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A Lacanian-Zizekian Psychoanalytic Application on the Problem of Godhood in Elden Ring: Miquella's Attempted Ascension to Godhood

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Abstract

This research paper seeks to apply Lacanian-Zizekian psychoanalytic theory to the popular video game Elden Ring, a game set in a mythological world fragmented by divine conflict and incompatible ideologies. In particular, this research paper focuses on the question of divinity and godhood posed by the game's lore, characters, and thematic depth. Miquella's storyline in Elden Ring will serve as the primary case study for the paper's research and analysis, which involves applying Lacanian-Zizekian psychoanalytic concepts to Miquella's attempted ascension to godhood. Since the lore of Elden Ring is built on fragmented clues and speculation, the in-game research will involve piecing together coherent narratives from item descriptions, hidden clues in character dialogue, community speculation, and in-game architecture. This paper reframes the speculative challenge in a process akin to literary analysis, which also relies on subjective interpretation and subtle cues. An application of Lacanian-Zizekian principles to Elden Ring contributes to ongoing research that merges traditional psychoanalytic thought with popular culture, while also deepening theoretical understandings of Elden Ring's philosophical and intellectual weight. Ultimately, the paper concludes that elements of Miquella's ideology and his storyline resemble Lacanian-Zizekian concepts of symbolic registers, ideology fueled by fantasy, and desire of the unattainable Objet petit a. In this framework, Elden Ring has insightful implications on the nature of godhood and the paradoxical consequences of divine glory.

Keywords: Desire; Fantasy; Ideology; Objet petit a; Political theology

> *"Miquella the Kind…is a monster. Pure and Radiant. He wields love to shrive clean the hearts of men. There is nothing more terrifying."*
>
> – Sir Ansbach, *Elden Ring.*

1. Introduction

The ascension to divinity has long been a topic of intense speculation, from the beginnings of human culture to Greek apotheosis and the Buddhist *arhat*. Mythological and religious systems not only designed pantheons of deities but also imagined how a mortal might surpass the limits

of human mortality to achieve divinity or to challenge the gods themselves. Godhood is typically associated with universal, transcendent justice and freedom, and attaining unity with godhood is deemed the pinnacle of human achievement. Subverting such trends, FromSoftware's popular video game *Elden Ring* offers a unique perspective on the question of godhood and divinity, as it presents divine beings who are powerful yet deeply flawed and human. In particular, Miquella the Kind's storyline, as established by *Elden Ring* and *Elden Ring: Shadow of the Erdtree*, embodies the entrapping, paradoxical nature of divinity. Miquella the Kind, an Empyrean demigod cursed with nascency, attempts to establish an Age of Compassion after realising the failures of the current Golden Order. He divests himself of all humanity, charming the hearts of both friend and foe, and positioning himself as a radical martyr. His ascension is characterised by the psychological depth and moral ambiguity that psychoanalytic theory thrives in, as well as the political intrigue that can be enriched by the field of political theology. While the Lacanian-Zizekian framework has been productively applied to literature and popular digital media, there is limited literature that applies these concepts to video games in a narratological sense.

Miquella's attempted ascension to godhood is a Lacanian-Zizekian attempt at filling a fundamentally lacking ontological gap, which fails not just because of the general lack that defines subjectivity, but also because of the philosophical aporias he attempts to resolve and the exposed structural conditions that make divinity irreconcilable. Through an analysis of Miquella through a Lacanian-Zizekian frame, this paper ultimately highlights how *Elden Ring* deconstructs the notion of godhood in its narratological presentation of Miquella.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 outlines the foundational Lacanian-Zizekian theoretical concepts used throughout the study; Section 3 situates the paper within existing literature across fantasy studies, psychoanalysis, and game studies; Section 4 details the canonical-hermeneutic methodology employed to analyze in-game evidence; Section 5 establishes a Lacanian model of political-religious authority in Elden Ring; Section 6 executes an in-depth case study of Miquella's ascension; and Section 7 synthesizes the broader conclusions and theoretical implications.

2. Theoretical Foundations

Lacan's philosophy illuminates the many constructs that govern the human psyche and perception. Fink (1995) provides a comprehensive overview of the Lacanian tripartite structure central to Lacanian philosophy – the Symbolic at the forefront of experience, the Real which resists Symbolization, and the Imaginary determination of the self (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Lacan, 2006b). For Lacan (2006a), the three registers are in a state of perpetual tension, and lack is constitutive in subjectivity. As such, the subject always has a desire for a certain unattainable Thing (Lacan, 1962). On the topic of desire, the Objet petit a is marked by "subjective opacity" and is therefore not a particular object but a void around which desire organises itself; thus, obtaining any object reveals that it was never the proper object of desire (Lacan, 2006d). This deferral of desire constitutes the Objet petit a that exists "insofar as it is lost" (McGowan, 2013). Desire is merely a reproduction of more desire (Evans, 1996).

Zizek extends the Lacanian insights on lack and fantasy to show how ideology is the political manifestation of these psychological symptoms. While Marx and Engels' historical materialism (1845) viewed ideology as a deceptive tactic devised by the bourgeoisie to control the proletariat, Zizek (1989) suggests that the working class is not ignorant of social injustices. They are instead fully aware of the "interest hidden behind…ideological universality," yet they wilfully choose to operate in that ideology, because ideology structures their experience of reality (Zizek, 1989). The ideological fantasy is the "discordance" between people's actions

and their beliefs (Zizek, 1989). Ideological fantasies cover up the gaps within reality structured by ideology, displacing objective knowledge of flaws in the Symbolic. The fantasy fortifies ideology's promises to overcome antagonism and achieve social harmony (Zizek, 2009). However, antagonism originates not from the outside but from inside the ideology itself. The Symbolic order redirects individual attention away from its flaws and towards an unattainable object that endlessly defers desire. This then generates a state of longing tension that renders knowledge of social antagonism obsolete. As such, every attempt to eliminate antagonism in ideology merely displaces it.

