

# The Reliquaries of Hyrule: A Semiotic and Iconographic Analysis of Sacred Architecture Within *Ocarina of Time*

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## Abstract

This study is a semiotic and iconographic analysis of the sacred architecture in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo, 1998). Through an analysis of the visual elements of the game, the researcher found evidence of visual metaphors that coded three temples as sacred spaces. This coding of the temples is accomplished through the symbolism of progression that matches the design of shrines and cathedrals, drawing on iconography and other symbolism associated with Shinto, Buddhist, and Christian sacred architecture. Such indications of sacred spaces highlight the ways in which these virtual environments are designed to symbolize the progression of the player from secular to sacred, much like the player's progression from zero to hero. By using the architecture and symbolism of the three aforementioned belief systems, *Ocarina of Time* signifies these temples as reliquaries—that is, sacred places that house reverential items as part of the apotheosis of the player.

## Keywords

Art history; The Legend of Zelda; sacred space; symbolism; temple.



## Introduction

The video game experiences that I remember and treasure most are the feelings I have within the virtual environments. Exploring new areas, encountering enemies, levelling up—these feelings are encapsulated in the visual language of the medium. Similar to theories of architecture, the games matter to me because of how the virtual space is designed and how that space feels to explore. As architecture shapes feelings in the physical space (Homan, 2006), video game architecture can shape atmosphere in the virtual (Rollings, 2004).

One series in particular that I loved for the atmosphere of the virtual space is *The Legend of Zelda* (hereafter *Zelda*). It goes to great lengths to create memorable experiences in its dungeons and temples, as evident in interviews with level designer Eiji Onozuka (later known as Eiji Aonuma). In discussing the process for designing dungeons in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo, 1998; hereafter *OoT*) with Japanese news outlet *1101*, Onozuka states:

When creating the dungeons, we drew level blueprints to consult and spoke in detail to the designers making it for us. . . . We got a lot of time to think about the dungeons, so we experimented on the CAD (Computer-Aided Design; used a lot in architecture) sheets the designers made. We ended up planning them like houses, so to speak. (Tanner, 2007a, para. 6)

Onozuka describes the process of level design—especially in the context of *OoT*—similar to that of drafting the architecture for a physical building, which suggests the virtual architecture of a video game can be understood with architectural theories of space.

The series has deep ties to Japanese culture, and any analysis of a game's architecture should include the culture in which it was created (Osborne, 2014). Researchers such as Djinn (2012) and Flanagan (2015) have found evidence for Shintoism in *Zelda*—citing the religion's influence on *OoT*. Hemmann (2016) further develops this argument, using *OoT* as a means of exploring the cultural impact of Shintoism on contemporary Japan. These foundational texts on Shintoism in *Zelda* games provide a starting point for this article in which I conduct a textual analysis of the temple architecture and consider how these virtual spaces are coded as sacred through religious iconography.

Building on scholarship about sacred spaces and the three religions of Shintoism, Buddhism, and Christianity, this study finds that the dungeons of *OoT* are coded as sacred architecture. Furthermore, I suggest that video games—much like physical architecture—can use religious design to influence players to engage in ritual along their path to apotheosis (becoming deity).

## Religion in Video Games

Analysing religion in video games builds upon literature of cultural analysis of the medium (e.g., Consalvo, 2016; Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Flanagan, 2015; Gray et al., 2018; Kafai et al., 2017). This research paradigm suggests that the inclusion of religion in video games is affected by the culture of the developers who created it and that it affects the culture of the players who consume it. In this research tradition, Campbell et al. (2016) discuss how careful attention to religious narratives and rituals within video games can create a space for critical reflection on how religion manifests within contemporary media.

One central aspect of religion is the act of ritual, and an analysis of ritual reveals much about the religion. Rituals are often interactive retellings of foundational stories, with religious rituals being a means for engaging with a religion's myths (Wagner, 2012). Sapach (2015) has analysed how in-game items can become sacred to players, drawing upon socially constructed rituals within *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004). Players create rituals and the meaning of sacred for their own paratextual culture, outside of the game's internal narrative and lore. Other studies of religion in video games discuss how religion is incorporated into the ludonarrative experience. Šisler (2017), for example, analyses how video games create procedural religion—divorced from contemporary world religions—through the rule systems of the game, where players learn or value ethical decisions within the confines of the virtual space.

