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Biblical and Christian iconography in Honkai: Star rail: An iconological analysis of Sunday's character design

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Abstract.
This study presents an iconological analysis of Biblical and Christian iconography in the character design of Sunday from Honkai: Star Rail. Methodologically, the research synthesizes Panofsky's iconological framework, Saussurean visual semiotics, and design theory into an integrative four-stage analytical pipeline to map character attributes against historical Christian artworks and theological concepts. Results reveal that key visual motifs – including halos, head wings, stoles, cross attributes, eye motifs, thorn motifs, and a pale color palette – are systematically recontextualized into visual communication systems that convey institutional power, surveillance, and structural authority aligned with Ena, the Aeon of Order. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate how contemporary East Asian game development decouples Western religious imagery from its original theological frameworks to construct ideological identity and narrative positioning within digital environments. Ultimately, the research shows how contemporary character design transforms sacred visual language to materialize narrative ideology in interactive spaces. As its primary scientific contribution, this study offers a replicable, interdisciplinary framework for digital game studies and visual semiotics to evaluate subverted Biblical and Christian iconography across modern interactive media.
Keywords: Iconology, Character Design, Christian Iconography, Visual Semiotics, Honkai: Star Rail Sunday

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Introduction

Honkai: Star Rail is a free-to-play role-playing gacha video game developed by miHoYo. It is the fourth version of the Honkai series, where some characters from Honkai Impact 3rd may appear throughout the story within the game. The first closed beta test was launched on October 27, 2021, and then publicly released on April 26, 2023. The main character within the game is referred to as the Trailblazer, who travels across the universes through the Astral Express, with the aim to connect old and new worlds while involved in resolving various planet-shattering disasters. Honkai: Star Rail wasa highly anticipated video gameeven before its release, based on the number of pre-registered players that reached 22.9 million with an additional 10 million outside of mainland China (GameLook, 2023). Following its release, Honkai: Star Rail quickly became one of the top 10 most downloaded games across 42 countries and regions, surpassing 20 million downloads within its first week.

Set within the science-fantasy universe, the characters within this game are aligned with specific universal concepts known as Paths, where each Path is associated with an Aeon; a godlike entity that exists across the universe. Those who follow a Path are called Pathstriders and usually designed to have an aligned will with its respective Aeon (Zhou, 2023). Characters from each existing path are portrayed as antagonistic, protagonistic, or neutral; and thus, each playable and non-playable character carries a certain visual design to enhance their position within the story.

Beyond their narrative functions, game characters operate as complex systems of visual communication that convey meaning through layered signs and cultural references. Character visuals play a crucial role in shaping how players interpret them, develop emotional attachments, and project aspects of their identity within interactive environments. Previous studies have demonstrated that players frequently establish affective and identificatory relationships with game characters through visual presentation, characterization, and narrative engagement (Erb et al., 2021; Burgess & Jones, 2020). Consequently, character design serves as a significant site for examining how meaning is constructed and communicated through visual representation and player identification.

From a semiotic perspective, visual elements such as costumes, color schemes, and symbolic attributes function as signifiers that convey both denotative and connotative meanings. Semiotics provides a framework for understanding how visual elements within character design operate as a communication system beyond their aesthetic function. In the Honkai: Star Rail universe, character designs frequently encode narrative roles, moral alignments, and thematic identities through stylized visual cues, thereby enabling players to interpret characters even prior to their narrative exposition (Bateman, 2021; Soriani & Caselli, 2020; Pradantyo et al., 2021). However, identifying how visual signs produce meaning does not necessarily explain the historical and cultural references from which those signs derive. This distinction is particularly relevant when character designs incorporate recognizable religious motifs whose meanings are shaped by established traditions of visual representation.

Honkai: Star Rail establishes a structured relationship between its characters and the Aeons associated with specific Paths, resulting in character designs that often function as visual extensions of broader cosmic principles. This relationship makes the game's characters a valuable subject for examining how visual communication operates across multiple interpretive layers without relying solely on verbal exposition. Character-driven storytelling in games frequently depends on visual coherence between narrative roles and design elements, allowing thematic identities to be reinforced through visual representation and player interpretation (Zaini et al., 2025).

To understand how these visual representations are structured and interpreted, it is necessary to examine the foundational theoretical frameworks of design principles, visual semiotics, and iconology.

Design principles are fundamental to structuring character design as a coherent visual system and establishing a distinct visual identity. In visual communication design, principles such as balance, contrast, hierarchy, unity, and emphasis function as an organized system that guide the arrangement of visual elements to achieve consistency and recognizability. These principles provide a framework through which designers can control composition and direct visual attention, ensuring that characters are perceived as unified visual entities rather than as collections of separate elements (Tomita, 2015; Oisina Putri et al., 2026). When applied effectively, these principles contribute to the development of a distinctive visual identity that enables audiences to recognize and differentiate characters within a visual environment.

In the context of character design, visual identity is constructed through the deliberate arrangement of shapes, proportions, colors, and stylistic elements. Prior studies have indicated that clear silhouette design and balanced composition play a significant role in enhancing recognizability, particularly in digital media where characters are suggested to have certain roles across various scales and contexts (Darma Yasa & Novitasari, 2025). Hierarchy and emphasis are also critical design principles, as they determine the focal points within the design, guiding the viewer's attention toward key visual features such as facial expressions, costume details, or defining attributes. This structured composition enables a character to communicate their identity and narrative significance.

Contrast and unity function as complementary principles, used to maintain both distinction and coherence within character design. Contrast differentiates visual elements through variations in color, form, or scale to make certain features stand out from others; while unity ensures that all visual components remain visually connected and consistent within the overall character design. Prior studies in visual communication highlighted that the balance between contrast and unity is essential

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in avoiding visual clutter without compromising visual clarity and aesthetic harmony (Seftina et al., 2024).

The application of design principles is also closely related to the expression of character traits and roles through visual form. Elements such as clothing, accessories, and stylistic features are organized using principles such as repetition, proportion, and alignment. For example, consistent arrangement of shapes and/or motifs can establish a recognizable visual pattern, whereas proportion can influence the perception of a character's strength, elegance, or authority (R. C. Putri, 2023).

Recent studies have shown that the application of design principles in character design is influenced by the cultural and social context as visual elements are designed to balance clarity with cultural relevance. Research in visual communication has demonstrated that an effective and communicative character design relies on the consistent application of compositional structure and visual hierarchy to ensure recognizability across diverse audiences, while still reflecting culturally grounded identities (Cao et al., 2021).

Visual semiotics is concerned with how meaning is constructed and communicated through visual signs by analyzing the relationship between the signifier (visible form) and the signified (the concept it represents). The interaction between these elements produces signification; a process through which meaning is generated and interpreted within a visual system (Saussure, 1983). Within visual communication studies, images are not understood as neutral representations but as structured forms that encode meaning through deliberate visual choices (Forceville, 2017) .

