Near-Death Experience in Video Games or How Looking Death in the Eyes Can Be a Sales Concept: The Case of *Blasphemous* from an Anthropological, Metaphysical, and Promotional Standpoint[1]

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Abstract: Death is common in video games and one of the key elements to achieve bestseller status. From an anthropological perspective, near-death experience in video games enables the player to encounter familiarity with this uncharted phenomenon through interaction–which is necessary to understand and include it naturally in life from a metaphysical point of view–given the recreational-communicative nature of video games and their capacity for creating culture and horizons of meaning–not just the video game as a device, but also the full transmedia promotional narrative in which players participate first-hand. In this article, we analyze the anthropological and metaphysical components of the representation of death in video games following the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg's theory of the *absolutism of reality,* as well as the case of *Blasphemous* and its promotional storytelling to determine how death appears as a sales concept in the publicity due to its place in the players' common symbolic consciousness.
Keywords: *Blasphemous*; death; Hans Blumenberg; transmedia; video games.

[es] La experiencia cercana a la muerte en los videojuegos o cómo mirar a la muerte a los ojos puede ser un concepto para vender: el caso de *Blasphemous* desde un punto de vista antropológico, metafísico y promocional

Resumen: La muerte es habitual en los videojuegos y uno de los elementos clave para alcanzar el estatus de superventas. Desde una perspectiva antropológica, la experiencia cercana a la muerte en los videojuegos permite al jugador familiarizarse con este fenómeno inexplorado a través de la interacción, necesaria para comprenderlo e incluirlo naturalmente en la vida desde un punto de vista metafísico, dada la naturaleza lúdico-comunicativa de los videojuegos y su capacidad de crear cultura y horizontes de significado, no ya solo el videojuego como dispositivo, sino toda la narrativa promocional *transmedia* en la que los jugadores participan de primera mano. En este artículo analizamos los componentes antropológicos y metafísicos de la representación de la muerte en los videojuegos siguiendo la teoría del *absolutismo de la realidad* del filósofo alemán Hans Blumenberg, así como el caso de *Blasphemous* y su narrativa promocional para determinar cómo la muerte aparece como un concepto de venta en la publicidad por su lugar en la conciencia simbólica común de los jugadores.
Palabras clave: *Blasphemous*; muerte; Hans Blumenberg; transmedia; videojuegos.

Headings: 1. The Role of Death in Promoting Video Games; 2. Hans Blumenberg's Absolutism of Reality Hypothesis, Applied to the Framework of Video Games and Transmedia Promotional Strategies; 3. *Blasphemous* and the Representation of Death; 4. Death as a Promotional Tool in *Blasphemous;* 5. Discussion and Conclusions; 6. Bibliography.

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1. The Role of Death in Promoting Video Games

It is irrefutable that death is part of the narrative of video games. It is often either part of the avatar's goal or consists of the ultimate aim. On other occasions, death is something the player must avoid in order to succeed. In thriller-type video games, such as *Fahrenheit*, the death of certain secondary characters is part of the storyline of a case the protagonist must solve. In life simulators, like the famous *The Sims* series, death comes into play in the behavior and mood of family members and, sometimes, of the players themselves. Even in a classic game such as *Tetris*, slotting too many pieces into the wrong spots brings the game to an end, a symbolic death that comes as part of failing in the fight for survival.

In Diego Maté, we recognize one of the few academic articles where we can gather an idea of the characteristic features of death as it is represented in video games, such as its recurring nature, its inclusion in a system designed for play, its detachment from the systematization that is typical of narrative genres, and its tendency to disrupt the story[3]. Going beyond the traditional message of *Game Over*, a sales strategy has been created based on increasing our understanding of death, which could appeal to our innermost desires and impulses. We are not referring to desires or impulses that lean towards morbid fascination, sadism, and releasing violence[4], or liberation from the Freudian death drive[5]. We are making reference to a different perspective, that of *gaining an understanding of and familiarity with* one of the most unknowable phenomena we must deal with over the course of our lives and that determines our existential path.

In this article, we contend that death works as a selling feature for video games. It allows us to *know* its nature, to have contact with it without needing to experience

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[3]   Maté, D., «La representación de la muerte en el videojuego», *Jangwa Pana: Revista de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades*, 17, 1 (2018), pp. 61-71.

[4]   Ferguson, C.J., Rueda, S.M., Cruz, A.M., Ferguson, D.E., Fritz, S., & Smith, S.M., «Violent Video Games and Aggression: Causal Relationship or Byproduct of Family Violence and Intrinsic Violence Motivation?», *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 35, 3 (2008), pp. 311-332; Greitemeyer, T., «Everyday Sadism Predicts Violent Video Game Preferences», *Personality and Individual Differences*, 75 (2015), pp. 19-23; Greitemeyer, T., & Sagioglou, C., «The Longitudinal Relationship Between Everyday Sadism and the Amount of Violent Video Game Play», *Personality and Individual Differences*, 104 (2017), pp. 238-242; Greitemeyer, T., Weiß, N., & Heuberger, T., «Are Everyday Sadists Specifically Attracted to Violent Video Games and Do They Emotionally Benefit from Playing those Games?», *Aggressive behavior*, 45, 2 (2019), pp. 206-213; Przybylski, A.K., Ryan, R.M., & Rigby, S., «The Motivating Role of Violence in Video Games», *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 35, 2 (2009), pp. 243-259.

[5]   Harrer, S., «From Losing to Loss: Exploring the Expressive Capacities of Videogames Beyond Death as Failure», *Culture Unbound*, 5, 4 (2013), pp. 607-620.

it first-hand or look directly into its eyes to overcome the fear it provokes. Players are drawn by finding recognizable things from daily life in the world in which the game is played, as explained by Claudia Rossignoli[6]. The promise of playability in relation to death enables the gamer to strip death of its mystery and transform it into something more accessible. This does not mean trivializing death, as Gonzalo Frasca highlights[7], by making it something that is reversible. We are alluding to reducing its absolute character by interacting with it, in terms of acquiring greater levels of meaning concerning a reality that is a non-conceptualizable phenomenon, following the philosophical-anthropological theory of the *absolutism of reality* [*Absolutismus der Wirklichkeit*] by German philosopher Hans Blumenberg[8]. Thus, this work analyzes in anthropological and metaphysical terms how death forms part of the storytelling strategies for marketing the video game and its promotional sales pitches, based on our need to know and normalize this slippery phenomenon.

