shares similarities to how many scholars theorize that Beatrice's fierce introductory lines are spoken to Dante the poet, through the character of the pilgrim, to chastise the kind of love he describes as having felt for Beatrice in his prior work, the *Vita Nuova*. In the context of the poem, after crossing through the wall of fire in purgatory, the pilgrim is to purge himself of his lustful thoughts for Beatrice so that his love for her may be transformed into an 'intimate but disembodied' adoration for the guide who saved him from his impure carnal desires.[61]

With this idea, the difference between Ms. Takao and Chiaki as feminine powers in Demi-fiend's journey, is that Ms. Takao more readily believes that through her guidance the protagonist will reach salvation while Chiaki presses for his obedience. Although, one could argue in response to these female characters' opposing views of the protagonist that Ms. Takao has been appointed to the trite archetype of the 'good' woman who must take a stand against the

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[60] *Shin Megami Tensei III: Nocturne*, personal screenshot.
[61] Regina Psaki, 'Dante's Redeemed Eroticism', *Lectura Dantis*, 18/19 (1996), 12-19
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/44806625> [accessed 10 August 2021] (p. 12).

vileness of Chiaki as the narrative's designated 'bad' woman. This dichotomy of the good/bad woman is only further amplified by Ms. Takao and Chiaki's comparison because Chiaki also doubles as an abject depiction of womanhood that defies nature and established gender roles. This does not imply, however, that Ms. Takao is powerless to the likes of Chiaki or more importantly Demi-fiend, because her influence on the protagonist's journey is arguably unmatched by any other character's. To elucidate, at the start of the game, Ms. Takao gives the player the option to choose a preferred family and given name for Demi-fiend, which thereafter, he will be referred to by for the rest of his journey. Ms. Takao's actions in this moment are equally thought-provoking because she is the first character to say the protagonist's chosen name. In regards to the *Comedy*, the only line that addresses the pilgrim by his name, 'Dante', is spoken by Beatrice, and when this line is paired with the naming mechanic of Ms. Takao, it demonstrates the personal hold these female guides have on their pilgrims.[62] Unlike the Virgilian guide who is a heroic model that is to be surpassed, the pilgrim reveres Beatrice as a spiritual muse and mentor capable of unveiling his faults which she knows the full extent of. Thus, Ms. Takao and Chiaki should not be thought of as clashing adversaries because when evaluated together they exhibit the complete spectrum of Beatrice's characterization in the *Comedy*'s as the stern but caring guide of the pilgrim.
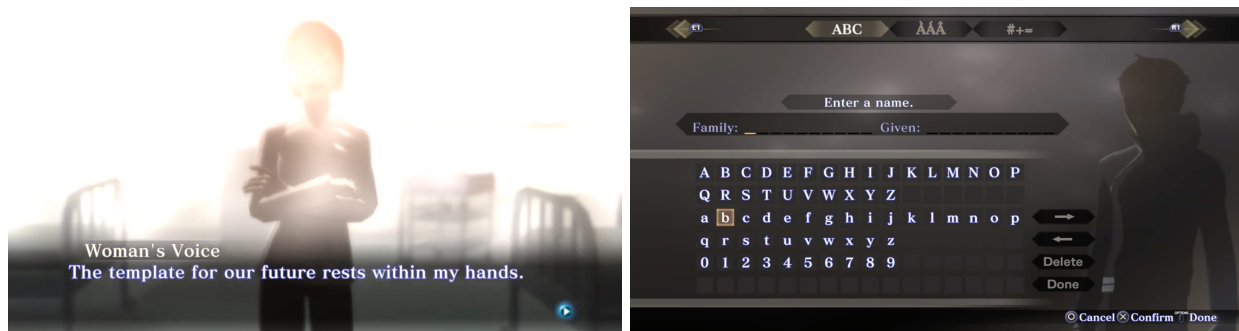

Figure 9: Ms. Takao as an apparition (left) and the menu she provides a player with to name the protagonist (right).[63]

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[62] *Purgatorio*, canto XXX. 55.
[63] *Shin Megami Tensei III: Nocturne*, personal screenshot.