Visual elements such as color, composition, form, and stylistic features function as signifiers that carry culturally and contextually informed meanings. These meanings are shaped by shared visual conventions, allowing audiences to interpret images based on prior knowledge and expectations. Previous research indicates that the interpretation of visual signs depends on both their formal characteristics and the viewer's cultural background, emphasizing that signification is a dynamic and context-dependent process. (Cohn, 2020; Wang, 2026).

In character design, visual semiotics provides a framework for understanding how characters communicate their identities and narrative roles through visual construction. Elements such as costumes, color schemes, proportions, and accessories function as signifiers that convey information about a character's personality, social position, and thematic alignment. Previous studies in game design have demonstrated that audiences can form initial judgments about characters based solely on visual cues, even before engaging with narrative exposition (Cao et al., 2021; Smith & Carette, 2020; Zaini et al., 2025; Vandewalle et al., 2024).

Iconology is an interpretative approach that seeks to understand the deeper cultural, historical, and ideological meanings embedded in images. While iconography focuses on identifying and describing visual motifs, iconology extends analysis to the broader systems of thought that shape those motifs (Panofsky, 1939). In this sense, iconology provides an analytical dimension beyond visual semiotics: whereas semiotic analysis examines how visual signs produce meaning within a system, iconological analysis investigates the cultural, historical, and ideological frameworks that inform why particular signs carry specific meanings. In contemporary visual culture studies, iconology has expanded beyond its traditional art-historical framework into a method for analyzing how images function within complex cultural and media environments. Andersson (2024) argues that contemporary iconological approaches increasingly intersect with visual semiotics in explaining how meaning is constructed through the interaction of images, cultural frameworks, and interpretative contexts. Consequently, images are understood not merely as passive representations but as active visual structures that participate in broader systems of cultural and ideological meaning.

Recent studies have emphasized that iconology operates as a multi-layered interpretative process in which meaning is not confined to visual representation but emerges through cultural and contextual frameworks. Images are understood to encode values, beliefs, and ideological structures, requiring interpretation that extends beyond formal analysis. In contemporary visual studies, this has led to an increased focus on how images function within broader systems of knowledge and

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communication; particularly in mediated environments where meaning is shaped by technological and social conditions (Baroncini et al., 2021).

Iconology has increasingly been applied to digital and everyday visual contexts. Rather than treating images as isolated artifacts, recent research highlights their role within networks of circulation and social practices. Kędra (2023) demonstrated that images shared in digital environments function as culturally embedded communicative acts in which meaning is constructed through both visual content and the contexts of use, distribution, and reception.

Cultural context remains central to iconological analysis, as meaning is not inherent solely in the image itself but emerges through the interaction between visual representation and the viewer's cultural knowledge. Previous contemporary studies have emphasized that images are embedded within systems of ideology, belief, and historical narrative; thus, they must be interpreted in relation to these broader contexts (Kędra, 2023).

Grounded in these theoretical perspectives, existing empirical research has investigated visual structures and symbolic representations within interactive media.

Previous studies have extensively examinedthe role of visual elements in video games as communicative structures that influence player perception and narrative interpretation. Research byCao et al. (2021) demonstrated that character-centered visual design significantly affects players' understanding of gameplay experience and character identity, thereby emphasizing the communicative function of visual construction within digital games. In a similar context, studies concerning video game semiotics have investigated how signs, symbols, and visual cues can contribute to the production of narrative meaning and audience interpretation. For example, a study by Mazlan et al. (2025) analyzed the symbolic storytelling in digital games through a semiotic perspective, revealing that visual signs within game narratives operate as systems of meaning construction. Nevertheless, these studies predominantly focused on gameplay perception and narrative symbolism without extending the discussion toward the broader historical, cultural, and ideological dimensions embedded within the character design itself. Simultaneously, studies regarding religion and symbolism in digital games have increasingly explored the representation of sacred themes and theological imagery within interactive media. Bosman (2019) argued that digital games frequently appropriate religious symbols, sacred narratives, and theological concepts as part of contemporary media culture. Likewise, a study by Harwood (2022) discussed how the adaptation of religious aesthetic traditions in digital game environments was appliedin order to construct symbolic and spiritual experiences for players. However, these studies primarily emphasize religion as thematic content or environmental aesthetics rather than examining how religious symbolism is systematically embedded within the visual construction of individual characters. Moreover, research integrating semiotic and iconographic approaches in game studies remains relatively limited. A study byHansen (2021) demonstrated how religious visual structures contribute to symbolic worldbuilding within digital environments. Despite this development, the application of iconological analysis within contemporary video game character design remains underexplored, particularly in relation to how historical religious iconography is transformed into visual communication systems that construct ideological identity and narrative positioning. To address these gaps, this study provides an iconological analysis of Biblical and Christian iconography in the character design of Sunday from Honkai: Star Rail. The primary novelty of this research lies in establishing an integrative four-stage analytical pipeline – combining Panofsky's iconology, Saussurean visual semiotics, and design theory – specifically focused on individual character design rather than general environmental aesthetics. By examining how specific motifs (halos, head wings, stoles, cross attributes, eye motifs, thorn motifs, and a pale color palette) are transformed into visual communication systems, this study demonstrates how sacred aesthetics construct institutional power, structural authority, ideological identity, and narrative positioning in digital interactive media. Methodologically and theoretically, this research contributes a replicable framework to digital game studies and visual semiotics for interpreting subverted Biblical and Christian iconography in contemporary video games.

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Although semiotic analysis provides valuable insights into how signs function within a system of meaning, it often remains limited to the level of significance and does not sufficiently account for the identification of symbolic references or interpretation of deeper cultural and/or ideological contexts. Iconographic elements are frequently present in character designs, especially in fantasy and science-fiction genres; however, there is a lack of systematic analysis that connects these elements to broader interpretative design. Addressing this gap, this study positions itself as the intersection of character design studies, visual semiotics, religious iconography, and iconology within the context of digital media. The novelty of this research lies in the integration of design principles, visual semiotics, iconography, and iconology to examine how historical Christian and biblical symbolism is reinterpreted through the character design of NPC Sunday in Honkai: Star Rail. From a practical perspective, this study contributes a more comprehensive understanding of how meaning is constructed, represented, and interpreted through visual elements.