Our objective is to study the production of meaning caused by an experience of death not only as part of the playability of the video game but also through all the promotional and advertising activities that comprise the symbolic universe of the video game as a transmedia narrative, geared towards creating a successful sales strategy. Many papers that analyze the potential of video games for creating culture have failed to explain the roles played by the link to the games' marketing and their advertising strategies in that endeavor[9]. Our study attempts to take one step further in that respect. To this end, we take by way of reference the premises of communicative theory to understand the video game phenomenon as a cultural manifestation that is directly related to the new and changing processes and systems of communication[10].

In line with the contributions by Scolari regarding hypermediations in his attempt to collect and explain communication theories in terms of interactive digital culture, we understand video games to be the result of technologically interconnected processes that foster the production and exchange of signs and symbols among subjects, media, and languages[11]. They are a hypermedium that allows knowledge to be transformed/constructed not linearly but through a net-like communication model that, at the current time, colonizes the video games' promotional processes. For Adrienne Shaw[12], considering video games as media would not only imply addressing their consumption but also how playing is linked to engagement in other media and how these practices are organized socially. This perspective joins others that consider video games from a cultural standpoint, rather than considering video games purely from the perspective of gaming culture. Gaming research has focused to a large extent on validating the consumption of video games, video game texts, and video game

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6   Rossignoli, C., «Playing the Afterlife: Dante's Otherworlds in the Gaming Age», *Games and Culture*, 15, 7 (2020), pp. 825-849.

7   Frasca, G., «Ephemeral Games: Is It Barbaric to Design Videogames after Auschwitz?», *Cybertext Yearbook*, 2 (2007), pp. 172-180.

8   Blumenberg, H., *Work on Myth*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1985.

9   Van Ommen, M., «Guild Wars 2, the Frankfurt School and Dialectical Fairy Scenes: A Critical Approach Towards Massively Multiplayer Online Video Games», *Games and Culture*, 13, 6 (2018), pp. 547-567.

10   Shaw, A., «What Is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies», *Games and Culture*, 5, 4 (2010), pp. 403-424.

11   Scolari, C.A., *Hipermediaciones: elementos para una teoría de la comunicación digital interactiva*, Barcelona, Gedisa, 2008.

12   Shaw, A., «What Is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies», *op. cit.*

players. However, Shaw posits that these studies should be reflexive, not reactive[13]. The legacy of the cultural research on which investigations into video games should base themselves does not consist of studying the culture inside the games, although that is also useful, but of investigating how the culture is built from the video games themselves as communicative tools.

We need to address the participation of publicity in the configuration of a sales concept such as *death*, for example, and its visibility in the video game from a hypermedia or, better, transmedia practice perspective. We should therefore consider how we understand the current publicity communicative system and its relationship with transmedia culture to be framed. Transmedia storytelling has today become defined as creating stories told through multiple media[14]. We understand that an advertising strategy for promoting a video game has become a narrative structure that grows through different languages–e.g., iconic or verbal–and media. Transmedia strategies develop a multimodal narrative world expressed in the aforementioned media and languages, which leads each of the narratives to vary and each medium to contribute something unique and individual to the story as a whole[15]. Each of these marketing narratives joins, co-exists with, and transforms the rest of the narratives that are part of the video game's narrative universe, constituting a symbolic universe that gives rise to the appearance of the video game's brand through the meaning of these stories. Transmedia narratives invite the player to explore and attempt to satisfy fans who want to know everything about the narrative universe while, at the same time, including fans who settle for covering one part and imagining the rest[16]. In this sense–and following in the wake of an earlier study[17]–this paper raises the question of the need to explore the meaning of death in the narrative from the perspective of its use as a sales concept and through the transmedia promotional strategies.

Our investigation focuses on analyzing the *Blasphemous* video game, in line with the argument explained above, to attempt to test our initial hypothesis: first-person interaction with death in a virtual world, and through the construction of transmedia narratives in which the players themselves participate, is successful because, due to the anthropological and metaphysical need to gain distance from the Absolutism of Reality implicit in death, the players are capable of transforming the unthinkable into the mundane and create culture and horizons of meaning around that phenomenon.

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[13]   *Ibidem.*
[14]   Jenkins, H., *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York, New York University Press, 2006; Jenkins, H., Ford, S., & Green, J., *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, New York, New York University Press, 2013; Raybourn, E.M., «A New Paradigm for Serious Games: Transmedia Learning for More Effective Training and Education», *Journal of Computational Science*, 5, 3 (2014), pp. 471-481; Scolari, C.A., «Transmedia Storytelling: Implicit Consumers, Narrative Worlds, and Branding in Contemporary Media Production», *International Journal of Communication*, 3, 21 (2009), pp. 586-606; Scolari, C.A., Bertetti, P., & Freeman, M., *Transmedia Archaeology. Storytelling in the Borderlines of Science Fiction, Comics and Pulp Magazines*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2014.
[15]   Raybourn, E.M., «A New Paradigm for Serious Games: Transmedia Learning for More Effective Training and Education», *op. cit.*
[16]   Scolari, C.A., *Narrativas transmedia: cuando todos los medios cuentan*, Madrid, Deusto, 2013; Marfil-Carmona, R., «Interactividad digital y estrategias narrativas en la publicidad audiovisual de Manos Unidas y Unicef», *Historia y Comunicación Social*, 18 (2013), pp. 169-181.
[17]   Nicolás Ojeda, M.Á., San Nicolás Romera, C., & Ros Velasco, J., «In the Warcraft Universe We Trust: An Analysis of Transmedia Advertising Strategies in the World of Warcraft Video Game Series ("Battle Chest 3.0," "Cataclysm," and "Mists of Pandaria")», *International Journal of Communication*, 13 (2019), pp. 1507-1525.