This paper will frame the narrative of Miquella in *Elden Ring* with these Lacanian-Zizekian concepts, demonstrating the extent to which his ascension to godhood aligns with Lacanian-Zizekian ideas, and how these theoretical foundations may be expanded in critical game studies.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Psychoanalysis in Traditional Fantasy Literature

Psychoanalytic literary criticism views texts as ways of complicating literary and philosophical understandings of how the human mind interprets the world and derives a sense of self from that interpretation (Brooks, 1987). Not only do characters become subjects of psychoanalytic case studies, but some scholars also argue that the readers are themselves participants in the psychoanalytic process. For instance, Qazi (2011) posits that metonymies are lingual parallels to the "metaphorical structure" of the reader's unconscious as signifiers slide in meaning. Such insights become more conspicuous in fantasy literature, where "the language of the unconscious" is explicit rather than implicit (Nayar, 2009). Scholars have established that psychoanalytic theory and the literary fantastic are deeply connected areas of inquiry, hesitating between narrative modes, blurring the animate and the inanimate, pointing to absences in the "dominant value systems", and staging the intrusion of the Real into Symbolic spaces (Caillois, 2003; Jackson, 1998; Sharoni, 2017; Todorov, 2007).

3.2. Contemporary Fantasy and Psychoanalysis: Tolkien and George R.R. Martin

However, there is a crucial distinction between different periods of the literary fantastic, one that defines the placement of *Elden Ring* in psychoanalytic application. The fantastic in classical psychoanalytic theory consists of literary classics written centuries ago, with Freud (1919) examining *The Sandman* when defining the uncanny and Lacan (1958) reimagining King Hamlet's ghost in *Hamlet* as the materialisation of the superego. However, they are still distinct from the fantasy fiction that modern readers are familiar with. A discussion of modern fantasy warrants an overview of psychoanalytic scholarship on J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (*LOTR*), which established the modern fantasy fiction tradition and is (as stated in an interview with *Elden Ring*'s director Hidetaka Miyazaki) *Elden Ring*'s major literary influence (Makuch, 2022). The worldbuilding of Middle Earth combines political power with religions "abstracted" from the real world (Higham, 2012). Tolkien himself (1981) suggested that he deliberately used theological concepts when crafting Middle Earth's political systems and ideologies, a convergence of political ideologies and religion that is prominent in *Elden Ring*.

Psychoanalytic scholarship on *LOTR* dissects not only the psychological details of the characters in Middle Earth but also the broad structures of desire and authority. Hinting at psychoanalytic concepts, Smyth (2015) reads Frodo's relationships with other characters through Markus and Nurius' theory of possible selves (1986), arguing that Gollum is the part of Frodo's "split persona" that Frodo fears, ideas reminiscent of Lacan's split subject. Frodo's

psyche is split between his ideal self (Bilbo) and this feared self towards which he is slipping slowly under the One Ring. For Smyth (2015), there is a constitutive imperfection (a Lacanian lack) in Frodo's Imagined self. Andersen (2023) engages in a similar analytic framework that divides characters into fragmented aspects of a Jungian collective unconscious, conceptualising Frodo's quest as one of "individuation" in the realm of the unconscious. While Carl Jung (1959) focused more on "polaristic" formations of individual psychology, scholars such as Stevens (2002) provide a bridge, stating that Jung recognised the necessity of mythology and theology in configuring archetypal systems. Lacanian-Zizekian analysis of *LOTR* exemplifies how the framework operates in fantasy contexts. According to Skogemann (2009), the Ring induces a "madness of grandiosity and paranoia" despite its appearance of granting unity, similar to how ideology prolongs antagonism under the guise of harmony. Employing Kristeva's theory (1982) of the self as a product of exclusion, Brown (2025) further indicates that the Ring demands nurturing from the bearer, thus defining the bearer based on its interiority while excluding the self from one's own desires. Since the bearer is in a constant state of anticipation of the fulfilment of the Ring's wishes, the Ring becomes the manifestation of the Objet petit a, revealing the impossibility of structural fulfilment, and generates a fantasy of power. The perpetuation of this fantasy henceforth creates an unending cycle of punishment and suffering (Tabrha, 2020).

Contemporary fantasy, particularly George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, builds on Tolkien's political theology while foregrounding the violence Tolkien partially conceals and romanticises. Martin's world presents a grittier competition between symbolic powers, where social antagonism and conflict are inseparable from the legitimization of political authority. Emig (2014) notes that the fantastical elements of *A Song of Ice and Fire* are oriented for "political effects," most notably in how House Targaryen invokes dragons. Nevertheless, scholars disagree on the purpose of Westeros' religion: Attali (2023) argues that religion places characters in a state of fundamental Otherness, yet Hunter (2020) proposes that theology grants women power and agency beyond what "high romantic love [stories]" typically offer. Engaging with more secular versions of political theology, Jordan (2017) suggests that interactions between Tyrion Lannister and Lord Varys represent a pluralistic, fragmented society in tension with the unified narratives of mythology designed by the Iron Throne, a state reminiscent of the many factions in *Elden Ring* that defy the Golden Order. As power vacuums exist in both Middle Earth and Westeros, Soler (2021) sees parallel reinterpretations of the Christian Messianic narrative that promise universal salvation. Martin's direct collaboration with FromSoftware on *Elden Ring*'s worldbuilding, as well as his stated admiration of Tolkien, hints that these influences carry over in video game format.