Method

This study employs a qualitative analytical approach to examine visual communication in video game character design through an integrated framework (Figure 1) by combining design theory, visual semiotics, and symbolic identification. Qualitative analysis is used to enable an in-depth interpretation of visual elements and their embedded meanings within a design context, where a character's position and design within the narrative serve as a medium of communication (Tumenbaev, 2024). The analysis begins by identifying visual elements through design principles of how visual elements are structured with composition, hierarchy, and visual identity to form a coherent character representation. The analysis then proceeds to a visual semiotic analysis where character elements such as clothing, color schemes, and accessories are examined as signifiers that produce meaning through processes of signification; a way to communicate how the character is positioned within the narrative roles and ideological positioning (R. C. Putri, 2023). To support a coherent analysis, iconographic analysis is used to identify symbolic motifs and references embedded within the character design to compare it with cultural and social recognition (Nugroho & Widiastuti, 2024).

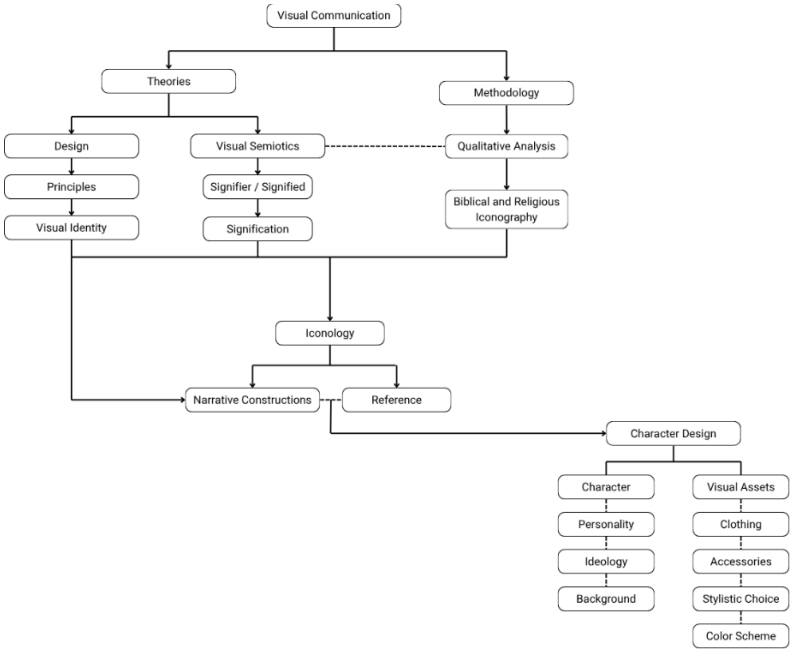


Figure 1. Research Framework
Source: Personal Documentation

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Data Collection and Unit of Analysis

The visual data analyzed in this study consist of the official 3D character model of NPC Sunday from Honkai: Star Rail, Ena's splash art, and visual materials presented through the official game. These materials were selected through purposive sampling because they represent official visual designs produced by the game developer and serve as the primary medium for communicating the character's identity. The unit of analysis comprises visual elements that possess symbolic and communicative functions within the character design. These elements include costume components, accessories, religious symbols, ornamental motifs, color schemes, and other visual attributes that contribute to the construction of the character's identity. Particular attention is given to visual elements that exhibit potential associations with Christian iconography, such as wings, halo-like forms, liturgical vestments, crosses, eye motifs, and thorn imagery. Each element is analyzed as a visual sign that contributes to the overall representation of the character.

Criteria for Identifying Iconographic References

Visual attributes were selected and analyzed based on three criteria:

1. Formal Resemblance: Direct visual alignment between Sunday's character features (halos, head wings, stoles, cross attributes, eye/thorn motifs, pale color palette) and historical Christian art or ecclesiastical attire.
2. Art-Historical Indexing: Cross-referencing identified motifs against established canons of Byzantine, Renaissance, Baroque, and Middle Ages sacred portraiture.
3. Functional Subversion: Identification of sacred signs recontextualized to convey institutional power, structural authority, and surveillance rather than traditional benevolence.

Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis was conducted through four stages that integrate visual semiotics, iconography in art history, and iconology. First, visual identification was carried out to document significant visual elements that are present in the character design, including costume features, accessories, symbols, motifs, and color compositions. Second, a semiotic analysis was performed to examine the denotative and connotative meanings of each visual element. At this stage, visual attributes were interpreted as signs that communicate particular characteristics, identities, and thematic associations. Third, iconographic analysis was employed to identify possible correspondences between the observed visual elements and established symbols within Christian visual traditions. The comparison was based on visual form, symbolic function, historical usage, and theological associations documented in academic literature concerning Christian art and religious imagery. Finally, iconological analysis was conducted to interpret the broader cultural, historical, and ideological meanings embedded within the identified symbols. This stage focused on understanding how the integration of Christian iconographic references contributes to the construction of Sunday's narrative role, ideological position, and thematic identity before the narrative explicitly reveals these characteristics.

Results and Discussion

Results

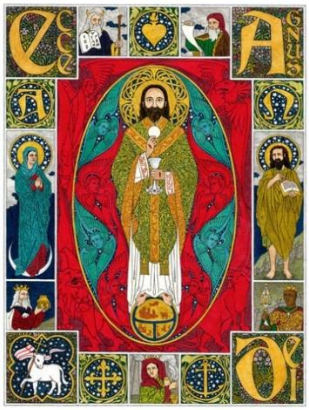
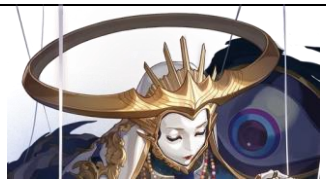
Visual Analysis of NPC Sunday's Character Design

The following section presents the visual analysis of NPC Sunday's character design through the frameworks of design principles, visual semiotics, iconography, and iconology. Table 1 provides a visual comparison between selected elements of Sunday's character design and relevant examples of Christian iconography, serving as the primary visual evidence for the analysis. Building upon these comparisons, Table 2 summarizes the analytical findings by identifying the semiotic meanings and

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iconological interpretations associated with each visual element. Through this approach, the analysis demonstrates how specific design features contribute to Sunday's narrative positioning, ideological identity, and representation of authority and divinity within Honkai: Star Rail.

Table 1. Visual Comparison of NPC Sunday's Character Design and Christian Iconography

Stylistic Choice	Character Design	Narrative Ideology and Positioning	Iconography
Full Design	 Figure 1. NPC Sunday Character Design in Dreamscape Pass StickerSource: Copyright: HoYoverse, accessed through Honkai: Star Rail Wiki on April 27, 2026.	 Figure 2. Ena, Aeon of OrderSource: Copyright: HoYoverse, accessed through Honkai: Star Rail Wiki on April 27, 2026.	 Figure 3. Private commission for the Roman Pontifical in 2012, *Jesus Christ the High Priest* by Daniel Mitsui (2011)Source: Copyright: Daniel Mitsui, accessed through Daniel Mitsui's Website on June 3, 2026.
Halo	 Figure 4. NPC Sunday's HaloSource: Copyright: HoYoverse, accessed through NPC Sunday 3D Model on April 27, 2026.	 Figure 5. Ena's HaloSource: Copyright: HoYoverse, accessed through Honkai: Star Rail Wiki on April 27, 2026.	 Figure 6. *Virgin and Child with Saints and Angels* by Pietro Lorenzetti, 1340 – 1345 (Middle Ages) Source: Don Marcello Massarenti Collection in Rome, accessed

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through the Walters Art Museum on May 1, 2026.



