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Sorrowful Be the Heart, Penitent One: Medievalism, Religion, and Cultural Memory in *Blasphemous*

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ABSTRACT:

This essay analyses *Blasphemous*, a Spanish independent digital game that recontextualises Catholic iconography and medievalist visual cultures in pixel-art form and ritualised play. Drawing on Andalusian Catholic traditions, the game constructs a symbolic world characterised by the figurations of guilt, penance, and redemption. Taking on sacred and profane models, social imaginaries, and myth, the study delves into how *Blasphemous* combines theology and mechanics to create a digitally bodied penance. Methodologically, the research brings visual semiotic analysis, digital game analysis, and visual ethnography together in an attempt to see how sacred space, relics, and ritual forms function narratively and interactively. The analysis suggests how *Blasphemous* constructs a form of ludic theology that enacts spiritual suffering by repetition, cycles of death and resurrection, and acts of confession. It also comments on the fact that the high cultural specificity of the game coexists with its global popularity, and it echoes larger conflicts between authenticity and access within the global independent game industry. In recontextualising religious and historical symbolism for a contemporary gaming public, Blasphemous shows that independent games are media for narrative experimentation, cultural commemoration, and symbolic recuperation in the digital age.

KEY WORDS:

Catholic iconography, cultural memory, digital game analysis, ludic theology, medievalism, religion, ritual.

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Introduction

Over the past several years, independent digital games have emerged as a significant site of aesthetic innovation, cultural critique, and narrative experimentation within digital media (Anthropy, 2012; Juul, 2019; Ruffino, 2018). Partially free from many of the commercial demands that shape mainstream production, indie designers ever more frequently employ digital games as spaces of personal expression and cultural critique. Sometimes, indie production even becomes the only "space of resistance" for creatives who want to convey their idea of what a digital game should (or can) be, in open contrast to the logic of the gaming market. Among these, *Blasphemous* (The Game Kitchen, 2019) stands out for its singular use of Spanish Catholic iconography, medieval visual aesthetics, and metaphysical invocations of guilt, suffering, and redemption. Inhabiting a barren, dark and gothic world (Anyó, 2023) filled with ecclesiastical imagery and penitential discipline, *Blasphemous* offers players a narrative game which is as much theological as it is ludic.

Blasphemous is a metroidvania game – an action-adventure subgenre characterised by non-linear exploration and a direct-action and narrative event progression system. The most representative titles in the genre, and those also responsible for bestowing upon it its name, are *Metroid* (Nintendo, 1986) and *Castlevania* (Konami, 1986). Aesthetically, *Blasphemous* take its cue from the pixel art style graphics typical of 8- and 16-bit console

games, while faithfully reproducing the defining features of the metroidvania genre. These include a single, interconnected map with initially inaccessible (and hidden) sections, the necessity of acquiring key items or triggering specific events to advance both exploration and narrative progression, the presence of bosses and sub-bosses, role-playing features that allow the enhancement of the protagonist's attributes and abilities to access more challenging areas, and a set of limited core actions – two-dimensional movement, jumping, sliding, and offensive manoeuvres – that can be expanded and refined as the game progresses. The title also features multiple alternative endings, a hallmark of the genre in terms of design complexity.

Set in the tormented land of Cvstodia, *Blasphemous* presents a world suspended between faith and damnation, where divine miracles and human sins coexist in a perpetual cycle of suffering and expiation. The setting is reminiscent of a dark reinterpretation of early modern Andalusia, its architecture and iconography recalling the excesses of Baroque religiosity and the penitential rituals of Spanish Catholicism. The landscape is populated by flagellants, martyrs, and grotesque relics, each embodying a form of devotion distorted by the weight of collective guilt. The player inhabits the role of the Penitent One, the last survivor of the "Silent Sorrow" massacre, condemned to wander through Cvstodia in an endless act of contrition. Armed with the sword Mea Culpa – itself a living embodiment of pain and suffering – the Penitent One journey is both a physical and spiritual pilgrimage, structured in cycles of death, rebirth, and purification. The narrative, conveyed through cryptic dialogues, environmental clues, and relic-driven storytelling, resists linear interpretation. Instead, it invites the player to reconstruct a theology of pain and redemption through fragments of lore and ritual performance. In order to do this, the game reimagines the act of play as a symbolic liturgy, in which atonement is wrought not through revelation but through persistence and repetition – an aesthetic and moral meditation on the intersections of faith, corporeality, and memory.