3.3. Psychoanalysis, Ideology, and Game Studies

Video game studies is an emerging academic field, with academic literature oftentimes explicating the duality between ludology (the analysis of gameplay and human-computer interactions) and narratology (the analysis of games as a medium of storytelling). On the narratological side, Jenkins (2001) emphasizes how video games foreground capacities for interactive, environmental, and emergent storytelling that are enhanced by human-computer interactions. However, Aarseth (2012) cautions against conflating diegetic experiences with pure storytelling, as video games are a growing medium that necessitate unique game studies perspectives that cannot be reduced to traditional literary analysis or film studies. Aligning with Aarseth, Lockwood and Richards (2008) further suggest that video games facilitate unique in-game ontologies that exist parallel to the players, which creates the question of perspectivism: how much of reality should game analysts bring into game studies.

This tension between the real and the virtual has encouraged scholars to apply psychoanalytic frameworks to understand the formation of player subjectivity within game environments. Drawing upon Lacanian psychoanalysis, Voorhees (2024) integrates the concept of the split subject ($) with "the phenomenological experience of gameplay" to demonstrate how *No Man's Sky*'s procedural generation simultaneously expands and regulates player agency. Similarly, Xiao and Choi (2024), building upon phenomenological approaches, argue that avatars represent a dialectical fusion between real and unreal selves, a process that Rehak (2003) conceptualizes through the competing dynamics of "avatarial rupture" and "avatarial identification." Moving toward explicitly psychoanalytic interpretations of narrative and affect, Kirkland (2015) examines *Silent Hill* through Oedipal and uncanny frameworks, arguing that the game's imagery revolves around confrontations with abject parental origins reminiscent of the Oedipal myth. While horror games often employ psychoanalytic mechanisms to generate anxiety and estrangement, other scholars highlight a potentially therapeutic dimension of gameplay. Kriss (2014), for instance, compares the player's vulnerability to transformation through games with psychoanalytic transference, suggesting that repetitive gameplay structures may parallel the repetition necessary for confronting trauma. Together, these studies demonstrate that video games are not merely representational systems but environments in which subjectivity itself is negotiated.

Beyond individual subject formation, video games also function as cultural artifacts embedded within broader ideological structures. Ideological analysis in game studies frequently examines how political assumptions become naturalized through seemingly neutral systems of gameplay and interface design. Drawing upon Althusser's concept of interpellation (1970), Romero-Medina (2026) argues that ideology operates through game mechanics and player cognition at an unconscious level, often independent of developers' explicit intentions. Similarly, Rehak (2003) observes that user interfaces, much like ideology itself, conceal their own operations while fundamentally shaping the conditions of player agency. Nevertheless, games may also expose and critique ideological formations. Galloway (2006), for example, interprets *Civilization III* as reproducing the expansionist logic associated with nineteenth-century colonialism, particularly through its representation of imperial development and historical conflict. Likewise, Aguilera (2022) demonstrates how *World of Warcraft* incorporates implicit Eurocentric assumptions by structuring even non-human races around characteristics historically associated with white masculinity. These analyses indicate that ideology in games exists not only in explicit narratives but also in systems, aesthetics, and representational structures.

Recent public controversies surrounding "woke" video games further reveal the contested relationship between games, politics, and ideology beyond academic discourse. Debates within gaming communities regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives reflect broader conflicts over whether political values should be incorporated into commercial entertainment products. Such disputes recall Adorno and Horkheimer's (1947) critique of the culture industry, particularly their argument that ideological positions can themselves become commodified within mass culture. Therefore, both scholarly research and popular discussions demonstrate that video games are inseparable from ideological negotiation.

Religion and theology represent another significant but comparatively underexplored dimension of ideological meaning-making in games. Unlike explicit theological works, many contemporary video games rarely employ religious systems primarily for doctrinal purposes; instead, theological imagery often functions as a narrative, aesthetic, or world-building device. Wildt (2025), for example, examines the use of Christian symbolism in popular games, arguing that *Assassin's Creed* reconstructs Christian imagery to develop the ideological and historical background of the Assassin-Templar conflict while maintaining connections to real historical

contexts. Similarly, religious motifs—including Christian Templars in *Diablo II* and *Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine*, as well as divine figures such as God-like entities in *Dragon's Dogma*—are frequently deployed to produce feelings of grandeur, mystery, and transcendence (Wildt, 2025).

The intersection of theology and ideology has further been explored through postcolonial approaches, particularly Edward Said's concept of Orientalism (1978). Scholars such as Heidbrink et al. (2014) demonstrate that real-time strategy games produced after 9/11 often reproduce Orientalist representations by positioning Muslim societies as cultural and ideological "others." However, there is limited literature that explicates how theology and politics are narratologically significant in the diegetic game-world from the perspectives of in-game characters, placing games in isolation from historical-political realities that conditioned their making.

3.4. The Psychoanalysis of *Elden Ring*

Video games provide ample material for Lacanian-Zizekian psychoanalysis in that interactive narration allows for more complex and fluid storytelling. Games such as *Elden Ring* implicitly engage with psychoanalytic concepts such as desire and antagonism.