Conclusion

It is certainly interesting to detect the presence of important characters in the *Comedy* as they have been reinterpreted for *Nocturne*, but it remains undetermined as to how Dante's writing influences the themes of the game. Or in other words, it is crucial to ask how Dante is incorporated into *Nocturne*'s understanding of life and death and what this signifies for Demi-fiend as a pilgrim in this ludic environment. These binaries are commented on in the visual sequence that plays after Demi-fiend dies because, according to Kaneko this 'Game Over' screen was inspired by Gustave Doré's illustrations of heaven he created for the *Comedy*.[64]
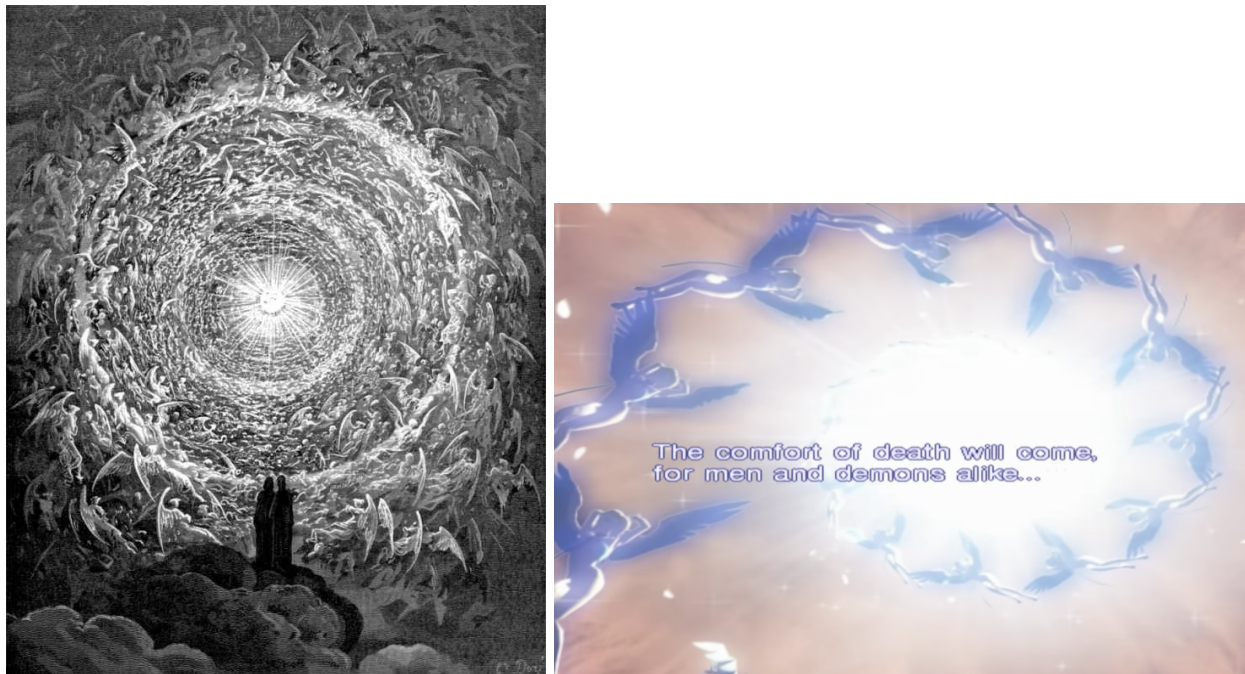

Figure 10: *Nocturne*'s 'Game Over' sequence compared to Gustave Doré's illustrations for *Paradiso*.[65]

Kaneko's fascination with the *Comedy* extends to other works within the poem's substantial reception history, which from the perspective of an artist may seem like a daunting amount of material to cover, but Kaneko rebuffs this worry and expresses that by collaborating with Dante and Doré across mediums his creative process is 'like creating your own world together with

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[64] dijeh, Shin Megami Tensei III Nocturne – Dengeki Online Release Interview (Okada Cozy & Kaneko Kazuma).
[65] Gustave Doré, *Paradiso Canto XXXI.19*, 1868, engraving. Available from: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paradiso_Canto_31.jpg> [accessed 5 August 2021]. *Shin Megami Tensei III: Nocturne*, personal screenshot.

