"Spiritual Warfare" and Intolerance in Popular Culture: The *Left Behind* Franchise, the Commodification of Belief, and the Consequences for Imagination

> The U.S. government's *9-11 Commission Report* characterized our basic failure in meeting the terrorist attack as a "significant failure of imagination" (446).
>
> "Imagine…."
> John Lennon

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reports that 57% of self-described Evangelicals now believe that "many religions can lead to eternal life," but this new open-mindedness has not yet influenced those who produce the books and games that turn belief into commodities. This essay reads the imagery of apocalyptic eschatology because, as Karen Armstrong has observed, "If we learn to read the imagery of fundamentalism, we take the first step in learning about and understanding each other" (*Battle for God* 446). We should read this imagery and understand its significance because, as it crosses over into secular enterprises, *Left Behind* images have the potential to redefine Christianity in popular culture. The impulse to close texts, either scripture, or Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* franchise, or J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, to one interpretation repudiates important elements of Christianity and an essential human trait—imagination.[1]

These apocalyptic images have had a long life in popular American culture, so this article traces them from their inspiration in the 19th century to their introduction into the digital realm with the computer game *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*.[2] The producers of the game seem not to see the ways in which reading oneself into a teleological game might inculcate intolerance: the box entices viewers with the opportunity to engage in "spiritual warfare." While it is possible to infer a fear of imagination among some conservative evangelicals when examining the game or the books that came before it, internet websites and bloggers explicitly reveal that there are those who believe imagination itself is dangerous. Confidence in biblical inerrancy may have its roots in discomfort with imagination, but Jesus' narrative strategy depended upon imaginative response.

We should be concerned that the *Left Behind* narrative has become an important lens through which the rest of the world views American Christianity. These products turn scripture to their commercial advantage by dramatizing a vision of eschatology that most Christian churches reject as unbiblical, including the conservative Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church, as well as mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches. Yet when cable television expands this perspective worldwide, viewers outside the tradition could rightly infer an overt hostility on the part of Evangelical Americans towards non-Christians as well as those from different Christian denominations. This thinking depends upon an imaginative reading of scripture: the word "rapture" never appears in the New Testament. The idea has one oblique scriptural source: After the dead rise, "we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (I Thessalonians: 4:17). The event in this one verse, as some evangelicals see it, unleashes Armageddon. But this is a distortion of the primary emphasis of biblical eschatology. "The rapture is a racket," according to theologian Barbara Rossing: "this theology distorts God's vision for the world. In place of healing, the rapture proclaims escape. In place of Jesus' blessing of peacemakers, the rapture voyeuristically glorifies violence and war" (Rossing 1, 22).

Eschatological Anxieties of the Past and Present

In order to explain this franchise I must briefly describe two apocalyptic traditions in Scripture. Broadly speaking, prophetic eschatology and apocalyptic eschatology present very different views of both human and divine nature. Prophetic eschatology expects God to work through human history to accomplish his aims. It uses direct language to refer to God's enemies and speaks in limited terms about the near future. Apocalyptic eschatology, by contrast, takes a darker view: it casts humanity as unredeemably sinful, so that the divine purpose can only be accomplished by ending this world. It reads metaphors—natural disasters, animals and numbers—as coded language which carries special meaning. This scriptural reading employs deduction rather than imagination. It is this latter approach, apocalyptic eschatology, that fuels the *Left Behind* narratives.

Broad popular acceptance of apocalyptic eschatology presents a case study of the ways ideas enter popular culture. The ideas of a nineteenth century British preacher, John Nelson Darby, who first articulated the idea of a secret rapture in 1833, were introduced into millions of homes through the Scofield Reference Bibles, first published in 1909, by C. I. Scofield, of Dallas Theological Seminary. Daniel Radosh observes that Bible publishing "embodies" the intersection of faith and consumerism that defines contemporary American evangelicalism; it was Scofield that initiated that trend (61). The page layout all but sanctified Darby's end-times system, by foregrounding his ideas—the rapture of the faithful, seven years of "tribulation," and the battle of Armageddon—by placing speculative, tendentious exegesis side by side on the same page with Scripture, thus leading the untutored to treat Scofield's notes as though they were Scripture itself (Schmidt 9). Consequently, the vision of our inevitable future that *Left Behind* propagates is built upon highly imaginative nineteenth century ideas.