2. Hans Blumenberg's Absolutism of Reality Hypothesis, Applied to the Framework of Video Games and Transmedia Promotional Strategies

Accepting death is not as simple as thinking of it–as Martin Heidegger posited[18]–as a liberating phenomenon. Rather, we all try to co-exist with the Sartrean idea that death is the reason that deprives life of all its meaning and humanity of its freedom[19]. Death is a painful, incomprehensible, and unbearable (in)*experience* in some cases. We need to build stories about death that make it easier for us to comprehend it.

It is not a coincidence that the most difficult questions to explain are precisely those we most need to understand, as Kant pointed out:

> Human reason has the peculiar fate in one species of its cognitions that it is burdened with questions which it cannot dismiss, since they are given to it as problems by the nature of reason itself, but which it also cannot answer, since they transcend every capacity of human reason[20].

These kinds of questions denote what Hans Blumenberg called the *absolutism of reality*[21], that is, the impotence we human beings experience when we are aware of the infinity and unfathomability of the reality in which we are immersed, one from which we must gain distance to live a meaningful life. The fact of pondering being part of that omnipotent nature which escapes our cognitive ability, of considering the unlimited and arbitrary existence of the universe that resists being pigeon-holed among the objectivist pretensions of the human gaze, and of knowing that the world exists beyond us, indifferent to our own existence, induces frustration, terror, and anguish in us[22]. According to Blumenberg[23], the absolutism of reality puts us under pressure and torments us, making us feel disconcerted and uncomfortable in our dealings with the world, disoriented by a relationship dominated by imbalance and inadequacy.

The question of death is perhaps one of the most challenging among those arising from the experience of the absolutism of reality[24]. Its contingent nature dominates our gaze towards what is absent beyond the horizon, inviting us, ultimately, to give free rein to a world of signs and images we ourselves create to acquire existential meaning[25]. To cope with the malaise caused by the absolute phenomenon of death–as well as with other absolute realities–we aim to gain distance from it as much as possible, doing everything to turn it into something more familiar and accessible, by either giving it a name, explaining it through a story or making use of whatever rhetorical stratagems are necessary–even gaining experience of it in a virtual setting. We have recourse to symbolic forms, a system to suppress arbitrariness, to transform the parts of reality we find unfamiliar and menacing, such as death, into accessible,

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[18]   Heidegger, M., *Being and Time*, New York, State University of New York Press, 2010.
[19]   Sartre, J-P., *Being and Nothingness. An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, New York, Routledge, 2018.
[20]   Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 99 [KrVAvii].
[21]   Blumenberg, H., *Work on Myth*, op. cit.
[22]   Blumenberg, H., *Theorie der Lebenswelt*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2010.
[23]   Blumenberg, H., *Work on Myth*, op. cit.
[24]   Blumenberg, H., *Theorie der Lebenswelt*, op. cit.
[25]   Cassirer, E., *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1965.

familiar phenomena[26].

Basing ourselves on Blumenberg's reflections, the representation of death in the video game and its transmedia promotional elements is a means to replace the unavailable with something available, as part of this process of deconstructing the absolutism. This is how human beings manage to dominate arrogant, unfathomable reality, especially when our intellect needs to tackle objects that require too much of it, such as death. The inclusion of death in the video game and its advertising creates what we need in order to come to a compromise with the absolutism of reality, to place it at a distance and thus to reduce the malaise caused in us by its unfamiliarity, or, in other words, to make death something more familiar by rendering it more ordinary and understandable. Thus, its role in the video game and in promoting that game is one of adaptation, as it enables us to draw connecting lines between the dominating nature of death and our insignificant perspective, preventing us from falling into a state of terror, nullity, and bewilderment in the face of uncharted mysteries. Our interaction with death through representations and narratives such as those constructed in video games and the transmedia promotional activities in which players play an active role provide a meaning about death that can in no way be offered by scientific explanations and that, however, we need in some way to provide our existence with meaning.

There are many ways to represent death; the first and most intuitive materializes simply with the act of giving it a name. We learn about death through rituals, by talking about it, disguising ourselves, explaining it through metaphors, integrating it into the storyline of parables, films, novels, and, of course, making it the protagonist of a video game story and of the culture created by that game through transmedia advertising. In this interaction with death, the player normalizes a non-conceptualizable phenomenon and enjoys it because it helps the player to integrate death into life. Its representation in video games and the culture created based on these can be successful insofar as it helps us in some way to relate to it through that interaction and the virtual experience obtained both first-hand and in the community. Its association with this recreational and cultural component enables us to integrate it inside the limits of human knowledge and transform it into an accessible, conceptualizable, and determinate phenomenon, far from the absolute spectrum it stays within most of the time.

This is why we venture to state that the creators of narratives for video games and of promotional strategies for these consider death to be a key element to achieve top seller status in the knowledge that gamers demand the type of experiences that enable them to explore absolute phenomena such as death to build a horizon of meaning relating to it, which enables healthier co-existence between the two parties, gamers and death. This is a question of control over what overwhelms us that the player appreciates and that, at present, is not only provided by the playability of the game in itself but is also strengthened by the universe of meaning around it, facilitated by transmedia promotional activities.

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26   Blumenberg, H., *Work on Myth*, *op. cit*.; Ros Velasco, J., «La antropología filosófica de Hans Blumenberg», *Res Publica*, 25 (2011), pp. 271-284; Ros Velasco, J., «Metaforología y antropología en Hans Blumenberg», *Azafea*, 14 (2012), pp. 207-231.

3. *Blasphemous* and the Representation of Death

Although *Blasphemous* was presented in 2017, it was not until 10 September 2019 that Spanish indie video games' developer The Game Kitchen launched the title. Produced by Team17 Digital Ltd for the Nintendo Switch, PC, PlayStation 4, and Xbox One platforms, this Steam-distributed video game is classified under the action, role-play, and non-linear two-dimensional-platform categories. *Blasphemous* offers a hybrid medieval fantasy product, according to the classification set out by San Nicolás Romera, Nicolás Ojeda and Ros Velasco[27]. Based on the pixel art of the 1990s and 16- and 32-bit consoles, players can move laterally, jump, slide, and fight by using simple and practical controls. With texts in Spanish and voices in English, *Blasphemous* combines elements of hack and slash, exploration, and storytelling in an open, non-linear world (Metroidvania) designed to hook gamers aged 16 and over.