people who share your sensibilities'.[66] The 'world' that Kaneko is referring to in this quotation is the afterlife, which as an incorporeal domain can be made accessible through the creation of poems, traditional pieces of art, and even video games. With this in mind, Dante's *Comedy* created a 'transmedial world' long before this concept was first theorized by contemporary academia. The term transmediality is typically used to describe the modern phenomena of how when a piece of fiction becomes popular it is anticipated to spawn a massive media franchise which includes an assortment of new products like films, comics, and games that are separated yet still moderately connected to the original source material. Scholar Yonah Ringlestein notes that transmedia has some religious qualities to it, as avid fans of a specific franchise will attempt to consume all of these different outputs in a ritual that Ringlestein believes is performed to achieve a sense of 'completeness' in their lives.[67]

This same framework of influence pertains to how over time the *Comedy* has found a place for itself within the arts and even popular culture. However, it would be a mistake to judge these derivatives of the *Comedy* as being works with diminished artistic value when each output is inventive in its own right. For example, scholar Ileana Marin argues that Doré's aforementioned illustrations marked a clear shift in a 19th-century reader's perception of text and image due to Doré insisting that his work be printed alongside Dante's poems, which was a change in format that starkly contrasted with how, in previous illustrated books, artists were restricted to the use of in-text vignettes.[68] Doré's illustrations are crucial for obtaining an understanding of transmedia and transmedial adaptations because these editions of the *Comedy* encouraged readers to look back and forth between its pages as if it were a proto-game simulating the multi-track experience of playing a present-day video game. Moving forward in time, *Nocturne*'s 'Game Over' sequence can be interpreted as functionally implementing these same ludic qualities first proposed by Doré into its version of the *Comedy*. Given this

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[66] dijeh, The other face of the Demon Artist, Kaneko Kazuma. In *dijehtranslations* [online]. Updated 23 November 2020 [cited 31 July 2021]. Available from:
<https://dijehtranslations.wordpress.com/2016/10/31/the-other-face-of-the-demon-artist-kaneko-kazuma/>.
[67] Yonah Ringlestein, 'Real or Not Real: The Hunger Games as Transmediated Religion', *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, 25.3 (2013), 372-387 <https://doi.org/10.3138/jrpc.25.3.372> (p. 375).
[68] Ileana Marin, 'Dante's Hell Envisioned by Gustav Doré: An Overlooked Opening to Modernity', *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Studies and Environmental Communication*, 4.1 (2015), 17-30
<https://doi.org/10.5682/22853324> (p. 11).

circumstance, Doré and Kaneko were galvanized by the *Comedy* to capture its greatness in their own works. The genesis of the *Comedy*'s transmediality is thereby, the impact it has on its readers who carry with them its influences from different mediums into modernity. Doré's illustrations and *Nocturne* are just two of the many examples of what transmediality can accomplish through adaptation, as both works' strengths are that they impart a unique perspective onto their audiences. These perspectives are also medium-specific, given that any scene in *Nocturne* may remind a player of how the game's spiritual undertaking is one they endure alongside the protagonist through countless hardships and miracles.

Perhaps, *Nocturne*'s close proximity to these moments of death and being reborn anew have relevance to the significant amount of time it takes to complete the game in juxtaposition to the approximate time one spends reading a novel or watching a film. According to HowLongtoBeat.com, which is an online database made for players to track their time spent playing games, the main story of *Nocturne* is reported to take a total of 50.5 hours to complete. Whereas from another point of reference, *Dante's Inferno* can be completed in a mere 8 hours. This data indicates that even when compared to other video games, *Nocturne* has a robust narrative that cannot be resolved from a single day of play. What this entails for a player is that if they do aim to complete *Nocturne*, the game will not be a channel of frivolous entertainment for them because, like the metaphorical undertaking of a spiritual journey, *Nocturne* calls for a dedicated and unyielding pilgrim. With these numbers in mind, it would not be unsurprising for a 50 hour game to have a narrative that, at some moments, becomes incredibly convoluted and difficult to understand. This assumption stands doubly true for the medium of video games because a player cannot sit idly during play, as the game demands for them to pay close attention to what is happening on-screen. In order to counterbalance this difficulty, the various messages that are presented to a player in *Nocturne* can be surmised by the game's unifying theme of viewing life and death as an endless cycle that repeats itself. The unity of this theme is best expressed in the two main pieces of key artwork that Kaneko created for *Nocturne*, known simply as 'Birth' and 'Death', which were printed on the game's manual and back cover respectively. Together they depict an impressive visual landscape of hell akin to many artistic renderings of the Last Judgement in its magnitude with Demi-fiend shown on both canvases as

being fully encompassed by a vibrant militia of Kaneko's uniquely designed demons. Outside of their function as eye-catching packaging, these pieces ratify *Nocturne*'s multicultural order of the cosmos as a universal space for world religions where its deities are intermixed with Demi-fiend's journey as either supernatural entities that preserve the protagonist's life or end it.