Love (2010) has documented some examples of religious iconography in video games, highlighting that games are borrowing iconography in their construction of fictional worlds. This raises the question of how it affects the game experience. The use of religious iconography to designate virtual spaces as sacred is central to Wagner's (2012) notion that the sacred space in the physical world—such as a church or temple—and its virtual version are not equivalent. She asks who decides if the virtual space is sacred: is it the player or the designer? According to her research, the power of video game storytelling through its use of virtual architecture coded with religious iconography is an area of research with unresolved questions. Religion in video games can be created by the player (Sapach, 2015), can be taught by the game (Šisler, 2017), and can borrow iconography from existing religions (Love, 2010). In the case of *OoT*, there is evidence of religious iconography in the game which serves to designate these areas as sacred from the perspectives of Shintoism, Buddhism, and Christianity.

## Religions and Their Architecture

Shintoism is centred on ritual practices (Nelson, 2000), with its unifying doctrine arising from the worship of *kami*, or the sacred spirits of all beings (Ono & Woodard, 1962). The word "kami" also refers to the

power of phenomena that inspire a sense of wonder and awe in the beholder (the sacred), testifying to the divinity of such a phenomenon (Picken, 1994). The worship of kami is then the worship of the sacred, the divinity of natural wonder. Shinto shrines are erected for the ritual practices of the religion. They also provide the spiritual nourishment that comes from these reflective—and nature-centric—spaces (Ono & Woodard, 1962). Similar to the sacred architecture of other religions (Hindu temples, Hopi kivas, Catholic cathedrals, etc.), Shinto shrines are physical manifestations of ideas and are filled with iconic signs and values (Nelson, 2000).

Buddhism derived from and grew out of the teachings of Buddha (Cantwell, 2009). The two sects of Tibetan and Zen Buddhism are the best-known forms of Buddhism in the West, while also being the most misunderstood by Westerners (Faure, 2011). In the history of Buddhism, the first groups of monks congregated around the domed *stupas* that contained the relics of the Buddha, while later *chaityas* (temples or assembly halls) and *viharas* (monasteries) were constructed nearby (Humphrey & Vitebsky, 1997). Stupas gained their sacrality of space due to their purpose of housing sacred objects or relics of the Buddha (Humphrey & Vitebsky, 1997), as sacred objects required sacred spaces to contain their powers (Scott, 2011). The architecture of Buddhist sites of worship is also patterned after the *mandala*, which is a ground plan that represents the celestial realm (depicted as a circle) enclosing the material world (a square; Humphrey & Vitebsky, 1997). This blueprint is used in the rituals of meditation and serves as a concentric path of circles that worshippers can travel as they progress toward the temple's centre, which is considered the most sacred space.

Christianity is monotheistic, with its foundational teachings and principles found in its scriptural text, the Bible (Homan, 2006; Newton & Neil, 1966). The architecture of Christian houses of worship has evolved through the centuries, across continents, cultures, and peoples. Of special interest for this paper is the style of Gothic cathedrals which, in and of itself, is difficult to define. Scott (2011) argues that the unifying aspect of Gothic cathedrals that separates that style from others—with its features of pointed arches, flying buttresses, ribbed vaults, soaring ceiling, stained glass windows, and pinnacles—is the desire to flood the interior with as much light as possible.<sup>1</sup> These stone edifices are large, majestic, and cavernous; leaving an impact, as Shackley (2002) notes:

The cathedral allows its visitors to rediscover the joys of ancient space. The echoing, dark, cavernous and mysterious interior of a cathedral divorces the visitors from the external (real) world . . .

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<sup>1</sup> These Gothic cathedrals would use their various techniques and iconography to create a space to accommodate a divine presence and to evoke astonishment, disbelief, and awe (Homan, 2006; Scott, 2011).

which creates a powerful “spirit of place” that affects visitors.  
(p. 350)

Hence, the symbolism of the space is created through its architecture (Hamilton & Spicer, 2016), and as these scholars note, the sacrality of the space affects visitors.

The history of Christian art is interwoven with symbolism, as artists attempted to capture the invisible doctrines of faith (Homan, 2006; Newton & Neil, 1966). Christian basilicas were designed to be octagonal, as it embodied the connection between the square (sign of the earth) and the circle (sign of the heaven). Furthermore, eight in symbology represented eternity (Duby, 1986). These spaces, then, were designed to symbolize faith while also including iconography and artwork of that faith. Understanding the sacred space of Christianity thus requires an understanding of symbolism and iconography.