Blasphemous was developed by The Game Kitchen and published by Team 17 Digital. The game, first announced in 2017, was officially released in 2019 across all major consoles and online gaming platforms. Its sequel, *Blasphemous II* (The Game Kitchen, 2023), was launched in 2023. The Game Kitchen is an independent development studio based in Seville, with an additional office in Tenerife, Spain. The studio's portfolio also includes *The Last Door* (The Game Kitchen, 2013), *Ninja Gaiden: Ragebound* (The Game Kitchen, 2025a), and *The Stone of Madness* (The Game Kitchen, 2025b).

Based on the observation made about the game's setting, the visual style of *Blasphemous* is deliberately Andalusian-centric, drawing heavily from the historical, religious, and artistic heritage of the region. The developers have purposefully and self-consciously constructed the visual narrative using Catholic and Baroque iconographic tropes, an overt allusion to southern Spanish cultural identity. Through this, they have articulated an aesthetic strategy aimed at exporting local cultural imaginaries beyond national borders (Ros Velasco et al., 2022). In partial continuity with this transnational orientation, the game was originally dubbed in English and only later, in 2020, in Spanish, despite the developers' initial preference for the latter. Financial constraints in production compelled the team to emphasise voice acting with a broader international appeal.

This study addresses *Blasphemous* as a cultural artefact mobilising medievalist and religious tropes to create an emotionally resonant (Rosa, 2019) and symbolically rich game world. It marshals interdisciplinary scholarship in game studies, cultural memory, and the sociology of religion to explore how the game repurposes sacred tropes for a global audience of consumers, while still being inflected with the cultural peculiarities of Spanish Catholic traditions. The study considers how *Blasphemous* participates in wider trends of neo-medievalism (Ortenberg West-Harling, 2009; Price, 2024) and post-secular

digital culture (Garner, 2021; Bosman, 2019), in which the sacred and profane are renegotiated through interactive media.

Taking a cue from Durkheim (2016) and Castoriadis' (1987) theories, the study argues that *Blasphemous* is set in a symbolic space where religious tradition is both honoured and distorted. The study suggests that the game serves as a cultural memory space, wherein collective identity is negotiated in aesthetic representation as well as ritualised play. In this, the study is contributing to an increasing amount of research on how digital games not only portray but also affect contemporary ideas of belief, history, and identity (Love, 2010; Fernández-Vara, 2019; Costalunga & Varini, 2025).

Methodologically, the study adopts a hybrid approach, combining visual semiotic analysis, digital game analysis (Aarseth, 2003; Consalvo & Dutton, 2006; Fernández-Vara, 2019), and ethnographic observations. The study addresses the game's design choices – mechanics, art direction, and narrative structure – not just as storytelling devices but as expressions of a broader socio-symbolic imaginary. Lastly, this research situates *Blasphemous* within the growing discourse on indie game authorship, cultural innovation, and the digital reworking of sacred traditions.

Literature Review

a) Indie games and narrative innovation

The independent games movement has provided a space for experimental storytelling, cultural specificity, and artistic ownership in the market of digital games. Whereas AAA games favour market-tested formulas and cinematic spectacle, independent games tend to prioritise personal, political, or culturally specific narratives (Anthropy, 2012; Parker, 2013). These include games, among others, such as *Undertale* (Fox, 2015), *Papers, Please* (3909 LLC, 2013), and *Blasphemous*, that embody the full potential of this movement: they showcase idiosyncratic narrative voices, unusual art styles, and unconventional mechanics that challenge traditional notions of game design (Juul, 2019; Ruffino, 2018). These games thus enable forms of expression that would otherwise not be possible, or not with the same level of attraction to the market. By introducing innovative interactive mechanics and non-linear narrative styles, they offer unique experiences in comparison to mainstream traditional titles (Lee, 2014), while fostering and encouraging imagination and reflection processes by involving active player participation (Hayes, 2020).

