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The Potential of Polysemy in Video Games: A Case Study of Elden Ring

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Dr. Crosby

COMM 460: Seminar in Digital Rhetoric

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## Intro

Over the past several years, video games have become one of the world's favorite activities, whether it was to play with your friends, family, or even by yourself in the comfort of your own home. Video games offer its consumers a wide range of experiences, from immersive storylines to competitive multiplayer matches. Over the last decade the top 10 best selling video games sold a combined total of 538,650,000 units (Llewellyn, 2020). These numbers have continued to grow over the past year as numerous high quality games have been released since then. The growth of game sales shares direct correlation with the recent surge in popularity for esports. During the last few years millions of people have been watching professional gamers compete in high-stakes tournaments (Petkovski, 2023). In an article from IESF news, it is stated that “the industry is expected to reach \$1.5 billion in revenue by 2023, with major companies like Coca-Cola, Intel, and Red Bull investing heavily in esports” (Petkovski, 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic is when the popularity of video games soared. Locked inside with not much to do, one of the things people turned towards was games in an attempt to connect with friends and family all across the world. Due to this, the increasing availability of high-quality games across multiple platforms and the surge in popularity for esports, video games have certainly established themselves as a significant part of today’s culture. In fact, right now there are approximately 3.09 billion active “gamers” worldwide; that number has increased by roughly a billion in the past couple of years (Howarth, 2023). Multiple high quality games have come out within the past couple of years, one of the most notable games of that bunch is the recent Game of the Year (GOTY) award winner, *Elden Ring*. A game that exhibits several attributes that make it one of the world's most popular games.

*Elden Ring* is a game that focuses on a mysterious artifact known as the eldren ring that gives unimaginable power to the person who owns it. The elden ring was shattered and spread across the Lands Between (the name of the world), causing the world to become filled with corrupt demigods, all wanting to use the elden rings' power for greed. The player character, known as the "Tarnished," is a person exiled from its society. They must travel the world, fighting strong enemies, in order to restore the elden ring and bring back peace to the Lands Between once again. One of the reasons as to why this game was so popular is that there is no correct way to play. As soon as the game starts it is completely up to the player as to what they want to do, even the tutorial is completely optional. *Elden Ring* does not provide the player with a linear storyline so every player's experience is different from one another, this is easily proven true based upon the number of different endings the game offers. As of now, the game has about seven different endings, all of them dependent on certain actions the player takes during their initial playthrough, this is a feature that a lot of games do not capitalize upon, but for *Elden Ring* it is the reason that it's so popular. After finishing the game, players are motivated to go back and play through it again in order to earn a different ending to the game than they did the first time, unlocking more story along the way. Mitchell Saltzman of IGN stated that he "felt regret missing out on stories that some of my colleagues have had," but it also helped to incentivise him to continue playing into new game plus (Saltzman, 2022). This formula is what helped *Elden Ring* shatter several records since the game was released back in February of 2022.

Since 2022, *Elden Ring* has sold over 20 million copies (Scullion, 2023) as well as won 324 GOTY awards, beating out the previous record holder, the Last of Us 2, by two (Cooper, 2023). *Elden Ring's* massive popularity and unique concept of multiple different endings are the two reasons that this research is being conducted. In this paper, I explore the potential for

polysemy to elevate video games, by analyzing one of *Elden Rings* endings titled “the age of the stars.”

### **Literature Review**

In past research, polysemy has been characterized “as the phenomenon whereby a single word form is associated with two or several related senses” (Falkum and Vicente, 2015). Another author characterized polysemy as “a concept to refer to the interpretive scope of media texts” (Jensen, 1990). According to communication scholars, a word can carry several different meanings depending on the context in which a person uses it. If we were to take this definition and apply it to media such as TV shows and movies we can use it to see how people interpret the different themes and messages. In an article about the rhetorical limits of polysemy author Celeste Condit argued that “current critical studies emphasize the way in which the polysemic qualities of mass mediated texts empower audiences to construct their own liberating readings” (Condit, 1989). Polysemy is being shown here in the way that audiences are able to come up with their own interpretations after consuming a form of media. In the same way a person and their friend sit down to watch a show, and after the show is over they both talk about what they thought. The person and their friend have different opinions about what they just saw so they discuss why they feel that way. That is an example of polysemy being applied to media.

