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The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword and Banal Religion

An analysis of the video game in search of what goes unnoticed.

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Acknowledgement

As a child, I used to say that I had "ludo-genes in my body" because my grandfather would always impress me with his skills in the board game Ludo. Learning what "ludo" means and looking at my life now, I support my childish claim.

The master`s thesis you are about to read was started in the fall of 2022. It is a merge of my love for games and interest in the subject of religion.

Finally, I am at the end of this adventure. Sometimes it has been life on "hard-mode" as I have studied alongside of everything else. I thank my supervisor Liv Ingeborg Lied at MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society for guiding me, inspiring me, and never giving up on me.

I would also like to thank my family and fiancé for supporting me on this journey, my "studybuddy" Purre the cat for keeping me company through late nights and the Nerdelandslaget community for being a safe space for nerds.

I wish you an interesting read and hope I might inspire others to do research on the fantastic alternate worlds in video games.

Abstract

In this master`s thesis, I will do an analysis of the game The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword and try to determine if the game mediates "banal religion". In order to do so, I will describe different religio-aesthetic content in the game, as well as the main story and characters. Then I will use a phenomenological hermeneutic method presented by Mikhail Fiadotau, in order to discuss the religio-aesthetic content`s function in the game and its possible origin of inspiration.

To aid me in my discussion, I will look at Stig Hjarvard`s theory of "banal religion" in contrast to Jane Skjoldli`s view of games as a religious interface in the light of Liel Leibovitz`observations on immersion.

In other words; What kind of religious traditions can be experienced in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword? Furthermore, what function does it serve, and is it mediating religion? Would I consider it to be banal religion, in the view of Hjarvard`s theory?

I have reflected upon my role in the methodological strategy, as both player and researcher. My findings are based on my experience and reflections during the play-through. Based on this, I have tried to determine whether I would label the religio-aesthetics in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword as "banal religion". I was inconclusive, but lean towards it not being "banal".

I have also tried to determine whether other players, who do not enter the gameplay as a researcher looking for specific content, would notice the religio-aesthetic content. Based on my findings by using Fiadotau`s phenomenological hermeneutic method, I lean towards labeling the religio-aesthetic content in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword as "banal religion".

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1. Introduction

1.1 How I discovered the game

I first discovered the game The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword when I lived in Trondheim, winter 2011/2012. My friends, with whom I rented an apartment, had bought and played this game right after its release on their Nintendo Wii console. I had recently discovered that I loved to play Zelda games, such as Wind Waker and Majorah`s Mask. As soon as my friends had finished the game, I borrowed it and started to play it myself.

I was excited as I started my journey through the adventures of this game for the first time. From the beginning, I was struck with the sensation that this game fascinated me. I would assume that it was because of the story, the challenges and the world they had created for me as a player to explore. I managed to play through almost all of it, when I moved from the apartment and consequently from the game. It haunted me that I was not able to finish it, as I saw it as one of my best gaming experiences.

My fascination for this game did not go away. All I wanted for Christmas in 2020 was a Wii console and The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword. As my wishes came true, I started a new save and re-experienced this amazing journey. Ironically, I did not reach the end of the game this time either. In celebration of the 35 years`anniversary of The Legend of Zelda, Nintendo announced that they would release a remake of Skyward Sword, as it was ten years since its release. The remake was released for Nintendo Switch on June 11th 2021, and it is this version that I use as a source for my research.

1.2 My Motivation and Interest in Religious Features of this game

In my experience as a teacher, the different media acknowledged and used as texts and source material in upper secondary school is increasing as technology evolves. Now, movies, songs and websites are as widely promoted as sources for an essay as books. In spite of this, video games have not been appointed the same status as a source of information in school subjects. In this setting, "source" is a published media acknowledged to be a useful source of information, usually peer-reviewed and produced by scholars on a specific field that varies with the topic.

There are hundreds of thousands games made that are both amazing storytellers and great tools for learning. In addition, most Norwegian students age 9-18 play video games almost every day in their leisure time (Medietilsynet, 2022, p. 4) making it a low threshold tool for learning. In Norway, institutions such as Kulturtanken work to make video games an acknowledged form of art. Spillpedagogene create and inspire other teachers to use video games in their classrooms and how to do it. NFI (Norwegian Film Institute) distributes funding from the Norwegian government to various video game design studios, to stimulate more creation of Norwegian video games. All in all, video games as media are at a point in time where they are starting to be acknowledged alongside books and movies. Therefore, I find it interesting to use this medium as the primary source for my studies of religion in this master's thesis.

1.3 Why Zelda?

The Legend of Zelda is a tale formed by many games over a period of many years. It is one of the largest Intellectual Properties (IPs) in the game industry and has a large community of followers. Some may claim that their interest in the Zelda-universe is religious. This makes the potential of a Zelda game as a source for an academic thesis both important and massive.

When playing video games, there are several ways players can experience something associated with religion. In the game Assassin's Creed 2, the protagonist has to fight the templar order, as well as the pope and it contains christian myths as part of the story. In many role-playing games, such as Dungeons and Dragons, you assume the role based on a class-type. One common class is the paladin, a holy knight who might resemble a templar knight. When playing Skyward Sword, it was not obvious to me at first that this world had religious elements. The story is a fated one, and the supernatural in this world becomes natural within its context. The supernatural is not explicitly expressed as something religious, rather mysterious and without any connection to religion in the real world. This results in a space where a unique form of religion can exist on its own. I want to take a closer look at what type of religion this is.

1.4 Research Questions

In this master`s thesis, I will do an analysis of the game The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword and try to determine if the game mediates "banal religion". In order to do so, I will describe different religio-aesthetic content in the game, as well as the main story and characters. Then I will use a phenomenological hermeneutic method presented by Mikhail Fiadotau, in order to discuss the religio-aesthetic content`s function in the game and its possible origin of inspiration.

To aid me in my discussion, I will look at Stig Hjarvard`s theory of "banal religion" in contrast to Jane Skjoldli`s view of games as a religious interface in the light of Liel Leibovitz`observations on immersion.

In other words; What kind of religious traditions can be experienced in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword? Furthermore, what function does the religio-aesthetic content serve, and is the game mediating religion? Would I consider it to be banal religion, in the view of Hjarvard`s theory?

1.5 Sources

It is interesting to use a game as my main source for analysis, as it is a complex text of both audio, video and interaction. It is also in many ways a linear source; when a quest or a chapter in the game is completed, you cannot just go back one page and read it again. One can create new save-files to enable points of return. However, these slots are often very limited and because of auto-save mechanics, they are easily overridden. In order to be able to refer to the game as a source, I will try to explain what part of the storyline I am referring to as I present new elements for analyzing. As an additional tool, I will use one or several walkthrough-videos on YouTube. Seeing someone else play through a game is not the same experience as playing it yourself. However, because Skyward Sword has a linear main storyline, the different cutscenes, challenges and unveiling of new areas will appear in the same order.

The Zelda franchise is very popular all over the world, and there are many dedicated fans. In forums they discuss and do research in order to unveil all information they can about the game series. Therefore, I will also use fandom websites as a part of my source material, both when referring to Zelda-related claims and finds, and when referring to other video games.

1.6 Prior Research

After I chose my approach towards studying religion in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, I did some research in order to see if this research had been done before. It is my impression that the theory of banal religion has not been applied to this game by other researchers before. I find this to be exciting, as I might find results and answers to questions that have not been asked before.

There has, however, been done some research on religion in Zelda games before. In the fandom community, many forums discuss the subject and search for information that adds to their view of the world where these games unfold. As I will present in the theory chapter, the Israeli researcher Liel Leibovitz has done a study on immersion when playing a Zelda game (Leibovitz, 2013). When it comes to the subject of studying religion in video games, there are several that I will refer to and discuss with in this thesis. The Norwegian researcher Jane Skjoldli has published works on religion and games, showing a broad field of interests, including norse mythology, catholicism and mediation (Universitetet i Stavanger, n.d.). Tanya Krzywinska has studied the massive multiplayer online game World of Warcraft and how that world is filled with content (Krzywinska, 2006). I find that Kerstin Radde-Antweiler has done some very interesting work on methodology for studying religion in video games, both as editor and contributor in "Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion" (2017), and the research on gamevironments (Radde-Antweiler et al, 2014).

2. Method

Even though there is an increase of academic work that specialize on analyzing video games, the methods of doing so are still being developed and redefined to fit this type of medium. One could claim that a video game is a medium similar to film, as it is an audio-visual text. Video games however, are audio-visual-interactable. This third dimension that differentiates games from film can be a big part of the research or almost left out. I believe that the interactive dimension that makes games unique as a medium is relevant for my analysis and have therefore chosen a method that takes it into account.

When analyzing The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, I will use a combination of several methods. It is qualitative research, as I have only chosen one game to study, and I have selected a small portion of the game to do in-depth analysis. These examples are then categorized into sub-groups of religious content. As the examples that will be analyzed are of different types, different approaches are applied.

2.1 Phenomenological Hermeneutics

According to Thomas S. Eberle, phenomenology is the analysis of "the things themselves" (Flick, 2013, p.188). Phenomenology was founded by Edmund Husserl and aims to describe how things appear and are experienced (Flick, 2013, p.188). Many forms of phenomenology have been developed to study the many aspects of life, one of them is phenomenological hermeneutics. Eberle suggests that what differentiates phenomenological hermeneutics from phenomenology is the option to analyze the experience of an *alter ego*. (Flick, 2013, p.197). It is my understanding that the concept of analyzing an alter ego`s experiences, is a way of highlighting the problem of subjectivity. When one analyzes the experience of others, it is somewhat understood and interpreted on the basis of what our own experiences are. As a result, it is not entirely someone else's experience that becomes a part of the analysis. Furthermore, in order to analyze someone else's experience of a phenomenon, one needs access to the source and opportunity to gather further information, for example by conducting interviews.

In the book, *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion*, Mikhail Fiadotau suggests that phenomenological hermeneutics can be used as a method of analyzing the "religious-aesthetic" content of a video game (Fiadotau, 2017, p. 100). It is a combination of examining the experience of something, as we as what that "something" really is.

When studying religion, subjectivity is a challenge, as most have a perception that may influence how religions are perceived. When analyzing a video game, this is also a weakness due to intractability as a part of the medium. Fiadotau suggests that this is one of the strengths in using phenomenological hermeneutics as a research method. By combining this with a "religio-aesthetic" approach, he suggests that:

- Aesthetics can function as a bridge between objects and experience, ensuring that perception is a part of the discussion.

- Religious aesthetics and its perception allow us to study a religion outside of its institutionalized form.

- When studying religion outside of the western cultural context, an aesthetic approach allows us to avoid being influenced by western tradition. It allows an exploration of religion without the rules of what it is and is not, based on western perception and tradition. (Fiadotau, 2017, p.101)

Furthermore, Fiadotau suggests that one can take the "ludo-performative" aspect into consideration and its relation to the narrative of the game. By "ludo-performative", he refers to how the game works, its mechanisms, rules and actions (Fiadotau, 2017, p. 103). For example, when Link enters a boss-fight in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, the game designers have planned and encoded how the player`s performance will impact the game. The fight-sequence may have its own set of rules, where Link can only win if a certain fighting move is used, that corresponds with the opponent's weakness. Sometimes, successfully beating a boss-enemy triggers unlocking of doors and/or the appearances of rewards. Fiadotau calls this the "*feedback loop between the player`s actions and the game`s behavior based on its mechanics and rule system*" (Fiadotau, 2017, p.104).

The analysis must not only focus on the ludo-performative, it must develop to also include the narrative component. As a combined term, Fiadotau calls this the ludo-narrative, where the game's mechanisms interplay with its narrative. (Fiadotau, 2017, p.104).

When analyzing The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword I will apply the phenomenological hermeneutic method described by Fiadotau, by using the two steps he describes:

First, I will analyze the relationship between the ludo-performative and the narrative in the part of the game that I have chosen to describe. I will consider what seems to be experienced as most important, if the two components reinforce each other or not and to what degree I think that the experience as a result of the interplay between the ludo-performative and the narrative is intentional or planned by the game-designers. (Fiadotau, 2017, p. 104).