The term *indie auteur* has become synonymous with the study of this movement (Oliva, 2021). Drawn from post-structuralist definitions of authorship in film and criticism, indie developers are coming to be regarded as curators of personal and cultural significance, whose games are expressions of individual and shared identity (Keogh, 2015; Garda & Grabarczyk, 2016). *Blasphemous*, developed by Spanish game developer The Game Kitchen, is a good case in point: its art direction draws on the cultural background of the studio, namely the aesthetic and theological traditions of Andalusian Catholicism. Parker (2013) argues that independent games prefer subjectivity and situated experience, offering not just entertainment to players but also scope for affective investment and critical reflection.

b) Neo-medievalism and cultural memory

Medievalism in contemporary popular culture is less historical representation than cultural myth creation (Eco, 1986; Pugh & Weisl, 2012; Emery & Utz, 2014). In video games, neo-medieval appearances are often employed to create immersive worlds that mediate

and negotiate modern anxieties regarding morality, violence, and the sacred (Ortenberg West-Harling, 2009). While other games employ a generic medieval fantasy setting, *Blasphemous* is notable for its commitment to localised historical specificity, drawing on Spanish iconography, Baroque Christian piety, Andalusian culture, Semana Santa customs, and Catholic martyrdom traditions (Venegas Ramos & Gutiérrez-Manjón, 2021).

This is in alignment with trends in the *new medievalism* (Hsy, 2021), where the Middle Ages are reappropriated in order to articulate cultural identity in the present days. These representations are common acts of collective remembering (Assmann, 2011), negotiating past and present through symbolic reinterpretation. Cultural memory for Ricoeur (2004) is not merely archival, but productive and reproductive: it reconfigures history in the form of narratives responding to contemporary circumstances and concerns. *Blasphemous* is thus a space for the reimagining of religious heritage in a secularised, globalised media economy.

c) The sacred, the profane, and the digital

The sacred-profane divide, a central concern of religious sociology, is the fulcrum of *Blasphemous*'s narrative and aesthetic development. Drawing from Durkheim (2016), Thompson (1993), and digital religion studies (Waltemathe, 2014; Campbell, 2023), this study considers how *Blasphemous* reconstitutes sacred iconography as an interactive narrative. While the game inverts ecclesiastical institutions – through grotesque iconography, distorted clergy, and obfuscated theology – it also invites reverence through ritual, penance, and martyrdom mechanics. The penance that the characters in the game have internalised and that guides them in their narrative reflects the disproportionate punishments of Catholic mythology (León, 2019).

Cornelius Castoriadis's theory of the social imaginary provides one productive framework for interpreting this double movement of respect and critique. Castoriadis (1987) argued that societies are founded in shared symbolic universes that mark the borders of meaning and identity. *Blasphemous* engages this imaginary by reworking the visual lexicon of Spanish Catholicism into a digital mythos, open to global viewers but rooted in local affect and memory (Ivy, 1995; Strauss, 2006).

Also, as Barthes (1972) suggests in his theory of mythologies, cultural signs have a tendency to operate at multiple levels simultaneously – denotative, connotative, and ideological. The game's motifs of blood, torture, and redemption are not merely aesthetic conceits but mythic structures that convey greater anxieties about guilt, trauma, and spiritual aspiration. In this sense, *Blasphemous* belongs to what Bosman (2019) has termed the *sacred digital*, a space wherein religious tropes are renegotiated in the procedural and aesthetic discursive reasoning of games.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology combining semiotic analysis, game analysis, and visual ethnography to study the ways that *Blasphemous* remakes religious and medievalist imagery into an interactive, narrative-driven digital product. Collectively, these methods produce a multi-layered approach that aims not merely to be sensitive to the visual and symbolic content of the game but also to its procedural structure and affective bond to the player.

a) Visual semiotic analysis

Semiotic analysis informs comprehension of the rich visual language of the game. Following in Barthes' (1972) footsteps, this approach speaks about how meaning is constructed through the use of signs, symbols, and mythologies incorporated into *Blasphemous*'s visual universe. Particular attention is paid to recurring visual tropes – such as blood, martyrdom, church buildings, relics, and the stylised depiction of religious icons – and how these items suggest broader cultural associations. As Huppatz (2011) outlines, semiotic analysis in contemporary media studies allows us to interpret not just surface pictures but also the ideological and affective meanings contained in them.