## **Semiotics**

Semiotics as a theory and a method are tied to the foundational theorists of Saussure and Peirce (D’Alleva, 2012). To the linguist Saussure (2011), signs are made of two components: the “signifier” (the form that a sign takes) and the “signified” (the idea or concept). This one-way model represents how communication is coded by a presenter and decoded by the receiver (Hall, 1973). Conversely, to the philosopher Peirce (1992), signs have three dimensions of meaning: the “interpretant,” or the concept; the “representamen,” or symbol; and the object itself. Thus, objects have symbols that denote what they are, while also having associated connotations that are open to interpretation based upon the context of the sign or symbol.

Although semiotics had its foundation in philosophy and linguistics, its theories have also been applied to visual media. Scott McCloud (1993), in his analysis of comic books, describes some of the symbolism and value attributed to what he refers to as “icons,” or any image used to represent a person, place, thing, or idea (p. 27). According to McCloud, visual representations and icons attempt to capture a literal or symbolic meaning—sometimes both. Evidently, this understanding of icons is useful when thinking about visual representations of religion.

Nelson (2000) notes, for example, that the architecture of many religions use iconography to designate sacred spaces. This is found in the flying buttresses of 13th-century cathedrals, which marked the boundary of the consecrated church (Hutterer, 2015). Religious processions regularly pause before entering churches, indicating a hierarchical shift between the sacred and secular areas (Baltzer, 2017; Sturgis, 1990). Researchers Mazumdar and Mazumdar (1993) have found that the mapping of place attachment—a concept related to identity, or a deep association with and consciousness of a place—ties into different forms of sacred spaces. They also found that

congregational religions (such as Islam, Christianity, or Judaism) view sacred structures as the setting for learning and expressions of religious identity, where the location's sanctity is reinforced through collective prayers and rituals (p. 233).

## Method and Research Questions

This paper employs two methods that are used for comparison: textual analysis and ethnography. For the first methodology, the author played the game *OoT* twice to experience and document the visual symbols of the game that accord with religious iconography. These visual symbols arise primarily from the environmental design of the game, focusing on the virtual spaces, the enemies contained within, and the architecture of the dungeons.

The first play session was investigative, where I identified key aspects of the game that would then shape the research questions. Notes taken from this playthrough were minimal.<sup>2</sup> For the second playthrough, I focused my attention on the three temples (discussed in the Findings section) and took notes about the symbols and iconography employed in the game. Following this primary investigation, the third round of data collection involved reviewing walkthrough videos on YouTube to support specific examples of sacred architecture and confirm the findings.

In terms of ethnography, I visited six Shinto shrines and one Buddhist temple complex in Japan to explore the belief systems of Shinto and their visual symbols. These Shinto shrines were in the region of Kanto and were of varying sizes and settings, such as an urban marketplace and in the countryside. These visits were documented with photographs and notes, outlining how I came to learn more about the religion through ethnographic research and by studying the physical spaces of Shinto worship. Some limitations of this study include my positionality: As a white Westerner, many of the cultural meanings and messages could be lost on me. I am unable to decode all the meanings—or potential meanings—from these Eastern religions. However, the findings of this study can serve as a starting point for additional symbolic and semiotic analysis.

The above literature on religion, sacred spaces, and semiotics led me to question how they intersect in the Japanese game of *OoT*, prompting the following research questions:

1. How does *Ocarina of Time* create a sense of sacred space in the temples of the game?

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<sup>2</sup> While I have played *OoT* before conducting this study, I did not know to what extent I would find religious architecture and iconography in the game. This exploratory play session was to reimmerse myself in the game.

2. How do the temples in *Ocarina of Time* use the iconography and symbolism of Shinto, Buddhist, and Christian sacred architecture?

## Findings

This study found evidence in three temples of the game—the Spirit Temple, the Temple of Time, and the Forest Temple—of how religious iconography and symbolism are recreated in the game world. The Spirit Temple serves as an example of the blend of Shintoism and Buddhism, while the Temple of Time is clearly coded as Christian, and the Forest Temple includes a blend of Shintoism with Christianity.