Second, Fiadotau describes the next step: "*The phenomenology of the playthrough is reflected upon in light of religio-aesthetic practices and concepts referenced in the game or pertinent to the cultural context it originates in*" (Fiadotau, 2017, p. 104). In other words, I will look at some religio-aesthetic components that I discover through playing the game or watching a playthrough. I will then reflect upon why I recognize it as something religio-aesthetic, where it originates and what associations it has. Then, I will ask questions to whether the religio-aesthetic interplay with the ludo-performative results in awareness of the religious or spiritual, the religious origins and whether it is relevant to the game itself (Fiadotau, 2017, p.104).

By using this phenomenological hermeneutic method when analyzing The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, the aim is to be able to reflect upon whether the components that might be perceived as religious are "banal religion" and what function they serve in the game.

This method has a lot in common with the concept of "Gamevironment"-approach, by Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, Michael Waltmathe and Xenia Zeiler (2014, pp. 8, 13-16). However, my impression is that the Gamevironment approach has a greater focus on the gamer than what I aim to have in my analysis.

When analyzing this content from the game and applying this method, I will assume two roles: the role of a player, and the role of the researcher. These two roles may affect each other, and the results of my findings. In the role as a player who is also a researcher, I am more likely to notice, recognize and pay attention to religio-aesthetic content in the game, than if I were only a player. This is because I am actively looking for it. As a researcher who is also playing the game, I am not referring to what others have experienced while playing the game, the description and experience is my own.

3. Theory

3.1 Banal Religion

Stig Hjarvard is a Danish professor in Media Studies, in the Department of Communication at the University of Copenhagen. His primary fields of research include mediatization theory, media & religion and media history (University of Copenhagen,n.d.).

In the seminal 2008 article "The mediatization of Religion: A theory of media as agents of religious change", Hjarvard explored a new perspective on media and religion, coining the term "*banal religion*". He looked at what happened when the media used and presented religious content and symbols in various ways without it being rooted in the institutionalized religions (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 8). For example, the song "Mary on a Cross" by the Swedish band Ghost, uses religious Christian symbolism in the song`s lyrics. However, the lyrics do not promote Christian beliefs and it is hard to believe that the song is sanctioned by a Christian institution. Furthermore, Hjarvard claims that "banal religion" can be used when the media presents something that may not even be religious, but it is perceived as something religious by the receiver. This may be mysterious and supernatural, inspired by folklore etc. A common example is the magical world in the Harry Potter franchise, where there are strong ethical motifs and the supernatural is an obvious part of the world.

When Stig Hjarvard introduces the concept of "banal religion", it is based upon the term "banal nationalism", developed by Michael Billig (1995). Banal nationalism is used to express that there is a difference between what is expressed and institutionalized forms of national symbolism and other symbols or connotations that can awaken the same perceptions and feelings. For instance, the American flag and the American constitutions are established symbols that are defined and precepted overall as American. At the same time, a big barbeque, Superbowl, big pick-up trucks and guns can be just as symbolic and be perceived as equally American. In other words, the media can send a message promoting what is perceived as American by the receiver without using the established and institutionalized symbols.

In the book Mediatization and Religion: Nordic Perspectives (2012), Stig Hjarvard further describes his term "banal religion". An important aspect of what "banal religion" is, is what he refers to as the "unwaved flag" . It is the pieces of content that we associate with institutionalized religions or folklore. However, reshaped in their new context in media, they go unnoticed by the receiver as something religious . Furthermore, Hjarvard claims that fantasy and popular culture can contain banal religion. In this instance, it is not the obvious and direct ties to any specific religious- or folklore tradition, it is how the supernatural presence in a fictional world in its own way produces religious content (Hjarvard, 2012, pp. 35-36). As a result, when we consume different types of media we may be consuming religion in many different forms, however, it goes under the radar.

I will apply this perspective when examining different contents of the game The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword. When examining content that I as a player, the receiver, perceive as being religious in some form, I will explore why it is perceived as religious. In addition, I will try to determine what function it serves. As a result, I may find sufficient grounds for claiming whether or not there is banal religion in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword.

3.2 Console Video Games as Media

Since banal religion is a term used when media is the vessel of religious content, it may be useful to examine what kind of media games are, especially console video games. By console video games, I refer to games played on a computer or a gaming console, where the most widespread products are Playstation, Xbox and Nintendo. One may suggest that smartphones also should be included in this list. However, I will not take that into consideration at this point. When looking at console games compared to other forms of media, such as texts, movies and plays, there are some key differences. Console games rely on the receivers active participation in the game, or else the story will not evolve and unfold. The story is formed in various ways by the choices and skills of the player. Some games might be driven by the story, but have several possible endings. Some of the bigger games, where there is an open world and you have to build the skills of your character, one can create thousands of different stories. The genre known as "sandbox games" allows users to create their own games and make them available online for anyone to play. In all of these games, function is a key element that must be considered. When a game is created, the creators must consider the function of all the elements in the constructed environment, from weapons, clothing and abilities, to the ground, buildings, animals and non-playable characters. The function of the elements must enable the player to make their own decisions and result in a progress of the story. If the game is a battle between good and evil, the player must have the opportunity to take an active part. This can be performed by for example fighting evil enemies or making ethical choices.

The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword has a pre-plotted storyline, resulting in the same outcome if the player has the skills to overcome the challenges that are presented. However, the game experience can be quite different from player to player. Some may find the puzzles in the game entertaining and solvable, others may struggle to move the story forward. Some players may

highlight the lore that is revealed in the game, rather than the battles and puzzles. According to the Cambridge dictionary, lore is defined as "knowledge and stories, usually traditional, about a subject"("Lore", n.d.). In the gaming community, lore is referred to as knowledge about the history and contents of a world where a game takes place. The lore of the Zelda-games has engaged a large community and inspired many discussions resulting in theories beyond what the creators of the games have published. In online forums, every word or action can be analyzed and reveal new information through interpretation. In a sense, they search for the truth of a world much like religious leaders.

In the Zelda games, there is a unique view of how the world is and what it contains. This includes what we as players might consider to be religious. In other words, when one plays a Zelda game, one might have the impression that there is something religious in that world where the story unfolds, that you as a player also experience through the characters. These elements that the player perceives as religious might not have any connections to institutionalized religions, folklore or magic. They may not even serve any religious functions in the game either. In other examples, elements may be inspired by religions widespread in the real world, however, in the game they may not have any religious function.

3.3 Religious Aspects of games

A large portion of video-games are dependent on creating a unique world in order to be successful. This world is often alternate to the world we live in, and offers unique experiences. Many game-creators want their players to experience what is often referred to as immersion. A player experiences immersion in different degrees, from being engaged in the game to total immersion. When a player is in a state of total immersion in a game, the sense of time and what happens in the real world is somewhat forgotten or does not matter. At this point, the player is emotionally invested in the game's narrative and characters and does not have to focus on how to use the controllers (Jennet et al., 2008, pp. 641-643). In order to successfully create an immersive gaming-experience, the alternate world needs to have content. There are small worlds with limited content, and there are open world-games, such as Read Dead Redemption 2 and Horizon Forbidden West, with what can seem like an endless amount of content. The games that can offer an alternate world that may be experienced as

complete to some extent, might be more immersive than what small worlds can offer. If the goal for game-developers is to create an alternate world that offers immersion, and in order to succeed it needs to have enough content and elements to feel somewhat like a complete world, one might ask; what is a world without religion?

In order to reflect on what a world without religion would look like, one would first try to define what religion is. On the one hand, one can define religion as "the belief in a system of a God or gods, or any such system of belief and worship" ("Religion", 2023). In my opinion, this definition does not cover what religion is, or can be, considering how religion has affected culture, architecture, war and technology, just to mention some examples. When teaching the subject religion and ethics in upper secondary level in Norway, we used Ninian Smart's seven dimensions to map the main content of what a religion is. Using this theory, one could claim that a religion is a product of the ritual-, experience-, mythical-, doctrinal-, social-, ethical- and material/aesthetic dimensions(Dæhli, 2022). This tool can be applied to an alternate world created in a game and make it easier to analyze whether or not there are religious elements present. For example, one can look at the myths presented in the game Horizon Zero Dawn and analyze whether they have something in common with myths presented in established religions.

For an alternate world to be able to facilitate an immersive experience, it is in my opinion necessary to include many, if not all, of Smart's seven dimensions. For example, in my experience, most video games present ethical choices or a battle between factions. I find it hard to imagine a world without the elements of Smart's seven dimensions. My best guess would be a sterile world with computer-like interactions.

Even if one claims that an immersive alternate world has to contain elements from Smart's seven dimensions, one can still question whether the elements from these dimensions have anything to do with religion. For example, an aesthetic element such as a painting can be non-religious in an alternate world, as it is in the real world. In contrast, a painting can also be religious in an alternate world- either inspired by the real world or as an element in the religion constructed for that world. For example, the cover art for the game Borderlands 3 is clearly a reference to a Christian painting of Jesus. In the game, the player will learn about Eridian markings, marks etched into rock walls by an extinct alien race. This aesthetic

element is part of the myth that belongs in the Borderlands alternate world (Borderlands Wiki, 2023).

Video game researcher, Professor Tanya Krzywinska, supports the claim of the need for religious or mythic elements in an alternate world to function as something that makes that world consistent. Krzywinski analyzed the game World of Warcraft; a massive online multiplayer game, in her article Blood Scythes, Festivals, Quests and Backstories: World Creation and Rhetorics of Myth in World of Warcraft (2006). In contrast to The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, the alternate world where players enter in World of Warcraft does not pause or "stop existing" when one leaves the game. It is a world that evolves, alters and where time passes at all times because it is shared by many players. It can also to a greater extent be modified by the players. In contrast, the alternate world in Skyward Sword is reset every time a player starts its journey for the first time, and the main story will repeat itself in the same chronology. This shows that myths and religious elements can be key to creating consistency, not restricted by game genre.

It is easy to find examples of religious symbolism and traditions in video games. Some games use it as a major part of the storyline and the universe. God of War is based on Greek mythology, and the sequel Ragnarök is based on Norse mythology. The Assassin's Creed`storyline is based on fighting the knights templar and gaining control of artifacts, called Pieces of Eden with clear references to biblical myths (i.e. one of the pieces is The Apple of Eden). In contrast, The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword is not upon an established religious tradition in the real world. Could there still be recognizable religio-aesthetic content in the game that ties it to established religious traditions?

3.4 Games as a Medium of Religious Transfer

Jane Skjoldli (2018) uses the term *Religious interface* when explaining how both religion and games can offer interaction with characters that exist in non-physical worlds. The interface of a game would be the combination of audio, video and interaction through the buttons on the controller. For example, a statue of a God can facilitate prayer and rituals. When one plays a game, the world in the game can contain statues, buildings and other relics that facilitate interaction. In a game one might even be able to interact directly with a god or deity. Skjoldli

claims that a game as a religious interface can transfer the feeling of being present with deities, as long as the player is able to imagine that it is in fact a part of the interaction and is engaged in the game. If this is to occur, one might see this as the opposite of Hjarvard`s "banal religion", where the religious experience goes under the radar.

An Israeli video game scholar, Liel Leibovitz, conducted an experiment described in his book "God in the Machine: Video Games as a Spiritual Pursuit" (2013). Leibovitz decides to observe himself while he plays the video game The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess. In his observations, Leibovitz records different stages of experiencing the gameplay. In the beginning, he is focused on learning the mechanics and being observant of the difference between the real world and the world of Zelda. "...to hear a character in the game refer to the mechanics of the hardware I, the player, was holding in my hand in the real world made me reflect on the fact that I was involved in game play, which, in turn, greatly undermined the suspension of disbelief required to successfully immerse oneself in all fictional narratives." (Leibovitz, 2013, p .36). After playing the game for twelve hours, Leibovitz describes how he experienced immersiveness through a change of agent. Even though he had operated with a rule for deliberately distancing himself in his notes, by referring to Link as the acting agent, he was now replacing Link: "Twelve hours into the game, however, I unwittingly broke my own rule; after having dispensed with Link altogether in my sentences, I now commented that it was I, not he, who deserved credit for solving a particularly tough puzzle. It was, in other words, I, not he, who was the agent in charge." (Liebovitz, L., 2013, s.50).