The pixel-art aesthetic of the game, while evoking retro style, is utilised here to convey semantically rich content. The representation of self-lashing penitence, hooded procession, and ghoulish religious figures, therefore, not only requires analysis as stylisation but also as a visual critique of religious tradition and transformation. This is something that semiotic analysis can allow in order to uncover a rich symbolic infrastructure matching Barthes's (1972) definition of myth as "a second-order semiological system" (p. 114).

b) Digital game analysis

The study also employs digital game studies to examine the interplay between game mechanics, narrative design, and player experience. Drawing on Bogost (2010) and Juul (2011), the contention is that games express meaning not only through representational content but also by employing systems, rules, and interactivity. *Blasphemous* utilises peculiar ludic structures – including the cycle of death and resurrection, accumulating and cleansing guilt, and enabling confession shrines – that are procedural metaphors for penance, redemption, and pilgrimage. Death, in particular, has an important (gameplay and narrative) presence, haunting the avatar-player throughout the game (Ros Velasco et al., 2022). In fact, through the continuous play-death cycle, the avatar's quest for atonement resonates with the player's goal of (playful) game completion.

By analysing how these mechanics simulate theological and ritualistic experiences, the research links gameplay and religious embodiment. Trapped in Cvstodia's hostile world, searching for narrative fragments through exploration, and dying repeatedly becomes a metaphorical reproduction of a spiritual journey and sacrifice. These elements of the game are compared to more general analyses of affect, embodiment, and agency in religiously themed games (Grieve & Campbell, 2014; Fernández-Vara, 2019).

c) Visual ethnography and cultural contextualisation

In order to situate the game in its cultural and historical context, the methodology adopts visual ethnography as outlined by Pink (2004). In contrast to traditional ethnography based on face-to-face fieldwork, visual ethnography allows the examination of visual and symbolic systems found in media artefacts as cultural texts. The methodology is ideally suited to *Blasphemous*, which, as already mentioned, appropriates heavily from Spanish Catholic material culture, with references to Semana Santa (Holy Week), religious relics, and Baroque ecclesiastical imagery.

Working from the theory of Pink, the research looks at the way visual codes function within their sociohistorical setting and how they are read and emotionally invested in by the player. What this process enables is a culturally grounded reading of the iconography of the game that takes into account both its Andalusian origins and its reworking for a transnational indie player base.

Results of the Game *Blasphemous* Analysis

a) Visual symbolism and semiotics

The world of *Blasphemous* is saturated to excess with religious imagery that goads towards a reading broader than aesthetic exploitation. Its pixellated realm draws from a particularly Spanish Catholic visual vocabulary and leverages reference to Semana Santa iconography (Keller & Kinkade, 2014), Baroque sacred painting, and the architecture of penitential piety. Semiotically, these signs become pieces of evidence in what Barthes (1972) calls a second-order mythological system – symbols which have ideological meaning inscribed within cultural memory.

Perhaps the strongest of the recurring motifs is that of martyrdom, achieved through bodies that combine holiness and physical agony. Saints appear in brutal forms: pierced, burned, twisted, or caged in spiked reliquaries. This foregrounding of bodily agony brings to mind the visceral realism of Spanish Golden Age religious sculpture – most specifically that of artists like Pedro de Mena and Juan de Mesa – where suffering is the vehicle of transcendence. Here, though, the pain indications take on double meanings. They evoke awe and revulsion, highlighting what Bosman (2019) refers to as the *sacred grotesque*, a combination of sacred symbolism and bodily monstrosity in the digital sacred.

The Penitent One himself is also a visual text: his enormous, cone-shaped helmet explicitly references the capirotes worn in Semana Santa parades. These hoods in formal practice are markers of anonymity, humility, and penitence. In-game, the helmet is nevertheless both a burden and a weapon – a component of the character's unstated self and perpetual gesture of his guilt. For Barthes, myth corrupts meaning insofar as history is interpreted into nature; *Blasphemous* does this maxim in reverse. In dissolving the distinction between religious symbols and their construct, *Blasphemous* highlights how spiritual signs are political and cultural constructs too.

