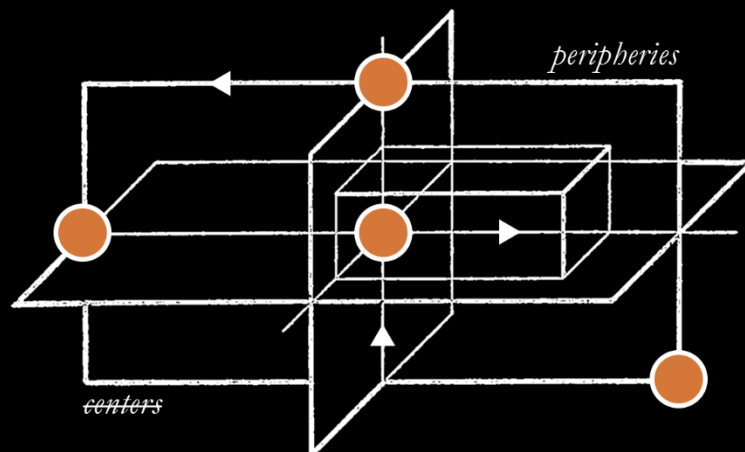


global network player authority PewDiePie guilt god Let's Play angel undead with authentic mediatisation skill PVP contest digital game rule system gameplay meta WGW blessing nobb kills demon fact body fight tropes pe game me s+ discussion wedding religion gamer analysis representation healing lore religio-scape soul dialo class tradition experience twitch rebirth genesis clan PVE simulation ludology The Last of Us death resurrection funeral ruins virtual identity buff priest mage xbox 360 PVE narrative



Peripheries – Title Image. Image by Aska Mayer. CC BY-NC.

Carolyn Puckhaber, Aska Mayer and
Knut V. M. Wormstädt

In this piece, I will describe how *Keep the Faith* (2025), my storytelling game of a religion in transition, functions and give insight into why I made the design decisions I did. I will also situate *Keep the Faith* among similar games and relevant scholarly work, specifically around fictionality and peripherality. I will also describe in detail some of the game's systems in the hopes that other scholars and designers can use or hack the systems that I developed in their own work.

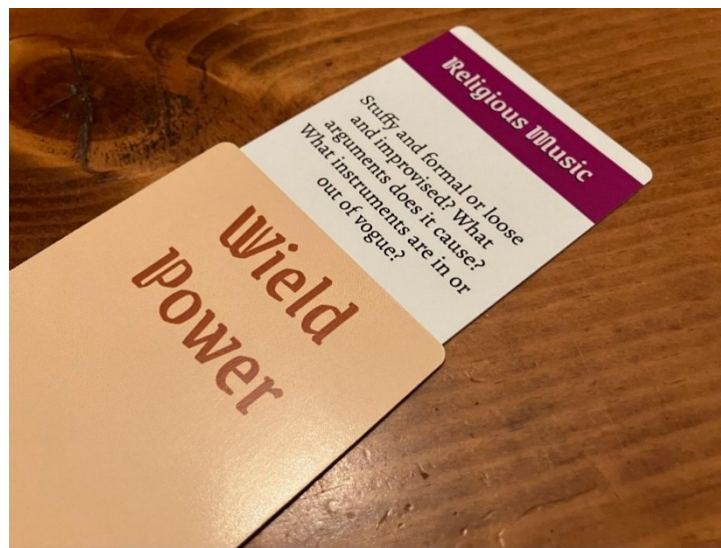


Figure 1. The Aspect *Religious Music* played to the Value *Wield Power*. Prototype components pictured.
© Greg Loring-Albright.

This core mechanic (play Aspect to Value) does two things: First, it creates, via short vignettes, a detailed picture of the religion being developed. Second, it increases the count of Aspects at that Value. Both of these aspects are important, and indeed their interplay is central to the argument that I hope *Keep the Faith* puts forward.

Institutional religions communicate explicitly about what their beliefs and values are by publishing documents and aligning with denominations or traditions. Their actions and practices, however, may not directly align with their stated values. *Keep the Faith* argues that, over time, the material, observable, practices of a religion (the Aspect cards) will shape the religion's embrace or rejection of its beliefs and values (the Values cards).

