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The (Un)perverse Symbolism of the Cross and Crusade in *Elden Ring: Shadow of the Erdtree*

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Abstract

The plot of the expansion to *Elden Ring*, titled *Shadow of the Erdtree*, extensively uses the central symbol of Christianity, which is the cross, and also the crusade derived from it. This article describes how the creators of the game and its expansion, the Japanese studio FromSoftware, approached these two terms, transferring them to a fictional fantasy world. The game developers explicitly demonstrated one crusade, which gave rise to the plot of the expansion, and this demonstration can serve as an artistic and at the same time critical commentary on the factual Crusades. But implicitly, the developers also described the second crusade, and not so much described it as allowed the player to take part in it. And this procedure may affect the interpretation of a game. Depending on the player's approach, it can serve as a personal complement to a scathing commentary on actual Christian military campaigns, or simply as an entertaining realization of poetic visions of medieval journeys to the Holy Land.

Keywords: video game, narratology, interpretation, symbolism, Christianity

1. Introduction

Starting from simple entertainment, video games relatively quickly became complex products of human culture in all its meanings, and they also begin to shape this culture in a way that is inaccessible to other media (Cerezo-Pizarro et al., 2023). Contemporary discourse and collective imagination can no longer do without video games. For this reason, virtually every aspect of such digital, interactive works deserves serious academic scrutiny. One such aspect is the symbolism, which, thanks to the possibility of linking it to interactivity of

a game, gains a second layer of interpretation. Bartosz Staniecko, continuing the thought of Lev Manovich about interfaces (Manovich, 2002) and Paul Booth about interactivity (Booth, 2009), calls this *narractivity*. It is a process, not an artefact—it arises as a result of the hybridisation of ludic and narrative activity at the level of 'the navigable space of the imagination' (Staniecko, 2019, pp. 91). Of course, not every video game exploits the full potential of this process, but there are some that do so in a way that is surprising or simply qualitatively good. Such games are not only great entertainment, but also a rewarding subject for research of all kinds.

The significance of studying symbolism in video games goes beyond a plain form of cultural criticism. These digital spaces can serve as proving grounds for understanding how symbols and their systems function in interactive, often public, environments, how players undertake meaning-making processes, and how contemporary creators reinterpret historical, religious, philosophical iconography for modern and broad audiences. The fundamental challenge in research of that stems from three tasks, specified by Michał Kłosiński:

> The first is to generate interpretative questions that problematize the game at hand. The second is to identify the preferred theoretical framework within which the interpretation takes place. The third, and last, task is to help formulate interpretative hypotheses, which are crucial for the process of understanding the nexuses of meanings. (Kłosiński, 2022)

The precision of the above citation would suggest that this is basically all that is needed to interpret video games. However, it should be noted that the specificity of this medium is not only interactivity, but also multimodality, one that Sigrid Norris would describe as high 'modal density' (Norris, 2004). Video games present their content across many simultaneous channels: visual, audial and in some even kinetical (e.g. gamepad's vibration), and in each of these channels, and especially in the visual channel, it is possible for many layers to exist simultaneously, each of which can operate in its own unique way at a given moment. Add to this the aforementioned interactivity and this creates a fourth channel: causative, as the mechanics in the game must be designed just as much as the sound or image and thus also represent a certain content. During gameplay each channel, each layer can reinforce, transform, or contradict each other's symbolic meaning, which usually increases the number of possible interpretations, but can also radically reduce them.

And with that, we return to narractivity. Classically understood interpretation tends to present the studied work as a single, ultimate point, which is inconsistent with the fact that experiencing narrative gameplay is a process. All the more variable the higher the modal density that can be observed. It is not enough to make just one hypothesis. It is necessary to pose a whole series of them. It can be said that when studying a specific game, a scholar has to create

a certain 'story' about that game's story. Without going further into this metaphor, it is worth pointing out that the situation only gets so complicated when we study the absolutely entire game and not just one aspect of it. Fortunately, only the symbolism is addressed in this article.