Seeing Skjoldli`s claims in the light of Leibovitz` observations and experiences, one could claim that games can be a medium of religious transfer. One may even claim that it has the potential to be a very powerful medium in this context, as it may be able to offer experiences in an alternate world, where the limits of reality are not present. Religious people all over the world travel far and make sacrifices in search of a closeness to their deity, as seen during Hajj. This makes it even more interesting to analyze elements of The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, whether it has religious elements, what function they serve and if they are noticed by the player. Can video-games be oth conveyors of obvious religious traditions, such as the

games based on explicit religious narratives, and at the same time be full of religious content that is consumed unnoticed?

4. The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword

Before I examine some of the content in the game The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword that may be perceived as religious and explore what functions they may have, I will give a description of the game. As this game contains a large world, with many characters and their stories, I will not try to cover all of it and go into depth. I will choose some elements that I find interesting and relevant. That may include elements that are not recurring, and it may exclude elements that are important to the gameplay. For example, I have chosen to not include the character Goose in this chapter, even though he appears frequently in the game. This is because I consider him to be a traditional comic relief character, and less relevant to the myths in the Zelda-game series. In this chapter, I will give a description of this game and its content to the extent that it can be a sufficient context as I highlight smaller events and concepts for analysis later in this thesis. This chapter will describe the game as a popular culture media, setting and plot, as well as some of the main characters.

4.1 Origins

The creation of the idea that became The Legend of Zelda is largely attributed to Shigeru Miyamoto. He was working for the company we now know as Nintendo in their Kyoto office, when they needed a launch title for the release of their new NES Disk System. Miyamoto and his colleagues designed a game where you could create dungeons, and play through them with a friend. Dungeons in these types of games usually have puzzles, enemies and bosses. When they were testing this game, they discovered that the most fun part of it was the playthrough. The game was altered to be a single-player, and landscape above ground was added as well. Following, a storybook was created for this game, on the encouragement from a PR planner. Miyamoto wanted to name the game "The Legend of" followed by something, and found the inspiration for the name "Zelda" in the wife of a famous American author (Thorpe, 2013, p. 2).

The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword was released November 18th 2011 by Nintendo for their Wii console. The remake for Nintendo Switch was released June 11th 2021. In the game, you play as the boy named Link, who is the protagonist. As in all the other Zelda games, Link wakes up in his bedroom as a normal boy. His fate and destiny is slowly unfolded in conversation with other characters and through overcoming obstacles.

4.2 Who is the Target Audience for The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword?

As of March 2022, the HD remake of The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword has sold 3,91 million copies worldwide. In the financial statements from Nintendo, the company divides sales into two categories; sales in Japan and sales overseas. In the Financial Results Explanatory Material released in May 2022, Nintendo stated that 450 000 copies of Skyward Sword HD had been sold in Japan, compared to 3 460 000 copies overseas (Nintendo, 2022). Reading from these numbers, both the Asian market and the international market are important target audiences for Nintendo when releasing new games in the Zelda-series. One could claim that The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword might be created with its world-wide audience in mind, as Link is not depicted to have an ethnicity such as asian or caucasian, he is a Hylian as described earlier. The game has buildings and nature inspired by Asian scenery and culture, as well as European style and fantasy. According to PEGI (Pan European Game Information) The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword is suited for everyone 12 years and over, because of moderate violence (n.d.). The Japanese version is rated A, which means that it is suited for everyone(CERO, n.d.).

Based on these indicators, one might assume that the target audience for The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword is very large. It targets globally and across age groups. The first game in the Zelda-series, The Legend of Zelda, was released in 1986 (Thorpe, 2013, s. 233). In 2023,37 years later, Nintendo is still releasing new titles in the game series.

4.3 Setting and Plot

4.3.1 When?

The story of Skyward Sword is taking place as the oldest game in the timeline. At a point in the game, a portal to the past is also opened, bringing the player even further back in time. It is hard to determine a "time", as the story is fictional in a fictional universe. However, one can establish that it is taking place somewhat after the creation of the world, as there were several creatures living in these lands when the first battle between good and evil took place. The main story, and main part of the game, takes place many years after this battle, as the characters have no memory of this. It is only passed through in forms such as songs and poems.

4.3.2 Where?

The story begins on the island called Skyloft. It is a floating island in the sky, above the clouds. It is surrounded by floating rocks and small islands. On Skyloft there is a market in the center, where you can buy gear or potions, storage items, see a fortune teller and interact with other characters. There is also an academy where they train the young adults to become knights. Some of the main characters in the story either attend or work at this academy. Part of the island, in the north, also has a temple for the goddess. The Goddess is displayed with a very large statue. There are ceremonies performed at this temple, and it is acknowledged as a sacred place. Another somewhat sacred place is the Light Tower placed in the south of the island. It is connected to a sacred harp that Link plays, and part of some puzzles. The inhabitants of Skyloft also live in houses located around the market and on the eastern part of the island. They stay there at night, and can be visited as a part of quests. The center of the island and the eastern settlement is divided by a river, flowing from a waterfall. The waterfall flows somewhat magically in from a pond on top of a floating piece of land in the north east of the island. This floating land has a cave inside. Around the edges of the island there are ramps for bird riders to jump off. The scenery of the island is green and harmonious, with grass, trees, flowers and butterflies.

As mentioned, Skyloft and the surrounding floating islands are above the clouds. As you progress in the storyline, holes in the layer of cloud opens up, and gives the player access to new areas. The map below the clouds, called The Surface, are divided into three climates. The forest, the desert and the volcano.

4.3.2.1 The Forest

The Forest is a green part of the map, where plants and trees thrive. It is entered by a green portal in the clouds. The ground is covered by grass, there are some bees nesting in their beehives in the trees and several rivers with clear water. This area has a peaceful and friendly aesthetic, only interrupted by the evil mobs that have invaded. The main part of the forest is Faron woods and Deep Woods. In the center is The Great Tree, home to the local ancient people, creatures called The Kiwi. The Kiwi are small, easily scared and have friendly features.

In the west of the forest lies The Sealed Grounds. This is a big pit, where the evil Demise is sealed away in the center of the bottom. Above there is a temple, where the portal to the past is eventually opened, and where the character Impa resides.

In the east, lies Lake Floria. This area is covered with water and home to a race called Parella. They live in the water and look like a crossing between squids and seahorses. Lake Floria is also the home of the dragon Faron, who is assigned by one of the gods to protect the surface. The Parella serve Faron.

4.3.2.2 Eldin Volcano

The second part of the Surface map that Link can access is Eldin Volcano. It is entered by a red portal in the clouds. This area has a hot climate, little water and only special plants will grow. The ground consists of rock and sand, the rivers are flowing with lava. The area is an uphill climb to the center of Eldin volcano and the Volcano Summit. The center is so hot that Link can not enter certain parts without special gear. There are few native residents in this area. It has been invaded by evil mobs and there are some mole-like creatures who are digging for treasure.

4.3.2.3 Lanayru Desert

Lanayru Desert is the third and last part of the surface map that Link can enter, through a yellow portal in the clouds. The area has large sand dunes, rocks and mountains and some

botanical growth. As a climate, it is somewhere between the green tempered forest and the hot volcano. A feature that is essential to this area is the ability to move back in time through crystals. Special crystals that are mined here, called Timeshift Stones, emit a field where time is turned back. The native creatures in this area are the Ancient Robots. As the name suggests, they are robots from an ancient time with highly developed technology. The Ancient robots are mainly miners with droid-like personalities and run on electricity. When Link arrives in the desert, only one of the robots is still functioning. The other robots will only function within a field emitted by a Timeshift Stone.

In the north lies the Lanayru desert. Here there are dangerous sinking sand dunes and ruins of many structures. In the west lies the Lanayru sand sea that can be maneuvered with a boat. In the sea Link encounters pirates and a big pirate ship that has many treasures and enemies. The Lanayru Gorge is located in the south, where the dragon Lanyru lives. In the east are the Lanayru mines, where ancient robots mine Timeshift Stones. These locations are connected through the Lanayru caves.

All of these parts of the surface map must be revisited several times through the game. The first time Link enters one of these areas, he might only have access to one section of it. As the story progresses, Link obtains new gear and skills, enabling him to unlock new areas. For example, some caves in the Lanayru desert have an entrance located high above the ground. At some point, Link obtains a grappling hook. This enables him to grab on to objects and pull himself towards it. This way he can reach new areas. By placing obstacles preventing Link from entering certain areas, the game developers can control the chronology of the story and guide the player to stay on path. If Link can not enter an area, he is not intended to do so yet.

4.4 Main Characters

4.4.1 Link- The Hero of Time

Link is the protagonist of the Legend of Zelda games. His name was chosen because of his ability to connect people together (Thorpe, 2013, p. 2). His appearance is recognizable across all of the games; a blonde haired boy with a green tunic, pointy elf-like ears and a green hat. In the first games, he was a pixelated character, however, these mentioned traits to his looks were

established. With technology evolving, games could give a more detailed display of Link and his appearance. The designers also used several different styles when creating new games in the Zelda-series. For instance, in the game The Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker, a different game in The Legend of Zelda-series from 2002, the drawn style is inspired by Japanese anime, and Link looks more like a cartoon- figure. In Skyward Sword, Link is portrayed with his classical features, such as the green tunic, aged somewhere between young and adult, as he is a student at the Knight`s Academy.

Even though Link is the Hero of Time, he comes off to the player as quite naive initially. Every piece of information that is revealed to him results in a strong reaction, almost like a shock, as he did not anticipate it. Link is therefore as unknowing to the plot as the player is, and relies on the player's skills to fulfill his fate. As the story progresses, Link becomes more confident and shows more bravery.

In Skyward Sword, Link is not affiliated with any family members or shows any sign of being particularly religious. He is just an ordinary boy, who follows the local traditions but has no greater knowledge or interest in the myths and other religious aspects of the world before his fate makes it relevant.

4.4.2 Zelda

Even though the game series is called The Legend of Zelda, Zelda is not usually a playable character or the main protagonist. Zelda is a princess of Hyrule, who is connected to the fate of the Hero of Time. She has blonde braided hair, pointy ears and often wears pink or blue dresses. Her appearance is beautiful and innocent. In Skyward Sword, she is the daughter of the Headmaster at the Knight Academy but otherwise an ordinary local girl.

As Zelda is connected to the fate of the Hero of Time, her part is crucial in the battle between good and evil. In the games she might disappear, being caught by the evil Ganon or to fulfill her part of the quest. Link then seeks to reunite with her before the final battle. In Skyward Sword, Zelda disappears to go on her own journey to become as powerful as she can be, in order to fulfill her destiny. She must use her powers to hold the demon king off until Link is strong enough to defeat him. Then, she will seal the demon away underground for good. Her

powers enable Link to have the time to grow stronger, but she cannot be the hero of time who wields the Triforce herself.

4.4.3 Impa

The character Impa is seen in the game as both young and old. Her young version is dressed quite androgynous, with a tall and strong appearance (Historia, 16). She is of a race called the Sheikah tribe. This tribe is very loyal to the royal family and serves as protectors. Their existence is somewhat secret to the world and they stay hidden, operating in the shadows. The Sheikah are great fighters and spies, have advanced technology and some magical abilities. Their symbol is an eye with three triangles above and can be seen in many places and on objects in Zelda-games (Encyclopedia, 44).

In Skyward Sword, the young Impa protects Zelda and guides her on her way to becoming more powerful. They are always one step ahead of Link, as he tries to find Zelda. The Old version of Impa resides in the temple outside the Sealed Grounds. She is sitting and waiting patiently, with her long braid rolled around her head and dangling down from it.This braid looks like the pendulum of a clock, waving back and forth to measure time. Every braid represents one year. Her cloak is shaped like a sundial and she is resting in a meditative position with her hands and feet (Thorpe, 2013, p. 16). At a point in the story, a passage through time is opened up in front of her. It is revealed that she has been waiting there since the passage was created, waiting for the chosen hero to arrive and to keep the passage safe in the meantime.

4.4.4. The Imprisoned and Demise

Demise is a powerful demon king who started the cycling battles between good and evil in Hyrule. He is defeated by the Great Goddess and his soul is sealed away in the Sealed Grounds. Demise has a large, muscular body that is partly covered in scales, and fiery hair. He wields a dark sword and can appear riding on a horse.