At the end of every round, players count the Aspects tucked under each Value. The Value with the most Aspects becomes the Tenet of the Faith, and a pawn is placed on it. The establishment of the Tenet sets the divide between Orthodoxy and Schismatic beliefs (capitalized because they are game terms; see below).

To explain these concepts and what I hope to model with them, I must first describe how the Values are laid out on the table. During the game's prologue (where players collaboratively set up the game pieces and discuss what kind of game they want to play), the group chooses a set of six Values, which are paired in three opposites on six two-sided cards. So players might select *Wield Power* and *Yield Power* alongside four other Values in diametrically opposed pairs. Each Value has a Roman numeral printed on it, and the Values are arranged in a circle in numerical order, ensuring that the oppositional pairs are maintained (e.g. if *Wield Power* is II, *Yield Power* is V). These six Values are the only available options for Values in the game; they do not change (this is a potential site of innovation for future designs to investigate; see below). Additionally, during the prologue, each player selects one Value as their Sect's Core Value, which I will also discuss below.



Figure 2. The six Value cards. Note the Orthodox / Schismatic divider in the center and the Tenet marker on the right. Prototype components pictured. © Greg Loring-Albright.

I made this change for two reasons. First, my playtesters lacked direction in the goal-less game. I am primarily a board game designer, and so my playtesting groups are more familiar with board games, and a game-imposed goal is often the first thing

that is mentioned when the game is taught. Second, as the game developed, I realized that giving each player a potentially conflicting goal contributes to Keep the Faith's argument about religions as human systems. Because of the goal cards, the Faith in *Keep the Faith* is always prone to internal conflicts, sectarianism, and petty politicking over minor issues of practice.

Goal cards ask players to care about one or (usually) two elements: one might ask a player to ensure that their Core Value is the Tenet, or that it is Schismatic. That same goal card might ask the player to ensure that the Faith is Stable or Fractured at the game's end. (See Figure 5 for sample goal cards.) The faith is Stable when there are more Aspects on *Orthodox Values* than *Schismatic Values*. Fractured is the reverse, and also ties. To put it differently, the faith is Stable when its practices (Aspect cards) are clustered on and around the Tenet. In this case, the faith has a unity of practice – there is broad agreement about which Values are important. Similarly, the faith is Fractured when there is no such unity.

197

Most goal cards ask the player to care about both the position of their Core Value *and* the Fractured/Stable state at the end, though some only ask players to care about one or the other. This means that goals are not all equally difficult to achieve; the game is not *fair*. This is where the design departs from the board game ethos that it adopted with goal cards: the goal of playing *Keep the Faith* is not to achieve one's goal card; it is to tell a shared story about factions striving to achieve their goals and succeeding or failing.

This is the sweep of a game of *Keep the Faith* at its mechanical level – the play of an Aspect to a Value and the ways in which the accrued consequences of many of these plays add up to the success or failure to achieve a goal card. Figure 3 summarizes this

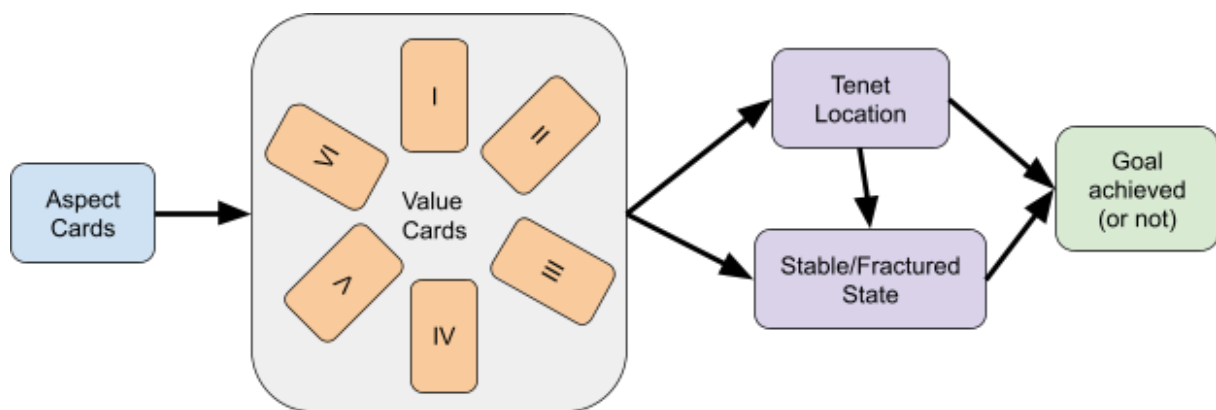
[illegible]

Figure 3. Formal diagram of Keep the Faith from core mechanic to end state.