Existing scholarship on Elden Ring hints at many pseudo-psychoanalytic ideas. Stein (2023) interprets *Elden Ring* on a metaphysical level, arguing that it questions Western philosophical idealism by inverting the traditional high fantasy trope of the "primacy of the rational subject." From a more descriptivist perspective, Bouzidi (2024) suggests that the game is situated in a world of "in-betweenness," where neither humans nor Other-than-Humans dominate the aptly named Lands Between. As such, *Elden Ring* challenges the "anthropocentric system of values" and constructs a unique system of multiplicity and plurality where even the gods themselves are depicted as subjects of excessive madness and lack (Bouzidi, 2024). The instability of its characters has led scholars to note the deeply psychological aspects of *Elden Ring*, with some applying Lacanian concepts to it. Indirectly connecting with Lacan, Ford (2024) explains how the mythology in Elden Ring operates through "excessive desire" and moral ambivalence. Max Coombes (2025) undertakes an in-depth Lacanian analysis of Elden Ring, also drawing upon Kristeva's theory (1989) of melancholia and its "dialectic of idealization and devalorisation" to analyse the in-game infrastructure of *Elden Ring*.

Thresholds seen throughout the game world are signifiers of something beyond, which marks the existing location as fundamentally lacking. Also deriving ideas from Kristeva, Nicoll (2023) indicates that failure is "inscribed" into the logic of video games, wherein players have a Freudian drive to fail repeatedly. Notoriously difficult games such as *Elden Ring* appear to have the ability to confront players with their own lack and limitations, allowing players to find enjoyment in failure. Another example of the Lacanian analysis of role-playing games is Xiao's research (2024), which builds on Lacanian philosopher Zhang (2019) to argue that the role-playing process transfers desire in reality onto the desire of the in-game Other. Coombes, Nicoll, and Xiao's analyses explicate the phenomenology of video game consumption and the relationship between lack and play. These researchers establish the precedent of Lacanian analysis of *Elden Ring* but focus primarily on ludology and the structural dimensions of video games. As such, this paper makes the contribution of interpreting *Elden Ring*'s thematic ambiguity through explicit narratological psychoanalysis, providing narratological rigor for the ludology-dominant centroid of game studies.

4. Methodology

As *Elden Ring* is notoriously fragmented and ambiguous in its storytelling, the canon "lore" beyond the fundamental facts is interestingly facilitated not by FromSoftware (which provides scant, riddle-like clues) but rather by player communities. YouTube lore theorists such as VaatiVidya and SmoughTown, the Reddit thread r/EldenRingLoreTalk, and Fextralife's *Elden Ring* Wikipedia take active roles in helping the community establish baseline narrative, yet individual players oftentimes diverge on deeply ambiguous lore details. This paper's methodology is built around the methodologies of *Elden Ring* lore communities, utilizing item descriptions, dialogue, and environmental cues as evidence for Lacanian-Zizekian analysis. In the *Elden Ring* community, only such evidence suffices as authentic, canonical "text" from which individual interpretation arises. This approach is deeply semiotic, as a quasi-unified "langue" is established on the factual canon, and "parole" depends on the individual use of that information to form interpretations (Saussure, 1916).

Mere speculation in one's "head-canon" without in-game evidence must be viewed with scepticism; therefore, this paper's analysis of Miquella will only base its analysis on explicitly in-game, canonical evidence. Events such as Miquella's failed eclipse at Castle Sol are important to the biography of Miquella, yet they are excluded because there is limited canonically authentic information to support any quasi-unified theory. Miquella may be attempting to revive Godwyn using the eclipse, while other theorists speculate that Miquella actively participated in the death of Godwyn in the first place. Such widely disparate interpretations built on speculation, though intriguing in informal settings, will be excluded in academic analysis. As such, this paper's approach to the enigmatic nature of *Elden Ring* is fundamentally literary: a baseline canonical text is established, and analysis must be supported by explicitly canonical information.

Rather than isolated quotations, this paper examines canonical evidence within the context of in-game events, linking each item description and dialogue to the diegetic realities that produce them. The history of the Lands Between is dynamic and fluctuating; thus, the discursive formations of varying contexts determine the boundaries of ideas that are capable of being expressed. This paper will support its argument by not only analysing in-game evidence but also examining the contextual circumstances and limitations that produced them. Conflicting descriptions, then, are adjudicated by highlighting how differences in character perspectives and, by extension, contexts lead to productive juxtapositions. Characters in *Elden Ring* are flawed and limited in their knowledge; thus, slight inconsistencies across evidence are to be expected. Yet it is through the process of revelation and change that *Elden Ring* manifests productive ambiguities without undermining its consistency.

5. Lacanian Framework of Religious Authority in Elden Ring

Since almost all political systems in Elden Ring involve quasi-deities or magical figures, the dynamic between political authority and religion is thematically central. Item descriptions and dialogue allow players to infer a recurring relationship among godhood, consortship, and Shadowbound beasts.

The God (exemplified by Queen Marika the Eternal) represents the Symbolic register; she functions as the Master-Signifier (S_1) at the apex of the ruling ideological order. In Lacanian terms, the consolidation of systemic authority requires a primary act of symbolization, wherein the chaos of the Real that resists symbolization is violently captured, named, and ordered through language and paternal law. The physical monuments and statues of Marika erected throughout the Lands Between reinforce this Symbolic capitalization, rendering the physical

form of the God synonymous with the historical ontology of divine justice. As Stopford (2024) notes, architectural monuments appear to possess a unified presence from one's phenomenology, yet their material reality co-constitutes a historical ontology with a vast network of structural entities. Marika's Symbolic icons thus materialize the sacred, judicial framework of the Golden Order itself, turning abstraction into multiplicity into a unified whole.