The scholarly approach to video games no longer relies on borrowed frameworks from other fields of humanities studies. Developing appropriate general research methods from the scratch was difficult and had to take its toll (Consalvo, Dutton, 2006; Simons, 2007), but in the last decade it has resulted in specialised monographs focusing, for example, on interfaces and immersion (Kubiński, 2016) or hermeneutical game studies (Kłosiński, 2018). Semiotics in game studies has not been overlooked either. It has been written about by scholars such as Jason Hawreliak, who targeted multimodality in his work (Hawreliak, 2019), and Gabriele Aroni, who focused on semiotics of in-game architecture alone (Aroni, 2022). Studies of religious symbols in video games, i.e. those most relevant to the topic of this article, have been carried out, among others, by Lars de Wildt and Stef Aupers who described roleplaying aspect of games 'suffused with religious elements' based on interviews with players from different nations and (non-)religious backgrounds (de Wildt & Aupers, 2018). The same year also saw the appearance of an entire monograph on methods for studying video games and religion (in which de Wildt and Aupers included their other work, focused on MMOs). The introduction to this book makes it clear how complex the subject is:

> Games with explicitly religious content appear on the market, coming from diverse religious traditions and backgrounds and ranging from proselytization to education and cultural dialogue. As a consequence, games can reflect, reject, or reconfigure religious ideas and are a source for the construction of religious practices and ideas in modernity. (Zeiler, 2018, pp. 3)

As can easily be seen, games can interact with religions and their motifs in an analogous way to channels conveying game content between themselves. In this article, only one motif will be addressed along with its one derivative—the cross and the crusade. The former is, one might say, the central symbol of a certain religion, and the latter is inseparable from this religion's history. And this is also the case in the game under this study.

2. Cross

The plot of *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware, 2022) takes place in a fictional world, with its own history, traditions, and geography. A complete *topos*, *mythos* and *ethos* is created for the game, as Krzysztof M. Maj would put it (Maj, 2019, pp. 171). Two years later, an expansion came out, entitled *Shadow of the Erdtree* (FromSoftware, 2024), which introduced a new land and a related storyline, focused on a certain crusade. But *Elden Ring* in its original edition was already

playing with some Christian symbols. Most notably with the cross, although not in its most popular visual form. The cross we see in the game looks like this:

Figure 1. One of the many crucified people the player may encounter in the base version of the game. Notably, they are all still alive. Source: FromSoftware, 2022

I used the word 'playing' because Christianity as such does not exist in the world of *Elden Ring*. Every religious motif exists there on the basis of distorted transfictionality—a variation of intertextuality in which the intertext is not only a linguistic expression, but also a fictional character, place or even the entire world. A characteristic feature of transfictionality is the ability to mask the intertextual nature of the reference by avoiding direct mention of other cultural texts and carefully concealing the source of the citation (Maj, 2017, pp. 246). The symbol of crucifixion, which is so widespread throughout our world, can also be transfictional, even if the name Jesus or any other word associated strictly with Christianity does not appear. But, as I mentioned, it is a distorted transfictionality. The non-traditional appearance of the cross itself in-game is a first indication of this. There are others, 'deeper' embedded.

Above all, a cross would not be the cross if it were not for the fact that a figure believed to be a god hung on it. In the world of *Elden Ring*, something like this has also happened.

Figure 2. In this state, the player encounters Queen Marika the Eternal—the divine sovereign of in-game world. Source: FromSoftware, 2022

Figure 3. A closer shot of Queen Marika. A spear-like object can clearly be seen piercing her through. Source: FromSoftware, 2022

The reference is clear and consistent in narrative and visual layers. There is a god(dess) that hangs outstretched, taking the form of a cross, and whose body is pierced. Crucifixion is a punishment that has been used on criminals and blasphemers before (Fig. 1), and it acquired a new meaning this time when the god was crucified. But this novelty only occurred for the player character. For

the players themselves, Marika's crucifixion took on an ‘old’ meaning. The symbol of the crucified god is so strongly marked in a human culture that there was a break in what Linda Hutcheon calls a ‘heterocosm’ (Hutcheon, 1987, pp. 8). All the fictive referents, instead of pointing to each other after the player has spent so long getting to know them (Marika is encountered only at the end of the many hours of gameplay) and constructing a common meaning from them, suddenly have to refer to external texts to become somewhat comprehensible. Or at least this interpretation imposes itself, as there is no explicit information in *Elden Ring* about why the goddess of that world is in such a state. Maybe this crucifixion is meaningless, and any other kind of punishment would serve the same narrative function. Or maybe it has enormous significance, because… And this is where the player’s theories begin (Holiday Engineer 7521, 2023; Rick the Freak, 2024), which is beyond the scope of this article.