If the *Scofield Reference Bible* introduced apocalyptic eschatology to many nineteenth century Evangelicals, books originally marketed for Christians crossed over to the secular market and introduced this "inevitable" concluding narrative to millions in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Hal Lindsey and Carole C. Clarkson's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, a *New York Times* non-fiction bestseller, looked to the founding of Israel in 1948 and predicted that Christ's Second Coming was imminent.

His was the first Christian prophecy text to succeed in the secular market, selling 28 million copies between 1970 and 1990 (Boyer 5). In 1986, Frank Peretti's *This Present Darkness*, inspired by the metaphorical spiritual warfare in Ephesians, set the standard for violent Christian suspense thrillers. Now Peretti distances himself from that book, which he describes as "just blatantly evangelical in tone. It's no holds barred. I don't write that way any more, though. I find it a little heavy-handed. . . . There's a lot of Christian material out there that's just so blatantly Christian, it's just *bad*" (Radosh 113).

By the end of the twentieth century, evangelists such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson preached about the rapture so constantly that many Americans assume it must be the only biblical explanation for how things are all going to end. This peripheral passage unconnected from any other texts about the end of history is so widely held to be true that, as Kevin Phillips argues in *American Theocracy,* the *Left Behind* books informed President George W. Bush's thinking as well as his rhetoric in the lead-up to the Iraq War. "Because mainline Christianity had not paid serious attention to the Cyrus Scofield—Hal Lindsey—Tim LaHaye viewpoint during the 1970s and 1980s when the Christian right was resurging, no contradictory theological foundation had been laid" (Phillips 252-62). [3]

Evangelicals of the *Left Behind* variety look to disasters as the portents of the end of the world. In the months after 9-11, a Time/CNN poll found that "more than one third of Americans say they are paying more attention now to how the news might relate to the end of the world. . . . and nearly one-quarter think the Bible predicted the Sept. 11 attack" (Gibbs). Those who want an up-to-the-minute forecast of the end of life as we know it can access the on-line Rapture Index, "the prophetic speedometer of end-time activity," which tracks how current events connect to 45 prophetic categories to signal the imminence of the rapture.[4]

LaHaye's catchy title, *Left Behind,* comes from Larry Norman's 1960s song, but has become pop culture short-hand for zany Christianity, providing fodder for satire. *The Simpsons* episode entitled "Thank God It's Doomsday" satirized the characteristic sense that we are, in *this* moment, on the cusp of the end times. When Homer becomes convinced that the rapture will take place, Lisa tries to persuade him not to rush out to a hilltop: " 'All through human history self-anointed seers have predicted the end of the

world. And they've *all* been wrong' " (Groening, Brooks, and Jean). Tina Fey's 2008 performance as Sarah Palin in Sa*turday Night Live*'s debate makes it clear we understand apocalyptic expectations. When moderator Queen Latifah asked Fey's Palin whether human actions explain global warming, the audience laughed as the "candidate" began to get lost in her own answer, but howled as Fey concluded: " 'We don't know if this climate change whosie-whatsit is man-made (pause) or if it is just a natural part of the end of days' " ("V. P. Debate").