The Imprisoned is the vessel for Demise`s soul after he is defeated by the Great Goddess. It is this vessel that is sealed away in the Sealed Grounds. It has an enormous body covered with black and red scales and a large mouth with sharp teeth. Its weakness is its white toes, that pulsate with electricity. It tries to climb out of the pit to reunite with Demise.

4.4.4 Fi

The character Fi is a humanoid spirit that resides in the Goddess sword. Both the sword and Fi are created by the goddess Hylia. She is a purple fairy-like creature and with her wings spread, she does resemble the sword. Her main purpose in the game is to guide Link, both in fulfilling his destiny as the chosen hero and with other smaller tasks. When talking to her, she gives the impression of being somewhat in between a machine and a human. She has analyzing skills like a computer and she has memories stored within her. In battle, she can analyze the opponent's movements and give Link tips on how to defeat it. At certain points of progression in the main story, she will teach Link verses from old songs and remember old memories that help him reach the next challenge. Fi does not express a lot of personality traits other than being helpful (Zelda Wiki, 2023).

Fi is introduced to Link very early in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, as it is her who guides him towards the goddess sword and sets him on the path of becoming the chosen hero. Link being able to see and communicate with her is a sign in itself that Link is the chosen one.

4.5 Summary of the Main Storyline

This summary of the main storyline in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword is based my recollection of the playthrough, BearBears walkthrough on YouTube and the plot summary on Zelda Wiki (2023):

In The Legend of Zelda:Skyward Sword, the main storyline begins with the myth of how the sky islands were created and the power of the Triforce. The main motif in the story of the game is the battle between good and evil, and the rise of a chosen hero. The creation myth will be further described in the chapter "Myths". In short, three goddesses create a power, the Triforce,

and whoever holds it can be granted their wish. The evil Demise wants to use this power to rule the world, and the forces of good try to stop him. The goddess Hylia separates Skyloft from the surface to protect the Triforce and survivors. A big battle is fought but Hylia could not kill Demise, only imprison him by sealing him away. Time goes by, and the people of Skyloft forget what happened and the existence of a land beneath the sky is only a myth.

Link receives a vision and events set him on the path of becoming The Chosen Hero. After Fi reveals herself to him and guides him to the statue of Hylia, Link draws the goddess sword. This is evidence that he can fulfill the prophecy of a hero that can kill Demise.

At the same time, Zelda's becomes the reincarnation of the goddess Hylia. She disappears and falls down below the clouds, and Link sets out to find her. This search leads him through the different areas of the land on the surface. Link is continuously one step behind Zelda, but finally catches up with her. She is being guided and protected by Impa of the Sheikah-tribe. Link wants to reunite with Zelda, but is prevented from doing so. One of Demise`s evil servants, Ghirahim, tries to attack Zelda and Impa, but Link holds him off. Impa and Zelda then escape through a gate that takes them back in time.

The Imprisoned, Demise`s soul vessel, is sealed away in a pit called "sealed grounds" outside the Temple of Time. In the temple, an old lady shows Link a gate that can take them back in time. This gate is dormant but Link can activate it. Then, the Imprisoned breaks free and tries to reach the gate to go back in time. Link seals him away but this is not a permanent solution. Link then sets out on a set of trials made by the three goddesses to activate the gate. As a reward for passing a trial, Link's sword is purified in a sacred flame. Link then goes back in time and learns about Zelda being the reincarnated Hylia and how he has to use the Triforce to defeat Demise. The Triforce is an artifact that can only be used by mortals, explaining why Hylia did not use it in the battle against Demise herself. To help Link, Zelda grants her powers to the goddess sword. The sword is now the Master Sword. Zelda also contributes by strengthening the seal that holds Demise imprisoned and sealing herself away in a crystal. Demise is defeated after Link finds the Triforce in Skyloft and Zelda is freed from the crystal.

In the aftermath, Ghirahim returns and kidnaps Zelda. He wants to sacrifice her in a ritual in order to resurrect his master, Demise, in the past. Link and Ghirahim travel back in time and fight. It is revealed that just like Fi is the spirit of Link`s sword, the master sword, Ghirahim is

the spirit of Demise's sword. Ghirahim is successful in resurrecting Demise once again, and Link fights him. Link wins the battle and absorbs Demise`s essence in his sword. Before the absorption, an important event takes place. Demise puts a curse on Link and Zelda, and everyone who is reincarnated in their roles:

"...You fight like no demon I have ever known. Though this is not the end. My hate..never perishes. It is born anew in a cycle with no end! I will rise again! Those like you…Those who share the blood of the goddess and the spirit of the hero… They are eternally bound to this curse. An incarnation of my hatred shall ever follow your kind, dooming them to wander a blood-soaked sea of darkness for all time!"

This curse is important to the story, because it explains why there is an ever recurring battle where Link and Zelda fights the evil demon king in the Zelda-games. After Demise is absorbed in the Master Sword, Link drives it into a pedestal to seal him away forever. Fi then says goodbye to Link as she is destined to slumber for eternity within the sword. Impa stays behind in this time to watch over the sword and prevent the evil king from returning or stop anyone from taking the Triforce. Link and Zelda then go back to their own time through the gate of time. There, it is revealed that the old lady who resides there is actually Impa, who has protected the gate and the sword all this time. She then vanishes and dies as her task is now fulfilled.

Zelda and Link return to Skyloft and reunite with their family and friends. The world is peaceful now, and the surface is accessible to everyone. Zelda reveals that she wants to live on the surface, and asks Link what he wants to do. They are standing on the big statue of goddess Hylia, with the Triforce glowing behind them. Link answers Zelda with a positive gesture, before we see two loftwings flying away. The End.

5. Temples, Statues and Symbols

A world is filled with things, buildings, art and symbols. These are some of the elements that fit into Ninian Smart's material dimension. As claimed earlier, even an alternate world needs content to offer immersion when playing. Even though a digital game is not something you can touch the content of, the representation of the material dimension is there. In The legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, the world is filled with buildings and other material

representations. I will describe some of these representations in this chapter and analyze them as I use the phenomenological hermeneutic method described by Mikhail Fiadotau. Then, I will discuss what function it serves. If the function is not to promote an established religion, then what function does it serve in the game?

5.1 Bird Statues

Statues in the shape of birds, loftwings, are placed all over Skyloft and the rest of this world. They are shaped in massive grey stone, a bit taller than Link. In the game, they are introduced as statues that Link should remember to say a prayer to. Furthermore, Link is informed that there is a saying amongst the people in Skyloft, that "a prayer in time saves nine??".

The Loftwings are somewhat magical or at least creatures bound by fate to the people of Skyloft. There is some sort of divinity attributed to them. By having a practice of saying a prayer to the statues, it is a ritual suggesting the loftwings have some God-like powers. What the people of Skyloft pray to the statues for, is somewhat uncertain. It may be for protection, as "save nine" can be interpreted to be a play on the cat`s "nine lives". Or, it could refer to Dante`s nine circles of Hell, or the state of cloud nine as one of the stages in becoming a buddha.

It is hard to interpret the meaning of the prayer as religious practice for the people in Skyloft, as the only time the player is praying to a statue is from a first person view through Link. When Link prays to the statue, it has an in-game function. Link is given the option to save the game or quit. When Link is on the surface, he is also given the option to "take to the sky" as a way of exiting that part of the map and respawn on his loftwing above the clouds.

One may consider some of these functions to be religious, as many religions pray to a statue in need of aid or to grant wishes. Statues are often representations of saints, gods or other supernatural beings who can intervene in someone's fate. The loftwing statues in Skyward Sword do not resemble any gods or supernatural representations from any institutionalized religions as far as I know. The function in the game is not to promote or convey a religious message, it has a very practical and technical function. When the player wants to save their progress in the game or exit, it is important to have recognizable points to do so. Therefore, objects recur throughout the map. In this case it is in the shape of a loftwing statue. Furthermore, it is a solution to the problem of how Link can enter and exit the surface areas. If the game had

a seamless transition between these areas, it would be a more complicated game to create and run on the Nintendo game consoles. When Link uses these fixed portals between the surface and the clouds, it launches a short cutscene, allowing the game to load the part of the map Link is about to enter.

In my experience when playing the game, the ludo-performative outshines the narrative when one is introduced and continuously interacts with the statues of the loftwings. The narrative of the prayer is something I experienced as an excuse to why the statues were placed all over the map.

The reason why I recognized the statues as something religio-aesthetic, is because of the prayer action and the story of its life-saving function. There are no visuals of how one performs this said prayer, nor any ritual citation of a prayer. As a result, I experienced no specific association to an institutionalized religion or spiritual practice. All in all, the ludo-performative design had the most focus and the narrative functioned as an intended camouflage of the game-design.

5.2 Temples

The concept of a "temple" is well known in religious contexts as being a place of significance. It can be a place of worship, prayer, and the priesthood. It is a house of celebrations and rituals. Religious temples also have a special aesthetic, muslim temples with geometric patterns, Buddhist temples with statues and flowers. The architecture and the decorations have a clear connection to the religion. Furthermore, it has functional elements that serve a purpose in rituals and ceremonies. Such as the bed where the sikh put their book to sleep.

In the world of video games, a temple is an equally well known concept. However, the concept is different from that of a religious temple. The best way I could describe a temple in a video game is as a house of trials. When the player enters a temple, it sets off a main event in the game where the player must try its skills to overcome challenges and find the way out on the other end. In the Zelda-games, the temples are usually filled with rooms that offer a variety of tests. They often have a mind puzzle that the player needs to solve in order to reach the next room. This may be combined with combat against minions and minibosses. Solving puzzles and defeating enemies are rewarded with Rupees (Hyrulean money) and chests that can contain

gear (armor, weapons, maps etc.). The final trial in the temple is usually a bossfight, where the character must fight and win against a strong opponent. This opponent can be significant to the main story of the game and have a more developed character design and combat style. The bosses in the Zelda-games usually require a special tactic in order to win, and therefore some might say that there is an element of mind puzzles to it. When the boss is defeated, it marks a step forward in the main story and starts a new sequence in the game. This can be access to a new part of the map, being able to use a new skill or unlocking a new main quest.

There is some confusion between the two terms "dungeon" and "temples" in the Zelda fandom community. It is my interpretation and understanding of the terms that all temples are dungeons, however, not all dungeons are temples. A dungeon can be optional, smaller and not necessarily be significant to the main story. The temples mark a significant progression in the main storyline and must be completed in order to progress further. Some of the dungeons that I consider to be temples in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword have the word "temple" in its name, such as The Fire Temple, though not all of them.

5.2.1 The Fire Sanctuary

The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword has seven temples with trials that Link has to complete. They are located in different parts of the world, both above and below the clouds. They all have very different architecture and aesthetics that match the context of its location. For example, the sixth temple is located within the Eldin Volcano. The area around the temple is rock, sand and hot lava. The creatures that live here are resistant to the heat. In games that are set later in the chronology, a people called "Gerudo" have settled in this place, who can withstand heat and are great miners and blacksmiths. The temple in Eldin Volcano is called The Fire Sanctuary and is filled with the fire element. Streams of lava, creatures spitting fireballs and magma-monsters to look out for. The miniboss is called Magmanos, a giant hand of lava that is sweeping at Link and tries to kill him. In order to succeed, Link has to harden the elemental hand with large drops of water produced by a special plant, and then strike it with his sword. The Bossfight at the end of the temple, is the second fight against Ghirahim.

5.2.2   The Ancient Cistern

The fourth temple in the game is the Ancient Cistern. It is located in lake Floria, a place where water dragons live along with other sea-creatures. The temple is a structure above and under the surface of the water surrounding it. Above water, it is a round house or a tower, with a head on top. The head has a face with a smiling mouth, open eyes and a chipped off nose. Beneath the surface, there are two arms with hands, resting with an open palm. On the palms floats a treasure. On the water surface surrounding the temple, there are floating lily pads and white flowers.

This temple has resemblances with a buddhist statue and looks to be inspired by eastern religious traditions. The hand positions may be a form of mudra, buddhist hand gestures. As mentioned, the hand is offering a treasure in the form of a valuable rupee. However, when Link swims across the palm to catch the reward, the hand swiftly closes. As a result, the hand is therefore a trap. In other words, if the player pursuits the goal of obtaining wealth, the temple or statue will try to punish you. This may be inspired by the ethics of buddhism, where ridding oneself of earthly temptations and a desire for wealth is an important step on the way to reach Nirvana.