The cross in *Elden Ring* is defined by the singular act of crucifying a god. The game does not provide any other information that describes this symbol or this shape differently than the Christian religion does in the current world. So, the cross is a direct reference to Christianity and nothing else. Distortions in the form of gender alteration of the god, little different shape of a cross, lower place where the body was pierced with a spear, it all serves one purpose—to think through, piece by piece, what this symbol means in the game world, and for this we need to think beforehand about what it means in our world, where it is free of these distortions. Conversely, the crucifixion of Jesus is full of distortions compared to that of Marika. In order to know everything about one version, we need to know the other one thoroughly. This is a cultural dialogue and the players’ meaning-making process. Shared when the discussion moves to online forums. They can learn new things about the actual religion through its fictional referent. This is similar or maybe even identical to what the previously mentioned Lars de Wildt described based on interviews with players from around the globe (de Wildt, 2021, pp. 103-140). We can read in his book:

> After games are made, sold and find their ways into players’ homes, the way games are consumed leads to meaningful public debate and individual (ir)religious experience. This, perhaps surprisingly, reasserts inter-religious experiences in public and private spheres, as they are played with and negotiated by players. (pp. 132)

But there is a little more to this matter. Another thesis can also be put forward. The distortions in the transfictional symbols are not to educate, but to indicate, through their nature, the intentions of the game's authors, who did not necessarily want to simply copy ideas from the current world. It is up to the player to decide which interpretative path to take… at least at the beginning of thinking about the world and plot of *Elden Ring*.

3. First Crusade

The symbol of the cross, or rather the symbol of the crucifixion, does not pose the same interpretative challenge to players as the crusade does. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the crucifixion only shows its narrative depth towards the end of the game and generally does not take up much screen time. And secondly, the whole symbol is almost entirely non-interactive in *Elden Ring*. It does not convey content through the causative channel—the player cannot differently interpret it through the actions of their avatar in the game. The only situation of interactivity in the case of the cross symbol is that the player's last enemy in the plot can grab the player's avatar and perform a spectacular crucifixion on them, thus confirming that this entity was responsible for Marika's crucifixion. Just that and nothing more. If the player plays the game well enough, they will evade this grab attack and not find out this one little piece of information that could have been suspected through other clues.

In contrast, the symbol of the crusade is entirely interactive in *Elden Ring*. Its interactivity, and therefore its narractivity, is divided into two parts: the first crusade and the second crusade. The first crusade in the world of *Elden Ring* took place before the events in which the player takes part, which include the second crusade (but more on that later). The player character encounters in a new land participants of the first crusade when it is formally still ongoing, although it was practically ended long ago. The nature of that expedition is best exemplified by the description of *Crusade Insignia*—the item the player receives after defeating a certain knight involved in this:

> A talisman depicting a raised spear on a backdrop of flames, in remebrance of the lives lost in the sacred crusade led by Messmer.
> Raises attack power after defeating an enemy.
> The warriors who fought in the crusade set aside both honor and mercy to wantonly impale and scorch those deemed impure.
> Those who felt invigorated by each cry of death were the same men who were certain of the sanctity of the campaign. (FromSoftware, 2024)

Wandering through this land where the crusade took place, the player sees every now and then the desolation that was wrought there. It is often very difficult to describe. The people who suffered from the crusade—'those deemed impure'—did not have warm feelings towards their invaders, because to them that is what the crusaders were, nothing else. Especially as the headhunting and oppression never ended, despite the emergence of an undisputed victor in this conflict. The narrative clearly and in many ways conveys who is the monster here and therefore who is to be sympathised with.

But to what does this massacre, this genocide refer? To which of the real, historical crusades? And does it have to refer to history for the player to be able to relate to it themself? To answer the last question first, of course not. The heterocosm is not broken here as with the symbol of the cross. Narration of *Elden*

Ring uses the word ‘crusade’ as belonging to the game world. It describes a military campaign that, at least officially, is fought solely in the name of god(dess). Remarkably close to the historical definition, is it not? How does it differ? The fact that in *Elden Ring* the crusade happened because god(dess) really wanted it to.