The buildings themselves also reinforce this symbolic net. Cathedrals are half-burned down; sanctuaries are swimming in blood; altars (Prie Dieu) are checkpoints. They are not fixed set pieces but "symbolic spaces" that tell the tale of a fallen theocratic society. The profanation of sacred architecture is part of broader assaults on institutional religion and is also consistent with the game's general ambivalence concerning religious authority.

Another of the key icons is the reliquary, a traditional Catholicism vessel for containing the physical remains of saints. Relics in *Blasphemous* resemble a thorn, a splintered bone, or a vial of blood. But these relics are not filled with Godly energy but with reflective memories. Rather than being channels for divine intervention, they are mnemonic devices that write narratives of trauma and guilt into play. This subversion of the relic is an action that imitates Barthes' deconstruction of myth: the exposure of ideological investments in supposedly sacred things.

Finally, colour and light are used symbolically during the game. Muted, funereal colouring – thoroughly shrouded in greys, browns, and dark reds – harmonises with the emotional gravity of penance and death. Infrequent but intentional flashings of gold or white identify moments of divine intervention or revelation. Colour shifts function semiotically to divide the holy from the unholy, maintaining visual discourse in accordance with theological distinction (Durkheim, 2016).

In general, *Blasphemous* constructs a symbolic world where visual motifs are not only ornamenting but also narrating. They articulate a shared imaginary – that is, a set of collective symbols and emotional resonances (Castoriadis, 1987; Strauss, 2006;

Adams et al., 2015) through which cultural identity and belief are visually and narratively expressed. In this sense, the game's imagery does not "speak" metaphorically, but rather communicates symbolically through recurring forms that structure meaning within the player's interpretative framework created at the intersection of religion, violence, memory, and cultural identity. With their deformation and ritualistic repetition, the game enacts the vulnerability of meaning in sacred systems and invites players into a world where redemption is always on the brink of collapse.

b) Ritual, mechanics, and ludic embodiment

While the visual symbolism of *Blasphemous* is firmly based in Catholic and medievalist iconographies, it is at the level of mechanics and player interaction that the game carries out a more profound theological and affective structuring. The game appropriates traditional religious conceptions – penance, sacrifice, redemption – into ritualised gameplay activities that commit the player cognitively and embodiedly, based on the procedural rhetoric of suffering and atonement (Bogost, 2010).

At the heart of this *ludic theology* is the death-rebirth cycle, a ubiquitous mechanic across Soulslike game but one that finds new meaning in *Blasphemous*. With each death, the player-character expels a piece of guilt, a mechanic that must be ritually circumnavigated either by returning to the site of death or through acts of absolution at a confession shrine. This layout evokes the Catholic doctrines of original sin and sacramental penance, rendering the player's failure narrative and ritual. Unlike death in games where failure is simply a setback, *Blasphemous* links all failure to a moral blemish – a persistent flaw that must be cleansed through work and expiation.

The game's confession shrines are homologues to sacred places wherein the unclean is suspended temporarily. Such sites allow the player to cleanse accumulated guilt, gain narrative content, and reflect upon sin. As Schnell and Pali (2013) also argue in their pilgrimage and ritual monograph, such habitual action generates meaning through the repetition of ritual and existential orientation. In this sense, then, the confession shrines are not just save points – they are sacraments in the game's ludic form.

Other mechanics double down on this affective economy of suffering and transcendence. The player collects relics and rosary beads, both of which enhance abilities but also weigh the body with diegetic traumas and martyrs' histories. Even traversal mechanics – such as self-flagellation-inspired wall climbing or kneeling to trigger altars – require the player to enact ritual gestures of submission, aligning motion with meaning.

The protagonist, The Penitent One, being voiceless, further contributes to creating an atmosphere of religious contemplation. There is no more than non-verbal action, prayer, and coded text used for communication, and the player – despite the game's action nature – is pushed toward a more contemplative, introspective mode of play. This is not merely an imitation of monastic silent culture but also game design practice using negative space – in audio, in movement, in story – to generate gravitas and contemplation (Fernández-Vara, 2019).