5.2.3 Why Temples?

So then, why are there temples in a video game like The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword? When one enters a temple as a religious person in the real world, it is a holy place with many connotations. It is a place somewhat separate from the rest of society, where one may seek guidance, redemption or hope. It is a place for special events, for community, for growth. It is not a place most people enter and leave spontaneously as a part of everyday life. In many cases, it can be a place of transformation through rituals such as weddings or a baptism. It is a place where one is considered to be closer to deity than any other place. It is where important relics are kept, where the walls are decorated with figurations of the myths.

In The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, a temple is as stated earlier, a place to overcome trials. Even though religious temples do not have puzzles and boss fights, they do have something in common. They are both places you enter where something extraordinary is to take place. When you leave the building, one might expect to be somewhat different, that what

happened inside the building has changed you. The expectations of this change is usually something positive, such as growth, strength or knowledge.

In addition, a temple in both a gameplay and religious context, is a place of outstanding architecture. When looking at a temple, it is often built in accordance with what it contains. If it is a buddhist temple, it will have the stupa. If it is a christian church, it will have a cross outside. In many cases, it will stand out from other buildings as something different. A temple in a video game will be recognizable as something different as well, because it is a point of interest for the player.

5.2.4   Are the temples mediating religion?

The architecture of the Ancient Cistern made me as a player immediately think of buddhism and eastern religion. The shape of the tower, the flowers, the many hands. I do believe that the game developers must have used this as an inspiration when designing the frame of the trials; what the temple should look like and what elements to include in the interior. When looking at the temples in Skyward Sword, there is also a theme of natural elements. As mentioned, fire and water are featured in The Fire Sanctuary and The Ancient Cistern. Furthermore, Link has to complete the Earth Temple and Sky Keep. In the temples, Link has to find the element's weakness and master it in order to succeed. For example, when Link is surrounded by lava, he has to use water to create new pathways. The use of these four classic elements could refer to several traditions, for example Greek philosopher Plato or the hindu veda texts.

When playing Skyward Sword, the reference to eastern religion in the Ancient Cistern was obvious to me instantly. One does have to take into account whether the player has knowledge or interest in religions, myths and similar subjects when considering whether it would be that noticeable and recognizable for anyone. However, I would claim that the representation is so clear in this instance, that most players would at least associate the aesthetics with eastern culture.

In contrast, the possible reference to religion and philosophy with the use of the four elements might go by unnoticed. In popular culture and game culture, the use of elements and understanding its strengths and weaknesses is very common. For example, the Pokèmon games

are built on mastering this tactic. That electricity is strong against water, fire against grass and water against fire, may to some generations be considered common knowledge.

I find it harder to determine whether the representation of the temple as a concept is mediating religion, or not. The word "temple" is easily associated with something mythic or religious. However, when immersed in the game where traditional religions and folklore is not present, the connection is harder to make. Where the culture of the real world is not present, it can be easily forgotten if the player is sufficiently immersed. The concept of a temple may still represent a special place for transformation, contain secrets and offer something divine. Whether it is mediating religion from the real world may depend on whether it is represented, and thus reminding the player of it, in the temple itself.

Although every temple in the Zelda-games can be analyzed separately, I will make some generalizations based on my experiences with the temples described above. It is my perception that the ludo-performative and the narrative reinforce each other during the temple sequences. The gameplay that unfolds in the temples has to offer an experience as "something other" than the main part of the gameplay. It needs to feel special, as highlights, as the core events of the game. The game-design, as described earlier with mind puzzles and bosses, gives the player a special experience. However, I would claim that this alone is not sufficient to create the highlights of the game. It is the combination with the aesthetic elements and the association with temples as a divine or magical space that creates the highlight. In these highlights, the symbols and aesthetic features of the temple are often part of the mind puzzles that the player has to solve. Therefore, the religious elements are given more attention and are reflected upon. Even so, it is not necessarily the case that one recognizes the religious elements as religious, because it is presented in a context so far from its origin. I will discuss this further, later in this thesis.

5.3 Symbols

The use of symbols can be very effectful when promoting a religion for several reasons. Religion is often composed of several abstract ideas that might not be all comprehendible for someone who is not a scholar or has an inside-perspective. A symbol can help simplify the idea

of something spiritual, supernatural, or magic. It can represent something complex with a simple visual language. Furthermore, symbols cross barriers such as language and culture. The visual representation can communicate the same meaning and feelings to people who are from different countries and create unity by shared understanding. Symbols also contribute to creating identity and recognizing other aspects that belong with that identity. For example, wearing a cross as a Christian signifies that one is a part of the Christian community. When recognizing a cross on other objects, one might be more susceptible to seeking it out, buying it or approaching it in some other way (Goldhammer, 2020).

In the The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, there is also a use of symbols. These symbols are connected to people, places, myths, traditions, and other parts of the world where the game takes place. There can be several reasons for the use of symbols in the game and they may serve different purposes. I will examine two examples of symbols that are present in the game and suggest what they may symbolize and if they might be inspired by other existing symbols related to religion or culture. Then, I will reflect upon the interplay between the ludo-performative and the narrative components. This may serve as a foundation for discussing what their function might be in the game and if it might be considered banal religion.

5.3.4 The Triforce

The symbol that is associated with the Zelda-universe around the globe is the symbol of the triforce. It consists of three triangles, one stacked upon two others, together creating a larger triangle with a triangle-shaped hole in the middle. Each one of these three triangles represent a force; wisdom, power and courage. These forces can be obtained through sacred challenges, if one is worthy. In Skyward Sword, and most of the other Zelda-games, Link has to obtain these in order to fulfill his destiny and become the Hero of Time. When all three forces are obtained and united, it becomes the triforce. The Triforce is the ultimate force in this game`s universe. The myth says that whoever holds the triforce will have their wish granted until they die (Thorpe, 2018, p. 13). This is how Link can defeat the evil forces, by wishing the demon king dead.

As mentioned, the symbol of the Tiforce is the most recognizable visual mark that communicates an association with the Zelda-games and its lore. In The Legend of Zelda:

Skyward Sword, the story of how the Triforce was created is told, and it is a big part of the main storyline that Link follows. Furthermore, it is a part of other symbols, such as the Hylian Crest (the crest of the royal family), that can be found on Link's weapons. It appears on Link's hand, as he obtains the forces. It is part of quests and tasks, and it is on the cover of the game. To summarize, the symbol is so well incorporated in the franchise that it has a natural and expected presence, both in the story and the aesthetics.

The symbol itself, three triangles forming a larger triangle, is not considered to be inspired by a religious tradition. It is said to be inspired by "The Three Dragonscales" (Truth Inquirer Wiki, 2012), which was the family emblem of an old japanese clan ("Later Hōjō clan", 2023). Today, the symbol is used by several companies as a part of their logo, such as Fischer Sports who make skiing equipment.

The name of the symbol; Triforce, and its meaning may bring up associations with religious, mystical and magical connotations. The idea of a trinity of one power is well established in the Christian belief, as the father, son and holy spirit. As described earlier, the trinity that makes the Triforce is wisdom, power and courage. These traits are commonly used in storytelling, mystical and religious myths. The idea that a deity can grant a person or character a supernatural power, or help realize this power within one, is also found in religious myths. In Greek mythology, heroes such as Achilles gain supernatural powers by the use of magic. He becomes nearly immortal as he can not be harmed in battle, due to his mother dipping him in the river Styx (Britannica, 2023). In christianity, many consider the event called Pentecost to be the start of the christian church. According to the Bible, the same day that the holy spirit was given to the disciples, they were also given the ability to speak in other languages. These are examples of humans gaining supernatural powers through magic and deities, and it may be because of these myths that religions often urge people to pray to their god for strength, guidance or help in another form.

In The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, the powers of the Triforce are only granted to Link after he has proven himself to be worthy. When playing the game, I did experience this symbol to be something religio-aesthetic, though I could not pinpoint what I thought would be the exact origin. I do find it interesting to compare the Triforce with another phenomenon in popular culture; the deathly hallows in Harry Potter. Just as how the Triforce represents three abilities

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that together grant extraordinary powers, so does the deathly hallows. In the books by JK Rowlings, the story of the three artifacts that together makes the owner the Master of Death. The artifacts are a powerful wand, a resurrection stone and a cloak that makes the wearer invisible. The symbol for the deathly hallows also has a resemblance to the Triforce (Harry Potter Wiki, 2024).

The function of the Triforce symbol in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword is to create a coherence with the franchise as a whole. As the symbol is the main visual branding of the franchise, it reaffirms that these events take place in the same universe as the other Zelda-games, and Link is still the chosen hero. It confirms that the deities and myths connected to the Triforce are present. Furthermore, it creates a goal to achieve for the player, to ensure that Link is granted all of the three powers. Without the presence of the Triforce there would also have to be a different incentive for the battle between good and evil. It is the battle between the hero and the evil force to obtain the Triforce that creates the conflict between the protagonist and the antagonist.

5.3.5 The Crest of the Sheikah

As described earlier, the Sheikah is a tribe of guardians and fighters, who serve the royal family of Hyrule. Their symbol, The Crest of the Sheikah, is a recurring symbol in the Legend of Zelda-games. The symbol has an open eye, with three triangles above it. The open eye symbolizes seeking the truth. What the three triangles symbolizes is not usually explained, it might not be of any other relevance than aesthetics. However, whenever one encounters three triangles in the Zelda-universe, it is often somehow related to the Triforce. In the Crest of the Sheikah, the eye sheds a tear. This symbolizes how the Sheikah are willing to do whatever is necessary to protect the kingdom, while they live in the shadow of the royal family(Thorpe, 2018, p. 44).

Even though Link does not meet or interact with many of the Sheikah in The Legend of Zelda:Skyward Sword, the Crest of the Sheikah is easily noticeable as one encounters Impa several times. In the original version of the game that was released on Nintendo Wii, Link would encounter locations of Sheikah Stones regularly in all areas of the map. The locations of

the Sheikah Stones were revealed as a swarm of blessed butterflies would be close to it. If Link then played the Goddess Harp, it would sprout up from the ground and give Link a reward. When spoken to, it would give Link advice about the area or the game in general. Therefore, it is also referred to as "gossip stones".

When looking at The Crest of the Sheikah, the first association I had was to the Egyptian religion. The Eye of Horus is a symbol from old Egyptian religion that has its origin in a myth where the God Horus loses his eye, but takes it back and it is then healed. The symbol is used in funeral rituals and religious texts (The Met, n.d). Another inspiration to the Sheikah-crest might be found in Buddhism. The eyes of Buddha is a common symbol in Buddhist art. On the statues of Buddha, the eyes are also one of the symbols. These eyes symbolize how Buddha has wisdom and is believed to be "all-seeing", he sees the material world outward, but also the knowledge and truth within ("Eyes of Buddha", 2023).

Another eye-symbol that might be worth considering an inspiration is the "Eye of Providence". Today, for many people this symbol may be associated with the freemasonry and conspiracy theories. It is a symbol used by popular culture when talking about secret societies, Illuminati and sometimes supernatural phenomena (Wilson, 2020). In common with The Crest of the Sheikah, this symbol also combines an eye with a triangle. It symbolizes how it is God's eye, and it being all-seeing. Another famous eye-symbol is the "evil eye". It is a symbol that occurs across the world in many traditions. It is widely associated with a belief that it can bring upon curses and that there are different ways of gaining protection against it ("Evil Eye", 2023).

As described, the use of an eye as a symbol can create several religious or mystical associations. In The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, it does serve the function of association similar with other religious eye-symbols. In real world symbolism, the eye is often a symbol of a deity being all-seeing or having wisdom. In comparison, the eye in the Sheikah-crest is seeking truth. Furthermore, it is not referring to a deity, as the Sheikah are not considered to be gods. They do however appear to have some knowledge about supernatural powers and have some magic abilities. In the world of the Zelda-games, this does not make a character a God, as magic and the supernatural is more common. The Sheikah are protectors and fighters.