Blasphemous takes place in a gloomy, dark world known as Orthodoxia, shared by fantasy creatures, monsters, zombies, gods, soldiers, and strange fallen knights, accompanied by common elements from Spanish folklore and the Easter week observances in Seville. The player assumes the role of The Penitent One, who has to face a huge variety of enemies who are themselves victims of a terrible curse known as The Miracle, which devastates the land of Cvstodia, to manage to atone for their sins and free humanity from its punishment. The main character is the sole survivor of the massacre of the Brotherhood of the Silent Sorrow and is trapped in a cycle of penitence involving constant death and resurrection to which he must put an end to reach the origin of his torment. To achieve this, the player must use weapons– such as the sword Mea Culpa–taking into account the position of the character in the landscape and the timing between attacks. The character's skills improve along the way by acquiring power-ups and small artifacts obtained through exploring cemeteries, woods, altars, temples, and castles inspired by Christian-medieval Seville, by avoiding or facing dangers and traps, and by making good decisions.

The most remarkable thing about this release is its Catholic symbolism, typical of 16th- and 17th-century Seville but lifted out of context to unimaginable levels. The representation of the Baroque art of the period has captivated players due to its originality and its almost perfect rendering. All this has prompted critics to praise *Blasphemous* since even before its launch, earning it a place among the bestsellers in the Nintendo Switch and Steam digital stores and leading it to win prizes and awards such as those from Devuego and Fun & Serious. Its success has been reported in Spanish and international media outlets such as RTVE and CBN News, respectively. It is true that, as stated by León[28], the game's personality is in its aesthetic force, at both a religious and artistic level. However, what interests us about this release, beyond that detailed above, is its ability to create a culture around the phenomenon of death through its symbolism, as represented in the video game itself, its playability, and its promotional materials.

Blasphemous begins at the start of the Age of Corruption in the village of Albero, with a woman–who brings to mind Saint Teresa by Bernini–who dies by stabbing

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[27]   San Nicolás Romera, C., Nicolás Ojeda, M.Á., & Ros Velasco, J., «Video Games Set in the Middle Ages: Time Spans, Plots and Genres», *Games and Culture*, 13, 5 (2018), pp. 521-542.

[28]   León, J., «Análisis de Blasphemous, un eficaz ejercicio de barroquismo referencial», *Vida Extra*, 2019, September 13. https://www.vidaextra.com/analisis/blasphemous-analisis-review-precio-experiencia-juego-para-nintendo-switch-ps4-xbox-one-pc.

herself in the chest with a statuette while she talks about repentance, demands pain, and asks the divine punishment to shape her Guilt. The bloodily impaled image of the woman turns to stone and flowers under a sacred light. Meanwhile, an unseen narrator picks up the story and describes the moment as the manifestation of every pain of the soul–sometimes in the form of a blessing and sometimes as the seed of something corrupt–and gives it the name of The Miracle. The game begins thus, against a backdrop of ruins filled with an infinite mass of naked bodies and cone-shaped hoods, or *capirotes*, all dead except for one: The Penitent One. *Blasphemous* begins, unfolds, and ends with death and execution as a narrative catalyst.

"In *Blasphemous* we are going to die a lot," noted journalist Fernando Chuquillanqui[29]. The method of dying in *Blasphemous* is of the trial-and-error type, with a certain amount of freedom for players to find their own survival strategies. Death adopts an aspect of repetition in a system of learning that expels players from the story, returning them to the point where they depleted their energy level so they can launch another attempt at the game. The game stresses that death is something capable of breaking the rhythm of life (or of the game). The key point is that the slightest error can lead to an instant death which will force us to start again from very far back: from the last checkpoint (Prie Dieu), represented by a small fire before which the Penitent One bends his knee, "as if we were being punished and the only redemption possible was to be found at the end of all this tortuous path that has made us start again so many times"[30]. Most of the deaths are caused by sudden, miscalculated falls onto spikes or into pits, rather than battles against enemies– foolish errors severely punished[31]. León pointed out that in the game players are penitent characters searching for atonement and that Christian myths know a lot about disproportionate punishments[32]. Upon death, the Penitent One does not lose his soul. His health bar drops to zero and guilt fragments (statues/bile flasks) are left in the place where the death occurred and have to be collected later (or the Penitent One will have to interact with them) to boost the level of the fervor bar again. Oddly, the lack of precision of the game controls often leads to a death the player was not truly responsible for; however, the punishment is just as harsh. According to Roberto Pineda, gamers are always "playing with the feeling that everything surrounding them could end their lives at any moment"[33]. In the view of critic Hugo Muñoz Gris, "there is always something or someone who wants to kill you"[34]. However, this is not a case of killing just for killing, out of ghoulishness or to release the innate violence of humankind, but of gaining a better understanding of the phenomenon in question through situations and symbols that build a narrative that is always more or less familiar to the player.

A game like *Blasphemous*, based on the relationship with death, enters the top 10 because, as stated by De Miranda[35], it stimulates philosophical thought–

[29] Chuquillanqui, F., «Lo bueno, lo malo y lo feo de Blasphemous», *Más Consolas*, 2019, October 1. https://rpp.pe/blog/mas-consolas/lo-bueno-lo-malo-y-lo-feo-de-blasphemous-noticia-1222395?ref=rpp.

[30] León, J., «Análisis de Blasphemous, un eficaz ejercicio de barroquismo referencial», *op. cit.*

[31] *Ibidem*.

[32] *Ibidem*.

[33] Pineda, R., «Análisis de 'Blasphemous', el calvario más placentero», *ZonaRed*, 2019, https://www.zonared.com/analisis/analisis-blasphemous/.

[34] Muñoz Gris, H., «Análisis: Blasphemous», *Nivel Oculto*, 2019, https://niveloculto.com/analisis-blasphemous/.

[35] De Miranda, L., «Life Is Strange and ''Games are Made'': A Philosophical Interpretation of a Multiple-Choice Existential Simulator with Copilot Sartre», *Games and Culture*, 13, 8 (2018), pp. 825-842.

and, specifically, metaphysical thinking–by placing players in extreme situations they could come across in real life about which they have to make decisions, but without having to experience the consequences in their own bodies[36]. It is a matter of apprehension and empowerment in the face of the bleakness represented by death that cannot be achieved in any other way. León described it as "an overwhelming feeling, I wouldn't know how to explain very well why it satisfies me, apart from for purely referential and almost egocentric reasons. I recognize that which is there"[37].