However, Lacanian theory argues that the Symbolic order is always built upon a fundamental misrecognition. It presents itself as a flawless, totalized whole while actively concealing a radically fragmented subject. Brother Corhyn's journeys culminate in discovering a statue demonstrating that Marika is ontologically identical to her masculine alter-ego, Radagon. On this reading, Marika/Radagon functions as a split subject ($), internally fractured by radical alterity that is consistent with the Lacanian lack in the Big Other itself. Because the sovereign Master-Signifier is internally divided, the socio-political fabric of the Lands Between can likewise be read as structurally fractured, an ontological crisis that culminates in the literal "Shattering" of the Elden Ring.

If the God functions as the abstract, linguistic centre of the Symbolic, the Consort (exemplified by Godfrey) can be read as operating within the Imaginary register, functioning as a visual apparatus that performs an illusion of structural wholeness. The systemic transition of Godfrey from the primal warrior Hoarah Loux into a civilized monarch [can be interpreted as analogous to] the mechanics of the Lacanian mirror stage. Lacan (2006b) asserts that the mirror stage constitutes an identification wherein the developing subject assumes a specular image of bodily unity, precipitating the illusion of a cohesive ego before the subject enters the castrative demands of social reality.

Godfrey performs the function of wholeness insofar as a function of the ego (the Golden Order) that asserts its wholeness. Godfrey's previous self, Hoarah Loux, is the embodiment of a "primordial" strength before Marika establishes her Symbolic realm. Upon being recognized as a function of value in a process of objectification, Hoarah Loux uses the beast regent Serosh to suppress his "ceaseless lust for battle" so that he may participate in the new Symbolic realm as Godfrey (FromSoftware, "Godfrey Icon," 2022). In this case, Godfrey becomes a microcosm of a broader Imaginary register, where his transcendence from a pre-Symbolic state to a function of the Symbolic realm mirrors the Lacanian process of achieving the experience of wholeness from "insufficiency" by Imaginary means (Lacan, 2006b). Besides his personal transformation, the role Godfrey and, by extension, the consort serve in godhood is also deeply Imaginary.

The consort functions as the visible, bodily manifestation of divine authority that carries out the functions. Whereas the god operates through Symbolic acts in abstraction, the consort operates with acts of physical power. Despite the god ultimately having more authority, the consort becomes the image of authority. For instance, Godfrey's crusades are synonymous with the "epoch glistening with life…the Age of the Erdtree" (FromSoftware, "Spoken Echoes of Queen Marika," 2022). Therefore, the consort establishes a visual illusion wherein the gaps are filled and the whole is unified, thereby legitimizing religious authority. Subjects believe in the Golden Order not because they understand the ambiguous laws of the Elden Ring, but because they perceive Godfrey's glory and thus become convinced that the authority is real. As such, the consort exists in the register of the Imaginary, suturing potential gaps with acts of strength that signify wholeness.

The Shadowbound beast to the Real in what it contains and its functions within religious authority. The Real contains what the Symbolic cannot integrate or express in language, most notably death, trauma, and violence. This translates into the Rune of Death (Destined Death) that was "plucked from the Golden Order" as Marika first established her religious authority

(FromSoftware, "Finger Reader Enia," 2022). The Shadowbound beast becomes a container for material that the Symbolic excludes but cannot fully eliminate. Yet despite its pre-ordained loyalty, it may turn against the god that it was designed to serve, "transforming from a follower into a horrid curse" (FromSoftware, "War Counsellor Iji," 2022). The Real always returns despite the Symbolic's efforts to repress and control it, suggesting the impossible attempt to contain the Real using Symbolic means.

The threatening intrusions of the Shadowbound Real and the expendability of the Imaginary consort demonstrate how the Symbolic register is fallible. In Zizekian terms, the Golden Order is an ideology that stems from fantasies and constitutive antagonisms. Three endings in the game reflect the fundamentally lacking qualities of the Golden Order: in order to end its state of stagnation, the Elden Ring must be mended by a supplemental rune. The need for "mending" implies a state of lack in the Golden Order. Goldmask, a devoted follower of Golden Order fundamentalism, demonstrates how the fallibility of the Golden Order is constitutive to faith, as he ironically discovers the contradictions inherent in ideology, thus "[betraying] a suspicion of the holism of the Golden Order" (FromSoftware, "Brother Corhyn," 2022). Despite realizing the contradictions of his faith, Goldmask intensifies his faith (like a Kierkegaard-esque knight of faith) and attempts to perfect the Golden Order ideology by removing the aspects that make antagonisms present. The Mending Rune of Perfect Order reads,

> *"A rune of transcendental ideology which will attempt to perfect the Golden Order. The current imperfection of the Golden Order, or instability of ideology, can be blamed upon the fickleness of the gods no better than men. That is the fly in the ointment."* (FromSoftware, "The Mending Rune of Perfect Order," 2022)

Goldmask exemplifies the ideological fantasy that Zizek (1989) identifies, [or, more precisely, can be interpreted through it], by misrecognizing ideological antagonisms as "contingent" (a removable flaw) rather than "constitutive" (central to the structural formation of ideology itself). His solution points to divine "fickleness" as the cause of ideological flaws, yet he assumes that the problem can be removed to achieve perfect order. Goldmask's solution therefore treating antagonism as an external contamination, a "fly in the ointment," that can be extracted with a supplement. However, what appears to be an external corruption can, within the Zizekian framework, be interpreted as an internal contradiction that structures ideology. Attempting to eliminate the flaws in ideology only displaces them further, making absolute harmony an impossibility.