Figure 7. *The Tribute Money, Matthew 17:24-27*, by Masaccio in Brancacci Chapel, 1424
Source: Photographed by Steven Zucker, CC-BY-SA 2.0, accessed through smarthistory on May 1, 2026.



Figure 8. *The Three Marys at the Tomb*, by Ludwig Ferdinand Schnorr von Carolsfeld, 1835
Source: Ludwig Ferdinand Schnorr von Carolsfeld Encyclopedia, accessed through Wikipedia of Ludwig Ferdinand Schnorr von Carolsfeld on May 2, 2026

Head Wings



Figure 9. NPC Sunday's Head WingsSource: Copyright: HoYoverse, accessed through NPC Sunday 3D Model on April 27, 2026.



Figure 10. The Halovians Race with Robin (Left), and Sunday (Right)Source: Copyright: HoYoverse, accessed through Honkai: Star Rail Wiki of Halovian on April 29, 2026.

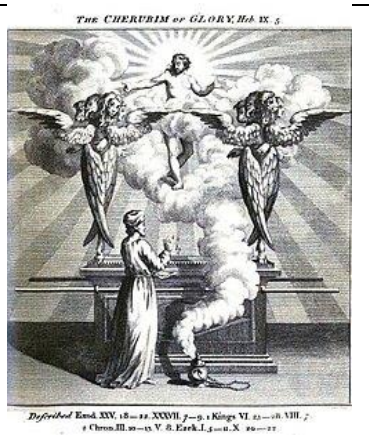


Figure 11. *Cherubim of Glory Shadowing The Mercy Seat* by Julius Bate, 1773
Source: Cherub Encyclopedia, accessed through Wikipedia of Cherub on May 2, 2026.

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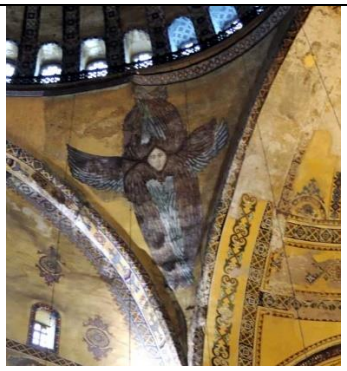


Figure 12. *Seraphim Fresco* in Hagia Sophia Chapel, Turkey, 13th Century
Source: Architecture around the World, accessed through Architecture around the World on May 2, 2026.



Figure 134. Stone-bas relief of a *Seraph* on the wall of Jerusalem International YMCA, Jerussalem, Israel, 1933.
Source: Wikipedia, accessed through Wikipedia Media on September 1, 2026.

Stole



Figure 14. NPC Sunday's Front of Upper Clothes.Source: Copyright: HoYoverse, accessed



Figure 15. NPC Sunday in Confessional SceneSource: Copyright: HoYoverse, personal documentation from an official in-game scene.

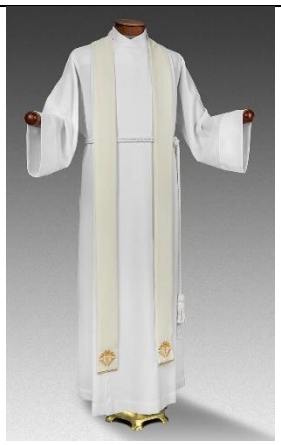


Figure 16. Stole for Priest
Source: Knights Gear, accessed through Knights Gear on May 5, 2026.

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through NPC Sunday 3D Model on April 27, 2026.



Figure 17. *The Confession* by Giuseppe Molteni, 1838
Source: Gallerie d'Italia, accessed through Gallerie d'Italia Artworks on May 5, 2026.



Figure 18. *Clergymen* within The History of Costume, by Braun & Schneider, 1861-1880.
Source: World4, accessed through World4 Court Dress during Byzantine on May 5, 2026.



Figure 20. *Pontifical*, France, 1485.
Source: The Morgan & Library Museum, accessed through The Morgan on September 1, 2026.

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Cross Attributes



Figure 21. NPC Sunday's GlovesSource: Copyright: HoYoverse, accessed through NPC Sunday 3D Model on April 27, 2026.

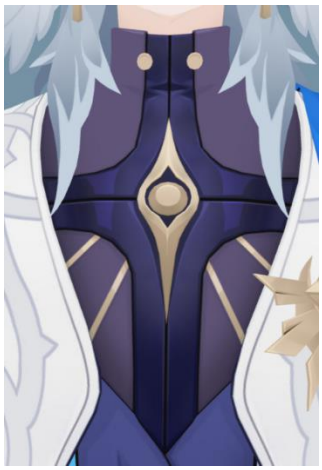


Figure 19. NPC Sunday's Chest Detail
Source: Copyright: HoYoverse, accessed through NPC Sunday 3D Model on April 27, 2026.



Figure 20. *Crux Mosaic* within Basilica of Sant'Apollinare in Classe, 549Source: Copyright: José Luiz Bernardes Ribeiro, CC BY-SA 4.0, accessed through Wikipedia Commons on May 5, 2026.

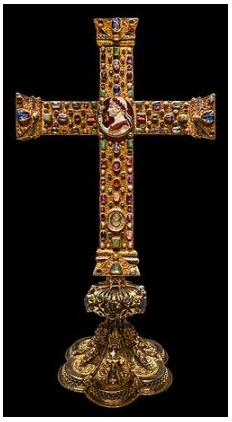


Figure 21. Cross of Lothair, *c. 1000 AD*
Source: Crux Gemmata, CC BY-SA 4.0, accessed through Wikipedia Commons on June 3, 2026.

Clothing Details – Eyes

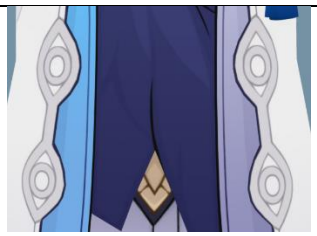


Figure 22. NPC Sunday's Front DetailSource: Copyright: HoYoverse, accessed through NPC Sunday 3D Model on April 27, 2026.



Figure 31. Eye on Ena's DesignSource: Copyright: HoYoverse, accessed through Honkai: Star Rail Wiki on April 27, 2026.