### *OoT* Temples as Sacred Space

The first research question asked how the temples of *OoT* create a sense of sacred space. These generalized findings are applicable to many—if not most—of the dungeons and temples of the game. First, I focus on these areas of trial and their ludonarrative purpose. Shigeru Miyamoto and Eiji Aonuma—lead designers for the *Zelda* series—have stated that the temples of the game were designed around either an atmosphere or a theme (Tanner, 2008; Totilo, 2011). These dungeons have been called caverns, towers, and temples, and are all noted to have the unifying principle of enemies, puzzles, and trials (Nintendo, 2018). This study looks in particular at the subset of dungeons known within the game as temples, which are revealed to be sacred spaces that deserve reverence and awe (Nintendo, 2018).

Sacred architecture serves the purpose of delineating the sacred from the profane, differentiating sacred space from the rest of the world (Humphrey & Vitebsky, 1997; Hutterer, 2015). This delineation occurs by using iconography and symbols that represent the concepts of thresholds and sacred boundaries. For Shinto shrines, this philosophy is embodied in the *torii* gate (see Figure 1), which serves as a portal from the ordinary to the sacred space of a shrine (Ono & Woodard, 1963). In addition, there are the *romon*, which are large gates that mark the entrance to the main shrine, again reminding the worshipper of the delineation of sacred space from secular.



Figure 1. Torii gate on the left (Daishogun Hachi Jinja Shrine), romon on the right (Kitano-Tenmangu Shrine). Taken by the author.

These features are also found in the virtual architecture of *OoT*'s temples and serve the same purpose. Outside of every temple are large, hexagonal pedestals (see Figure 2). While these pedestals serve a ludographic purpose (fast travel), they also are similar to the torii and romon gates in that they are reminders that the player (or worshipper) is crossing a threshold and entering a mystical or sacred space.



Figure 2. Triforce pedestals in *OoT*. Screenshots by the author.

Another recurring element of the dungeons in *OoT* is the presence of twin guardians at the entrance. At the entrance of the Forest Temple there are two *Wolfos*, Jabu Jabu's Belly has two *Octoroks*, and the Spirit Temple has two *Flying Pots*. This mirrors the iconography of Shinto shrines, with their *komainu*. *Komainu* are guardian dogs that come in pairs and are placed on each side of the main entrance to a shrine (see Figure 3). These spiritual guardians are symbols that demarcate the sacred space of the shrine.



Figure 3. A *komainu* at the entrance of the Rokusho-jinja Shrine. Taken by the author.

Lastly, another symbol of sacred space found in this game is the progression of sacrality through architecture. The structure and layout of both Shinto shrine complexes and dungeons in *OoT* follow basic patterns. In the case of Shinto shrines, there are six repeated architectural elements: the torii, the *komainu*, the *sandō*, the romon,



the *haiden*, and the *honden* (see Figure 4). When visiting the complex, there is a recognizable map and direct path that leads from the torii at the entrance to the *honden*, which is the sacred site of worship where the *kami* (sacred spirit) resides. Part of this path that stretches from the torii to the *romon* is known as the *sandō* and can contain a variety of elements, depending upon the size of the shrine (such as additional torii gates, minor altars and shrines, and food vendors). The *romon*, however, is the gate along the wall that separates this outer court from the inner court and serves as another threshold for the worshipper to cross. Within this inner court is the *haiden*, or the major altar for worship, which is the final threshold that most worshippers do not cross; only the priests of the shrine enter the *haiden* and approach the *honden*.