Another way polysemy can be explored in media is in film in the form of teasers and trailers. In a thesis on understanding the effectiveness of trailers, teasers, and television spots in marketing movies, researcher Daniel Septak found that “trailers persuade consumers to see their promoted movie in theaters and other formats” (Septak, 2008). Movie trailers and teasers use the concept of polysemy in order to drive excitement and anticipation for their films and effective use of this concept can be seen in the popularity of the film. Watching trailers and teasers sparks

conversation within the community as people share ideas of what they think the film will be about, this is especially true in *Marvel* productions. *Marvel* films are always about superheroes that mostly exist within the same universe. There are a total of thirty one *Marvel* films and they have grossed over twenty eight billion USD in the worldwide Box Office. (The Numbers, 2023). *Marvel* movies use the concept of polysemy in most of their films by employing teasers at the end. After the conclusion of most *Marvel* films there is almost always a post credits scene for the audience to watch which hints at sequels and other movies in the works. These seemingly small hints allow the audience to converse with one another across multiple different platforms to discuss what it could have possibly meant. This helps to drive anticipation and excitement within consumers for the next movie. As the conversations about the teaser rise, so does the popularity of the *Marvel* franchise. Perhaps the most important concept surrounding these *Marvel* teasers is the fact that they are completely left up to audience interpretation. Depending on how well versed a consumer is in the *Marvel* fandom could leave them with a different interpretation than their peers.

The concept of polysemy is not only relevant when it comes to film and TV but is also relevant in recent exploration of video games. Until recently the issue with a lot of single player story games is that there is no replayability, after the player finishes the game that's it. Unless the developer decides to create new downloadable content (DLC). For example, games such as *Pokemon* and the *Legend of Zelda* are very linear in their story lines and only have a single ending. There is no room for interpretation nor much motivation for the player to go back and play the game further. *Elden Ring* does a fantastic job of employing polysemy into the game in order to drive more consumers to play it. Each ending is completely unique and a motivator for players to continue playing the game even after finishing it. Even a year after *Elden Ring's*

release players are still discussing what they think certain endings mean all in anticipation for the game's upcoming DLC. For these reasons, I believe that *Elden Ring* is the ideal artifact of study for my research. Within this paper I will be focusing on two research questions in order to explore the potential for polysemy in video games.

RQ1: In what ways does polysemy emerge in *Elden Ring*?

RQ2: In what ways does polysemy change, improve and impact the genre of video games?

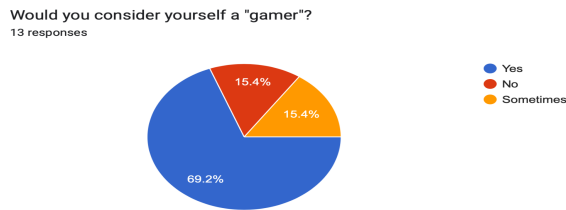
## **Method**

In order to answer the research questions I conducted an online survey using google forms that I sent out to participants via convenience sampling. The survey asked a mix of multiple choice and short answer questions. After gaining participant consent to publish information the survey asked questions about the participant, including: Would you consider yourself a “gamer?” When playing games, do you prefer ones with a single ending or multiple different endings? Have you heard of/played the game *Elden Ring*? After answering these questions participants were asked to watch a clip of one of the endings from the game *Elden Ring*. After watching the ending they were asked these questions: What did you like the most about this ending? What did you like the least? On a scale of 1-5, how likely are you to play this game based on that clip? After watching the ending, what story do you believe is being told? (What message is being conveyed). The survey concluded by asking for participants to share any additional thoughts that they may have. All of the questions in the survey were optional and participants were allowed to drop out at any time during the course of the survey.

## **Results**

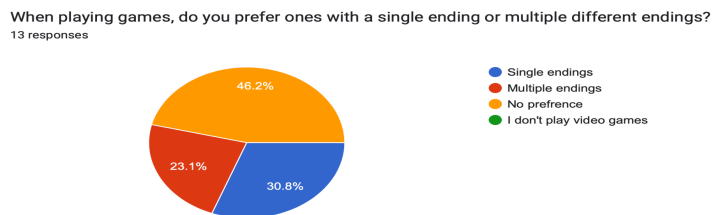
I was able to gather a total of thirteen participants who were willing to take and complete the survey. When asked if they considered themselves gamers, nine stated that they consider

themselves a, two sometimes consider themselves a gamer and two did not consider themselves gamers.