> Black armor of Messmer the Impaler. Draped with a red cloak bearing his crest embroidered.
> On his mother's wishes, Messmer made himself a symbol of fear, undertaking the cleansing crusade she desired.
> “Direct thy maledictions, thine ire, and thy grief towards me alone.” (FromSoftware, 2024)

The above quote is a description of the armour belonging to the crusade leader Messmer, who was the son of Queen Marika. She had ordered her child to purge the land, which, as the player may learn during the game, was her native land. The Holy Land, one might say, seeing the reference to history. But while the purpose of this campaign and its instigator are known, it is still unclear why the crusade was called a crusade and not, for example, an expedition against the barbarians. Marika, when she sent her son off to war, was not yet crucified, and it was that crucifixion that gave the cross its godly meaning in this world. The reasons why Messmer’s crusade became internally a crusade are to be found in the game and may or may not be convincing to the player. This is of no deeper significance in the context of this article, as the game undeniably calls this particular military campaign a crusade and therefore triggers at the start a full range of connotations in the player. And it does not matter of what kind exactly either, because ultimately the nature of Messmer's crusade will only confirm the negative ones. The player witnesses firsthand the horrors of the crusaders’ actions and interprets them independently. Only few facts are verbally told to them through descriptions of equipment or conversations with NPCs. But if the player does not explore all the available space, does not look closely, does not analyse, it will all be for naught. This is what the interactivity of the crusade symbol in *Elden Ring* is all about. Its interpretation depends on the player's engagement, conscious or not, in the act of interpretation. The more the player learns, the more critical they will be of the whole idea of a crusade, which may also carry over into thinking about historical crusades.

4. Second Crusade

The second crusade as a term is not present in the game. There is no description or dialogue that uses this phrase. There is not even one that uses the phrase ‘the first crusade’. Because of that many *Elden Ring* players do not know about the second crusade, even though they are taking part in it after all, because that is what *Shadow of the Erdtree* storyline is about.

If the first crusade is a crusade primarily because it was so named, what constitutes the second crusade? The similarity to the first? Absolutely not, they are not similar. The second crusade is defined by the player themselves through their knowledge of history. It is much simpler for them, because the first crusade has already evoked the proper connotations. They can be positive, and they can be negative. Negative connotations were already explicitly portrayed. In an effort not to confuse this, the positive connotations had to be presented implicitly. And so it is in *Shadow of the Erdtree*. The second crusade is not a loud military campaign, but a quiet pilgrimage to the holy land in search of a god—'the way of the cross'.

> Notably, Pope Urban II did not invent the term 'crusade'. The expedition he launched at Clermont was so novel, and in some ways still so embryonic in its conception, that there was no word with which it could be described. Contemporaries generally termed this 'crusade' simply an *iter* (journey) or *peregrination* (pilgrimage). It was not until the close of the twelfth century that more specific terminology developed, in the form of the word *crucesignatus* (one signed with the cross) for a 'crusader', and the eventual adoption of the French term *croisade*, which roughly translates as 'the way of the cross'. For the sake of convention and clarity, historians have adopted the term 'crusade' for the Christian holy wars launched from 1095 onwards, but we should be aware that this lends a somewhat misleading aura of coherence and conformity to the early 'crusades'. (Asbridge, 2012, pp. 42)

In *Shadow of the Erdtree*, the way of the cross was taken quite literally. During gameplay, the player encounters crosses left by Miquella, another son of Marika. They look like this:

Figure 4. One of the thirteen crosses scattered by the demigod Miquella in his mother's homeland. Source: FromSoftware, 2024

Each cross is a symbol of Miquella's discarding part of his body on the path to godhood. His aim is to replace his mother as the divine sovereign. Miquella's followers are so confident of his success that no one raises a question that he is technically still a demigod. So, to look for crosses is to look for god. It would be hard to imagine a more sacred task.