Figures 11 & 12: Key visuals from *Nocturne* tilted 'Birth' (top left) and 'Death' (top right) created by Kaneko to represent the themes of metempsychosis in the game. This artwork was used on the front page of the game's manual (bottom left) and the back cover of its box design (bottom right).[69]

[69] Kazuma Kaneko, *Birth*, *c*. 2003, digital illustration. Available from:
<https://megamitensei.fandom.com/wiki/Demi-fiend?file=Concepts_2.jpg> [accessed 5 August 2021]. Ibid., *Death*, *c*. 2003, digital illustration. Available from:
<https://megamitensei.fandom.com/wiki/Demi-fiend?file=Nocturne-Lucifer%2527sCall.jpg> [accessed 5 August 2021]. *Shin Megami Tensei III: Nocturne*, game box and manual.

Upon first glance, these works give the impression of being only slightly distinguishable from one another. Although, when their finer details are studied, the postures and expressions of these demons convey a vastly different mood from 'Birth' to 'Death'. For example, in 'Birth' Demi-fiend appears at ease with the demons around him encapsulated by how his limbs are drawn entangled with two female demons, namely the Shinto goddess Kikuri-Hime, to his right and the alternative first wife of the biblical Adam, Lilith, to his left, as the pair look to him in awe with a hint of sexual desire. The demons on the outer circle of this composition, which include the masculine figures of the Norse god Thor, occult deity Baphomet, and Zoroastrianism's divinity Mithra, like their female counterparts gaze in awe but in exchange for eroticism these male demons exude an air of competitiveness as if they have gathered to witness the birth of Demi-fiend to challenge him to an energetic battle. Thus, as a complete scene 'Birth' narrates the course of challenge and pleasure that surges through one's life in disparity to the aesthetic language of 'Death' which calls for Demi-fiend to be tormented at the hands of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. The Horsemen in 'Death', specifically the Red Rider of war and the White Rider of conquest, grasp Demi-fiend's flesh with hostility, as they are not his demonic companions who he is peacefully coexists with but instead violent harbingers of the end whose sole mission is to deracinate the protagonist from the world of the living. Amidst this ambush, the remaining figures of the Trumpeter and the Whore of Babylon from Revelation, observe distantly as Demi-fiend meets his inevitable demise under the watchful eye of the fallen angel himself, Lucifer, who is partially shown encased by shadows at the top of the composition.

Lucifer is a seminal character in *Nocturne* because regardless of a player's varied experience and the time they spend playing the game, he will remain as a permanent fixture of hell. In fact, most Western scholarship on *SMT* tends to inquire about the series's peculiar depiction of Lucifer, with an article of note being scholar Jonathon O'Donnell's close-reading on Lucifer's characterization in *SMT IV* and how it is parallel to Milton's influential portrayal of him in *Paradise Lost*. This close reading is informative because O'Donnell dedicates his analysis to showcasing how *SMT IV*'s Lucifer radiates the same essence of rebelliousness that the

Romantics crafted for their version of the fallen angel.[70] Yet *Nocturne*'s Lucifer is more consistent with the Dantean depiction of this figure who along with all the sinners in hell is punished for his sins against God. To specify, in the *Comedy*, Lucifer's punishment is elucidated to the reader through the explicit descriptions the poet provides which detail how the once beautiful angel, now imprisoned in the frozen center of hell, has been transformed into a repulsive beast with the wings of a bat and three heads. In addition to this repulsiveness, Lucifer is denied any agency as he cannot speak or do little more than continually sob while he is forced to gnaw on sinners and flap his grotesque wings to generate an icy wind that preserves the landscape of his imprisonment. Therefore, it is evident that Dante's Lucifer is no fearsome ruler of hell; rather he is a mechanical puppet of a higher power. The same can be said for *Nocturne*'s interpretation of the character whose design mirrors the poet's description as well as the later illustrations produced by Doré for *Inferno*.[71]

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[70] Jonathon O'Donnell, 'A Digital Devil's Saga: Representation(s) of the Demon in Recent Videogames', *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, 7 (January 2015), 139-160 <https://doi.org/10.11588/rel.2015.0.18511> (p. 147-9).