6. Lacanian Case Study: Miquella

6.1. Eternal Nascency, the Haligtree, and the Alternate Big Other

In *Elden Ring*, one of the first things that players learn about Miquella is his curse of eternal nascency, his share of the burden in the curse of the Twin Prodigies. As the Remembrance of the Rot Goddess records:

> *"Miquella and Malenia are both the children of a single god. As such, they are both Empyreans, but suffered afflictions from birth. One was cursed with eternal childhood, and the other harbored rot within."* (FromSoftware, "Remembrance of the Rot Goddess," 2022)

Miquella's curse of eternal childhood is significant from a Lacanian perspective because Miquella is defined by a fundamental lack of adulthood and maturation. On a biological level, Miquella lacks the natural process of growth that the other demigods experience. The phrasing of "as such" suggests a causal relationship between the conditions of their birth and their

subsequent afflictions, which indicates that Miquella's existence and participation in the Symbolic order are defined *a priori* by lack rather than wholeness. This lack is not merely a passive stagnation in growth but a more active process of suffering akin to trauma. The specific form of lack as eternal nascency bars Miquella from occupying the position of adult authority that necessitates physical exertion. Malenia similarly encounters a fundamental lack in her Scarlet Rot, which embodies an uncontrollable excess. Morales-Primo's (2024) analysis of *Elden Ring*'s fungal biology reveals that this excess is akin to the "gangrenous decay and hallucinations" caused by *Claviceps purpurea*. The symptoms of the fungal rot are positive symptoms, reflecting an excess on a biological level. Yet simultaneously, the excesses associated with rot are a form of lack because it physically "eats away at life like a vicious plague" (FromSoftware, "Rot Pot," 2022). Taken together, the twins embody Lacan's characterization of lack as a process of multiplicity, taking many forms but still fundamentally constitutive. The fact that both Miquella and Malenia were chosen to be Empyreans reveals the paradox of divinity, where those deemed the holiest suffer the most from ontologically central lack.

As lack is constitutive and inescapable, Miquella's desires can be interpreted as emerging from this lack, and a primary objective of his life becomes attempting to traverse gaps. Malenia is akin to a Lacanian Other for Miquella in that she is a separate entity who operates on an almost opposite biological logic but simultaneously accompanies Miquella throughout their lives. Like the Lacanian Other, she is both separate and inseparable from Miquella and his identity formation. Lacan (1973) posits that "desire is the desire of the Other" – the individual adopts the desires of the Other to attempt to fill in lacking gaps. In Miquella's case, he adopts Malenia's probable desires to be cured as his desire and duty, creating Unalloyed Gold as an attempt to stop the spread of Scarlet Rot in Malenia.

When Golden Order fundamentalism fails to satisfy his desires, Miquella becomes disillusioned with the Symbolic authority and instead seeks a different ideology that is capable of filling the ontological gaps he perceives. Namely, Miquella creates the Haligtree faction as an attempt to establish an alternate Symbolic order. The Haligtree can be interpreted as a Symbolic order that is purposely designed to address the flaws of the Golden Order: Marika's order purges the Hornsent, the Omen, and the Misbegotten to achieve homogeneity, yet Miquella's Haligtree hosts a diverse array of creatures and species that exist seemingly in harmony. The Golden Order ideology is built on a fundamentally anthropocentric mythos, revolving around humanoid figures and thus excluding the Other (non-human beings) in the Lands Between. The deconstruction of anthropocentric narratives is one of the core pillars of post-structuralism, as thinkers such as Lacan began to challenge the Western ideal of a rational human *cogito* (Bell & Russell, 2000). Accordingly, the paper reads Miquella's alternative order through a post-structuralist lens rather than claiming that Miquella consciously conducts "post-structural experimentation.

The Haligtree embodies a misguided Symbolic that inadvertently mirrors the Big Other he is trying to disconnect from. Lacan's mirror stage lends an intriguing framework to Miquella's Haligtree: on a literal level, the Haligtree is built as a mirror to the Erdtree of the Golden Order. The infant identifies with their specular image, thereby formulating the ego from the synthesis of this image (Evans, 1996). The specular image is the ideal image that promises wholeness. Miquella's Haligtree is structurally parallel to the Lacanian mirror stage in how it attempts to create a better specular version of the Erdtree. As a response to the perceived flaws of the Golden Order, he nurtures the Haligtree as a reflection of the Erdtree – with the same structure of a tree as symbolic sovereignty – but better in its divine functions (FromSoftware, "Miquella's Haligtree," 2022). The Haligtree faction upholds the promises of universal salvation, becoming what the Erdtree promised to be and Miquella's ideal embodiment of

perfection. In doing so, Miquella begins the process of formulating his ego identity in relation to this mirror stage apparatus.

In the mirror stage framework, Miquella's Haligtree is doomed to fail due to the forces that sustain it. For Lacan (2006b), the condition of identity formation via the mirror stage is *méconnaissance*, the misrecognition of selfhood in specular wholeness. Miquella recognizes the flaws in the Golden Order's Erdtree, yet he can be interpreted as misrecognizing perfection in the Haligtree, treating it as a specular solution that might guarantee wholeness. This reading suggests that he conflates the internal and the external: changing the external appearance of ideology and how it interacts with others cannot by itself produce an ideology without lack. Wanting to establish an ideology of radical acceptance and compassion is not intrinsically amoral; rather, the psychoanalytic point is that even a benevolent project may reproduce the structural conditions it seeks to overcome. The claim that the Haligtree is therefore destined to fail is interpretive, not a canonical prophecy.