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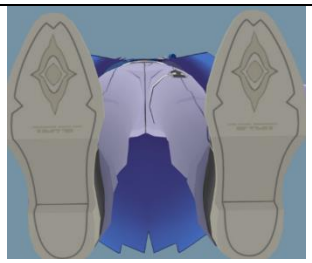


Figure 23. NPC Sunday's Sole of ShoesSource: Copyright: HoYoverse, accessed through NPC Sunday 3D Model on April 27, 2026.



Figure 24. NPC Sunday's Shoulder PieceSource: Copyright: HoYoverse, accessed through NPC Sunday 3D Model on April 27, 2026.

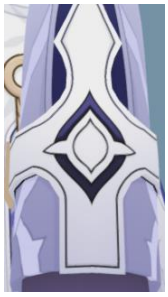


Figure 25. NPC Sunday's SleeveSource: Copyright: HoYoverse, accessed through NPC Sunday 3D Model on April 27, 2026.



Figure 26. NPC Sunday's Back DetailSource: Copyright: HoYoverse, accessed through NPC Sunday 3D Model on April 27, 2026.



Figure 32. *Eye of God* on Apse Chapel Ceiling in Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, Lviv, 1360 Source: Eye of Providence Wiki, CC BY-SA 4.0, accessed through Wikimedia Commons on May 2, 2026.



Figure 33. *Allégorie chrétienne*, by Jan Provost, 1966 Source: Louvre, accessed through Louvre Collections on September 1, 2026.

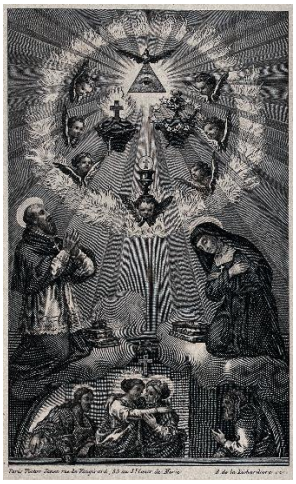


Figure 27. *The eye of God, with the dove of the Holy Spirit, the Sacred Hearts of Christ and the Virgin, and the Eucharist*, engraving by A.A. Bourgeois de la Richardiere, 1840 – 1849. Source: Wellcome Collection,

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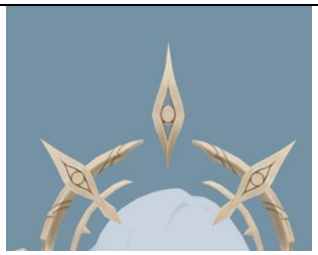


Figure 30. NPC Sunday's Detail on HaloSource: Copyright: HoYoverse, accessed through NPC Sunday 3D Model on April 27, 2026.

accessed through Wellcome Collections on September 1, 2026.

Clothing Details – Thorns



Figure 28. NPC Sunday's Detail on ClothingSource: Copyright: HoYoverse, accessed through NPC Sunday 3D Model on April 27, 2026.



Figure 29. NPC Sunday's Detail on BackSource: Copyright: HoYoverse, accessed through NPC Sunday 3D Model on April 27, 2026.



Figure 32. *Christ Crowned with Thorns*, by Annibale Carracci, 1598-1600, Baroque
Source: artera, accessed through artera on May 5, 2026.



Figure 40. *The Crowning with Thorns,* by Tiziano Vecellio, 1542-1543
Source: Le Louvre Collections, accessed through Louvre Collections on May 5, 2026.

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Figure 30. NPC Sunday's SleeveSource: Copyright: HoYoverse, accessed through NPC Sunday 3D Model on April 27, 2026.



Figure 31. NPC Sunday's TailcoatSource: Copyright: HoYoverse, accessed through NPC Sunday 3D Model on April 27, 2026.



Figure 41. *The Crown of Thorns*, by Giandomenico Tiepolo, 1772Source: Copyright: Museo Nacional del Prado, accessed through Museo del Prado on May 6, 2026.

Color Palette	 Figure 42. Color Palette Source: Personal Documentation	(See Figure 2 and Figure 3)

Source: Personal Documentation

Table 2. Analytical Findings of Sunday's Christian Iconography

Visual Elements	Christian Reference	Semiotic Meaning	Iconological Interpretation
Halo	Saintly halos in Christian art	Sanctity, divine presence, spiritual authority	Positions Sunday as a figure of elevated religious legitimacy and transcendence
Wings	Angelic iconography	Divine messenger, intermediary between heaven and humanity	Reinforces his narrative role as a sacred servant of higher powers
Stole	Christian liturgical vestment	Clerical garment, ritual authority	Communicates institutional religious power and ideological affiliation

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Cross	Christian cross symbolism	Faith, devotion, salvation	Establishes a visual association with religious commitment and spiritual leadership
Eye Motif	Eye of Providence	Divine omniscience, surveillance	Suggests a position of authority, observation, and ideological control
Thorn Motif	Crown of Thorns	Suffering, sacrifice, devotion	Represents a commitment to belief and acceptance of spiritual burden
White Palette	Christian color symbolism	Purity, holiness, transcendence	Constructs moral legitimacy and sacred identity

Source: Personal Documentation

Discussion

As shown in Figure 2, Sunday's overall character design visually reflects his ideological alignment with his dedicated Aeon, Ena (Figure 3). Within the narrative of Honkai: Star Rail, Ena embodies the Path of Order and is depicted through iconography that emphasizes control, hierarchy, and authority, including the imagery of a giant observing eye, a puppet figure, and a prominent golden halo-like crown. These visual attributes establish Order as a principle associated with structure, discipline, and obedience. Sunday's design reflects these qualities through the deliberate use of formal and highly organized visual elements. His attire is characterized by a clean silhouette, symmetrical composition, and carefully arranged garments, with no visible elements appearing misplaced or visually disruptive. This stylistic coherence communicates a sense of discipline and restraint, reinforcing his narrative position as a devoted follower of Order. Furthermore, his clothing bears visual similarities to contemporary representations of Christian clergy, particularly the formal garments associated with priests in religious iconography. Comparable visual conventions can also be observed in artistic depictions such as Jesus Christ the High Priest (Figure 4). Through these associations, Sunday's design communicates religious authority, devotion, and institutional legitimacy, allowing audiences to infer aspects of his ideological identity before engaging with his narrative role in detail.