Ludic and Scholarly Approaches

It is important to highlight that none of the arguments above are directly rooted in the scholarship of religion or its history, but rather in my own experiences of religion having been raised in an Evangelical Christian church (which I will discuss more below). *Keep the Faith* has been published by Central Michigan University Press, which operates as a publisher of academic books and games, and as such, has been reviewed by outside experts. Additionally, the press brought the scholar of religion Liz Davidson to write the curriculum guide that accompanies the game. I designed this game as a reflection on and argument about my own experiences with religion, and I trust that, whether or not the theses I state above are verified, the scholars affiliated with this project found the process of playing the game worth endorsing.

Many scholars have written about religion in games (including in an earlier special issue in this very journal!). One important piece is Howard (2018) who describes using purpose-designed games for her New Testament courses at a Christian university. She notes that “by adopting new and different roles, students gain proficiency in sympathizing with and articulating the perspective of a different viewpoint” (Howard 2018, 278). This outcome is also supported by de Wildt and Aupers (2017), who interviewed video game players about the ways in which they identified with characters who identified with a different religious (or non-religious) orientation. They found that “(role-)playing in video games motivates a form of religious relativization that destabilizes the ‘absolute truth’ claims of many religions” (de Wildt and Aupers 2017, 2). This destabilizing move is one that players of *Keep the Faith* also note, as the game situates changes in doctrine and practice in player action, rather than divine intervention.

Keep the Faith is in the lineage of analog tabletop role-playing games (RPGs). It is customary to mention *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) when situating RPGs, but *Keep the Faith* has very little in common with *Dungeons & Dragons*: there is no game master (GM), there are no pencils or dice, and players do not embody a single, distinct character. Instead, *Keep the Faith* follows GM-less worldbuilding games like *The Quiet Year*, *Companions’ Tale*, or *Microscope* (2011). These games center the creation and/or evolution of a place or shared narrative, more than the play of individual characters. *Keep the Faith* also departs from TTRPGs’ material conventions of dice and character sheets. Instead, it uses cards and tokens, appearing similar to a board game in terms of its components. In this, it is also not unique: *For the Queen* (2019) and *Once Upon a Time: The Storytelling Card Game* (1993) both use strictly cards; *Star Crossed* (2019) and *Dread* (2006) use a Jenga tower; and *Fog of Love* (2017) uses cards, a board, and tokens (see below for a more in-depth discussion of *Fog of Love*). All of these games

My earliest inspirations for *Keep the Faith* came from playing and reading about board games that push the boundaries of the form. The aforementioned *Fog of Love* was the first inspiration. *Fog of Love* models a romantic relationship via a shared board featuring six personality dimensions. Players have goals that involve direct trait goals (have tokens on one side of a trait or another), alignment with their partner (similar token placement; see Figure 4), and/or a Happiness measure that is not represented on the main board.



Figure 4. Three of *Fog of Love*'s six personality dimensions. Here, players are aligned on Sensitivity and misaligned on Gentleness. © Greg Loring-Albright.

201

This system directly inspired the central card ring in *Keep the Faith* (see Figure 2, above). *Fog of Love* also inspired *Keep the Faith* in its position at the intersection of board games and role-playing games – both are mechanically complete and playable as board games without engaging in any role-play or storytelling, but both suffer if played in this way.