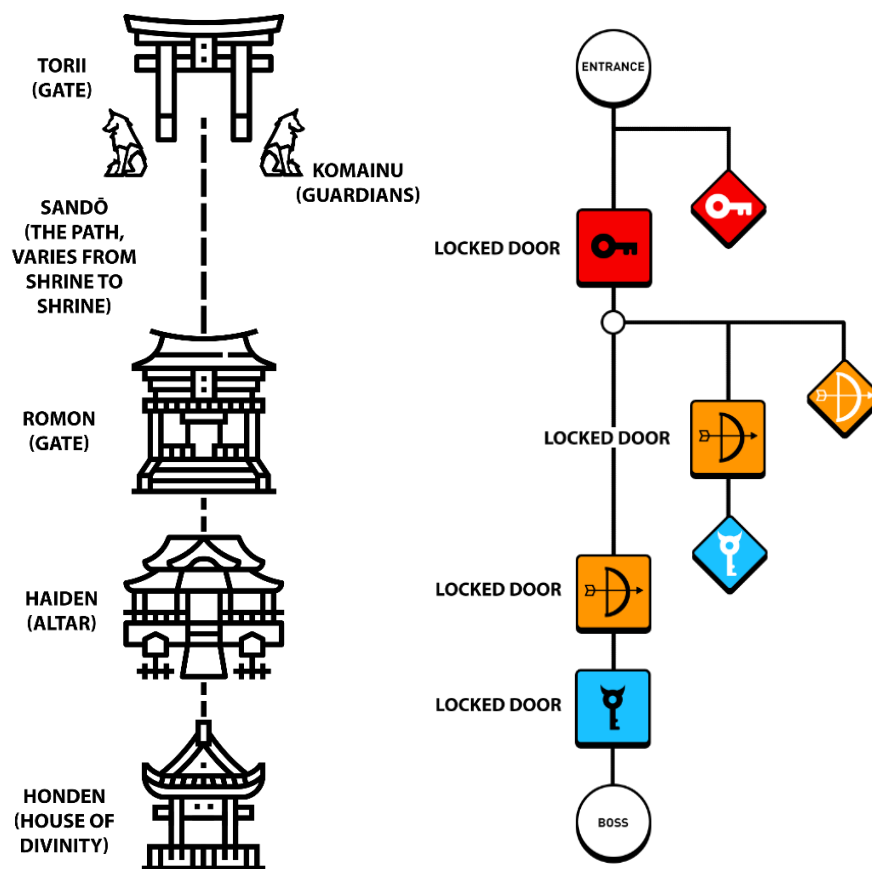


Figure 4. A map of the general features of a Shinto shrine (left) and the general features of a dungeon in *OoT* (right). Made by the author.

Gothic cathedrals contain similar patterns of progression from profane to a more sacred space. The configuration of sacred space is both axial and concentric in its design, with zones of increasing degrees of sacredness culminating in the altar (Scott, 2011). Attention is drawn to the altar through architectural design, as it is the focal point and most sacred location within the building (Homan, 2006; Scott, 2011). The fortress-like exterior walls separate the outside world from the inner world, with the choir and presbytery considered an inner sanctum surrounded by ambulatories (more exterior walls), leading to a sense of encapsulation

through the roof vaults (Scott, 2011). Thus, the sacred architectures of these religions—as mirrored by the game—symbolize the progression and apotheosis of the player.

Additionally, the dungeons in *OoT* follow a pattern in their design and layout, with each dungeon being a progression from the entrance to the boss room, with gates and keys along the way (Brown, 2017; Hansen, 2018, 2019). In order to progress, the player must find the keys (either literal or figurative, as in the case with a key item) to unlock the gate along their path. In Figure 4, these gates are represented by the red and the orange squares, which are opened by the red and orange (key) items respectively. The final challenge, then, is to find the boss key, which unlocks the door to the boss room and the climactic battle of the dungeon (as marked by the blue symbols in Figure 4). Both sacred architecture and the dungeons in *OoT* create a sense of progression from their entrance to the final place of worship or the final activity. These two rituals—worshipping at the altar and fighting the final boss of the dungeon—are similar acts and symbolize the small steps that worshipers and players take in their ascension to actualization.

### Examples of Sacred Architecture

The second research question asked how the temples in *OoT* used the iconography and symbolism of Shinto, Buddhist, and Christian sacred architecture. This study found evidence of Shinto symbolism, as well as Buddhist and Christian sacred architecture, in three temples of the game.<sup>3</sup> As these three locations were designed with architectural software (Tanner, 2007a), it is fitting to study their sense of space.

#### Shintoism in the Spirit Temple

Inside the Spirit Temple, there are enemies that appear to be kami. They are the Flying Pots, the *Beamoss* (statues with a laser eye), the *Armos* (statues that come alive), the *Anubis* (floating mummies), and the Blade Traps, all of which are objects that are animated or possessed by some spirit. In this way, the very enemies within the dungeon appear to be objects that hold a spirit, or kami (Ono & Woodard, 1962).

Another symbol in this dungeon that relates to Shintoism is the inclusion of the mirror shield which relates to the *Yata no Kagami*, a sacred mirror that is part of the Imperial Regalia of Japan (Guodong, & Haiyu, 2018), or also translated as the “Three Sacred Treasures” which represent the Shinto sun goddess Amaterasu (Farris, 1998). Thus, this dungeon includes a recurring symbol of the Japanese family, a sacred treasure, or a Shinto artefact in its key items.