The Spiritual Warfare of the *Left Behind* Books

The *Left Behind* franchise, by closing scripture to one terrifying conclusion, participates in a religious commodification designed to instill and sell fear.[5] Those who create *Left Behind* products fear both a wrathful God and anyone who won't convert to this belief system. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins first captured an adult market with *Left Behind* (1996-2004), a thirteen volume adult series; at one point, four of the books simultaneously appeared on *The New York Times* bestseller list. Early success led Jenkins (with a credit line going to LaHaye) to recast the story for middle school children in forty volumes: *Left Behind: The Kids* (1999-2004). The authors encourage pre-teens to read terrifying books because they fear what God plans to do. *Left Behind* casts the Secretary General of the United Nations, Nicolae Carpathia, as the antichrist. The plots follow the Tribulation Force, a small band of Christians converted after the Rapture, that spends the seven years awaiting Christ's return battling Carpathia's forces. The world implodes when the Battle of Armageddon begins; meteors crash into the earth, great cracks swallow the antichrist's soldiers, while Everest flattens. It is a Manichean vision that sees those outside of a narrow definition of Christianity as the forces of evil, which becomes especially problematical in the genre of computer games.

A glimpse into the *Left Behind* narrative illustrates how a closed text breeds fear and intolerance. Millions of Christians across the Church affirm in the Nicene Creed that Christ "will come again to judge the living and the dead," without limiting that expectation to one version of future events. The last novel in the adult series, *Glorious Appearing*, provides a sense of the

use of violence. Christ, recently returned to earth, calls all to " 'come near, you nations, to hear, and heed, you people.' " At that moment:

> Men and women, soldiers and horses seemed to explode where they stood. It was as if the very words of the Lord had super-heated their blood, causing it to burst through their veins and skin . . . Tens of thousands of foot soldiers dropped their weapons, grabbed their heads or their chests, fell to their knees and writhed as they were invisibly sliced asunder. Their innards and entrails gushed to the desert floor, and as those around them turned to run, they too were slain, their blood pooling and rising in the unforgiving brightness of the glory of Christ (225-26).

The reader is encouraged to relish the violence of those "others" damned in such a graphic way. The children's version encourages either a repellant enjoyment of violence or a fear of damnation. In volume forty, *Triumphant Return*, when Christ appears, the kids in the Tribulation Force notice "bodies ripping open and blood pouring out" (112). When the antichrist's army advances, the soldiers melt: "But before they could shoot, skin dripped from their arms and their eyes melted. The once healthy soldiers were now simply uniforms full of bones. Seconds later the same thing happened to the horses. Their flesh and eyes and tongues dripped away like candle wax" (145).

These scare tactics recast the Prince of Peace into a terrifying judge and encourage intolerance in pre-teen readers: those outside the faith deserve the most excruciating deaths. Christ damns the antichrist's converts: " 'Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his demons! For I was hungry, and you didn't feed me. I was thirsty and you didn't give me anything to drink. . . . when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me' "(*Triumphant Return* 186-87). To a child raised within the Christian tradition, this call for social justice is turned on its head as the sin requiring excruciating punishment:

> 'We repent! We will turn! We will turn! We worship you, O Jesus, Son of God. You are Lord!'
> 'But for you it is too late,' Jesus said with sorrow in his voice. . . Rather than resist the evil one, you chose to serve him.'
> 'We were wrong! Wrong! We acknowledge you as Lord!' 'Like my Father, with whom I am one, I take no pleasure in the death of wicked people, but that is justice, and that is your sentence.'

> [They] screamed in pain, their snakelike bodies shedding their clothes. Then they burst into flames and were finally carried away by the wind (165).

Jesus may take no pleasure, but it seems Jenkins does. All four Gospels consistently present Jesus as generous to outsiders, those on the margin, those deemed unclean—"others"; the problem with the dualism of the *Left Behind* stories, categorizing all into the saved and the damned, is that it encourages its readers to dehumanize others. In binding scripture to one preordained, cataclysmic conclusion to the human narrative, it constricts Christianity itself, at least in the view of those outside this specific perspective.