The first drafts of *Keep the Faith*, however, did not have a role-playing element. I was listening to podcasts and studio streams where Cole Wehrle was discussing his upcoming project, *Oath* (2021). *Oath* is a game about historiography – it has a session-to-session “memory” without using any permanently alterable components (Wehrle 2019). This concept intrigued me; legacy board games were at their peak of popularity, and the temporal session-to-session design space intrigued me, but using consumable narratives and destructible components turned me off. Seeing Wehrle working in that space encouraged me. Religious institutions quickly came to the fore

This new understanding of my own growing discomfort with the religion of my childhood helped clarify the arguments that *Keep the Faith* is making, and aided me as I tuned the game and adjusted its goal structure. By creating a space where players manipulate which beliefs are central to serve their own ends, I had found a way to

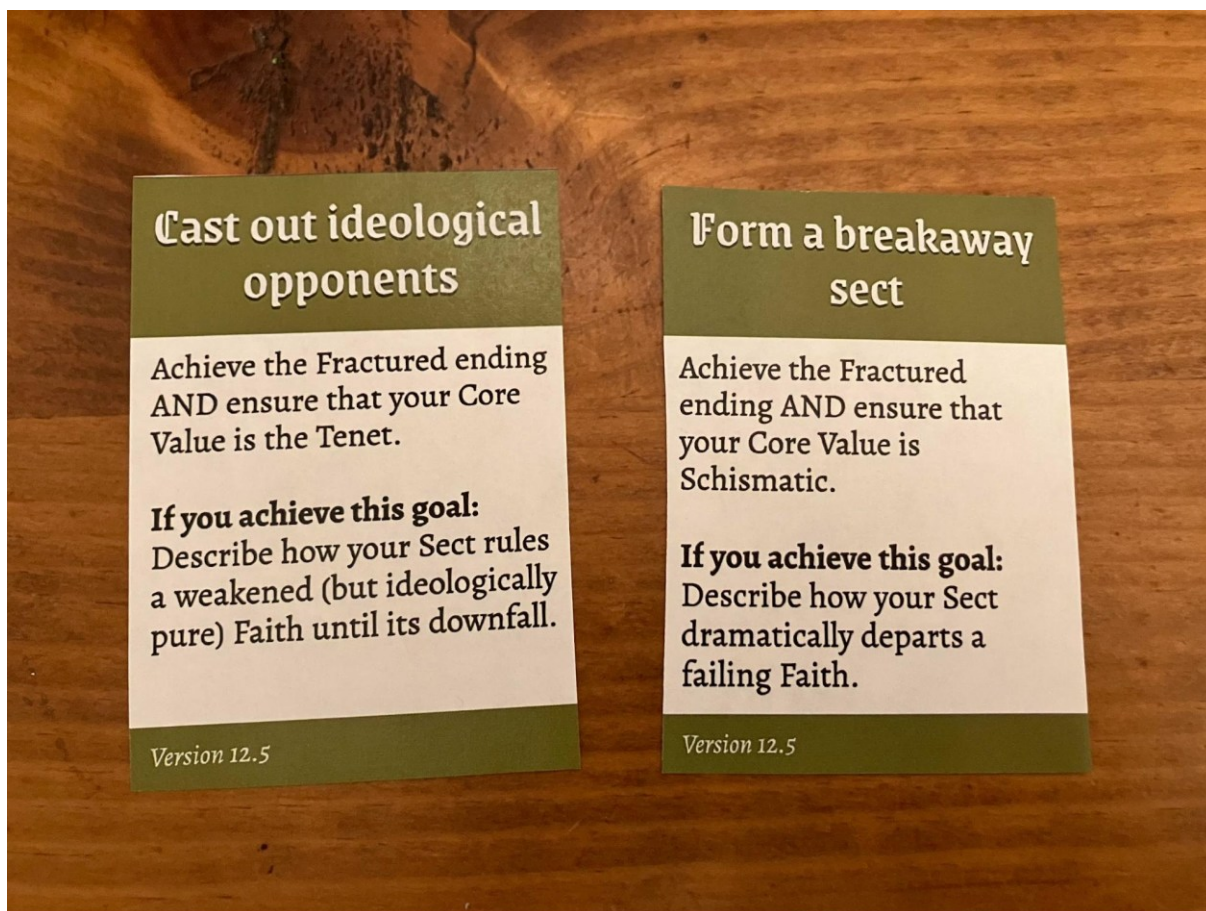


Figure 5. Two goal cards that incentivize peripherality. Prototype components pictured. © Greg Loring-Albright.

Over the course of play, a sect could go from being a mainstream, insider part of the Faith (if its Core Value is Orthodox), to being a suspect outsider on the periphery (if its Core Value is Schismatic). These shifting dynamics make narrativizing games of *Keep the Faith* incredibly interesting – as I ran playtests of the game, I would always pay close attention to what happened when a player’s sect fell out of favor with mainstream.

