

Jan Wysocki

## Game Review

# HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG

Team Cherry, 2025

The miniscule two-legged bug named Hornet enters a great hall and faces a shining gate. In front of the gate stand two other bugs, clad in simple robes. They are exhausted by the pilgrimage they have endured, climbing through the kingdom of Pharloom, traversing its labyrinthine caves full of monsters and other dangers. They have finally arrived at the gate to the Citadel, which is where they hope to end their journey and fulfil their religious duty. Hornet, in her bright red coat and with her trusted weapon, musters the two hopeful bugs. She knows what they must have survived to arrive here. She has seen the countless remains of other pilgrims on the long road to this hall, pilgrims who died lonesome deaths and whose lifeless husks have been cast aside, cared for by no one. It's a wonder that those two simple bugs stand here with Hornet. But they can't get the heavy gate to open and so ask Hornet for help. Just then the whole hall starts to tremble and from its ceiling drops a behemoth, a figure in metal armor that towers menacingly above Hornet. And with a mighty swing of its weapon – a gigantic incense burner – it carelessly sweeps aside the two pilgrims, who now face the same fate as the countless other dead pilgrims in Pharloom. The mighty creature's name, the Last Judge, appears on the screen and a fight begins. A struggle that will probably last for many, many tries and that will cost the player – as it did this reviewer – a lot of nervous tension.

The game described here is HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG, by the small Australian developer studio Team Cherry. It's a sequel to the studio's very first commercial video game release, HOLLOW KNIGHT. After its initial and surprising success in 2017, HOLLOW KNIGHT gained many fans, who were then excited when HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG was released eight years later. Its arrival was such a big event that other game developers had to reschedule

the release of their own products because SILKSONG soaked up all the attention of the gaming audience. In only a few weeks Team Cherry sold millions of copies of SILKSONG. One striking feature of the game is its beautiful hand-drawn art style that resembles an animated cartoon with loveable characters and mysterious places in a world full of talking bugs.

From both a game-studies perspective and a religious-studies perspective, it is particularly interesting (1) that a game that is so difficult and often frustrating has been so well received by a broad gaming audience, and (2) that the aesthetic and narrative elements of SILKSONG have such strong recourse to religious imagery.

The difficulty of video games is still a hot topic in gaming discourse. Arcade games in the 1970s and 1980s were often deliberately hard to master, to ensure a player returned to a machine repeatedly, paying to play again and again. When games became “domesticated” and developed a broad appeal, game designers began to include difficulty options or made games more accessible to players with limited gaming experience. Such was the standard in the 2000s and 2010s, up until the arrival of the DARK SOULS phenomenon. This series of role-playing games from the Japanese development studio FromSoftware gained many fans in the West despite being very difficult and requiring great patience from the player. Initially treated as niche games, the DARK SOULS series transcended its original target audience to gain much attention in the broader gaming world. It was viewed as an “authentic” or “true” gaming experience that did not cater to modern inclusive sensibilities; it could be mastered only through trial and error. Its marketing embraced the notion of DARK SOULS as a hard game, declaring, for example, “Prepare to die. Over and over again” in its video trailers, or naming its Microsoft Windows edition the “Prepare to Die Edition”. This approach was a strong departure from the ideal of a frictionless gaming experience through which the player could flow.

In their own way, both HOLLOW KNIGHT and HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG rode this wave of appreciating difficulty in games and embracing the resulting frustration as part of the challenge and reward of playing. SILKSONG is all about repeating sections of a game, learning how to traverse the environment, how to read and dodge enemy patterns and how to use openings left by enemies to attack. The result is a very physical experience and a specific kind of work. After some time, the player can control SILKSONG’s protagonist, Hornet, in just fractions of a second through muscle memory that builds up in the fingers after playing the game excessively. Games scholar

Espen Aarseth coined the term “ergodic literature” to describe texts that need some kind of non-trivial work (“ergon”) to be navigated and experienced.<sup>1</sup> Video games can be seen as a very elaborate form of this kind of ergodic hypertext. Playing SILKSONG is all about the work. The author of an academic text is often expected to be somewhat detached from their topic and to approach the subject without emotion. But here I can say that this author was and still is very, very frustrated with this game and questions his decision to spend more than 50 hours on it. Yet I must admit that those 50 hours of aching fingers, sweaty palms, and a lot of cursing created an experience that other media cannot provide. Negative emotions were (eventually) followed by my jumping triumphantly from my couch. Maybe this kind of experience is a big part of the enjoyment that players derive from games like HOLLOW KNIGHT, HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG or the DARK SOULS series.

HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG and the DARK SOULS series also share some narrative and aesthetic elements. DARK SOULS asks about the nature of death and builds its lore around creation myths of fire and darkness; players explore shrines, churches or other such structures with religious names. SILKSONG also draws heavily on religious narratives. The currency which Hornet can use to buy helpful items is called “rosary beads”. Those red balls are strung together on a cord, thus resembling an object one can find in different religious traditions, including Christianity and Buddhism. Throughout the game the players encounter many bugs who were on a pilgrimage but succumbed to a curse that either killed them outright or made them aggressive. After fighting these bugs, Hornet can collect the rosaries that the pilgrims carried with them. The bugs are on a journey to the Citadel, a place designated as “holy” and guarded by the Last Judge. The giant incense burner this figure wields is only one of many allusions to religious practices, in this instance to Roman Catholic tradition. The Last Judge, as the game notes, is tasked with judging the bugs according to their sinfulness and with admitting only those deemed “pure” and without sin.

When the player defeats this gatekeeper, they enter the Citadel and are greeted by large cathedral-like halls with gold ornamentation and columns that are reminiscent of classical Greek temples. Hornet encounters figures called Scrollreaders, whose task is to “read and recall the near endless scrolls of prayer”<sup>2</sup>, and Vaultkeepers, who are “responsible for delivering

1 Aarseth 1997, 1.

2 The quoted descriptions are from notes found in the game itself.

sermons and leading prayer”. Hornet can find “Psalm Cylinders” that contain recordings of sermons or songs that resemble Gregorian chant. Those who are deemed to have committed sins against the Citadel are found incarcerated as penitents. Some are granted absolution – though only after death. There’s even an automated confessional stall where Hornet can have her sins forgiven if she toils hard enough.

HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG is full of such interesting connections to religious aesthetics and narratives. It could make for a fun and helpful teaching object in religious-studies classes, where students could debate how religion is depicted in popular media and the purposes it serves in media products such as video games. Unfortunately, the usefulness of SILKSONG has to be balanced against its great difficulty. Scholars of religion interested in exploring its resonances firsthand must be ready to die over and over again and be prepared to invest a lot of their precious time. But those willing to risk their time (as well as their peace of mind) will experience a captivating connection between physical “ergon” and religious world-building in a video game.

### **Bibliography**

Aarseth, Espen J., 1997, *Cybertext. Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

### **Gameography**

DARK SOULS (FromSoftware, JP 2011).

DARK SOULS II (FromSoftware, JP 2014).

DARK SOULS III (FromSoftware, JP 2016).

HOLLOW KNIGHT (Team Cherry, AU 2017).