One of the most prominent features of Sunday's character design is the golden halo positioned behind his head, extending approximately to the width of his shoulders (Figure 5). This element closely resembles the large crown-like halo depicted in Ena's visual design (Figure 6), which serves as one of the most visually dominant aspects of the Aeon's appearance. The visual correspondence between these two halos reinforces Sunday's ideological alignment with Ena and visually establishes his association with the Path of Order. Historically, the halo has been widely associated with divinity, holiness, and spiritual authority within religious art and iconography (Dartar & Kaplanoğlu, 2021). One of its early appearances can be observed in Pietro Lorenzetti's Virgin and Child with Saints and Angels (1340–1345) (Figure 7), where halos are used to signify the sacred status of the Madonna and Christ. Similar symbolism appears in Masaccio's depiction of Matthew 17:24–27 (Figure 8), in which halo-like disks are positioned above Christ and the apostles. In contrast, the illustration The Three Marys at the Tomb with an Angel (Figure 9) depicts a halo only above the angel, visually distinguishing the divine figure from the human characters. These examples demonstrate how halo imagery has historically functioned as a visual marker of sanctity, spiritual distinction, and divine authority within Christian visual traditions. Because of this long-standing association, the halo has become a culturally recognizable symbol within both Christianity and broader visual culture. In contemporary media, halo imagery is frequently employed to communicate qualities such as purity, transcendence, innocence, or elevated status, depending on the narrative context. Within Sunday's character design, the halo

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functions not only as a decorative element but also as a visual communication device that immediately signals his spiritual significance and ideological authority. By drawing upon established Christian iconographic conventions, the design enables audiences to infer aspects of Sunday's religious identity and narrative importance even before encountering his story directly. The adaptation of halo imagery therefore demonstrates how historical Christian iconography is recontextualized within digital media as an efficient visual shorthand for communicating character identity, belief, and authority.

Another notable feature of Sunday's character design is the pair of white wings located on either side of his head, which share the same color as his hair (Figure 10). This anatomical feature originates from the narrative background of his race, the Halovians. According to the in-game description, Halovians are a species characterized by seraphic iconography and are commonly portrayed with wings emerging from the backs of their heads and halo-like ornaments. They are described as possessing voices and appearances capable of captivating the soul, halos that draw attention, and wings that contribute to their divine appearance. Notably, this anatomical feature is uncommon among Halovian characters. Among the Halovians introduced in the game, Sunday and his biological sister are the only known characters depicted with these distinctive head wings (Figure 11). From an iconological perspective, the visual depiction of wings closely resembles common artistic interpretations of biblical angels, particularly Seraphim and Cherubim. One example can be found in Julius Bate's Cherubim of Glory Shadowing the Mercy Seat (1773) (Figure 12), in which the Cherubim are portrayed as multi-winged celestial beings positioned above humanity yet below Christ. Such compositions reflect a long-standing iconographic tradition in which wings function as visual indicators of heavenly origin, spiritual authority, and divine status (Romanescu & Kaya, 2022). Similar associations can be found in Isaiah 6:2, where the Seraphim are described as possessing six wings, as well as in the thirteenth-century Seraphim fresco of the Hagia Sophia Chapel (Figure 13) which depicts a multi-winged angelic figure, and a stone bas-relief depicting six-winged seraph on the wall of Jerusalem International YMCA in Israel (Figure 14). Throughout Christian visual history, Seraphim and Cherubim have frequently been represented with multiple wings arranged across different parts of the body, reinforcing their distinction from ordinary human forms. Within the context of character design, these wing motifs function as more than references to angelic beings. As visual signifiers, they immediately distinguish Sunday from other characters and communicate his elevated status within the narrative hierarchy. The association with angelic iconography reinforces themes of transcendence, authority, purity, and spiritual legitimacy that are consistently reflected throughout his design. Through the adaptation of established religious visual conventions, the wings serve as an efficient communicative device that conveys aspects of Sunday's identity and ideological positioning before they are explicitly revealed through narrative exposition.

Another notable element of Sunday's character design can be observed in the front portion of his attire, which resembles a priest's stole in its placement, shape, and color arrangement. This garment appears as a white vertical element positioned over a purple and grey suit, creating a clear visual contrast that draws attention to the center of the character design (Figure 15). The significance of this feature becomes more apparent throughout the narrative, particularly in scenes where Sunday listens to the concerns and confessions of other characters within a setting that closely resembles a traditional church confessional (Figure 16). The visual association between the costume and the narrative setting reinforces his role as a religious and institutional figure within the story. Within Christian liturgical tradition, the stole is one of the most significant vestments, functioning as a visual marker of priestly authority, sacred duty, and ecclesiastical identity. Traditionally worn around the neck and shoulders, the stole symbolizes spiritual responsibility and participation in sacramental rites. Previous studies on liturgical vestments have emphasized that religious garments function not merely as ceremonial attire but also as symbolic and communicative elements that convey sacred identity, institutional hierarchy, and theological meaning within Christian ritual practices (Borgioli, 2018; Glodt, 2020). As shown in Figure 17, the stole is typically draped over the shoulders and often incorporates decorative embroidery or ecclesiastical symbols associated with specific churches, religious orders, or

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liturgical occasions. Although the design of the stole has varied throughout history, its distinctive form remains one of the most recognizable visual attributes of Christian clergy (Figure 19). A notable historical example can be found in Giuseppe Molteni's The Confession (1838) (Figure 18), which depicts a confessional encounter between a woman and a priest, and Pontifical (1485) (Figure 20). In The Confession painting, the priest is portrayed wearing a white robe accompanied by a purple stole, visually emphasizing his spiritual responsibility, sacred authority, and clerical role. This imagery offers a compelling visual parallel to Sunday's confessional scene in Figure 16, where similar visual and narrative elements are employed. From a character design perspective, the incorporation of stole-like vestments serves as a communicative function that extends beyond historical reference. The garment visually establishes Sunday as an institutional figure whose authority derives not only from personal qualities but also from his position within a structured religious system. Through this visual association, the design communicates hierarchy, spiritual legitimacy, and ideological affiliation using iconographic conventions that remain recognizable across cultural and historical contexts.

Several elements within Sunday's character design incorporate forms that resemble a cross, most notably on the back of his gloves (Figure 21) and at the center of his chest ornament (Figure 22). The cross is one of the central symbols of Christianity, functioning both as a representation of Christ's crucifixion and as a broader sign of salvation, sacrifice, divine authority, and spiritual devotion. Contemporary studies emphasize that the cross operates as a complex theological and visual symbol whose meaning extends beyond its physical form. Doviak (2021) explains that the Christian cross functions as a devotional image intended to encourage contemplation, prayer, and spiritual reflection through its symbolic associations. Throughout Christian history, the cross has appeared in various artistic and architectural contexts. One example can be observed in the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare in Classe (Figure 23), where a mosaic cross featuring the figure of Christ occupies the center of the composition. As Christian visual traditions developed, the form of the cross was adapted into a variety of artistic interpretations while maintaining its symbolic significance. This can be seen in the Ottonian crux gemmata from the Rhine-Meuse region (Figure 24), which incorporates imperial imagery through the representation of the laurel-crowned Emperor Augustus. Although the visual form evolved across different historical periods, the placement of a central figure within the cross remained a recurring compositional feature. A similar visual arrangement can be observed in Sunday's character design. The cross motif positioned on his chest features Ena's eye at its center (Figure 31), replacing the figure of Christ commonly found in Christian iconography. This adaptation visually reinforces Sunday's devotion to Ena and reflects his ideological commitment to the Aeon's Path. Through an iconological perspective, the substitution of Christ with Ena's eye transforms a familiar Christian symbol into a narrative device that communicates both religious devotion and ideological allegiance within the fictional world of Honkai: Star Rail. Beyond its association with Christianity, the cross functions as a highly recognizable visual symbol that communicates meaning efficiently within character design. Due to its widespread presence in religious art and visual culture, audiences can readily associate the symbol with devotion, spiritual authority, sacrifice, and moral conviction. Within Sunday's design, the incorporation of cross motifs contributes to the construction of an identity deeply rooted in religious belief and institutional authority. The symbol therefore functions not only as an iconographic reference to Christian visual traditions, but also as a communicative device that enables players to infer aspects of Sunday's ideological alignment and narrative significance prior to direct narrative exposition. This demonstrates how historical religious imagery can be reinterpreted within contemporary game character design as a form of visual shorthand for conveying complex narrative information.