Most strikingly, these systems not only represent religious practice, but also mimic it. Adopting a synthesis of Bogost's (2010) procedural rhetoric, *Blasphemous* constructs a theological grammar in code: a system where sin, penance, and grace are not merely witnessed but enacted by rule-based systems. That is where its difference from iconographic games lies. Its message is not just delivered – it is acted out.

Furthermore, the mechanics put the player into the role of an active penitent, rather than a spectator or heroic figure. The player suffers, labours, and sacrifices alongside the character. Play is therefore an act of passage, echoing the liminal modes of pilgrimage in Turner's (1969) anthropological model: leaving protection behind, trial, symbolic

dying, and final reintegration (or transcendence). In this framework, *Blasphemous* offers not only an adventure but a virtual rite of purification. Its overall difficulty, and the numerous deaths caused by even the slightest mistake, are well (and slyly) justified by this narrative-symbolic context, while the player is forcibly immersed in it.

Overall, the game mechanics of *Blasphemous* inscribe Catholic metaphysical and liturgical theory into ritualistic play. In so doing, the game constructs a sense of ludic embodiment, wherein religious subject matter is not merely represented but sensed. Such procedural inscription of pain and penance confers on the game a unique space of post-secular engagement, whereby timeless spiritual thought is met through recent ludic media.

c) Localisation and the global indie market

Blasphemous is a great example of how deeply ingrained cultural content can be successfully adapted into an internationally relevant indie title. Even though its look, narrative, and structural themes take directly from Andalusian Catholicism and Spanish memory, the game has been a huge international hit and success – both in critical and commercial reception. It is this accomplishment which exemplifies one of the fundamental tensions of contemporary indie production: balancing true cultural specificity and broad translatability within globalised media economies (Parker, 2013; Albarran, 2023).

As Ruffino (2018) argues, independent games operate through a "politics of presence" (p. 107), where a game's identity is created just as much by its cultural provenance as by its position in the global market. *Blasphemous* performs a double move: it foregrounds a specific, excluded religious-aesthetic tradition – based in Spanish penitential Catholicism – while simultaneously positioning that tradition within a genre (Metroidvania [Oliveira et al., 2020]) and visual style (pixel art [Kopf & Lischinski, 2011]) that are legible to a mass gaming public.

This intentional opacity and the control of this same opacity – offering another cultural frame without fully expounding or diluting it – is a strategy of what Casetti (2015) calls transcultural negotiation. Many terms in the game – like "Cvstodia", "The Miracle", "guilt", "flagellation", etc. – are not defined through lore exposition but are met through context and visual-symbolic experience. This aligns with Aarseth's (1997) ergodic theory of literature in which meaning is not delivered but revealed through engagement and struggle.

Yet, this strategy does not alienate players unfamiliar with Spanish religious history. Rather, it constructs what Juul (2019) refers to as "unstable meaning structures" (p. 162-163), wherein interpretative ambiguity is an inherent feature of the narrative experience. Thus, *Blasphemous* invites international players into a culturally intensive imaginary without reducing its content to essentialist or exoticist cliches. The digital game voids the trap of "cultural tokenism" so common in global media by being respectful and serious in its engagement with its religious subject, even if it distorts it on an aesthetic and storytelling level.

Moreover, the localisation choices of the game – maintaining some of the Spanish names, using liturgical and archaic English for international releases, and preserving references to real religious practices – reflect a non-neutrality in the approach to localisation. O'Hagan and Mangiron (2013) argue that localisation is always cultural, ideological, and aesthetic, not merely linguistic. The success of *Blasphemous* comes from the fact that it avoids "flattening" its symbolic world for the international public, but rather from its ability to leave the player with some responsibility in interpreting strange materials through playing and affect.

This is a distinctive kind of strategy compared to the more anglicised neo-medievalisms in *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011) or *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), the tendency of which is to universalise medieval tropes within generic fantasy settings, probably also due to market choices or the cultural distance of the development teams from narrative material of reference. *Blasphemous*, on the other hand, roots its world in some very specific histories of suffering, ritual, and Catholic visual culture and then applies indie game design philosophy to them in order to produce a hybrid narrative form: both particular and translatable, devotional and gruesome, nostalgic and hermetically written.