The function of the symbol, The Crest of the Sheikah, in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword is mainly as a reminder and placement. When Link encounters the symbol on an object, the

player is reminded that the Sheikah has been there and is present in this universe, even though they operate in the shadows. That also places the Sheikah being present and part of the lore when important events unfolded. For instance, when a cutscene is shown as a myth is told, the symbol represents the tribe without members being visible. In addition, as this Sheikah tribe is mysterious and works in the shadows, Link would not be able to know who the members of it are. The symbol helps Link, and thus the player, identify characters as Sheikah members. It is then easier to understand who is an enemy and who is not. In Skyward Sword, Zelda is seemingly abducted by a person. When that person is recognized as a Sheikah, the player knows that this is for a reason and that Zelda is safe.

Another function in video games where symbols are effective is called "points of interest". Game developers want to guide the player towards objects, characters, and places where the player can interact and discover something new. This could for example be a reward, a new task or an event that moves the story of the game forward. If a player is put in an unknown world without any guidance, the chances of the player discovering everything that the game developers have made in the game is lower and it will require more effort from the player to do so. When the player recognizes a symbol, a sound or other markers, one may be more likely to investigate that area or object. This way, symbols can be an effective way of creating points of interest and therefore enhancing the gameplay experience for the player and somewhat controlling the narrative. The symbol of the Triforce and The crest of the Sheikah are effective markers of point of interest in Skyward Sword.

I might suggest that the use of symbols as marking points of interest, is a shared function of both religious institutions and the game The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword. They also share the function of identifying what group a person or character belongs to by using symbols. Furthermore, attributes are placed upon the person or character wearing the symbol that is associated with the symbol. This can be ethics, allegiance, and origin. In other words, using symbols as identity markers. For example, in Skyward Sword the evil characters, such as mobs or demons, will not have a Triforce symbol on their clothing or weapons. Nor will their caves and camps be decorated with it. If for example a temple where enemies reside has a Triforce symbol, it signifies that it has been overtaken by the enemy and Link has to take it back.

6. Myth

What is religion without the stories? The myths are the foundation of how belief has persisted through generations and spread across continents. Myths tell stories of who the Gods are, and how they spend their time. How deities have become powerful and what their powers are. Myths exemplify moral and ethics, they give people shared values and societies common rules. The myths challenge people, as they are often too mystical and magical to fit in, in a world of science.

In this chapter, I will describe the creation myth and how it is presented in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword. Even though the Zelda-franchise and its lore had been developed for many years and described in several media, I believe Skyward Sword is the first game to tell the story of how the evil Demise is connected to the creation of the world and how the eternal battle between good and evil begins.

After I have presented the myth of The creation of the Land and Sky, I will look for similarities and inspirations in other religious myths and mystical stories. Then, I will reflect upon the interplay between the ludo-performative and the narrative. Lastly, I will try to determine whether the religio-aesthetic elements go unnoticed by players of the game, what function it serves in the game and try to determine whether it could be an example of banal religion.

6.2 The Creation of the Land and Sky

After starting a new game in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, a cutscene is shown. It tells the story of how and why Skyloft was created, and the power of the Goddess. This is at the very start of the game.

First, it is the voice of Fi saying "This is a tale that you humans have passed down through uncounted generations…" (The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, 2021). This suggests that the humans in Hyrule have an oral tradition of passing on the myths from one generation to the next. Then, the myth appears in text on what resembles a tapestry, accompanied by dramatic orchestral music. The tapestry has moving images, depicting the main events in the myth. The myth reads:

"It tells of a war with unmatched scale and ferocity, the likes of which would never be seen again.

One dark, fateful day, the earth cracked wide and malevolent forces rushed forth from the fissure.

They mounted a brutal assault upon the surface people, driving the land into deep despair.

They burnt forests to ash, choked the land`s sweet springs, and murdered without hesitation.

They did all this in their lust to take the ultimate power protected by Her Grace, the goddess.

The power she guarded was without equal.

Handed down by gods of old, this power gave its holder the means to make any desire a reality.

Such was the might of the ultimate power that the old ones placed in the care of the goddess.

To prevent this great power from falling into the hands of the evil swarming the lands…

the goddess gathered the surviving humans on an outcropping of earth.

She sent it skyward, beyond the reach of the demonic hordes. Beyond even the clouds.

With the humans safe, the goddess joined forces with the land dwellers and fought the evil forces, sealing them away.

At last, peace was restored to the surface." (The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, 2021).

This myth establishes that there is a duality of forces in this world, the good and the evil. The evil creatures come from below the earth's surface, suggesting it is where evil originates or belongs. Religions, christianity for example, has a tendency to locate hell as an "underworld" or under ground where demons and other evil creatures live. The evil forces are ruthless, burning the trees which can be a symbol of peace and balance. When they also stop the water from flowing across the land, it can start to resemble a wasteland without life. In addition, killing ruthlessly the people of the surface, which would be in league with the good forces, would result in a fiery naked landscape where only evil would thrive. At least, this fits with common perception of evil habitat in the adventure genre. It reminds me of the second film in the Lord of the Rings, "The Two Towers". In this film, an evil sorcerer, Saruman, has an army of orcs(evil, moblin-like creatures). They are bred in a large industrial pit, partially underground. The nearby dam is sealed and they burn the forest. The big turnaround in the movie, where our heroes start to win, is when the forest fights back, and they release the water

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(Jackson, 2002). It can seem like water and trees are often seen as pure and good forces in fantasy stories.

The power that is mentioned in the myth will later be revealed to be the Triforce. In this myth, the power is not split into three, it is a unified power that can make any wish come true. The Goddess is a powerful creature, but the UltimatePower, handed down by old gods, is an artifact or something that can be passed on. In the opening cutscene, she is depicted in a dress, with a crown holding a harp in one hand and a sword in the other. A bright orb of light is shining over her head. This orb of light is the Ultimate Power. In the cutscene, there is a scene from a temple. There, the orb hoovers above a pedestal and humanlike creatures are praying to it. They are on their knees, some with their head towards the floor, others upright with their hands in a prayer-position before their head. It can resemble images of prayer traditions from monotheistic religions, such as islam or christianity.

Furthermore, the battle between these forces is a long one, dating back to a distant past. It features the ultimate evil and the ultimate good. In order to win, the goddess creates a safe haven, a utopia where the humans can live. This piece of land is sent to the sky, along with the Ultimate Power. Much like a common perception of hell being underground, heaven is often imagined as being in the sky, beyond the clouds. The surface becomes a middleground, and the battleground between the good and evil forces.

After the myth of The Creation of the Land and Sky is told, this text appears:
"This is a tale that you humans have told for many ages, generation to generation…
But there are other legends, long hidden away from memory, that are intertwined with this tale.
Now, a new legend bound to this great story stands ready to be revealed.
A legend that will be forged by your own hand. "
Immediately after, there is a cutscene showing the earth cracking open and The Imprisoned breaking through from underground. The Imprisoned is an avatar, or subform of the ultimate evil Demise. This suggests that the evil force once sealed away by the goddess has now awakened, and must be fought again. (The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, 2021).

The first time we see Link in this game, it is in an empty void, facing The Imprisoned. then Fi`s voice says:

"Rise, Link…

The time has come for you to awaken…

You are fated to have a hand in a great destiny, and it will soon find you…

The time has come for you to awaken…

Link…" (The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, 2021).

Then, Link wakes up and realizes that this was a dream. Even though Link is asleep, the verb "awaken" has another meaning to it. Not only does the human Link need to wake up from his slumber, the hero also needs to be awakened. It suggests that Link is not aware at this point of his role or destiny in this battle. Before this, he was just an ordinary boy living in Skyloft. When he wakes up from his dream, he is not immediately changed either. The message says that destiny will find him, as he faces the trials ahead of him. Then, he will become the destined hero. The dream is a foreshadowing of his destiny, and this includes therefore a battle against the ultimate evil forces. This battle is destined, however, one can wonder if the return of evil sets Link's destiny in motion, or if it is the awakening of the hero that provokes the evil forces to break loose from the seal. The chronology of how the story is told suggests that the seal that keeps The Imprisoned breaks, and that forces the destiny of the hero to be fulfilled in order for the good to win the battle again. This way, Link's innocence is also maintained. Whatever blood is spilled in this battle is not because of his desire to fulfill his destiny, it is a necessary evil.

When the myth is presented in the game as a starting sequence, the narrative is the main focus. As the player is only able to watch and read, the ludo-performative is secondary. The only action the player is able to make, is to push the story forward and signal that you have read the text on screen.

When I was presented with the myth the first time I played this game, I immediately recognized it as a creation myth. The story of an eternal battle between good and evil forces has been told many times in both religion and popular culture. God versus Satan in Abrahamic traditions, Ahura Mazda vs Angra Mainyu in Zoroastrianism or Aslan vs The White Witch in Narnia.

Even though the narrative focus allows for little action from the player during the presentation of the myth, I would still claim it has an important function in the game. By telling this story, it gives the player the important context and the reason why Link, you, must take on this exciting adventure full of dangers. It gives you knowledge that the other characters in this world do not have, and therefore makes you special. It gives your journey a meaning and an end-goal. Also, it makes you curious to find out more about this story, filling in the gaps with information along the way. In addition, this myth places this Link in the history of rebirths as The Hero of Time and explains why there is a need for his continuous reawakening.

7. Rituals

An important part of what makes a religion are rituals. In this chapter I will give a short definition of what a ritual is, why it is so important and then describe some of the rituals that are part of The Legends of Zelda: Skyward Sword. After describing a ritual, I will analyze it and try to define what the function of the ritual is, and if it serves a religious purpose. It will also be interesting to reflect upon how the ludo-performative focus is, compared to the narrative. Furthermore, I will attempt to determine if it has a connection to the established religions or traditions in the real world.

7.1 What are Rituals?

For many people, the rituals may be the most important tie to religion. Important events such as weddings, funerals, baptisms and bar mitzvahs may for some be the only time they visit the religious community or temple. These rituals are, in similarity with many other rituals, a way of reinforcing your belief and performing a religious action in accord with the established tradition. This is often performed under guidance from a priest or another form of religious guide.

In a religious context, rituals may serve several functions. For example, the sense of community can be strengthened by people performing and participating in rituals. This may again give and reinforce the feeling of belonging in a larger group, as they share values and experiences.

Furthermore, rituals are a way to experience closeness with deities. Some seek to communicate with their god(s) through prayer, asking for a blessing or aid. This is a situation where the nature of the communication is affected by the nature of the deity. Some cultures have a tradition of deities where certain gods have domains or abilities. For example, a god may be viewed as the God of War. In this case, they would seek to please this God in order to win a war. This also indicates the belief that this God can have a say in the outcome and can act either in favor or against the one who was praying for aid or luck. Such a god is therefore able to act both good and evil, depending on what the nature of the relationship between the prayer and the god is. Other religious traditions have a god that is believed to be only good and forgiving.

To summarize, rituals in the institutionalized and established religions are important events where people can experience transitioning through ceremonies, community with other believers and closeness or communication with deity. In the storylines and worlds of video games, rituals are also important, however, they may serve different purposes. I will describe some examples from The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword and analyze what they may have in common in terms of function and what may differentiate them.

7.2 The Wing Ceremony

In the very beginning of the game, you are informed that today is the day of the *Wing Ceremony*. Some of the students at the Knights Academy have been chosen to attend the Wing ceremony, and Link is one of them. Link meets up with Zelda before the Wing Ceremony starts. She explains that she is given a new outfit for this occasion, and a harp. This is because she is going to play the role of the goddess for the ceremony. Zelda refers to the legends that say that this harp is just like the one that the goddess had (The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, 2021).

The Wing Ceremony is a race between some chosen students at the Knights Academy, where they ride on their Loftwings.The race is a part of the final tests before the students become knights. It is intended to test the rider's skills, but also its bond with the bird. The winner of the race will then participate in the post race ritual with Zelda. The winner is also rewarded with a sailcloth that Zelda has made.

The goal of the race is to catch a statuette that a Loftwing carries with its claws when flying. The other students try to cheat, but eventually Link will catch the statuette and win. Link and Zelda then ascend on the Great Statue of the Goddess, and the statuette is offered to the goddess. The small statue is in the shape of a loftwing. Zelda then plays a melody on her harp, as their loftwings circle around the statue in the sky. Link kneels before Zelda and gives her his hand. Zelda says " Great goddess, guiding light and protector of our people, grant us your blessing and mercy as I act in your stead during this ceremony. Valiant youth who grasped victory at the celebration of the birdfolk… In accordance with the old ways…I now bestow the blessings of the goddess upon you. The blessings of the goddess drift down from the heavens aloft a sail, which I now pass on to you." Link then receives the sailcloth, and Zelda tells him of a rumor that the goddess also gifted her chosen hero a sailcloth (The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, 2021).