[71] For these various illustrations see Figure 13.

Figure 13: Depictions of Lucifer beginning with an illustration from a medieval manuscript of the *Comedy* (bottom), to Doré's interpretation, (top left), and finally Kaneko's (top right).[72]

Strangely, in *Nocturne* Lucifer does not reveal his 'true' form as the Dantean monster until the game's end because leading up to this climax he only appears to Demi-fiend as a human either in

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[72] Gustave Doré, *Inferno Canto XXXIV.34*, 1890, engraving. Available from: <http://www.worldofdante.org/pop_up_query.php?dbid=I636&show=more> [accessed 5 August 2021]. Kazuma Kaneko, *Lucifer*, illustration, from *Kazuma Kaneko Art Book Works Vol.2 Megami Tensei* (Tokyo: Shinkigensha, 2006) Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Holkham misc. 48: <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/ab35e336-a471-4cf0-a9a7-592dbb8695d8/>.

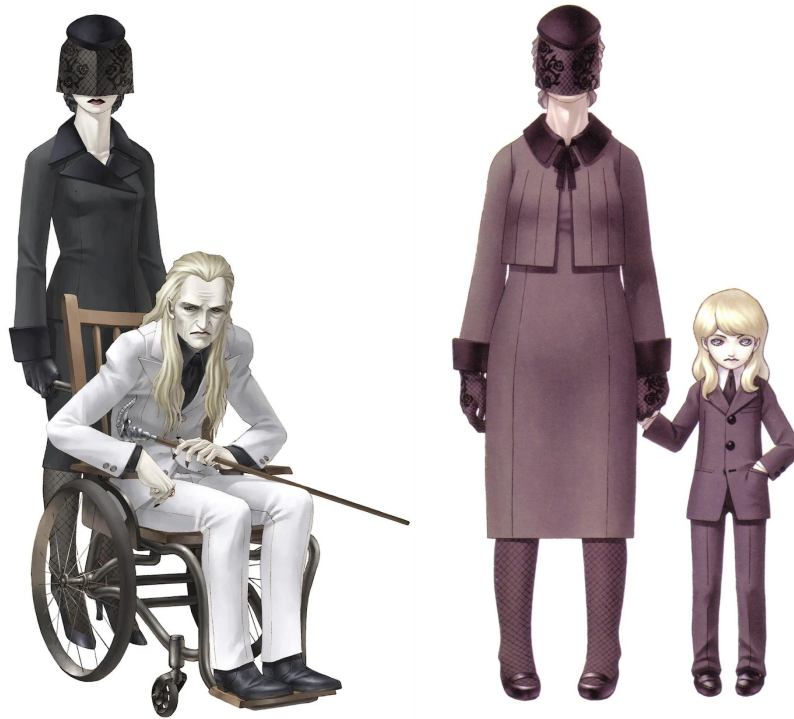the body of a young child, who relies on the care of a nanny, or as an equally feeble elderly man.
[73]

Figure 14: Lucifer as he appears in *Nocturne*, notice how vastly his age differs in both forms.[74]

I propose that this design choice is the outcome of Kaneko's intentions to have the game's dominant fixation with the binary of life and death merge fluidly with the punishment of Lucifer, because by doing so it stresses how even a powerful and culturally significant demon cannot escape this cycle of metempsychosis. Consequently, like his Dantean equivalent, *Nocturne*'s Lucifer is also rendered powerless by his confinement where, due to the machine-like coding of the game, he is only called to action when Demi-fiend ultimately enters his chamber at the narrative's conclusion.