Tribal Anxieties in the Digital Realm

The computer game *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* is yet another commodity in a series of ever restrictive, more tightly closed narratives that directly encourages intolerance. *Rolling Stone* described the game, released in December 2006, as "the perfect American holiday gift. Celebrate the birth of Jesus by wasting dozens of people at a time, using a provocative variety of Christ-sanctioned weapons" (Taibbi). Surveys suggest that evangelical Christians are less concerned with representations of physical violence than with sex and profanity in the media, especially if they see it having a "factual basis"(Romanowski 207-8)—think *The Passion of the Christ* as well as *The Left Behind* plots.

Michael Maudlin, a former editor of *Christianity Today*, sees the attraction as "tribal": "If you are not a Christian, you are either evil or stupid. You are with God or against him. It's us vs. them, and we win" (Grossman). Players of the game join the tribe to participate in the cyber-fight. For teens within this faith community, playing the game reinforces one's place in the community. We should not underestimate how toys, games, and jewelry help average Christians "tell themselves and the world around them who they are" (McDannell 272). For Evangelical teens playing the game, they are "with God" when they log on. After watching a brief video that situates the game plot in the moments after the rapture, the game opens in 500 blocks of New York City, including Wall Street, Chinatown, Greenwich Village, the UN, and Harlem.

As one enters the landscape, one cannot help but "read oneself" into the teleological world as an elite hero, part of the tribe, who will survive Armageddon while many who remain will suffer ghastly deaths. Even though the *Manual* states "you do not personally participate in the action: you command your units to perform tasks by giving orders via the game interface"(9), the player looks at the landscape and every other character from the point of view of a member of the Tribulation Force. Unlike the novels, you don't see the world through the narrator's perspective; you watch out for danger to your avatar around every corner. The *Game Manual* can't compete with the informal learning spaces of game play, what James Paul Gee calls "affinity spaces" outside of adult control (qtd. in Henry Jenkins 177). There other players and the "God" of the game—the software—teach players what they need to become full participants in this liminal realm.

Eternal Forces traps players in a closed narrative landscape where the manufacturers hope they will come to understand the truth about death. That hope frames the greeting that opens the *Game Manual* by Troy Lyndon, Co-Founder of Left Behind Games.

> Video games no longer have to enter into a dark world. . . . . For those who are not believers of any faith, this game will not only entertain you with great game play, you will be encouraged to think about matters of eternal importance in a way that is not abrasive or negative. It is my personal opinion that seeking the reality of what might happen when we die should be exciting adventure. . . similar to an Indiana Jones' real-life story.

Mr. Lyndon seems not to understand the visual impact of the New York landscape in his game: whatever it is, it is dark. He does not understand his secular audience: how many gamers will contemplate eternity or agree that thinking about one's own death is like a Spielberg plot?

On some level the company understands the difference in the product it is marketing; the attitude toward violence is far different than in the novels. Because the plot has now morphed to a platform where the genre expectations require violence, the company faces a real challenge. In some senses, gaming requires a deeper imaginative engagement than reading, as the company realizes when its advertising entices consumers with the lure of the opportunity to engage in "spiritual warfare." While reading invites a reader to imagine what other lives might be like, gaming involves a virtual participation in some distinctly other life. While the books encourage read-

ers to enjoy the violence, the *Game Manual* continually reminds players that salvation, not destruction, is the goal because of genre expectations: it is proof that the producers fear what happens in the digital world outside of adult control. The *Manual* exhorts players: “Your purpose is absolutely NOT to wipe out the enemy forces!”(26). Players of other games are likely to be frustrated by the Christian limitations of violence. On the seventh level of the game when bad guys appear in a Humvee and fire machine guns at the chapel, the player cannot attack. Players are likely to be disconcerted by comments from the Tribulation Force who often shout out, “Praise God.”