Everything that implies interaction facilitates understanding of certain concepts[38]. In this respect, the constant interaction with death in *Blasphemous* acts as a potential tool for familiarization with a phenomenon, according to Blumenberg, *we need* to understand. The agency of the player, that *virtual other*, is essential to integrate the concept of death in an exercise of reflection about oneself and death's place in life[39]. One of the aspects in which *Blasphemous* facilitates this process of extrapolation between the character and the player is the fact that the character, the Penitent One, lacks any identifying features such as a face or even a voice. This was something that the creators consciously decided on to enable players to experience the character more closely, according to Enrique Cabeza Mogollo[40], the creative leader of The Game Kitchen.

Analysis of the symbols enables us, using rhetoric theory[41], to explore video game culture. Although Reed applied this theory to the concept of corruption[42], the same can be done with death. León states that the point of *Blasphemous* is in "the bloody and fascinating designs […] but above all it's the familiarity"[43] with the symbols that shape the narrative which enables this rapprochement with death in a far more profound way.

In *Blasphemous*, death is represented through real and fictitious recognizable religious symbols, some of which the player is highly familiar with (Table 1), and also through secular and fictitious elements linked mostly (but not only) to southern Spain popular culture (Table 2) to make the phenomenon more comprehensible to the public. Of course, there are many symbols in the game, both religious and secular, sometimes real, sometimes fictitious, which do not refer to death at all (Table 3), although they do make it more familiar insofar as they have been integrated into the plot as easily recognizable elements for the players.

The symbolism constructed around a storyline normalizing death and divesting

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[36]   Veerapen, M., «Where Do Virtual Worlds Come From? A Genealogy of Second Life», *Games and Culture*, 8, 2 (2013), pp. 98-116; Jenkins, H., Ford, S., & Green, J., *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture, op. cit.*; Reed, C., «Resident Evil's Rhetoric: The Communication of Corruption in Survival Horror Video Games», *Games and Culture*, 11, 6 (2016), pp. 625-643.

[37]   León, J., «Análisis de Blasphemous, un eficaz ejercicio de barroquismo referencial», *op. cit.*

[38]   Jenkins, H., Ford, S., & Green, J., *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture, op. cit.*

[39]   *Ibidem.*

[40]   Cabeza Mogollo, E., «La Andalucía macabra de 'Blasphemous', explicada por sus creadores», *Verne*, 2019, October 21. https://verne.elpais.com/verne/2019/10/21/articulo/1571670244_293452.html.

[41]   Reed, C., «Resident Evil's Rhetoric: The Communication of Corruption in Survival Horror Video Games», *op. cit.*; Nicolás Ojeda, M.Á., San Nicolás Romera, C., & Ros Velasco, J., «In the Warcraft Universe We Trust: An Analysis of Transmedia Advertising Strategies in the World of Warcraft Video Game Series ("Battle Chest 3.0," "Cataclysm," and "Mists of Pandaria")», *op. cit.*

[42]   Reed, C., «Resident Evil's Rhetoric: The Communication of Corruption in Survival Horror Video Games», *op. cit.*

[43]   León, J., «Análisis de Blasphemous, un eficaz ejercicio de barroquismo referencial», *op. cit.*

death of the fear surrounding it, through popular culture and religion, no doubt aids players in their relationship with this absolute reality in an attempt to make it more knowable. All the symbolic corpus that can be recognized as deriving from Spanish culture and religion is interwoven with the fantasy with which the creators have endowed *Blasphemous* and can be considered an effect that–drawing upon the non-existent, incomprehensible, and unreal–helps players to gain an understanding of something unknowable, something dominant, something that seems to be beyond what is familiar here and now: death.

The intention behind all this iconographic representation was not that of criticizing fanaticism or Christianity, said Cabeza Mogollo[44], but of underscoring the value of classical art–particularly from southern Spain, which is closely linked to religion–in its purest cultural sense to tell the story of Spain during the Baroque period. In fact, the main goal of the video game is not to make death more familiar but to increase familiarity with the culture of southern Spain–its creators are paying homage to the local culture of Andalusia. Cabeza Mogollo (2019, September 13) explained that *Blasphemous* was an attempt to export a little bit of Spain to the rest of the world as well as to get players interested in the references that appear in the game[45].

> The project has a type of hidden agenda, as I want there in the future to be gamers who come to visit Seville because it is a type of theme park for *Blasphemous*. For them to come because they really liked the game, and they want to see where the references they know are,

said Mauricio García[46], CEO of The Game Kitchen and in charge of the marketing for *Blasphemous*.

4. Death as a Promotional Tool in *Blasphemous*

The success of a video game consists of a combination of the part that gamers can recognize from their own life experience and the creation of their own stories and personalized experiences in the virtual world[47]. The transmedia promotional strategies, in this respect, focus on melding the holistic virtual experience that enables players to embark on a journey of self-reflection, entertainment, recognition, and creation or participation in the story.

The publicity strategies commodify and strengthen the players' need to experience death, just as occurs with other phenomena such as nostalgia[48]. The transmedia communication advertising helps to engage players, making use of their

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[44]   Cabeza Mogollo, E., «'Blasphemous', el oscuro juego inspirado en la Semana Santa que quiere exportar la cultura española al extranjero», *20 Minutos*, 2019, September 13. https://www.20minutos.es/videojuegos/noticia/blasphemous-oscuro-juego-indie-inspirado-semana-santa-quiere-exportar-cultura-espanola-3761350/0/.

[45]   *Ibidem*.

[46]   García, M., «Blasphemous: La ascensión del indie español», *Break Revista*, 2019, September 10. https://www.breakrevista.com/blasphemous-la-ascension-del-indie-espanol-parte-1/.

[47]   Rossignoli, C., «Playing the Afterlife: Dante's Otherworlds in the Gaming Age», *op. cit.*

[48]   Sloan, R.J.S., «Videogames as Remediated Memories: Commodified Nostalgia and Hyperreality in Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon and Gone Home», *Games and Culture*, 10, 6 (2015), pp. 525-550.

anthropological need to become acquainted with death through situations in which they enter into a relationship with it[49]. As happens in many other video games, in *Blasphemous* death is incorporated as part of the playing experience, a singular experience with its own interpretation and expression, becoming a sales concept that provides meaning for the entire gaming story from a visual, narrative, and transmedia perspective.