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<sup>3</sup> This list of three temples is not exhaustive, so there could be more symbolism in the other temples and dungeons not mentioned in this study.

### Shintoism in the Forest Temple

In many ways, the Forest Temple appears to be the temple that aligns the most with Shinto symbolism, as Shintoism reveres nature and shrines are often filled with gardens and flora. The theme of this dungeon carries this reverence for nature, as many of its rooms are outdoor gardens filled with ivy, trees, grass, and ponds. A major tenet of Shintoism is that spirituality comes from the equilibrium of our spirits with those around us (Wright & Clode, 2005); in the case of this temple, we can see that there is an attempt by the forest to retake the manmade structure through its overgrowth (Sterritt, 2019).

### Buddhism in the Spirit Temple

The Spirit Temple appears to be stereotypically Middle Eastern. Visually, it contains iconography of desert civilizations and ruins, reminiscent of Tibetan Buddhism. A likeness of the Goddess of the Sand is carved into the mountain outside of the Spirit Temple, and the dungeon itself is a literal cave hewn out of the sandstone (see Figure 5). The Goddess of the Sand can be read as an interpretation of the image of Buddha, as she is sitting with crossed legs and arms outstretched in a meditative position. These figures are also shown with a serpent wrapped around their neck and enveloping their head.



Figure 5. The Goddess of the Sand outside the Spirit Temple in *OoT* (left) and its sister inside the dungeon (right). Screenshots by the author.

There are other examples of this icon used throughout the dungeon (such as at the entrance), alluding to the *nāga*, which are a race of half-human and half-serpent deities in Hinduism and Buddhism. *Nāga* are often depicted as humans with serpents around their necks and heads (Duran, 1990), reinforcing the Buddhist iconography of the Goddess of the Sand. Lastly, the boss room in the Spirit Temple also contains the image of the square and the circle, reminiscent of the mandala pattern for Buddhist sacred space. Thus, the culminating room of the temple is the altar at which the player meditates and worships.

### Christianity in the Forest Temple

As well as including Shinto symbolism, there are also allusions to the Christian faith in both the architecture and iconography of the Forest

Temple. While Shinto shrines are made of wood and borrow from the Nagare-zukuri style (which originated in the Heian period of Japanese history, 794–1185CE; Cartwright, 2017), many architectural elements and visual symbols of the Forest Temple allude to Western styles of architecture. A large section of the dungeon is made up of giant stone walls and balconies, which are placed beside Greek-inspired porticos and pillars.

The boss room in particular holds much iconography related to Western art history (see Figure 6). It is an octagonal domed room (like a basilica), with stained glass windows and upon each wall there appears to be an oil painting.<sup>4</sup> The boss room can be interpreted as a Western art gallery. While this room reads more like a hall of Christian worship, the artefacts on the wall—presenting a scene of a decrepit and ghostly path—conjure a stronger association with the literary genre of Gothic.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 6. The Forest Temple's entrance (left) and the boss room (right), with Classic-inspired architecture. Screenshots by the author.

#### Christianity in the Temple of Time

The Temple of Time, while not technically a dungeon, is further an example of the patterns I have identified in response to the research questions. Named a temple, visually it is coded as a Christian sacred space: large columns, chequered tiled floor, and large stained-glass windows. From the exterior, it is easy to see how the architecture mimics Gothic cathedrals, and it symbolizes the grandiose and awe-inspiring power of religion (see Figure 7). The Temple of Time stands in contrast to the subtle religious imagery and symbolism of the other temples in *OoT*, and instead represents the power of space as it relates to worship. This Gothic cathedral serves as the centre of the game, as the player is repeatedly returned to this space after their worship in other temples (that is to say, after they complete them).

<sup>4</sup> The material is impossible to define in this game, so this is conjecture.

<sup>5</sup> While these two styles share a name, Gothic architecture is separate and different from Gothic literature.



Figure 7. The Temple of Time interior (left) and exterior (right).  
Screenshots by the author.

## Discussion

This study found allusions within *OoT* to the iconography of three religions: Shintoism, Buddhism, and Christianity. This blend of religions highlights the multiculturalism of the game, suggesting that international audiences can understand some of the symbolism. However, the meaning of these symbols is meant to be obscured by the noise of the metaphor (Barthes, 1980), giving the audience the chance to be entertained. The temples of *OoT* are therefore designed primarily to entertain the viewer, and players of the game may not even notice the religious symbolism of the text.