The last part of the ceremony is where the winner of the race must jump from the Great Statue of the Goddess and land safely by using the sailcloth as a parachute. It is a test of bravery, as the statue is very tall and the bravest would wait until right before they hit the ground to open the sailcloth.

The bond between a rider and its loftwing is seen as something sacred in Skyloft. They believe that there is some mental or magical connection between them, each other`s half.

"We are only made whole by our Loftwings, the guardian birds that the goddess bestows upon each of us as a symbol of her divine protection. When we are young, every one of us meets our Loftwing under the great Statue of the Goddess…"- Gaepora (The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, 2021).

Link's Loftwing is a Crimson Loftwing, which is so rare that the people of Skyloft thought that it might be extinct. Their first meeting is remembered as something extraordinary and fated, as is the bond between them.

One of the basic skills the player must learn how to master is flying the loftwing. This is the main form of travel that is faster than on foot. It is also the only way to access the different parts of the surface map, in addition to the various floating islands above the clouds. By practicing for the ceremony, the player is essentially doing a tutorial on how to maneuver the loftwing and

use different action buttons. For the player to proceed in the main story of the game, one has to win the race and catch the statuette. As this requires some skill of the player, it is a way to make the player practice flying within a closed section of the game. When the race is won, the player will have at least the basic necessary skills to use this form of transportation in the game.

The jump from the Great Statue of the Goddess is also a tutorial. The sailcloth that Link has just received is one of the items most used in the game. It serves no ritual function after the ceremony, it is only a tool for Link to use as it enables falling from great heights without taking damage upon landing. If Link fails to open the sailcloth at the end of the ceremony, he must try again. The story does not proceed until Link has successfully landed by opening the sailcloth before hitting the ground. As a result, the player has the necessary skill to land safely when playing the rest of the game.

Based upon this I would claim that the ludo-performative and the narrative reinforce each other and are balanced. As a player, I was aware that it was a ritual and that it was something special. At the same time, I was very aware of the tutorial-function. The ceremony reminded me of similar rituals found in popular culture. In the movie Avatar, the local people on the planet Pandora have a ritual where they manage to bond with a large dragon-like bird (Cameron, 2009). In the fantasy TV-series House of the Dragon, the dragons only bond with one rider at a time, making their bond somewhat special. In the TV-series, it is also said that only the Targaryen family can ride dragons, giving them special or supernatural attributes (Condal et al., 2022).

7.3 The Silent Realm

When Link has overcome the trials of the first temples, he now needs to face a new type of challenge. In order to do so, he needs to enter another dimension, called The Silent Realm. Fi guides Link to a spot where he can create a passage between the two worlds. He plays on the Goddess`s harp, in a specific pace to accompany Fi while she sings the words. It intensifies and reaches a musical climax as a gate is revealed. Fi tells Link that she cannot follow him into this realm, he must face this challenge alone. When Link thrusts his sword into the mark of the gate, he passes through. Then he hears Fi say:

…As expected, I cannot follow you into this realm, for this trial calls out to your mind alone.

This is the nature of places known as Silent Realms. they are domains of the spirit, accessible only to the goddess chosen hero."(The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, 2021).

"...Your spirit has temporarily separated from your physical body so that you may undertake this challenge.

To reach the location of the flames that will enhance your sword, it is necessary for you to overcome this trial and undergo spiritual growth."(The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, 2021).

Then, several small light orbs emerge from Link's chest, and form into a flower called a *spirit vessel*. It is a flower with many small white light knobs. The knobs are parts of Link's spirit, split into fifteen. The Silent Realm is much like the ordinary realm. The structures, landscape, trees and walls are the same. However, this realm is in darkness with no kind creatures. It has guardians with lanterns that will try to catch Link if he is discovered. If that happens, he is not able to enhance his sword and will fail his trial. Across the area, the parts of Link's spirit are scattered. To overcome the trial, he must collect all of these parts and complete the Spirit Vessel and return to the ordinary realm without being caught.(The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, 2021).

When Link is successful in finishing all of the trials in the spirit realm, he is rewarded with the "Stone of Trials". This is an orange gem-like object that is "created to lead the chosen hero to the hidden location of the Triforce". After leaving the spirit realm, he then starts to pursue the location of a stone similar to the Stone of Trials, and the pair will open a way to the Triforce. (The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, 2021).

There are four spirit realm trials in Skyward Sword. All of them offer a reward to Link when they are completed, which will grant Link access to new areas that could not previously be explored. The rewards are gear that enhance Link's abilities. For example, after completing the first trial of the spirit realm, Link is given a relic called "Water Dragon`s Scale". This allows Link to swim and breathe under water, and perform a spinning maneuver. The spinning maneuver allows Link to attack underwater and shoot himself through the water's surface. (The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, 2021).

The trials in the spirit realm are in many ways a rite of passage. When Link enters the realm, he is being tested to see if he is ready to change, to start a new part of his life with new challenges. It is a challenge of skills, mind and bravery. When he enters the realm, he must do so alone and it is performed in accordance with a set of traditional rules. If he succeeds, he is expected to be somewhat different than when he entered, and is trusted with precious relics. The Link who exits the trials is not the same who entered them, his spirit has undergone some transformation.

The concept of "spirit" is being heavily used in this part of the game. It is visualized as a flower that can be split into parts and then reassembled. The spirit of a person in the real world is a somewhat abstract concept, it is not something one can touch or draw. Yet, it is often described in many ways, as "strong", "good" or maybe "evil". It can be hard to distinguish between what is a spirit and what is a soul. To many people, this may be the same. The Holy Spirit is a central part of christianity and religions such as Wicca believe in spirits visiting them on Samhain. I claim that the word "spirit" and the concept of it being tested and strengthened can evoke religious perceptions. Therefore, it is interesting to analyze what the function of Link's spirit in The Legend of Zelda:Skyward Sword is, and what function the trials of the spirit realm have.

From a gameplay point of view, the Trials of the Spirit Realm in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword can be viewed as gatekeepers. By that, I mean that Link is not able to access new areas until they are finished. The areas that he is able to reach after the spirit trials are essential to completing the main quest in the game. What differentiates these trials to the trials of the temples and dungeons, are how they are overcome. In the spirit realm, Link is stripped of any enhancing relics and gear in addition to being alone without guidance or help. It takes the player back to the starting point of maneuvering Link, reminding the player of how far he and the player have come. In these trials, the skills required of the player are strategy, memory and movement. In other trials, the player can leave and enter with more aids if the trial is too difficult. For example, bottles with potions can make a bossfight a lot easier. In the spirit realm that is not possible and if the player leaves the trial or fails, the player must start from the beginning next time. This way, the player is also challenged.

The spirit vessels and its parts being scattered around the map to be collected, is simply a way of creating gameplay. It gives the player an incentive to move around in the area, and makes

sure that Link has to visit each part of it. Then, the creators of the game can adjust the level of difficulty by posting enemies around the parts of the spirit vessel.

All in all, from a ludo-performative point of view, the function of the Spirit Realm Trials is to create gameplay that fits in with the storyline, and helps keep it linear. It also gives the player a sense of accomplishment as the trials can be somewhat hard to overcome.

7.4 Ghirahim`s Resurrection Ritual

After Link defeats Demise as described in the summary of the main storyline, Ghirahim resurrects Demise in the past. First, Ghirahim is seen standing over Zelda's body on the bottom of the pit in the Sealed Grounds. He snaps his fingers, and objects come shooting down from the sky. They create fences that act like barriers to keep Link from reaching them. Then, Ghirahim does a dance around Zelda's body. The dance consists of different moves and Ghirahim disappears between different sections of it. He then speaks some unidentifiable words and makes hand gestures over Zelda's body. Particles of light shoot out from her body, and then back to an area concentrated in Ghirahim's hands and Zelda's body. She seems almost unconscious as she starts to lift from the ground. Ghirahim realizes that Link is threatening his ritual and summons evil mobs to protect him(The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, 2021).:

"Hear me, my hordes! The spell is nearly complete! The demon king returns! Until then, you WILL keep that whelp from interfering with my ritual. I don`t care if the whole lot of you get lodged, on the end of his blade. you will buy me the time that I need! Do not fear him…Fear my wrath if you fail me!"(The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, 2021).

Link fights his way towards the ritual in the bottom of the Sealed Grounds and faces Ghirahim. Zelda is still floating in the air in front of him, as the ritual is not completed yet. Ghirahim is frustrated and angry as he says:

"I realize a simple child like you knows nothing of magic, but spells like this takes time and a steady hand! Can`t you wait quietly like a good boy? HMM? You petulant brat…You've pushed me too far. I've waited my whole existence for this! This is my moment! you know what? Fine!

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If you`re so intent on hurrying to your grave, I`ll be happy to show you the way!" (The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, 2021).

Ghirahim sends Zelda`s floating body upwards in the air, interrupting the ritual to fight Link himself.

"This time there will be no heroic escape. I was a fool to toy with you and let you walk away with your life before, but I won't make that mistake again." (The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, 2021).

Ghirahim screams with his face buried in his hands, and black fragments emerge from his body. A platform arises for the battle between him and Link to take place. It is revealed that Ghirahim is the spirit of Demise's sword, and the battle begins. After Link defeats Ghirahim, it is revealed that Link was not able to stop the ritual. Ghirahim says:

"Ah…But never mind that. Victory is still mine to savor. While we fought, the ritual I started continued…At last, It's complete! The demon king shall devour the soul of the goddess and resurrect in his full glory!"(The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, 2021).

Zelda is in pain as she floats in the air, surrounded by particles of light. A black hole in the ground opens up and releases black particles. A big black mist covers the ground and the Imprisoned emerges from it. As Zelda screams, the particles of light travel from her body and are devoured by the Imprisoned. A storm of light and wind surrounds the Imprisoned. As the storm calms, the Imprisoned is gone and Demise is reborn (The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, 2021). This story of resurrection reminds me of how the evil wizard Voldemort plots to be resurrected in the Harry Potter series. His soul was never defeated, only his physical body. Through magical rituals, the making of "horcruxes", his soul is attached to artifacts, and can therefore survive without his body. By making a regeneration potion, his body is restored (Harry Potter Wiki, 2023).

The game does not say anything more about the ritual, other than what we can see as Ghirahim performs it. The sounds he is making are not subtitled or dubbed, therefore I do not know if they are actual words or just sounds. This reminds me of the voces magicae, the use of vocal sounds to invoke spirits or enchant rooted in old traditions such as the Greek and Roman (Addey, 2012, p.133). Ghirahim appears to have some magical supernatural powers and uses

them to promote evil forces. He can perform the ritual without aid from anyone else, and apparently it consists of several stages. First, a dance performance around the body. This part may or may not require the recital of magical words. Secondly, separation of light-particles from the sacrificed body. These light-particles may symbolize the soul or maybe magical powers. Thirdly, the body is elevated in the air and the process that is started must work for a while before the result is revealed. It seems that this stage does not require actions of the ritual performer anymore, as long as the sacrificed body is not interfered with. Lastly, the particles of light separated from the sacrificed body can be consumed by the soul of the being one wants to resurrect.

There is nothing natural about beings who die and come alive again. Therefore, the event of a resurrection requires the presence of something supernatural. To have power over life and death is usually ascribed to deities or magical characters. In fiction literature, some stories tell of human madmen who try to defy the laws of life and death, such as Dr. Frankenstein. In the TV-series Game of Thrones, the queen Daenerys tries to resurrect her late husband by sacrificing her child. Furthermore, in the same series, the Red Woman resurrects John Snow after he is killed. The Red Woman used fire magic, similar to Daenerys but practiced differently (Benioff et al., 2011). As mentioned earlier, resurrection is also a part of the fantasy story of Harry Potter. One of the deathly hallows is the resurrection stone. It is fabled to have the power to resurrect loved ones as well as being a key ingredient to making a potion that will stop you from dying of old age (Yates, 2011).