From the point of view of its visual symbolism, the *Blasphemous* product needs to use a set of promotional tools to ensure all the promotional concepts for the game and the symbols used to enrich them become absolutely identified with each other. Special mention must also be made of how unusual aesthetic elements are drawn upon to create an unequivocal affinity between the product and all its publicity and advertising materials. We are referring here to how the pixelization effect is utilized as the first sign of the game's visual identity, employed to construct its corporate image. The game projects an imperfect, low-resolution image, inspired by the resolution of video games from a previous age, but it is presented as being added value for the product–an intentional imperfection to create the aesthetic specific to the scenes in *Blasphemous*, where death is center stage at all times.

This initiative is at odds with realism and impacts the aesthetic expression of the game's fantasy-based plot, inspired by the symbolism, legends, and the mythology of Catholic art as manifested in Spain and especially in Andalusia, the city of Seville, and the Spanish Baroque. It refers to Easter week traditions: for example, the helmet worn by The Penitent One is characterized by the typical *capirote* cone shape which dates back to the era of the Inquisition. All the symbols employed take us unequivocally to that anthropological and religious framework in which Catholicism is closely bound to death–let us not forget that Holy Week is itself the celebration of the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, covering all the gory states of betrayal, arrest, trial, torture, and crucifixion of Christ present in the collective unconscious. Together with these anthropological and religious references, we find many others where the presence of death creates a dense network of symbolic relationships to promote the game.

From a narrative point of view, the advertising for the video game is based on the connection between death and the different thematic backdrops against which the story is set. The trailer presents the setting in which the video game takes place–Hell– and contains promises about the product's playability. The task of the trailer is to highlight the significance of this setting in the game's narrative. Altars, temples, and Baroque sculptures, as references to the aesthetics of Catholicism, convey fascination with the mystery of death. Blood and the concepts of penitence, forgiveness, and salvation are presented as being unconditional values of the protagonist of the game, who has to carry out his mission within a scenario similar to that offered by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*–one particular interpretation of the place where damned sinners are condemned to extreme physical suffering due to their sins in life. The hell in *Blasphemous*, Cvstodia, is a place of suffering, of tormented, disfigured, monstrous, and violent characters. Weapons and physical violence represent the Penitent One's path to salvation, and, during his journey, he shows the particular vision of death arising in *Blasphemous*. If the objective of the game is to execute tormented souls

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[49]   Smethurst, T., & Craps, S., «Playing with Trauma: Interreactivity, Empathy, and Complicity in The Walking Dead Video Game», *Games and Culture*, 10, 3 (2015), pp. 269-290.

and destroy the demons that dominate them, the purpose of the trailer is to convey this narrative and proclaim the qualities of the product through a sequence of images and texts, such as "Explore a forsaken land," "Brutal pixel-perfect combat," "Execute tormented souls," "Intense boss battles", "Customize your build," and "Unveil the mysteries of Cvstodia"[50], that are linked through the first track on the game's soundtrack, "Dame Tu Tormento", from the album *Blasphemous. Original Game Soundtrack* by Carlos Viola[51].

Finally, from a transmedia perspective, the circulation of the trailer in digital and social media made it possible to discover fans' first impressions about the game's aesthetic. The expressions they used to illustrate their reactions to the trailer included the following comments: "I need this video game in my life," "This is a work of art," "Dante's Inferno, pixelated," "Shut up and take my money," "Satan and the Vatican are proud," "How amazing the design of the main character is," and "I love its violence, I love his hat"[52].

Although *Blasphemous* has an official website, social media profiles, and its own space on the Team17 website–in addition to being present on various commercial and video platforms specializing in promoting video games–its promotional strategy does not rely on such a complex and developed digital structure as those used by other large companies in the sector. Its promotional strategy is reliant on a limited set of actions that expand on the storyline of the product itself, build its fan community, and make the video game a hypermedium with its own corporate personality. In addition to the aforementioned trailer, other elements of this strategy that have caught the interest of online fans are the book *The Art of Blasphemous* by Cabeza Mogollo[53], the cinematics presenting the new version of the game entitled *The Stir of Dawn*[54], the video showing the Spanish voice actors dubbing the characters, entitled "Blasphemous: The Stir of Dawn – Introducing the Spanish Cast"[55], and the launch of the abovementioned soundtrack[56].

Moreover, *Blasphemous'* main setting, Cvstodia, has become a place of great interest for gamers, who post their own video montages where they interleave sequences of images from trailers and cutscenes with sequences of the game being played, thus contributing to promoting the video game phenomenon. In other videos, gamers and YouTubers analyze the story and symbolism of *Blasphemous*, its characters, and the reasons which account for the adventures of the characters in the game. These include videos showing all the final battles to death of each stage of the game in a single sequence interwoven with sequences from the official cutscenes, resulting in the creation of *movies* which interpret and narrate the story of the game. There are also several videos interested in understanding the symbolic narrative of

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[50]   Luna, J.A., «En el píxel está la penitencia: procesiones y arte barroco, la inspiración del videojuego español del año», *elDiario.es*, 2019, October 14. https://www.eldiario.es/cultura/videojuegos/blasphemous-videojuego-arte-barroco_1_1318767.html.

[51]   Viola, C., *Blasphemous. The Original Soundtrack*, Seville, The Game Kitchen, 2019.

[52]   Padilla del Valle, B., ««Blasphemous»: culto al barroco pixelado», *Mercurio*, 2020, January 14. https://www.revistamercurio.es/2020/01/14/blasphemous-culto-al-barroco-pixelado/.

[53]   Cabeza Mogollo, E., *The Art of Blasphemous*, Madrid, GTM, 2019.

[54]   Team17, «Blasphemous: The Stir of Dawn - Free DLC Trailer!», *YouTube*, 2020, July 20. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QdGzJhunb4&feature=emb_logo.