When this theme is applied to characters outside of Lucifer's sphere like Demi-fiend's guide, Dante, *Nocturne* appears to be commentating on the lifecycle of video games themselves and how even a popular franchise like *DMC* can meet a disastrous end from releasing one poorly

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[73] See Figure 14. The elder Lucifer is on the left and his child counterpart is on the right.
[74] Kazuma Kaneko, *Lucifer*, illustration, from *Kazuma Kaneko Art Book Works Vol.3 Megami Tensei* (Tokyo: Shinkigensha, 2008).

received installment. Demi-fiend, by contrast, does not share the same tragic fate as his guide and adversary because, as a result of completing his journey, he is able to break free from the constraints of mortality in games and redefine how a player thinks of them. The resolution to *Nocturne*'s narrative is finalized through Demi-fiend creating the new world that was fostered by the player's input on how society could be improved. Knowing this, it is vital to consider that this type of decision-making does not cease to exist once the game has been completed because moral 'crossroads', to use Kaneko's term, linger outside of the experience of play and regularly materialize in one's everyday life. As someone who has played *Nocturne* multiple times, I can attest to the fact that after I put my controller down and turned off the console that I still thought about Demi-fiend's journey and if the decisions I made were the correct ones or not. Simply put, *Nocturne* strengthens the player's ability to reflect internally on their beliefs and actions so that they can transfer the game's ideal 'new world' to their reality. In his design notes, Kaneko explains that when developing Demi-fiend's character he chose to 'put more emphasis on reflecting his [Demi-fiend's] outlook on the world rather than developing his personality' hence *Nocturne*'s protagonist is like a vessel for the player to become the pilgrim and poet of the game's spiritual journey.[75] Not to mention, like the *Comedy*'s pilgrim who is instructed by his guide, Beatrice, to write of his experience once he has returned to the world of the living, the player is also a prophet of sorts whose benefit to society is their enlightened perspective on how to behave and treat others.[76] What this denotes for the *Comedy* and *Nocturne* is that while their narratives do have clear endings, one is meant to ponder the significance of these texts after an initial reading or playthrough respectively. Reflections on art can in themselves lead to new transmedial pieces, like illustrations for various cantos in the *Comedy* or for *Nocturne*, fan art, fan fiction, and video essays amongst other player made content that can be casually found in fandom spaces online. In this vein, when Atlus announced that a remastered edition of *Nocturne* would be released in May 2021, there was a resurgence in interest for an 18-year-old RPG that

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[75] Maragos, In Character: Kazuma Kaneko.
[76] *Purgatorio*, canto XXXII. 103-5.

had new and old players alike excited to partake in the game's distinctly 'solitary' and 'almost meditative experience'.[77]

This event in *Nocturne*'s own reception history demonstrates that video games, be it from play or engaging with fan content, have an emotional impact on their players as they are brought together to form niche communities and share insight into the games they cherish. For this reason, *Nocturne*'s relationship to the *Comedy*, as one of the many outputs that comprise the poem's boundless web of adaptations, should not be overlooked because by occupying a different creative space it illuminates the aptitude of transmediality to produce works that are fully independent from their source material. To clarify, in transmedial adaptation there is no precise expectation for what a final product should look like and *Nocturne* has exercised this freedom to evolve from its influences. Evocative of a palimpsest, transmedial outputs may appear at first glance to be unrelated to a seminal work of art due to the extremity of the revisions they make to it, but nevertheless beneath the surface lies traces of the original, or the center of this web that connects artistic inputs from different mediums and periods. This process can naturally occur over and over again and the *Comedy* with its impressive legacy brings to this transmedial space a well of unmistakable influence for new works to be made from the poem's endless creativity.

The *Comedy* is truly an immortal piece of literature and its longevity is fortified by the production and analysis of recent texts, like video games, and the validity of this statement will remain absolute proceeding into the unprecedented future with the emergence of additional digital mediums that, with time, will increase in critical acclaim and their power to influence experimental forms. In the meantime, *Nocturne* should be upheld as an exemplar of what constitutes a 'good' game as it bestows players and academics with a text that is stimulating to play and analyze.

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[77] Patrick Klepek, 'What It's Like Updating a Classic Like 'Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne' for 2021', *Vice*, 28 May 2021<https://www.vice.com/en/article/5dbgwq/what-its-like-updating-a-classic-like-shin-megami-tensei-nocturne-for-2021> [accessed 5 August 2021].

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