6.2. Radahn, the Gravitational Pointe de Capiton, and the Objet Petit a

When analysing Miquella as a case study, Radahn is the centrepiece of the case study that represents how Miquella externalizes his psychological mechanisms. Radahn is an object of desire, yet *Elden Ring* presents a dynamic of repeatedly negating fulfilment that reveals the tensions surrounding the Objet petit a.

It is revealed that when the demigods were still young, Radahn vowed to become Miquella's consort in exchange for Miquella to "make the world a gentler place" (FromSoftware, "Miquella, End of DLC Cutscene" 2024). While it is ambiguous whether Radahn fully agreed to Miquella's proposal or he perhaps broke his promise upon obtaining his Great Rune, the game makes it clear that Miquella desires Radahn. The stronger claim that Radahn later renounced a binding childhood pact is an interpretation of the fragmented evidence and should not be treated as settled canon. Radahn is therefore analysed here as the object toward which Miquella's desire becomes organized, rather than as a definitively consenting or non-consenting partner at every stage of the narrative.

The later confrontation between Miquella's forces and Radahn can be read as an attempt to secure the consort relationship after the earlier promise becomes uncertain. The game establishes Malenia's campaign against Radahn and, in the DLC, Miquella's continued pursuit of Radahn as consort; however, the precise psychological mechanism by which Miquella responds to Radahn's will is not directly narrated. The claim that Miquella "rewrites Radahn's mind" should therefore be understood as an interpretation of the charm imagery and Radahn's post-resurrection status, not as an explicit canonical statement of mind control. Within the Lacanian reading, the important point is that the desired object appears to be secured only by compromising the autonomy that made the object desirable in the first place.

A semiotic mapping becomes exceptionally multifaceted when we contrast Radahn with other potential candidates, such as Godwyn the Golden. Radahn is read in this paper as especially significant due to his specific relationship to the linguistic chain of signifiers. In the Lands Between, stars are signifiers of fate in how they represent causation and the metaphysical laws of the Elden Ring. The movement of the stars, then, signifies an interpreted chain of fate and destiny, forming a deferring and sliding chain of signification consistent with Lacanian and post-structuralist interpretations of signification as unstable.

> *"The fate once writ in the night skies had been fettered by the Golden Order."* (FromSoftware, "Telescope," 2022)

While lingual meaning for Lacan (1955) arises from the temporary fixation of signification at a point de capiton, a quilting point that temporarily stabilizes meaning within a signifying chain, Radahn's actions present a fixation that exceeds the point to the extent of stasis. As the item description suggests, Radahn halted fate itself at the behest of the Golden Order, which can be interpreted as revealing the Symbolic as an externalized fantasy of wholeness. Radahn and the Symbolic can therefore be read as overriding the lack constitutive in subjectivity and fate, choosing an unnaturally static metaphysics over a deferral chain of signifiers to preserve the Golden Order's exclusive theology. Consequently, the fate of Miquella and the other Empyreans is interpreted here as fixated on the current Symbolic order. As the Tarnished player kills Radahn, the stars resume their movement, reintroducing deferral, flux, and fate into the Lands Between.

6.3. The Death Drive, De-subjectification, and Subverted Martyrdom

When Radahn is a placeholder of desire that enforces an unnatural semiotic stasis, Miquella's Age of Compassion is also marked by internal contradictions. Miquella claims to usher in an age of compassion and abundance, yet his actions can be interpreted as reproducing some of the antagonism and lack that he seeks to remove. As Miquella's project involves establishing a political and theological order, Zizekian philosophy provides a conceptual framework for deconstructing this ideology by revealing discrepancies between promises and actions.

The Age of Compassion demonstrates Zizek's ideological fantasy in how it appeals to the desire to escape antagonism. According to Zizek (2009), the ideological fantasy promises to overcome social antagonism entirely in exchange for adherence. Miquella's ideology of Compassion operates on the same fantasy logic, promising "a thousand-year voyage guided by compassion," even utilizing the same vocabulary of "promise" (FromSoftware, "Promised Consort Radahn," 2024). The "promises" of ideology instil a fantasy of perfection by implying a guarantee of responsibility, thus providing the psychological certainty that strengthens fantasy. Ideology structures desires around a promise that antagonism will be removed by the correct intervention. Miquella's Age of Compassion presents itself as a corrective solution to the Golden Order's antagonistic failures. Yet the Symbolic order requires exclusion in its structural constituents; thus, Miquella's attempt at universal acceptance is philosophically impossible, as it attempts to escape the antagonism that constituted ideological existence in the first place. Miquella's declaration of the Age of Compassion in his cutscene suggests this tension:

> *"Aspiring Lord of the old order. If you have known sin, if you grieve for this world, then yield the path forward to us."* (FromSoftware, "Promised Consort Radahn Cutscene," 2024).

The passage is spoken from Zizek's extension of Lacan's concept of the superego that commands the subject to "enjoy!" The pleasure-driven subject adheres to the imperative to enjoy, yet is thwarted by the fundamental lack in subjectivity and the death drive. In the passage, Miquella addresses a conditional subject who knows sin and grief (signifiers of antagonism and lack), juxtaposing with his ideology that removes the subject's perceived antagonisms. By naming sin and grief, Miquella addresses the subject to expose lack, emphasizing the necessity to "enjoy" rather than suffer. The further claim that this discourse necessarily produces guilt and a Miquella-specific superego is a theoretical inference, not an explicit psychological description provided by the game. The subject who "yields" therefore [can be interpreted as entering] a cycle of superego demand rather than achieving permanent satisfaction.