[55]   Team17, «Blasphemous: The Stir of Dawn - Introducing the Spanish Cast!», *YouTube*, 2020, July 24. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vKfree2PJ_A&feature=emb_logo.

[56]   Viola, C., *Blasphemous. The Original Soundtrack*, *op. cit.*

the characters and settings from *Blasphemous*. These videos analyze, for example, the comic and the book *The Art of Blasphemous*[57] in search of explanations about the aesthetics, the iconography, and the original meanings of terms such as Milagro, Crisanta, Deogracias, Amargura, Penitente, Custodio, Demente, Lazarino, Cautiva, Lienzo, Baronesa, Peter I "The Cruel," church, convent, corpse, tomb, cruelty, fire, mask, piety, and, of course, death, among others.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

In accordance with Venegas Ramos' diagnosis[58], *Blasphemous* breaks with tradition and decontextualizes the icons linked to groups and traditions, not so much to create a culture through a communication medium like the video game but rather to create a product for mass consumption with the twofold goal of entertaining and making a profit. Our current relationship with the past through video games is demonstrated through a lack of any connection between the game and history: a characteristic of so-called artistic capitalism, in the words of Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy[59]. As a product of artistic capitalism, *Blasphemous* represents homogeneous diversity, repetition based on difference, the same but in plurality, and this is precisely what facilitates the interaction with death that is so highly exploited in the game.

In this article, we have asserted that video games should not be considered merely to be a play-related medium but rather as a hypermedium and that their use–as the basis for their symbolism–of the portrayal of certain experiences with which players establish a dialogue of integration and interaction lies in their complex nature. This is the case of death in its use as an item in the video game examined here. As stated in the main claim for the most recent trailer for *Blasphemous*[60], "the Penitent One is blessed in death." It is not a matter of exhibiting the opportunity to make death a less terrifying experience as the fundamental reason which increases its playability and its commercial success, but of portraying it as the symbolic underpinning which gives meaning to the underlying narrative of the gaming product itself. Its consumption, its experience, and its reality expand in the aesthetic and narrative of its interpretation of death. Beyond any reflection on this experience with death that may be embarked on by each player, the game offers an interpretation of death as a commercial, promotional, and consumable concept, manifested through the game, its promotional activities, and fan interactions and self-made productions.

The world of *Blasphemous* as a hypermedium phenomenon takes it one step further because it also submerges us in a visual, narrative, and transmedia universe which is the result of the interpretation of old anthropological, metaphysical, and, ultimately, religious–in a word, cultural–accounts where death plays a central role. We have referred to the fact that interaction with death raises the question of the normalization of a non-conceptualizable phenomenon, resulting from an

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[57]   LazaPLAYS, «Leyendo el cómic y artbook de Blasphemous», *YouTube*, 2019, October 15. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUq6DEn3VFc.

[58]   Venegas Ramos, A., «La memoria estética de Blasphemous», *Presura*, 2019, September 23. http://www.presura.es/blog/2019/09/23/la-memoria-estetica-de-blasphemous/.

[59]   Lipovetsky, G., & Serroy, J., *L'esthétisation du monde: Vivre à l'âge du capitalisme artiste*, Paris, Gallimard. 2013.

[60]   Team17, «Blasphemous: The Stir of Dawn - Free DLC Trailer!», *op. cit.*

interpretation of the Blumenberguian approaches, where players enjoy the game which helps them to integrate death into their daily lives thanks both to first-hand interaction plus virtual experience and to that gained as part of a user community. This factor, which connects the playful and cultural components, therefore serves as a formula for success, as it enables us to integrate this relationship with death inside the limits of our own knowledge, making something conceptualizable when it is not and making something which in actual reality is absolute into something familiar and relatable to our life experience. This transformation of death is used as a sales concept to promote the video game under the guise of mysteries, legends, and mythology that awaken a profound fascination due to the aesthetics and to the power of a story peppered with anthropological, historical, and religious references that connect to our playful–don't forget that we are *Homo ludens*, as Johan Huizinga said–human nature.

Tables

Table 1. Religious symbolism, both real and fictitious, representing death in Blasphemous

Category	Representations of real elements	Fictitious elements
Architecture	Vault of the bullfighter Joselito ("El Gallo," José Gómez Ortega), Cemetery of San Fernando in Seville (1920).	Ossuary. A place where the bones of the dead are laid.
	The catacombs of Seville Cathedral (1401–1507).	Sanguine Fountains.
Sculpture	*The Gates of Hell* (*La Porte de l'Enfer*), Auguste Rodin (1880–1917).	
	The Piety (*Pietà*), Michelangelo (1498–1499).	
Characters	*The Piety* (*Pietà*), Michelangelo (1498–1499).	Tentudía's remains.
	Cesareo. Inspired by two elements: a) the painting *Magdalena Ventura with Her Husband and Son or The Bearded Lady* (*La mujer barbuda/ Magdalena Ventura con su marido*) by José de Ribera El Españoleto (1631) and b) the Sevillian crucified Saint Wilgefortis.	Lvdovico of the Order of the True Burial, found in the church in Albero.
Weapons	Votive candles, Whip, Candelabra, Bell.	Sinful Wrath.
Objects	Crown of thorns.	

Table 2. Secular symbolism in fictitious characters, inspired by popular culture, representing death in Blasphemous

Character	Description
Jocinero	A child born from a bull divided in two, imitating the wings of an angel, inspired by a) the songs *The bull and the moon* (*El toro y la luna*) by Los Centellas (1995) and *Son of the moon* (*Hijo de la Luna*) by Mecano (1986) and b) the painting *Figure with meat* (1954) by Francis Bacon, which was in turn inspired by a portrait by Velázquez. Jocinero is also the name of the famous bull which passed into history for killing a bullfighter in 1862.
Guardainfante	A mix between a) the film by James Whale *Frankenstein* (1931) and b) the paintings *Las meninas* (1656) and *Deer head* (*Cabeza de venado*, 1634) by Velázquez. The result is a giant ridden by Infanta Margaret Theresa of Spain (1651–1673).
Decapitated chamberlain	Composed of a) elements characteristic of the Spanish aristocracy from the 16th and 17th centuries, such as a ruff around the neck, red velvet cushion, and golden ornaments for carrying relics, and b) decapitated children based on the cherubs of the painting of the *Immaculate Conception of Soult* (*Inmaculada Concepción*) by Murillo (1662).
Stone golems	Inspired by the tombs of Queen Isabella I of Castile (1504) and King Ferdinand II of Aragon (1516), located in the Royal Chapel (Capilla Real) of Granada.