There are examples of resurrection in religious myths. The christian faith is built upon the belief that Jesus was resurrected and came back to guide his disciples before returning to God. In the gospel of John chapter 11, the Bible tells of Jesus resurrecting Lazarus from the dead and rejoining his family. Muslims, christians and jews believe that there will be a judgment day when everyone is resurrected, and will face a judgment from God. Therefore, one can claim that the concept of resurrection is present in religious myths. Furthermore, it is an existing idea present in myths in fiction literature and stories of the supernatural.

8. Summary, Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter, I will summarize the results of my analysis and try to create a general foundation to discuss religion in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword. More specifically, I will discuss the religio-aesthetic pieces of content that I have described and what traditions, culture or religions they may be inspired by. Then, I will reflect upon the balance between the ludo-performative and the narrative. Following this, I will ask whether these religio-aesthetic pieces of content would be experienced and recognized as something religious or spiritual, or if it goes by unnoticed. Based upon my analysis, I will also try to determine what function the pieces of religio-aesthetic content serves in the game. Lastly, I will reflect upon the analysis as a whole and whether the game serves as a mediator of religion and if the religion in this game is banal.

8.1 The Inspirations for the Religio-Aesthetic content in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword

When I played through this game, I was looking for what may be experienced as something religio-aesthetic. I wanted to make sure that I included examples from several of Smart`s dimensions, to secure some width in representation. The examples I have described and analyzed show that the creators of The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword may have been influenced or inspired by several cultures, traditions and religions. I have recognized abrahamic religions, in the creation myth and the resurrection of Zelda. One could also claim that Link can be perceived as a "messiah-figure", though I have chosen not to reflect too much about it. I have recognized eastern religion, such as buddhism in the Ancient Cistern and the eye symbol that the Sheikah uses. I have recognized old religious traditions, such as Greek mythology and Egyptian religion. I have also been reminded of Greek philosopher Plato and the natural elements. I found that the concept of the Triforce could be inspired by Christian belief in the Holy Trinity.

The Triforce was also one of the religio-aesthetic pieces that gave me associations to popular culture and fantasy. It reminded me of the Deathly Hallows in Harry Potter. Furthermore, I was reminded of The Eye of Providence, a symbol often used in popular culture in connection to conspiracy theories and secret societies. There have been several occasions where I have been reminded of some of the most successful narratives in popular culture. This includes the Lord

of The Rings, The Game of Thrones, Avatar and several entries in the Harry Potter franchise. When looking at the analysis of the religio-aesthetics of the game, I realize that I have not recognized other video games and their narratives, as I have recognized books, TV-series and film. This has not been on purpose. I do refer to the Pokèmon franchise once, however only to its game- mechanics.

In the world where The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword unfolds, there is also a presence of the supernatural. Good and evil spirits who turn out to be swords, such as Fi and Ghirahim. The Silent Realm is supernatural in itself, as it depicts a different dimension. The ritual of resurrection both reminded me of Christianity, as well as folklore with the vocae magica.

In summary, by describing and analyzing symbols, statues, temples, rituals and myths, along with a description of the main characters in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, I have recognized a variety of religious tradition, folklore, popular culture and the supernatural.

8.2 The Ludo-performative versus the Narrative

While analyzing the examples from The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, there is a large variety of how the ludo-performative and the narrative is balanced. In other words, how the gameplay and the story is balanced. There are examples of experiences being very focused on the gameplay action, such as the bird statues. As mentioned, my experience was that the narrative attached to these statues is an excuse to make these points of interest, portals, and saving points a part of the environment. In contrast, the opening of the game with the presentation of the creation myth is heavily focused on the narrative. Other examples have shown that the ludo-performative and the narrative reinforce each other, that there is a natural flow of how action-based the gameplay is, and how the story is progressing. I would describe the experience of the temples as quite evenly balanced.

8.3 Function

After describing the different religio-aesthetic content and what it reminded me of, I have attempted to determine what might be its function in the game. I have found this quite

interesting, as the functions seem to vary broadly. Several concepts, such as symbols and the bird statues, function as points of interest. The bird statues and the temples also function as gatekeepers, hindering the player from breaking the chronological linear order the narrative is designed to play out. In my experience, the temples also functioned as a place for transformation and a highlight in the gameplay.

The myths in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, I find to be of an important function. They are what puts this Zelda-game in the history of reborn heroes of Time, what gives the player the reasons to not give up and makes this alternate world mysterious and immersible.

8.4 Active Perception or Under the Radar?

The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword is acclaimed as a very good game, both in quality of the gameplay and the story. The first time I played the game, I was not looking for any religio-aesthetic experiences, I was merely enjoying myself. I was probably experiencing immersion in some form from time to time, as I can remember being very excited about carving out long sessions to play. When I started the process of researching for this thesis, I started to play it again. This time, as mentioned before, I was both enjoying it as a player and as a researcher in the field of religion. This has been my analytical strategy and should be considered as I am trying to determine whether the religio-aesthetic content in The legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword is banal.

Even though I have managed to display a variety of examples of experiences that reminded me of something religious, folklore, supernatural or popular culture after playing this game, it does not equal that it would be the case for any player. If I were to ask a random person who had played Skyward Sword "did you notice any references of religion or were you reminded of any religious traditions when you played the game? ", they may instinctively reply "no". In contrast to games such as God of War: Ragnarök, where the storyline and the world is obviously based on an established religious tradition, Skyward Sword has created its own alternate world.

When Leibovitz did his experiment on immersion while playing The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess, he discovered that over time, his experience of immersion increased. As he had to spend less time on learning the mechanics, because his muscle memory improved, and he

became the agent of change. In other words, he "became" Link. With this in mind, I revisit the theory of games as a religious interface, by Jane Skjoldli. How I interpret and understand her claim, it is a contrast to Hjarvard`s "banal religion". Skjoldli claims that because of how video games work, the combination of audio, visuals and interactive gameplay, they can provide a real religious experience. This is provided that the player is able to imagine that one is present in the alternate world of the game. Leibovitz has shown in his observational experiment that one can have these immersive experiences after several hours of playing. Therefore, one might not have to rely on imagination alone, depending on the immersive qualities of the game.

If the game works as a religious interface and the player has the feeling of a religious experience, I do not think that would classify as going "under the radar". Hence, the religion in the game can not be labeled as "banal". It can seem as if the two theories can not coexist and be valid in the same game. Or can they?

In order to recognize something, one must have knowledge or experience with it. People have different opinions of what they claim to have experienced and some religious people may claim to have had supernatural experiences. However, I would claim that people in general have never experienced being in the same room as a deity. Therefore, one does not know what that feeling would be like and would not be able to recognize or label it. So when Skjoldli claims that games can give the player the feeling of authentically being present in the same room as a deity, could one also claim that it goes under the radar? The player would know that it is experiencing something, as one does all the time when playing video games, but because it can not be recognized, it can not be labeled as religious or folklore. With this approach, something religio-aesthetic in a video game can be felt as an experience, but the religious connection would go unnoticed.

8.5 Is the Religio-aesthetic content in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword Banal Religion?

I have established through previous chapters that there is religio-aesthetic content in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword and that it can be considered to be inspired by a broad

selection of religious traditions, folklore and popular culture. The main question I want to try to answer in this thesis, is whether the religio-aesthetic content is "banal religion".

The fact that I was able to easily find examples to describe and analyze for this thesis may in itself be evidence that it is not banal. I took on the double role as both researcher and player when gathering material. I was actively looking for something that I could recognize as religious. Therefore, based on my experience in this double-role, I find it hard to call it "banal religion".

However, I will try to make a more objective conclusion, based on my findings in the analysis. In all of the examples I have described, the religio-aesthetic content was taken very far from its original context. Several of the examples also reminded me of other religious traditions only in concept. For example, look at the resurrection ritual that Ghirahim performed on Zelda to resurrect his master. The concept of a resurrection is something I can easily connect with the resurrection of Jesus, but I find it hard to make more connections to what is unfolding in this scene in the game. Furthermore, the game is not potentially inspired by one religion or a few similar religious traditions. It is a melting pot of possible connections, both geographically, historically and in form. This makes The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword an interesting contrast to analyze compared to games that have a clear connection to a specific tradition. This reflects who the target audience for this game is, a world-wide audience and suited for almost all ages. A game with scenery and buildings inspired by fantasy, asian- and european culture, where the characters may look more elvish than any specific human ethnicity.

With this in mind, as well as how the function of the religio-aesthetic content is generally moving it further away from its origin, I am leaning towards calling the religio-aesthetic content in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword "Banal religion". When I look back at the first time I played through this game and consider what I might have answered if someone had asked me if there was religion in the game, I would probably have answered "yes". However, I do not think that I would have referred instinctively to established religious traditions, folklore and popular culture of this world. In my experience, it is much easier to recognize the construction of a supernatural system of belief, myths, gods and powers that belongs in this alternate world.

8.6 Conclusion and Further Research

What kind of religious traditions can be experienced in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword? Furthermore, what function does it serve, and is it mediating religion? Would I consider it to be banal religion, in the view of Hjarvard`s theory? These are the main questions I have reflected upon in this master`s thesis.

I have presented some of the research that has been done on video-games. As this field is somewhat new, I did not find any prior research or master`s thesis that takes on the same research questions in a similar video-game. Therefore, I chose some of the research that I found interesting and relevant to constitute the theoretical toolbox I needed in order to make some relevant reflections on my own.

My main theory was Stig Hjarvard`s "banal religion", where he claims that religion can be mediated through different media without the receiver noticing. I wanted to examine if this might be the case in The legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword. I used Tanya Krzywińska`s research to explain why the presence of religion, folklore or other supernatural belief systems is important in alternate worlds. Then, I looked at how games can mediate religion to the player and Jane Skjoldli`s term "religious interface". This claim was reinforced by adding Liel Leibovitz` observation results when he played the Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess and registered an experience of being immersed in the game.

The method I chose for my analysis was a phenomenological hermeneutic method presented by Mikhail Fiadotau. I therefore tried to find the inspirations of the religio-aesthetic content I recognized in the game. Then, I reflected upon what its functions were and how the narrative and ludo-performative is balanced.

I found that The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword had religio-aesthetic content inspired by a broad variety of religious tradition, folklore and popular culture. It is a mix, and I found it hard to claim that one tradition has generally more influence than others. Next, I reflected upon the balance between the narrative and the ludo-performative where I recognized the religio-aesthetic content. I found that it ranged from being almost all driven by narrative on the one side, and almost all ludo performative on the other side. I also experienced that the two aspects reinforced each other, for example in the temples. When reflecting upon what functions these religio-aesthetic contents had, I found that it was mostly to contribute to the lore in this franchise

and content in this alternate world, points of interests, gatekeeping and mechanical functions such as savepoints.

This gave me some basis for discussing whether the Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword was mediating religion and whether it is "banal religion". I found it interesting to discuss if Skjoldli and Hjarvard`s theories implicated that one excluded the other, or if a game can both offer an experience of religious feelings and be unrecognizable because one has not experienced it before, and it is impossible to know what it would be like. I have not come to a conclusion on this matter, however, it might be an interesting basis for further research.

I have reflected upon my role in the methodological strategy, as both player and researcher. This allowed me to more easily gather examples of religio-aesthetic content in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, as I have interest and competence in the field of religious studies. I have made a selection of examples from the game, based upon what I determined would create a broad basis for analysis. The extent of this research would not allow a thorough analysis of the whole game and a complete representation of religio-aesthetic content. My findings are based on my experience and reflections during the play-through. Based on this, I have tried to determine whether I would label the religio-aesthetics in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword as "banal religion". I was inconclusive, but lean towards it not being "banal". I have also tried to determine whether other players, who do not enter the gameplay as a researcher looking for specific content, would notice the religio-aesthetic content. Based on my findings by using Fiadotau`s phenomenological hermeneutic method, I lean towards labeling the religio-aesthetic content in The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword as "banal religion". In order to present a well-substantiated conclusion to this question, further research is necessary. I suggest a study where a variety of players describe their experiences during and after a play-through, without being asked questions that can make them more aware of religio-aesthetic content that can remind them of established religious traditions, folklore or popular culture. If this is not mentioned, then it would be a strong indicator that the religio-aesthetic content in the Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword is "banal religion".

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