Under indie game authorship, *Blasphemous* is thus what Galloway (2006) describes as *cultural interface* – a place of meeting between narrative code and cultural code, between localised remembrance and global mediation. The game is not just entertainment, but a cultural envoy, situating the southern Spanish rituals, anxieties, and pictorial traditions into dialogue with a multicultural, global player community. This was probably mainly due to the fidelity of the source narrative and iconographic material and, most likely, to the spatial-cultural "closeness" and passion made possible by the indie nature of the project.

Discussion

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that *Blasphemous* is more than a stylistic homage to old games or a dark fantasy platformer, but rather a culturally situated work of narrative innovation that mobilises religious symbolism, ritual structure, and regional aesthetics in a globally readable fashion. Its hybridisation of theological themes and interactive mechanisms breaks through established genre forms and offers a potent illustration of what happens when collective memory is reimagined through digital means.

At the heart of *Blasphemous* is a trade between piety and critique, and between sacred tradition and profane transgression. In its grotesque yet respectful, distorted yet emotionally resonant use of Catholic iconography, the game performs what scholars have called a *double gesture* (Goldstein, 2005): it defiles the symbolic power of religious institutions while upholding the emotional significance of spiritual practice. This twofold articulation addresses Hughey's (1979) reading of Weber and Durkheim in which secularisation is not the elimination of the sacred but its transfer to new symbolic orders.

While Durkheim's theories were developed to analyse real societies, they remain heuristically valuable for the study of fictional and ludic systems. Digital games construct symbolic universes governed by norms, boundaries, and rituals, which regulate player behaviour in ways comparable to social structures. This Durkheimian lens can thus be extended to digital environments, which – although simulated – generate genuine forms of collective meaning and moral order. In this sense, it argues that the internet and other mediated spaces reconfigure the social imagination into new, digitally instantiated communities that retain the symbolic density of traditional societies (Blommaert, 2018).

Within this framework, the boundaries and ritualised actions that define gameplay echo the processes of social regulation. Games can be described as "self-referential systems" in which meaning arises precisely from their internal constraints and ritual control of boundaries (Harviainen, 2012, p. 508). These ritual structures enable games to model collective behaviour and moral codes in procedural form. Similarly, therefore, video games can "work like rituals" by generating temporary sacred spaces that organise symbolic actions and emotions (Wagner, 2014, p. 18).

The religious or mythical dimension of this structure highlights how digital gaming can function as a "religious act" in its repetition, devotion, and suspension of disbelief (Bosman, 2019, p. 4). It situates this symbolic practice within a ludic habitus, linking the dispositions learned by the player and their previous experiences to their continued participation in rule-based systems (Jaćević, 2022).

Through this lens, Durkheim's reflections on ritual and the division between the sacred and the profane can shed light on the procedural and affective dimension of games such as *Blasphemous*, where interactive systems enact moral order and shared symbolic meaning rather than merely representing them.

On this interpretation, *Blasphemous* is a post-secular object (Smith, 2012) – a digital game which addresses the secular media economy but re-invests in the symbolic power of religious forms. The gameplay systems of the game do not merely point to sacrifice and penance, but enact them through ritualised gameplay, generating a ludic theology where the player ritually suffers, confesses, and endures. This framework is consonant with Bogost's (2010) concept of procedural rhetoric – games that argue through systems rather than symbols – and discloses the potential of interactive media to enable belief and instantiate moral structures.

Second, the cultural particularity of the game resists the homogenisation traditionally attributed to global media. Rather than universalising its medievalism in a generic world of fantasy, *Blasphemous* objects to a regionalised, localised authorship based on Andalusian aesthetics and religious practices. This objection to the cultural anchorage is part of the broader indie ethos – a rejection of mass-market pressures for individual, situated, and oftentimes marginal narratives (Anthropy, 2012; Ruffino, 2018). The role of The Game Kitchen as a Spanish indie game studio is crucial here: they not only draw upon cultural heritage but also perform it in a new technological and narrative idiom.