Echoing the prominent eye motif that appears in Ena's design (Figure 31), eye-shaped symbols are repeatedly incorporated throughout Sunday's costume design. These motifs can be observed on the front of his vest or stole (Figure 25), the soles of his shoes (Figure 26), the pin attached to his shoulder piece (Figure 27), the sleeves of his upper garment (Figure 28), the ornament positioned on his back (Figure 29), and within the structure of his halo (Figure 30). The repeated appearance of this motif establishes the eye as one of the dominant symbolic elements within Sunday's overall design. In

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Christian iconography, the image of a singular eye is commonly associated with the Eye of God or the Eye of Providence. Historical examples can be found in the Eye of God depicted on the apse chapel ceiling of the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption in Lviv (1360) (Figure 32), a painting by Jan Provost titled Allégorie chrétienne (1966) (Figure 33), and an engraving by A.A. Bourgeois de la Richardiere in 1840-1849 titled The Eye of God, with the dove of the Holy Spirit, the Sacred Hearts of Christ and the Virgin, and the Eucharist (Figure 34) . Within Christian visual culture, this symbol is associated with divine omniscience, authority, and spiritual presence. Traditionally, the Eye of Providence is represented as a single eye enclosed within a triangle and surrounded by rays of light, serving as a visual expression of God's all-seeing nature and the theological concept of the Holy Trinity. Contemporary studies suggest that the symbol functions not merely as an ornament but as a theological image intended to communicate divine surveillance, protection, and transcendence through visual form (Zavalii, 2022). Similarly, Kašparová (2026) argues that visual symbols associated with divine perception are often employed to evoke awareness of faith, morality, and spiritual accountability. A comparable symbolic function can be observed in Ena's visual design. The singular eye appears behind the figure, directing its gaze toward Ena and the celestial sphere held between their hands. Through this composition, the eye becomes a visual representation of observation, authority, and divine knowledge. When this motif is repeatedly integrated into Sunday's costume design, it reinforces his ideological devotion to Ena and visually communicates his alignment with the Aeon's principles. From an iconological perspective, the eye motif extends beyond its traditional association with divine omniscience and acquires additional meanings related to surveillance, judgment, order, and control. Its persistent presence throughout Sunday's design contributes to the construction of his identity as a figure closely associated with authority, observation, and ideological discipline. This demonstrates how historical religious symbols can be recontextualized within contemporary digital narratives, allowing established iconographic meanings to be adapted and expanded to support new narrative and ideological functions.

Another recurring element within Sunday's costume design is the thorn motif, which appears prominently across several parts of his attire, including the right side of his stole (Figure 35), the back drapery of his garment (Figure 36), the sleeves (Figure 37), and the tail of his coat (Figure 38). The repeated use of this motif establishes thorns as a significant visual component within his overall character design. Throughout Christian visual culture, thorns have long functioned as an important symbol associated with suffering, sacrifice, redemption, and spiritual endurance through the imagery of the Crown of Thorns worn by Christ during the Passion. This symbolism has been extensively represented throughout art history, as seen in Annibale Carracci's Christ Crowned with Thorns (1598–1600) (Figure 39), Titian's The Crowning with Thorns (1542–1543) (Figure 40), and Giandomenico Tiepolo's The Crown of Thorns (1772) (Figure 41). These works emphasize the Crown of Thorns as both a physical instrument of suffering and a visual symbol of sacrifice and redemption. Historically, thorn imagery in Christianity can be traced to the biblical narrative of the Fall in the Book of Genesis, where thorns symbolize hardship, punishment, and the consequences of human sin (Genesis 3:17–18). This symbolism later developed in the New Testament through the Passion narrative, in which Roman soldiers placed a crown of thorns upon Christ as an act of mockery toward his kingship. As described in Matthew 27:27–29, Christ was clothed in a scarlet robe and crowned with thorns before being ridiculed as the "King of the Jews." Through this narrative, the thorn became a powerful visual symbol of suffering, humiliation, sacrifice, and ultimately redemption. For centuries, the Crown of Thorns has remained one of the most recognizable motifs within Christian iconography, serving as a visual reminder of Christ's Passion and salvific sacrifice. Previous studies on Christian visual culture have demonstrated that religious imagery functions as a medium through which spiritual meaning and emotional contemplation are communicated visually. Flora (2025) argues that Christian devotional imagery operates as an embodied sensory structure capable of mediating sacred presence, spiritual contemplation, and emotional experience through visual perception. Similarly, studies on biblical visual interpretation suggest that Passion imagery functions symbolically to communicate theological

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concepts such as martyrdom, redemption, salvation, and divine authority through representations of Christ's suffering (Hornik et al., 2021). Within Sunday's character design, however, the thorn motif is detached from its original biblical narrative and recontextualized within the fictional world of Honkai: Star Rail. Rather than functioning as a direct representation of Christ, the motif operates as a visual marker of devotion, self-sacrifice, and unwavering commitment to a higher belief system. Through its repeated appearance across multiple costume elements, the thorn imagery contributes to the construction of Sunday's identity as a character whose actions and worldview are shaped by ideological conviction and religious devotion. This adaptation demonstrates how contemporary character design appropriates historical religious symbolism and reinterprets it to construct narrative complexity, emotional resonance, and ideological meaning within digital media.