By modeling the socio-historical changes in a fictional religion, *Keep the Faith* engages both directly and indirectly with the concept of religious peripherality. Both the status of the Faith as a whole (the Fractured or Stable state) and players’ individual sects are shifting in and out of favor within the Faith, creating an

inexperienced role-players, giving mechanical, rules-defined structure to the daunting task of *making up a story*.

Finally, hacking: *Keep the Faith* is, in my biased opinion, an interesting and flexible system. While I have not written a formal system reference document (SRD; a standard practice in RPGs that guides designers and players in altering and/or reusing the game's system), I would encourage designers to hack *Keep the Faith*. There are two particular modifications that I attempted to include in the game, but could not be accommodated during the design process. The first is using *Keep the Faith* to model an inverse process. The game as it currently exists models how material, observable practices (the Aspect cards) are inflected by the beliefs and values of the Faith (the Value cards). Aspects change, move, and are removed from the game, but Values are static (though the import of a given Value changes through gameplay). One of the game's cultural consultants, Joel Swanson, pointed out that religions also change their values over time, and indeed that the values of a given religion can change in reaction to the material practices that the religion adopts. I attempted to include this dynamic in *Keep the Faith*, but ultimately, it required undoing too much of what I had already done, so I present it here as a potential hack, or as a seed for a new game.

211

The other modification I would encourage interested designers to pursue is to model other, non-religious, institutions. By creating new Value and Aspect cards, and renaming things like the Tenet, I could imagine a *Keep the Faith* hack that models a corporation, government, colony, commune, etc. as it evolves over time. If either of these ideas sparked your curiosity, you have my blessing to pursue them! Let me know how it goes.

References

Acts of the Evangelists, 2022. [board game] Belltower Games, Belltower Games.

Bloc by Bloc, 2016. [board game] Out of Order Games, Out of Order Games.

Bloc by Bloc: Uprising, 2022. [board game] Out of Order Games, Out of Order Games.

Companions' Tale, 2017. [tabletop role-playing game] Sweet Potato Press, Sweet Potato Press.

de Wildt, L. and Aupers, S., 2017. Role-playing the (non-) religious other.

Academia.edu. Available at

https://www.academia.edu/114859174/Role_Playing_the_non_Religious_Other

accessed 12 July 2025.

212

Dread, 2006. [tabletop role-playing game] The Impossible Dream, The Impossible Dream.

Dungeons & Dragons, 1974. [tabletop role-playing game] Tactical Studies Rules, Tactical Studies Rules.

Ezra and Nehemiah, 2024. [board game] Garphill Games, Garphill Games.

Fog of Love, 2017. [board game] Hush Hush Projects, Hush Hush Projects.

For the Queen, 2019. [tabletop role-playing game] Evil Hat Productions, Evil Hat Productions.

Fortugno, N. and Stark, L., 2015. *This miracle: An American freeform game by Nick Fortugno and Lizzie Stark*. Self-published.

Howard, M. A., 2018. A game of faith: Role-playing games as an active learning strategy for value formation and faith integration in the theological classroom. *Teaching Theology & Religion*, 21(4), 274-287. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/teth.12455>.

Ierusalem: Anno Domini, 2023. [board game] Devir Games, Devir Games.

Juul, J., 2003. The game, the player, the world: Looking for a heart of gameness. In: *Proceedings of DiGRA 2003 Conference: Level Up*. DiGRA, Tampere, Finland. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26503/dl.v2003i1.65>.

213

Keep the Faith, 2025. [tabletop role-playing game] Greg Loring-Albright, Central Michigan University Press.

Kobes du Mez, K., 2020. *Jesus and John Wayne: How white evangelicals corrupted a faith and fractured a nation*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation.

Lunarpunk Games, n.d. About us. *Lunarpunk Games*. Available at <https://www.lunarpunk.games/about-us>, accessed 12 July 2025.

Microscope, 2011. [tabletop role-playing game] Lame Mage Productions, Lame Mage Productions.

Nicaea, 2021. [board game] Hollandspiele, Hollandspiele.

Zeller, B. E., 2018. "Make your own religion": The fictive religion assignment as educational game. *Teaching Theology & Religion*, 21(4), 321-335. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/teth.12461>.