The dungeons discussed in this study are sacred spaces to the designers who chose to include these symbols and icons. They include religious elements that could potentially be interpreted by the player to become the signifier. However, some of the elements used by the designers are archetypal examples of religion: The Gothic elements of the Temple of Time are not stylistically accurate but represent the basic elements that most viewers will be able to interpret as a cathedral. However, the recognition of the temple as a cathedral does not immediately designate it as sacred to the player, but the signifiers are there for meaning to be construed.

In Christianity, sacred spaces such as cathedrals inspire reverence and a sense of humility through the cavernous space, the echoing walls, and the art of the space (Hutterer, 2015; Newton & Neil, 1966; Shackley, 2002). In Shintoism, sacred spaces are designated by an affinity towards nature and the structure of thresholds signifying a hierarchy of sacred space leading toward the divine (Nelson, 2000; Ono & Woodard, 1962). Buddhist sacred architecture was initially designed to house sacred relics of Buddha and, eventually, became monasteries for meditation toward nirvana, employing the mandala pattern as a blueprint for architecture (Humphrey & Vitebsky, 1997; Scott, 2011).

Thus, when *OoT* employs semiotics and iconography to designate its dungeons as temples—sacred spaces—the player is inspired to feel similar feelings. The effects of architecture are evidenced by the 150 years of academic literature since the publication of Ruskin's

foundational work, *The Stones of Venice* (Homan, 2006). This theory hinges on the findings that architecture affects visitors and, as a subset of architectural theory, literature on sacred space documents how visitors feel a sense of reflection and meditation. This study argues that this can also be applied to virtual architecture and how it creates similar sacred space.

This virtual architecture is used to create a sense of worship, awe, and reverence for the game. The Spirit Temple includes enemies coded as kami from Shintoism, in addition to the iconography of Tibetan Buddhism (especially the Desert Colossus as a statue of Buddha). The Forest Temple is reminiscent of an outdoor Shinto shrine and sacred garden, while also being influenced by Christianity with its castle-like walls, Roman columns, and octagonal galleries filled with paintings. The Temple of Time also borrows heavily from Christian cathedrals, with its gothic arches, pillars, and marble tiles.

These areas do not have unique architecture for their fictional races to inhabit. Instead, they employ iconography and architecture from various religions to suggest that these temples are sacred spaces (as noted by their names). The designers could have used other iconography to adorn these areas of trial—perhaps leaning more into the dungeon aesthetic—but they chose to designate these areas as sacred, suggesting the interpretation that this paper argues: These areas become memorable to the player because they are special and hallowed places of worship. Sacred settings are tied to personal identity and are made more memorable as individuals form place attachment to these sacred spaces (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1993).

These areas of the game are coded as sacred spaces to signal their importance and their separation from the secular, or the rest of the game. As Figure 4 outlines, there is a clear progression through both sacred spaces and the virtual architecture of *OoT*, with thresholds separating the sacred from the secular. Thus, the true worship of a Zelda game comes in playing the dungeons, which are coded as sacred and special. Sacred buildings build relationships with human worshippers through the act of ritual (Humphrey & Vitebskey, 1997), which the temples of *OoT* also employ through the rote and repeated actions the players take in each of them (defeat enemies, progress from room to room, solve puzzles, acquire a key item, unlock doors, use the key item to defeat the boss). These rituals of Zelda gameplay may or may not be sacred, or religious, but their repeated actions hold meaning.

Completing dungeons in *OoT* is a linear progression, just like worship in a Shinto shrine, a Gothic cathedral, or a Buddhist temple. They both use thresholds, gates, and keys, to signal layers of sacred space and encourage the player to engage in meditation along the pathway toward the holiest space in the centre. Thus, the gameplay becomes a pseudo-religious experience, a ritual to perform for fulfilment. This progression

of worship through *OoT* temples can also be interpreted as a form of flow, which is a psychological state where individuals get lost in an activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). The layers of sacred space that players advance through in *OoT* are memorable due to their symbolism, as sacred spaces touch on universal human emotions (Shackley, 2002). This could be why this game is so beloved: It creates a sense of sacred space in its temples, which are memorable and have made a lasting impression through their design (Tanner, 2007b).