In this case, the game serves as a space of cultural translation, not by erasing local differences for the global market, but by trusting the player to meet and engage with non-familiar symbolic worlds. It is a strategy that places *Blasphemous* within the context of what can be defined as a *conjunctural analysis* (Jefferson, 2021) – a game that emerges at the intersection of tradition, technology, and transnational media flows. Its combination of devotional visuals, corporeal gameplay, and independent creation is a performance of the potential of digital games to be repositories of cultural memory, not preservation but reinvention.

Lastly, *Blasphemous* invites us to reflect on the cultural and narrative potential of games. It demonstrates how games can be made into ritual spaces, symbol repositories of inheritance, and negotiation grounds of culture. By doing so, it creates a model of indie game authorship that is not only personal or aesthetic, but also historical, political, and religious.

Conclusion

This study examined *Blasphemous* as an example of innovation in symbolism and narrative in indie game design, drawing attention to its unique combination of Spanish Catholic iconography, neo-medieval aesthetics, and interactive ritual. Through the application of visual semiotic analysis, digital game analysis, and visual ethnography, the study aims to demonstrate how *Blasphemous* reworks culturally specific religious traditions into an engaging digital experience that resonates with global audiences.

The key findings include the identification of a ludic theology – a game mechanical design approach that replicates sacramental and ritual practices such as guilt, penance, and absolution. Rather than simply representing religious themes, these mechanics allow players to embody them, performing spiritual tropes through procedural logic systems. This game design reshapes religious experience as a practice rather than a belief, and it compels us to think through the affective and ritual dimensions of digital interaction.

Visually, the game constructs a mythopoetic space wherein sacred and profane combine in divine and grotesque hybrids. Through the use of martyrdom, reliquaries, ecclesiastical architecture, and symbolic suffering, it illustrates how games can be archives of cultural memory, reusing religious iconography to produce not only aesthetic nostalgia, but also critical reformulation of historical identity.

Furthermore, the success of *Blasphemous* as a Spanish indie game demonstrates that games deeply rooted in culture can access international and global markets without compromising their specificity. The game manages to achieve a balance between cultural specificity and global accessibility, validating the role of indie game authorship as a mediator of localised memory and transnational storytelling. All this in (global) market conditions that rarely leaves little room for highly creative production.

While existing research has addressed religion in games largely from representational or narrative perspectives (Bosman, 2019; Garner, 2021), this study moves the argument ahead by introducing the concept of ludic theology – a perspective that interprets procedural gameplay as a ritual performance that occurs when games become ritual, that is, when players enact repetitive symbolic patterns within a delimited system of rules and meanings (Riley, 2005).

Ludic theology therefore accounts for the ability of games to express theological reflection in and through the game itself, rather than solely through explicit narration or doctrine and dogma. Theology is enacted instead of represented: the player performs ritualised actions – penance, repetition, and renewal – that convey spiritual concepts into interactive experience. Drawing upon an idea of play as a form of ritual (Huizinga, 1955) and on a conception of theology imagined as performative practice (Milbank, 2006), ludic theology highlights how digital games can render belief and metaphysical inquiry into embodied, procedural forms of reflection.

Furthermore, by situating *Blasphemous* within the specific cultural matrix of Andalusian Catholicism, the study aims to show how indie games can serve as a vector for regional memory and post-secular engagement in a globalised world. Video games have increasingly turned into sites of cultural memory, while their narratives and aesthetics are engaged in the negotiation of local identity within a global market (Hammar, 2019). The dual focus – ludic theology and cultural localisation – is the central contribution of the present research. By engaging intensely with questions of tradition, faith, identity, and creativity, *Blasphemous* challenges hegemonic paradigms both in religious representation and in game design. It attests that digital games are not merely entertainment products but also cultural texts, ritual spaces, and theoretical provocations. Since game studies as a field continues to emerge, subsequent research might follow up with comparable culturally located indie games, observe player reception of religious mechanics, or conduct comparative studies across religious traditions in digital media.

Overall, *Blasphemous* offers an example of how indie games can revive cultural memory, represent symbolic structures in gameplay, and continuously negotiate identity, beliefs, and authorship amidst a post-secular, globalised media landscape.

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