While the fantasy of ideology is what Miquella constructs externally, his actions towards his personal ontology likewise cannot escape its aporias. Miquella divests himself of his flesh, emotions, and humanity in order to transcend into divinity in spirit alone. From Miquella's perspective, markers of the Golden Order are undesirable signifiers because they point to the Symbolic gaps that his ideology attempts to remove. In self-divesting, Miquella is removing all markers of lack in order to achieve ideal wholeness. The philosophical aporia arises in how he pushes lack to its extremes to paradoxically cure himself of lack. Similar to how Miquella misrecognizes the flaws of the Erdtree, he misrecognizes lack as a property that can be altered rather than a foundational component of subjectivity itself.

Self-divesting interacts with Miquella's subjectivity in deeply ambiguous ways that blur the subject-object division. As lack is constitutive in subjectivity, Miquella's removal of markers associated with his former identity can be interpreted as deconstructing his subjectivity. His ontology can be read as losing the status of a conventional subject because he abandons foundations that previously constituted his identity; thus, self-divesting is interpreted here as a process of de-subjectification. When the subject loses stable coordinates of subjectivity, the drives that sustain action become more difficult to distinguish from abstract purpose. The game does not provide direct access to Miquella's interiority, and it does not explicitly state that he has ceased to be a subject. Nevertheless, from a psychoanalytical and observational perspective, Miquella's actions blur the boundaries between subject and object. His ascension to godhood can therefore be read as a transitional state between subjecthood and objecthood, bringing the notion of godhood under scrutiny.

Miquella's divesting via crosses has Christian connotations that highlight the theme of martyrdom and sacrifice throughout the narrative. Barczyński (2025) argues that Miquella's crosses are transfictional "references" to Christ's crucifixion that serve as a perverse parallel to Christ's "way of the cross." Extending Barczyński's argument, Miquella's martyrdom is not merely a reference to Christ but the subversion and antithesis of Christian theology.

Christ sacrifices as the substitute that pays the penalty of humanity's sins, thereby offering eternal salvation and reconciliation between humanity and the Holy Trinity (the Big Other). Therefore, martyrdom adhesively bridges the individual with the Big Other, requiring the Big Other as an active participant who grants an almost Hegelian recognition. Martyrdom in the Christian sense needs the Big Other as a witness, as revealed in Jesus's final words, "My God, why have you abandoned me?", where he demands a response from a Big Other whom he accuses of being absent (Matthew 27:45).

Miquella occupies a subverted martyrdom structure because he does not address any Big Other. The Greater Will is not a Big Other that recognizes martyrdom but the cosmic order that Miquella is attempting to escape. To address the Greater Will, like Christ addresses God, would be to linger within the Symbolic realm of exchange and symbolization. This is because Christ still operates within Symbolic gestures of sacrifice, exchange, and gratification. However, Miquella's martyrdom is characterized by a drive that finds its "enjoyment" in repetition regardless of the Big Other's perception, suggesting a mechanical function of martyrdom qua martyrdom.

Since self-divesting de-subjectifies Miquella, the Symbolic forces of repression that once regulated the psyche weaken. The repression that defines subjectivity dissolves, causing the once-repressed death drive to become increasingly explicit and dominant. It is as if Miquella has instigated the return of the repressed, which in turn haunts the Symbolic. Miquella reappears as a golden apparition that challenges the Golden Order, making the unrepressed death drive akin to an ultimate weapon with which Miquella attacks the Symbolic. Yet the negation of repression comes at a cost: the death drive becomes the dominating force that

pushes Miquella towards increasingly mechanical acts. The numerous crosses of Miquella are thus repetitions of the aforementioned death-drive mechanism that disguises itself as wholeness and divinity. Miquella is like a function with the sole purpose of achieving the twisted version of compassion divinity. This understanding of ascension as a manifestation of the death-drive points to the subverted nature of godhood itself in *Elden Ring*, where the establishment of religious authority finds its roots in repetitive, recognition-less drives. In this case, Miquella's attempt at divinity may not be his individual flaws but rather the symptom of the broader system of divinity that necessitates the death-drive as its obscene underside.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, divinity in *Elden Ring* is fundamentally lacking and self-contradictory, with Miquella serving as the prime example of a symptom of structural impossibilities. His ascension is a Lacanian attempt to traverse the lacking gaps through fantasies, oblique desires, and perverse structural inversions. The Lacanian and Zizekian elements construct an endlessly deferred cycle of desire that displaces antagonism and lack further. The impossibility of wholeness in both Miquella is consistent with dominant Lacanian ideas, whilst also providing the space for theoretical and narrative ambiguity, such as in the liminal existence between a subject and an object, and the attempted negation of deferring signifiers. In doing so, this research deepens video game research by outlining the application of a Lacanian-Zizekian perspective when analysing complex video games. It also reveals the capacity for video games to contain philosophical connotations that rival literature and other forms of digital media. In turn, *Elden Ring* questions utopian myths of social harmony, revealing obscene realities beneath the glorious facades of perfect ideology constructed by divinity. Miquella's case studies, coupled with *Elden Ring*'s narrative logic, show how philosophically impossible the pursuit of divinity actually is. The intersection between Lacanian theory and game narratology is a productive merging that deepens both Lacanianism and video game studies. More broadly, *Elden Ring* can be read as questioning utopian myths of social harmony by placing ideals of compassion, order, and divinity alongside violence, exclusion, and unresolved contradiction.

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