Those who inhabit the landscape reveal how dark this view of human nature is—college is the training ground for the enemy and even your friends are in danger of being recruited for the antichrist. The enemy include Musicians, Recording Artists, Pop Stars, Thieves, Thugs, and Gang Bosses—all of whom have been “Trained: at College”(44-47). “Friends” are new converts who have the ability to pray to raise their “spirit level” or help the player by driving Humvees, Tanks or Helicopters. The *Manual* advises, “Be careful with your newfound Friends. . . . They can be easy pickings for any enemy recruiters”(26). Prayer Warriors are the ultimate spiritual fighters: “Prayer Warriors are *women* [emphasis added] tapping into their exceptional, unconditional care for people and transform[ing] themselves into outstanding fighters who will never fire a shot.” The strategic player keeps Medics, Nurses, and Doctors—both genders qualify—near their “forces engaged in physical warfare” (33). “Remember your mission is NOT to inflict bodily harm. But if you are attacked, Medics will be pivotal in keeping your people alive”(32-33). The *Manual* cautions players to be careful with a Level 3 Soldier: “His abilities are absolutely a double edged sword—his skill with weaponry is extraordinarily effective when required. But, left unchecked, his exceptional skill is a clear danger to winning the spiritual war he is also fighting” (35). Players are also cautioned about the snipers, whose “skills are deadly at a longer range, which could easily result in greater casualities, which is something you absolutely don’t want” (36).

The company knew to anticipate backlash. Not surprisingly, in the weeks before Christmas 2006, the Council for American Islamic Relations, the Christian Alliance for Progress, and the Anti-Defamation League as well as some conservative Christian organizations, denounced the game.

Annette Brown, Left Behind Game Company's Prayer Team Leader, identified a list of "corporate prayer goals." Just before the Thanksgiving holiday Brown sent an email, "Please pray that our sales will skyrocket this weekend. We have a big God that promises to surpass all that we could ask of Him" (qtd. in Taibbi). When reviewers critiqued its corpse-strewn video landscape, the company began to pray for good media appearances: "God will use these interviews to open the hearts and minds of the listeners to the true intentions and purpose of the game." The manufacturers stressed the purpose of the game "is to communicate the truth of the disappearances [of the Rapture] to the world" (Taibbi).

Imagination as "a Discovering Faculty"

Thomas Merton considered imagination a deeply holy impulse, "a discovering faculty, a faculty for seeing relationships, for seeing meanings that are special… and new" (De Waal xiv). Reading exercises imagination in a way film or computer games do not. As Tony Morrison put it, when she read or listened to stories in childhood, she relied heavily on her "own imagination to provide detail; the specific color of things, the feel of the weather, the space the characters occupied, their physical features, their motives, why they behaved as they did, and especially the sound of their speech, where so much meaning lay" (174). An open reading of the New Testament allows a reader to see relationships between their own lives and the Gospels, to embrace both mystery and possibility. It is particularly curious for Christians to fear imagination, since Jesus relied on it for his essential narrative strategy, the parable. His stories began with a metaphor in response to a question. He provided no finite answer to questions. His parables opened the question and invited his listeners inside the story where one must use imagination to seek meaning from among multiple possibilities. Parables illuminate life precisely because they open up multiple interpretations.

Because the adults who produce or purchase *Left Behind* products have such confidence in the power of texts to convert, it is not surprising that they also fear the conversion power of secular novels, most famously the *Harry Potter* series. We don't know whether children and teens who consume secular or religious commodities confuse imaginative fantasy with

reality, but that must be more likely when parents supply or censor fiction that they label as "true." While the manufacturers appear not to be concerned about negative repercussions for those playing the game, many who subscribe to apocalyptic eschatology see threats in other popular culture texts. It might seem odd to argue that the producers and consumers of *Left Behind* plots distrust imagination because, to those outside the tradition, the stories seem extremely imaginative. The writers, and many of their readers, see it otherwise. LaHaye and Jenkins do not believe they are inventing something for us to pretend to believe in, but depicting events that will inevitably become real. The same principle holds when some consider Rowling: she isn't imagining a school, she is teaching real witchcraft. As one author who posted on the Christian Broadcast Network (CBN) website sees it, the material in C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien "is not real. You can't replicate it" (Elliott). In other words, while apparently the powers of Lewis's White Witch or Tolkien's Gandalf have no efficacy in our world, some fear that kids can actually learn how to successfully perform Rowling's Cruciatus Curse.