Finally, the color palette presented in Figure 42 is prominently reflected in both Sunday's character design and Ena's visual appearance. The shared use of white and pale tones functions as a direct visual reference to Sunday's devotion to Ena and reinforces his narrative alignment with the Path of Order. Within Christian visual culture, white is frequently associated with holiness, purity, transcendence, and divine presence. Contemporary studies on religious imagery emphasize that luminosity and pale visual tones function as symbolic devices that communicate sacredness and spiritual elevation. Flora (2025) argues that the color white in Christian devotional spaces operates as an embodied sensory experience associated with spiritual purity, sacred illumination, and contemplative transcendence. Consequently, white is commonly employed in depictions of angels, saints, clergy members, and other sacred figures. Within Sunday's design, the predominance of white contributes to the perception of moral legitimacy, spiritual authority, and elevated status. The visual correspondence between Sunday's palette and Ena's design further reinforces his ideological devotion and his position within the narrative. This demonstrates how contemporary game character design continues to adapt historical Christian color symbolism as a visual shorthand for communicating character identity and belief.

Alternative Interpretations and Visual Tropes

While this study decodes Sunday's design through Christian iconography, semiotic analysis evaluates the functional meaning of visual structures within the game text rather than asserting definitive developer intent. Certain key attributes – such as halos, multi-winged silhouettes, and eye motifs – are also prevalent across broader East Asian digital media, particularly within Japanese animation (anime) and high-fantasy game design. In these traditions, angelic visuals frequently operate as generalized tropes denoting transcendent status, cosmic purity, or biomechanical majesty rather than direct theological commentary.

Recognizing these overlapping traditions prevents a purely deterministic reading. Visual features in digital games often result from aesthetic convergence and globalized design tropes rather than singular historical borrowing. As contemporary game design literature observes, modern interactive media relies on synthesized visual repositories where sacred symbols, secular tropes, and pop-culture conventions intersect. Acknowledging these broader traditions enriches the analysis, demonstrating how Sunday's character design leverages both specific Biblical references and wider media tropes to construct institutional power and narrative positioning.

Critical Implications for Digital Media and Game Design

In contemporary game design, adapting Biblical and Christian iconography serves as a direct visual shorthand to establish a character's authority and moral alignment before explicit narrative exposition occurs. In Honkai: Star Rail, Sunday's design draws on familiar sacred symbols – such as halos, seraphic wings, and liturgical stoles – not to signal traditional benevolence, but to convey institutional power and structural authority. This reflects a broader trend in global digital media, particularly within East Asian game development, where Western religious motifs are decoupled from their original theological contexts and repurposed into secular story elements. By pairing pristine angelic visuals

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with symbols of surveillance like Ena's eye, Sunday's character design subverts classical sacred aesthetics. The contrast between holy imagery and oppressive oversight illustrates how visual representations of divine perfection can be used to justify strict control and institutional power within interactive spaces.

Sunday's visual design aligns with an established convention in digital games where religious iconography represents themes of absolute order and authoritarian control. Similar design choices appear in series such as Shin Megami Tensei, where Law-aligned figures adopt angelic forms, halos, and white robes to symbolize a desire for universal peace achieved through the sacrifice of human free will. Likewise, titles like Final Fantasy and Bayonetta frequently utilize sacred visual elements – such as multi-winged structures, divine eyes, and radiant halos – to visually code antagonists whose self-righteous authority poses a threat to the protagonist. By placing Sunday within this broader gaming tradition, Honkai: Star Rail relies on a recognizable visual language: using sacred aesthetics not to represent genuine benevolence, but to signal a rigid ideology that values systemic harmony over individual autonomy.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Sunday's character design in Honkai: Star Rail functions not merely as an aesthetic construction but as a complex visual communication system built through the adaptation of Christian and biblical iconography. Through the integration of design principles, visual semiotics, iconography, and iconology, the analysis reveals how visual elements such as halos, wings, stole-like garments, crosses, eye motifs, thorn imagery, and pale color palettes collectively construct his narrative identity and ideological positioning within the game's story. Rather than functioning as decorative features, these elements draw upon long-established Christian visual traditions associated with divinity, spiritual authority, devotion, suffering, transcendence, and sacred responsibility.

The findings further demonstrate that Sunday's design systematically aligns with his role as a follower of Ena, the Aeon of Order, through the reinterpretation of visual structures commonly found in Christian religious art and ecclesiastical representation. Historical depictions of angels, clergy members, Christ figures, and devotional symbols are transformed into contemporary visual signifiers that communicate his ideological devotion, elevated social status, and spiritual authority. Through iconological interpretation, these visual elements function not only as references to Christianity but also as symbolic structures that reinforce themes of order, control, faith, and transcendence within the narrative world of Honkai: Star Rail.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates how contemporary video game character design appropriates and reinterprets historical religious iconography to construct coherent narrative meaning within digital media. The systematic use of Christian and biblical visual references in Sunday's design shows that historical iconography remains a powerful tool in shaping a character's ideology, narrative positioning, and audience perception.

Scientific Contribution

Beyond Sunday's specific portrayal, this research offers both theoretical and practical scientific contributions to visual communication and game design scholarship. Theoretically, it demonstrates that classical iconological frameworks can be effectively adapted to interactive media, providing a structured, four-stage approach to decode how visual aesthetics encode ideological power dynamics. Practically, the analytical framework established here offers researchers and game developers a replicable model for examining how historical, sacred, or cultural symbols are repurposed across different genres and titles. By bridging art history with character design, this study confirms that digital

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media iconology is a valuable approach for understanding how interactive media communicates complex cultural and narrative meanings.

Methodological Limitations

Despite these insights, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study's focus on a single case study – Sunday from Honkai: Star Rail – limits the immediate generalizability of the findings across the broader gaming landscape. Second, the reliance on qualitative semiotic and iconological frameworks grounds the analysis in textual decoding through theoretical models rather than primary developer interviews or confirmed design intent. Finally, because the research relies strictly on text-based visual analysis without empirical audience testing, individual player perceptions and interpretations of these sacred visual motifs may vary.

Future Research

Future research may extend this study by examining the visual development of Sunday's character from his initial non-playable appearance to his later playable form in order to explore how shifts in personality, ideology, and narrative role are reflected through design changes. Future studies may also integrate narrative analysis, including character behaviour, background story, racial identity, and interpersonal relationships, to examine how visual design and narrative exposition operate together in constructing character meaning through an iconological perspective. Finally, future works could build upon this research by conducting player reception surveys, incorporating developer commentary, or expanding the analysis to a broader corpus of characters across multiple titles.

Declaration

Artificial Intelligence Use Statement

The authors used Gemini during manuscript preparation strictly for language editing, grammar correction, and sentence restructuring. The tool was not used for content generation, data analysis, or scientific interpretation, and its use did not replace the authors' scientific judgment. The authors take full responsibility for the final contents of the manuscript.

Author Contributions Statement

- F. N. S.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Writing—Original Draft.
- T. E. W.: Validation, Resources, Writing—Review & Editing.

Both authors have made substantive contributions to this work, have read and approved the final version of the manuscript, and take full responsibility for its content.

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