The player does not have to find all these crosses, although the storyline and mechanics encourage them to do so. But still, they can ignore the second crusade just like the first. What makes this holy pilgrimage different from the earlier military campaign in terms of narractivity is that this time the player has some influence over what they experience. In order for the storyline to progress, there are actions that the player m u s t perform and there are actions that the player c a n perform, and some of them in several diverse ways. It all affects the interpretation process because of the variable potential engagement and the variety of knowledge the player can acquire. In the case of the first crusade, there was no such 'interpretative opulence'. It was practically over by the time the player character reached those lands, making it impossible for them to do anything that would affect its course and change their interpretation in that regard.

But what awaits at the end of the way of the cross? God, of course. Marika's son wants to become a god in the same place where she obtained her divinity. There is a certain resemblance between the two that the people of this world recognise. There is also a second layer of similarity, recognisable only to the player. Both Marika and Miquella are Jesus figures. Marika through the crucifixion, and Miquella through the Stations of the Cross, which are also called 'the Way of the Cross'. There are thirteen Miquella crosses. If we add the player character's meeting with him at the end of the *Shadow of the Erdtree* storyline, we have fourteen encounters, exactly as many as there are stations in the traditional Way of the Cross, which is the story of Jesus fulfilling his divine destiny. So why is it still a symbol of a crusade and not a symbol of the Stations of the Cross? The answer is an ending—a single ending. Despite such freedom of gameplay, resulting in many possible interpretations of everything that is in the game, the ending of *Shadow of the Erdtree* is only one—to slay a god. For although Miquella has become one, he has not yet achieved his goal—he has not replaced his mother. Until he does, he is a usurper. T h e god of this world is still Marika. It is she who, through her power as a ruling deity, grants the player 'Grace'. Grace is a phenomenon that provides the player with many gameplay possibilities in a diegetic way. Without it, the player character would not be able to appear in the game's plot at all. One aspect of Grace is that it visually guides the player through the game world. They do not have to be aware of where it is leading them or why. It just leads them. In *Shadow of the Erdtree*, Grace leads to killing the usurper, Miquella. This is the only solution to the situation that the god allows. Player character—and through the act of playing the player themselves—turns out to be no better than Messmer and his

troops, because despite the noble, even poetic beginnings they end up doing the same thing—invading a foreign land to kill those 'deemed impure'. This is a crusade.

5. Conclusion

The cross stands for power in the world of *Elden Ring*, and the crusade signifies submission to that power. This may be the ultimate conclusion drawn from playing the game and its expansion. But the earlier conclusions are equally important, as the game's narrative impact on the player is determined by the whole interpretative process and how dynamic it was. This dynamic is made possible by the thoughtful structure of the embedded and emergent narrative (Amiri, 2019), and by the extraordinary gameplay challenges (Domingues et al., 2024) for which FromSoftware's games are renowned. Discovering all the storyline content in *Elden Ring* is physically difficult and this is indisputable, because without modifying the game it is impossible to change the difficulty level. Those players who follow the line of least resistance during their gameplay, e.g. due to lack of appropriate skills, will miss out on some of the story's interpretative potential. They will still be able to explore the critical commentary on the factual Crusades by analysing those locations that need to be crossed to reach the ending of *Shadow of the Erdtree*, but probably no thought of their own will be added to it. At least in comparison to this situation in which the player learns everything they can from a single playthrough and therefore has a higher chance to understand how they have been used, and what kind of crimes they have committed because of that. With all this, the spectrum of possible interpretations of *Elden Ring* with *Shadow of the Erdtree* has two extremes. In one, the symbols of the cross and crusade are perverse—stripped of their pious, poetic connotations. In the other, these symbols are relatively untouched and do not evoke negative connotations that might carry over into thinking outside the game. Admittedly, the mechanics push players towards the first extreme, but do not exclude the second. The player still has control over the style of their gameplay and of what comes out of it.

Elden Ring in its original edition sold 30 million copies (GBest, 2025). That is a significant number. Thirty million players have conducted (or at least could have conducted) their own 'existential investigation' (Kłosiński, 2023, pp. 31) based on this game. Their playing could serve as a cultural practice, transforming all its participants—their subjectivity, identity, existence. This is what interpretation is. The ambiguities of the plot in *Elden Ring*, together with the gameplay mechanics, afford an unusual multitude of interpretations, which later clash with others in the online space, expanding and connecting cultural practices of different players. The symbols of the cross and the crusade were and still are an excellent *playground* for this mechanism.

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