Reading as a Liminal Threat

If the rapture is *the* liminal event, a vocal minority of evangelicals uses the Internet to testify that consuming fantasy presents a liminal threat, especially to children. Books, especially *Harry Potter* but also *Narnia*, in their view, open dangerous doors to the occult. Consider how popular esoteric ideas are reinforced. If people in the early twentieth century saw Rapture theology as "gospel" because they read it in Scofield's presentation of the Gospels, today the Internet authorizes pop culture theology. Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network provides articles on both sides of the Harry Potter debate, so that concerned parents can see that there are, in fact, two sides, but the number and tone of the collection suggests there is much to fear—even C. S. Lewis is a danger. The Jesus is Savior website engages in a surprisingly virulent form of Internet "spiritual warfare" against Martin Luther, Billy Graham, Martin Luther King and C. S. Lewis, among others. "C.S. Lewis: The Devil's Wisest Fool" imagines those it disagrees with going to Hell: "Kennedy went to Hell because he trusted in the Roman Whore. . . Lewis went to Hell because he invented a new god,

and he ended his Life a Taoist." Concerned parents who consult the CBN website learn from Richard Abanes, author of *Harry Potter, Narnia, and The Lord of The Rings: What You Need to Know About Fantasy Books and Movies*, that "it takes only seconds for *Harry Potter* to open a door" and then children will begin practicing witchcraft (Elliott).

Christian authors on the CBN website repeat the refrain that reading functions as a door to the occult, while the blogosphere reveals the depth of fear to which this line of thinking can extend. The publication of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* elicited a number of attacks on the dangers of imagination by those who seem unable to distinguish between imagination and reality. *The Scotsman*'s website posted an extensive conversation about the book on 26 July 2007. The most interesting participant was an Australian, "Graeme Gibson," who was convinced that Satan uses Rowling as an open door: "The proof also lies in the fact that the Rowling writings encourage young children to get involved in witchcraft confirming an open door in her life into the dark world of fallen spirits." When another blogger thought that, "Perhaps J.K. Rowling did not know she is the Devil's mouthpiece," "Graeme" disagreed:

> The author gets the money from the sale of the 'demon given concepts' and Satan gets an authority and access into this world over the children drawn in by the witchcraft practices because practicing those practices is turning away from God and Jesus His Savior for men. Satan can now use his evil spirits to encourage the youngsters to open doors through that witchcraft and gain the attack upon their souls (*Scotsman*).

Those who seek to censor literature for children have always seen reading as potentially dangerous, but "Graeme" represents the extremes to which these imaginative flights of fancy extend.

Richard Abanes, "Graeme," and those like them, who fear that reading certain fiction is synonymous with the practice of magic, deeply misunderstand literature and imagination. Reading becomes synonymous with sorcery. Imagination is doubly suspect: Rowling's creativity hides seductive magic in the guise of fantasy; the child's imaginative engagement with the story makes her complicit with satanic forces, as it lures her through the door to the real world of the occult. It is hard to conceive a more profound distrust of imagination and of children.

A Profound Distrust of Imagination

For those inclined to criticize fantasy, some see imagination itself as prohibited. Berit Kjos, one of the most prolific cyber critics of *Harry Potter*, produces the Kjos Ministries website to "help believers prepare for an anti-Christian global society." Her attack on Rowling may be informed by her assumption that the Bible prohibits imagination. Concerned Christians attracted to Kjos's website can sort out God's preference for our leisure reading by clicking on a page dedicated to "Fantasy and Imagination." There is no analysis, but rather a list of passages that specifically identify "imagination" itself as the source of evil.