This study suggests that the temples in *OoT* are sacred spaces, as evidenced by the iconography and semiotics they employ to tie to sacred architecture. However, the question remains: What type of sacred architecture are these virtual temples? In their work on sacred architecture, Humphrey and Vitebsky (1997) identify three major types of sacred buildings: places for public worship, monasteries, and reliquaries. According to the official lore about these spaces in *OoT*:

The temples of Hyrule are not only places for the faithful to gather and worship the goddesses. They are also built to protect sacred treasures and items, which is why temples often have mechanisms in place to stop intruders. (Nintendo, 2018, p. 26)

Here the *Zelda Encyclopaedia* suggests that the temples in the game serve two purposes: they are places for the inhabitants of Hyrule to worship their patron deities (the goddesses), as well as reliquaries to house sacred objects. However, it seems the buildings in *OoT* are best described as reliquaries. The Spirit Temple is located among the ancient ruins of the Haunted Wasteland, and the Forest Temple is among the ruins in the Sacred Forest (Nintendo, 2018). These locations are physically separate from the cities and towns of their regions, as well as largely devoid of other worshippers, suggesting a monastic purpose in their construction. The player engages in these spaces on their own, further indicating a singular and lonesome worship in the sacred space.

Additionally, these spaces contain arguably sacred items (such as the mirror shield and hookshot) that are necessary for completing the puzzles and defeating the final boss. As mentioned by the *Zelda Encyclopaedia*, the locations are built to protect these sacred items, much like reliquaries. While the key items that the player recovers in each of these temples serve ludographic purposes (which includes defeating enemies), the game's narrative suggests they are sacred and special items that are housed in the sacred architecture of the game. When coded as relics—objects that hold sacred or special powers—these items and where they are found signal different meanings and interpretations. This suggests philosophical ramifications to the player: Are they preserving the sacred nature of these places and items, or are they desecrating them?

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study discussed sacred meanings and symbolism surrounding the virtual locations within *OoT*. While this study is a semiotic analysis and attempts to decode potential meaning from the signifiers, these are not the only meanings available. Wyeld et al. (2007) identify dangers of including sacred spaces in simulations, noting that the nuances of the sacred is often mistranslated across cultures. As this game was developed by a Japanese company, localized into English, and analysed by an American, there is to some extent a loss of cultural meaning.

But Wyeld et al. (2007) are not the only scholars sceptical about the inclusion of sacred space in video games. Rachel Wagner (2012, 2014) has also analysed sacred space and religion within video games. She argues that often the nuances of the religions being expressed in the video game—such as their cultural and religious values—do not translate toward the player, suggesting a disconnect between the ethics of the game and the ethics of the player, especially in violent games (Wagner, 2014). While virtual spaces may be coded by the designer as sacred through their use of sacred architecture, it is ultimately up to the player to decide if these locations are sacred or not (Wagner, 2012).<sup>6</sup>

Homan (2006) has also discussed the dangers of studying the sacred, asking if the mere act of documenting and objectively analysing sacred architecture could lead to its desecration. In a similar vein, does the inclusion of sacred architecture and the coding of sacred space within video games diminish its power through this secularization?<sup>7</sup>

This study argues that temples in *OoT* can be identified as sacred spaces through their use of sacred architecture. This is of significance because it signals the role that these virtual environments and spaces have on the play experience: when interpreted as religious and sacred, they suggest new meanings to the player such as reverence and awe. These areas, and the rituals that the player performs in them, are then symbolic of the player's apotheosis and are the ultimate form of power fantasy. As reliquaries, these temples are made sacred through their housing of sacred items, which are then given to the player in their quest to ultimately defeat evil.

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<sup>6</sup> This is similar to the "death of the author" literary theory, where the intentions of the developer are deemed irrelevant in the analysis of a text such as a video game.

<sup>7</sup> "There is a tendency to colonize museums as sacred spaces. Conversely, churches and cathedrals are being visited as tourist sites" (Homan, 2006, p. 158). The blurring of the line between sacred and secular spaces can either increase their power (museums become sacred and thus more meaningful) or decrease it (churches as tourist sites).



These findings indicate ramifications for the blending of the sacred with the secular, as well as for the power of religion outside of established systems. If video games and other media texts like *OoT* can wield the symbols and iconography of world religions to inspire spirituality in their players—as a metaphor for progression and apotheosis—then it solidifies the power of these religious institutions into new generations. The sociological and cultural impacts of religion will continue—much like their monuments and sacred architecture—and the repurposing of this iconography into the medium of video games allows for the sacredization of the secular.

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