Table 3. Religious and secular symbolism, both real or inspired in popular culture and fictitious, not representing death in Blasphemous

Category	Representation of religious elements
Painting[*]	*A Procession of Flagellants* (*Procesión de flagelantes/ Procesión de disciplinantes*), Goya (1812–1819).

Architecture[**]	Great Mosque of Córdoba/Cathedral of Córdoba (987).
	Triana Bridge (Puente de Triana/Puente de Isabel II) (1845–1852).
	Cathedral of Seville (1401–1507).
	Giralda, Cathedral of Saint Mary of the See, Seville (1172–1182).
	Baths of Dona Maria de Padilla (Baños de María de Padilla) in the subterranean gallery of the Alcázar, Seville (1364).
	The church, Iglesia Colegial del Divino Salvador (1679).
	Fictitious: Convents, Mea Culpa altars, Chapels of travel, Wall of the Holy Prohibitions, Deambulatory of His Holiness, Archcathedral Rooftops, Mother of Mothers, Buried churches, Convent of Our Lady of the Charred Visage, Desecrated Cistern.
Sculpture	Sculptures of the Virgin Mary from Easter week in Seville.
	Floats for processions from the village of Barcianos de Aliste.
	St. Peter's Baldachin from the Vatican by Bernini (1623–1634).
	Sculptures by Granada sculptor Alonso Cano (1601–1667).
	Fictitious: Fountain of the Blessed Lord of Salty Shores, Statues of Guilt.
Literature	Local Seville legend about creating a ball of wax with the Easter votive candles. In the game: Big Bead of Red Wax, Medium Bead of Red Wax, Bead of Red Wax, Big Bead of Blue Wax, Medium Bead of Blue Wax, Bead of Blue Wax.
	The verses of the Holy Bible.
	Christian legend of Doña María Coronel (1334–1409), the founder of the Convento de Santa Inés.
	Terms and works taken from the works of Saint Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582), Saint John of the Cross (1542–1591), and Gonzalo de Berceo (1190–1264).
Music	Processional marches with drums and cornet.

Fictitious Characters	Gemino. Tried to a tree, the graphic representation of *The Martyrdom of St Sebastian* by Rubens (1608).
	Deogracias, whose face is covered by a table mat and leaves clues for the Penitent One.
	The Lady of the Six Sorrows. Inspired by a) *Witches in Flight* (*Vuelo de brujas*) by Goya (1797) and *Our Lady of Sorrows* (*Nuestra Señora de los Dolores*/*Dolorosa*) by Luján Pérez (1803) and b) the image of the *Seven Sorrows of Mary*, a Catholic legend from the 14th century about Jesus appearing to Bridget of Sweden.
	Aserrado and Carthos. Inspired by *St Hugh in the Carthusian Refectory* (*San Hugo en el refractorio de los catujos*), by Zurbarán (1630–1635).
	Our Lady of the Charred Visage. Inspired by Áurea/María Fernández Coronel (1334–1411).
	Wound Kissers. Inspired by Murillo and Costumbrismo.
	The Penitent One. Wears a heavy metallic *capirote* (hood with a conical tip) with a crown of thorns like that of Jesus Christ, which recalls that of the hooded penitents known as Nazarenos and serves as penitence. The creator calls it a *sanbenito* (a type of penitential garment).
	Children of Moonlight, imprisoned angels that we can liberate.
	Hooded penitents (Nazarenos), nuns, priests, monks, altar boys.
Weapons Items	Rosary beads, Tears of Atonement (the currency of the game), Sword (Mea Culpa, filled with thorns and with a man in a position of suffering on the hilt: statuette of the Twisted One), Relics (Big Toe Made of Limestone: Toe from the statue of the First Barefoot Pilgrim, which leaves its mark on the secret routes and adds extra thrust while in the air; Beads of Red and Blue Wax; Consecrated Amethyst).
Category	**Representation of secular elements**
Painting	*The Toilette* (*Vieja espulgando a un niño*/*Abuela espulgando a su nieto*), by Murillo (1660).
Architecture	Castles, Libraries, Prisons/Dungeons, Cellars, Gutters.
	Fictitious: The elevator of the Masks (goes up to heaven).

Literature	Fragments from Larra (1809–1837).
	Fragments of poems by Lorca (1989–1936).
	Local legends contained in the works of José María de Mena (1923).
	The legend of the Large Tree, Confessions from Dolphos.
Music	Original soundtrack: flamenco.
	Lyrics of coplas and songs by Lola Flores (1923–1995).They appear in the dialogues in the original Spanish: *"que mis acais, si digo mentiras, se queden sin luz"* ("may the light, if I am lying, leave my eyes").
	Lyrics of coplas and songs by Manolo Escobar (1931–2013). They appear in the dialogues in the original Spanish: *"llevo sangre de reyes en la palma de la mano"* ("I have royal blood in the palm of my hand").
	Saeta by Joan Manuel Serrat (1943) mixed with piano and flamenco guitar.
Fictitious Characters	Viridiana (inspired by *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, by Oscar Wilde [1890]), Socorro, Cleofas, Tres Angustias, Ten Piedad (goat's head and body halfway between a goat and a plant), Mud men, Crisanta of the Wrapped Agony, Acolytes, Amargura, Seraph, Soldier of the Anointed Legion, Winged Face, Guardian of the Silent Sorrow, Candelaria (merchant), Redento, Esdras.
Weapons Items	Armor, Sword Hearts, Keys, Chests, Bile Flask (Bile Flasks which hold blood instead of Estus), Rope Knots, Relics (Nail Uprooted from Dirt, Linen of Golden Thread, Amber Eye, Fourth Toe Made of Limestone, Pelican Effigy, Thorned Symbol, Blood Perpetuated in Sand), Marks of Refuge.
Nature	Woods, Mountains, Swamps, Bonfires.

* Baroque art, Naturalism, and Tenebrism.
** Isabelline Gothic or Castilian Gothic and Mudejar.

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