To find evidence that the Bible prohibits imagination itself, one must look to the King James Version, arguably one of the great works of English prose, but not the most faithful translation of the original Hebrew and Greek. Relying on the seventeenth century translation, the Kjos website finds danger in imagination itself—a danger that more precise translations proves is illusory. The website repeatedly quotes the curious phrase from the King James version "the imagination of man's heart," casting it as an "evil" force in Old Testament passages from Genesis and Jeremiah as well as New Testament quotations from Luke and 1 Chronicles (Kjos). The Genesis example will reveal the nature of the translation problem. The King James Version that Kjos posts reads "and God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that *every imagination of the thoughts of his heart* was only evil continually" (6:5 KJV, emphasis added). More modern scholarly translations of the Bible, such as the *New Revised Standard* or the *New International Version,* translate the word in Genesis as "inclination," rather than "imagination": "and God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every *inclination* of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (6:5 NRSV and NIV, emphasis added).

Exercising Imagination

What is at stake in understanding and contesting this narrative? Perhaps we are too inclined to think nostalgically about imagination simply as the inspiration of play, something to be set aside by adults. But imagination,

best *cultivated* in childhood, plays a crucial role throughout our personal lives and our national life. Speaking of the "most transformative and revelatory capacity" of imagination at Harvard's 2008 Commencement ceremony, J. K. Rowling argued that it allows us to empathize with others whose experiences are completely different from our own. Empathy requires that we imagine ourselves into other people's situations, just as Jesus' parables ask that we imagine ourselves into his stories:

> Of course . . . many prefer not to exercise their imaginations at all. They choose to remain comfortably within the bounds of their own experience, never troubling to wonder how it would feel to have been born other than they are. . . . They can close their minds and hearts to any suffering that does not touch them personally; they can refuse to know. I might be tempted to envy people who can live that way, except that I do not think they have any fewer nightmares than I do. Choosing to live in narrow spaces can lead to a form of mental agoraphobia, and that brings its own terrors. I think the willfully unimaginative see more monsters. They are often more afraid. (Rowling)

Imagination breeds empathy, but discernment as well. The inability to think outside preconceived notions can lead to dangerous blindness. When we fail to exercise our imaginative "muscles," scaring ourselves with the monsters we fabricate, it turns out we may miss the real ones, as the *9-11 Commission Report* reminded us.

The stories young people consume—the ones they read and the plots they reenact in games—resonate powerfully in their lives, shape their assumptions, and breed their fears. The stories we produce for their consumption reveal powerful insight into the nature of cultural conflict. This terror of not being saved blinds the creators of *Left Behind* media and the parents who purchase them to the profound imaginative identification when one assumes a persona in the virtual landscape of a game. A teen playing *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* comes closer to "practicing" violence than the one who reads *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* comes to practicing spells. Repeated reminders by the company that players should control their weapons and team members to limit collateral damage misses the point. The genre, as well as the end-times imperative, compels players to want to destroy the Global Community even if this particular game restricts players to defensive maneuvers.