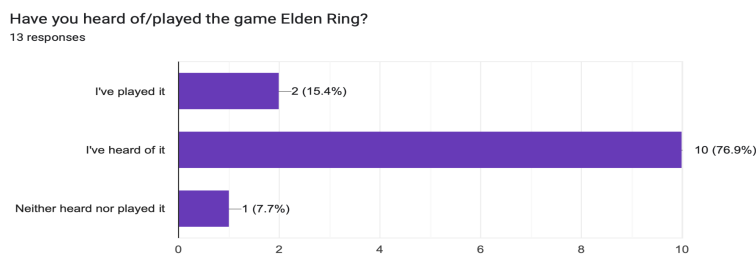
**Figure 1**

When asked if they prefer games with multiple different endings vs a single ending, three said that they preferred multiple different endings, four said that they preferred a single ending and six answered that they had no preference.



**Figure 2**

When asked if they had heard of or played the game *Elden Ring* two participants said they had played it, ten participants have heard of it and one participant has neither played the game nor heard of it.



**Figure 3**

When answering questions about what they liked the most about the clip shown in the survey, participant answers varied significantly from one another. While some participants stated that they liked the imagery and the overall vibe the most, others said that they liked the overall



mysterious theme of the actual cutscene. A participant even stated that the dialogue of the character was their favorite part. However, this was not necessarily the case when participants stated what they liked the least about the clip. In general participants were fairly unanimous in what they least liked about the clip. Participants felt that they had no connection to the scene shown in the clip and that there was a huge lack of context for those who had not already played the game.

Finally, when the participants were asked their opinions on what story they thought was being told in the clip, they all seemed to have a different opinion. One participant stated that they believed “the story is a journey of a chosen adventurer in the environment of an apocalyptic battle of supernatural and divine forces. When the star witch character talks in the end, it seems like there is a victory, but with the battle so brutal, the land is no longer suitable to live on.” Another participant stated that felt that “the player character helped a god acquire power to be able to set upon eternal night. Funny enough, through love.” From all the different responses, a handful of themes emerged. These themes include romance/marriage, kings and queens, a damsel in distress, and a journey to become the strongest. It should be noted that two of the participants stated they were “unsure” and “had no clue” what the story was about after watching the clip.

## **Conclusion**

The primary aim of this research was to investigate the potential for polysemy within video games in order to decide whether or not the concept would be beneficial. I believe that the results yielded within the survey were able to help deduce just that. Polysemy is a concept that is beneficial to video games and future games should work to employ that concept. With only looking at one of *Elden Ring*'s seven endings, participants were able to come up with several different themes from the ending. Responses varied from participants in the way that those who

had already played through the game and achieved this ending interpreted the ending to be about something completely different than those who have never played the game. Participants also all seemingly enjoyed different aspects of the ending while being similarly displeased with certain items within the trailer. With this we can prove that polysemy emerges within *Elden Ring* in its ending due to the responses that were received within the survey. One participant even mentioned that “there almost wasn't enough closure, it is open ended, which is intriguing, but it seems like there could be more story to tell.” This here is the key behind *Elden Ring's* success, using the concept of polysemy within its endings by making its consumers want more. This is the motivator for people to continue replaying the game in order to gain more story, changing their thoughts and opinions of the game over time. Much like *Marvel*, this is also why the game has become so popular, because people are able to interpret the story differently. In addition, it has been shown that polysemy can help to foster community and relationship building. People have been able to share their experiences about the *Elden Ring's* endings with one another. This encourages people to further play the game, but to do so with a different mindset after being able to share in one another's experiences.

Within this paper, I have provided what I believe to be strong evidence that proves to answer the research questions previously stated: In what ways does polysemy emerge in *Elden Ring* and in what ways does polysemy change, improve and impact the genre of video games. After studying people's feelings and interpretations of *Elden Ring* by analyzing the ending titled “the age of the stars,” I conclude that polysemy is a concept that not only changes the genre of video games but will drastically improve it as well. Further game developers need to take note of *Elden Ring's* success and begin to employ polysemy within their own titles.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

My study was presented with two main limitations which was the low number of people who participated in the survey and the quality of the survey itself. Since only thirteen people participated in the survey this severely limited the quality of responses I received. With such a low number of participants this could inhibit me from gaining an accurate representation of people's thoughts and opinions on *Elden Ring*. This also severely limits the demographic of the people who participated, not allowing me to hear from multiple populations of people. The other main limitation comes from the survey itself. The game *Elden Ring* has seven different endings and only analyzing one ending potentially limited the quality of information I received when there could have been much more information that would have benefited my research. This leaves room for holes within my research, potentially leaving myself unable to answer certain questions that I had set out to answer.

In further research, the number of survey participants needs to be increased significantly with greater diversity in the sample size. This will ensure that researchers gain a more accurate representation of the data that they are using to back up their hypothesis. Also, further research should employ multiple different surveys, one for each ending, ensuring that no stone is left unturned when gathering data.

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