We should appreciate *Left Behind* thinking for what it is: a reaction against American values. Martin Marty characterizes the foundational pattern of all fundamentalisms as "An embattled form of spirituality. . . . engaged in a conflict with enemies whose secularist policies and beliefs seem inimical to religion itself. Fundamentalists do not regard this battle as a conventional political struggle, but experience it as a cosmic war between the forces of good and evil" (quoted in *Battle* xiii). *Harry Potter*'s readers lose in this cosmic war: inevitably "*all* who enter the world of *Harry Potter must* meet the true face behind the veil. And when they do, they discover what *all* those who toy with evil discover and that is, that while they may have just been playing, the Devil always plays for keeps"(Arms 84, emphasis added). In 2007, Professor Marty reminded a group of academics of the ways in which "the new pluralism and styles of religiosity will make new demands on the ethos of campuses." After the speech, when we spoke briefly about *The Left Behind* franchise, he said that we need to "let them see other ways to imagine the future"(Marty). In other words, we need to encourage the opening of texts. That may be an essential strategy in the academy—where Musicians, Pop Stars and Gang Bosses are "trained"—but in the culture at large this strategy will, in the end, fail. An appeal to reason and to nuanced textual analysis will not eradicate the expressions of apocalyptic eschatology so well entrenched in American popular culture. It is not enough to understand this narrative; one must contest it. Stanley Fish argues that "real principle rooted in moral conviction" requires one to either accept or reject core cultural ideas. Discussing racism, sexism, and homophobia, he argues you cannot say to the "intolerance residing at the heart of a culture 'you're not respecting the decorum of enlightened argument'; you say, 'you are wrong' "(Fish).[6] The 2009 press release for the sequel game *Left Behind II: Tribulation Forces* quotes Dallas Anderson of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association: "The genius of these games is that they provide positive moral input to a generation that would otherwise not hear it!"(Earth Times) He is wrong. So, too, is Mr. Arms, who sees all *Harry Potter* readers as tools of the Devil. It seems most kids know he is wrong, and a good many parents as well. Four out of five evangelical teens have either read one of Rowling's novels or seen a Harry Potter film, and most do so without discussing it with a pastor or parent (Romanowski, 39).

So let us encourage the reading of fantasy: it can remind us that life is far more mysterious than it seems. Sometimes this truth makes people uncomfortable. Fantasy provides children with the time, space, and opportunity to practice open-mindedness. In Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, Mrs. Murray tells her daughter Meg not to be disturbed by what she doesn't understand: "I don't understand it any more than you do, but one thing I've learned is that you don't have to understand things for them to *be*"(L'Engle 29). Fantasy exercises an appreciation for ambiguity. It does so by presenting a clearly mysterious universe: characters and readers have no choice but to try to make sense of mysteries in order to make meaning out of the story. And that, it turns out, is very good practice for real life.

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Notes

[1] Umberto Eco's *The Open Work* (Trans. Anna Cancogni. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989) forcefully anticipated the ways in which contemporary literary theory explores the reader's interactive role in creating interpretations. William Romanowski provides a careful reading of popular culture from within the Evangelical tradition in *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture*. He encourages those within the faith community to watch TV programs even when they don't reflect one's own values: "We can appreciate and evaluate these efforts by asking what kind of perspective this artwork offers on the matters of life in addresses" (17). While he briefly mentions the *Left Behind* films, he does not examine or evaluate the perspectives of either the computer game or the novels.

[2] Editor's note: Cf. Janssen and Whitelock on the history of apocalyptic imagery. See Book Reviews, this issue.

[3] It is beyond the purview of this article, but anyone who doubts the influence of this perspective should read Kevin Phillips' *American Theocracy*. He acknowledges that "Twenty years ago, *The New York Times* would not have considered LaHaye for the bestseller list, and my scenario of his writings influencing the White House could only have been spoof. Not so today"(xv).

[4] For the Rapture Index, any score above 145 is labeled "fasten your seatbelts"; it has ranged from a high of 187 on 24 September 2001, to a low of 57 on 12 December 1993. On June 1, 2009, the index stood at 166.

[5] Colleen McDannell's *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* demonstrates that commercialization of belief has long been an integral part of American religion. While she doesn't emphasize toys or games, she provides an excellent analysis of the fascinating and ever-present material dimension of Christianity in American culture.

[6] Daniel Radosh, who wrote a cultural ethnography of the "Parallel Universe of Christian Pop Culture" from the perspective of a self described "Humanistic Jew" (108) agrees with Fish, though perhaps with more sympathy: "I realized that for at least some people, common ground will never be possible because they don't object to specific ideas that can be reframed or adjusted. They object to Satan, whose bidding we do. They may not hate us—they may believe they love us—but they hate him and they won't negotiate with him either. We want to persuade them, reason with them, listen to them, and accommodate them. They want to save us. It's not even the same playing field" (111).

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