

**Master's Thesis**

**Adaptation of Japanese Myth in Video Games:  
The Case of Ghost of Tsushima**

by

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September 2021

Master's Thesis Presented to

Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Asia Pacific Studies / Society and Culture

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## **Certification Page**

I, Brown Jordan Michael (Student ID 51119605) hereby declare that the contents of this Master's Thesis are original and true, and have not been submitted at any other university or educational institution for the award of degree or diploma. All the information derived from other published or unpublished sources has been cited and acknowledged appropriately.

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Brown Jordan Michael

23 July 2021

## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Yoshida Kaori, who's guidance and feedback has been invaluable throughout the research process. Yoshida's seminars and hours long talks in her office discussing research will forever be cherished memories from my time here at APU.

I would also like to thank my roommates (Sophie Badiashvilli, Guobjartur Mar Snaebjornsson (bibi), and Joshua Kevin) who provided constant feedback and a place to rant about my research. Struggling through the changes Coronavirus made to our lives while also trying to make progress on our thesis is something I am glad I did not have to go through alone. Our time together will always be one of my most fond memories of life in Beppu, Japan.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the support that my friends and family provided. My friends endured rants about research they did not fully comprehend, and my family provided welcome breaks from research here in Japan by informing me of life in America. A special thanks is owed to my parents; without their financial and undying support this research would not exist. Finally, I would like to thank my girlfriend who's coffee making skills and emotional support were instrumental in the weeks leading up to submission.

## **Abstract**

The present study aims to discover how myths are being utilized in video games, more specifically, how they are continued, adapted, and created in video games. Video games have become the newest storytelling device to transmit myths across the world, yet there are few studies that touch on this phenomenon. This study fills the gap in literature by using *Ghost of Tsushima* (2020) as a case study to understand this phenomenon. A textual analysis of *Ghost of Tsushima* was conducted to understand how Japanese mythology is being used in the game. After analyzing the data, it was concluded that myths are most commonly used to camouflage gameplay mechanics and enhance world building. Myths in video games also conform to mythical structures theorized by Joseph Campbell and Levi Strauss.

## **Introduction**

### **Background of the Study**

Mythology is intertwined with a region's culture and history. They not only reflect cultural values, but also provide a framework from which to understand the world around us. Myths have survived through history by being carried forward to new generations through various forms of storytelling. The way in which mythology is transmitted is fueled by technological advances. For our ancestors that meant myths were told through oral storytelling, drawings, oral epics, and literature. In modern times myths are mostly found in literature, film, and (most recently) video games. It is well established that myths are an important research topic, hence the name mythology, due to its important place in human history. Meanwhile the importance of video game studies is becoming gradually recognized by academia. As of 2021 there are numerous journals dedicated to the study of video games such as *Games and Culture* by SAGE publications. According to Richter (2019), video games were the largest entertainment industry by far in 2019 with a \$147.7 billion global revenue versus the box office's \$42.5 billion. Mythology is prevalent in video games and while the importance of studying mythology and video games are both recognized, there are remarkably few studies that research the intersection of mythology and video games. To fill this gap in literature the following research questions and objectives are posed:

### **Research Objectives**

This study aims to accomplish the following objectives:

1. To identify how videogames continue, adapt, and create new myths.
2. To better understand how video games reflect Joseph Campbell's monomyth theory.

## Research Questions

In order to achieve the objectives above, this thesis attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. How do contemporary video games incorporate Japanese myths into their narratives?
2. How does the interactive nature of video games contribute to the adaptation of Japanese myths in video games?

The video game *Ghost of Tsushima* is analyzed as representational data to answer the research goals of this thesis. *Ghost of Tsushima* was chosen because it is an extremely popular game released in 2020. The popularity ensures that readers of this thesis will have easy access to both the game itself and information surrounding the game online if they choose. According to Katrin Becker (2011) in her article about justifying game choices in video game studies, using games that are commercially successful is one way to make sure the audience respects the example. *Ghost of Tsushima* was also selected because the developers clearly took inspiration from Japanese mythology while at the same time intentionally steering the game away from being “high fantasy”<sup>1</sup> (PerFunctory, 2020). Japanese mythology was chosen because it is a mythology that commonly serves as inspiration for video games.

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<sup>1</sup> High fantasy in this context refers to a video game that has a lot of fantastical elements like spells, mythical beasts, and magic.



# Chapter 1: Literature Review

## 1.1 Defining Games

Since game studies emerged as a viable international academic field in 2001, researchers have continued to struggle with one of the most fundamental questions in game studies: What is a game? While seeking to provide a short and simple definition of what a game is, Nicolas Esposito (2005) claims that games can be defined as an activity that is fictional, unpredictable, and unproductive with time and space limits, rules, and without obligation. According to Thomas Malaby, “Games are activities that can accommodate any number and kind of stakes and are not intrinsically consequence free, or therefore, separable from everyday experience” (Malaby, 2007, p. 98). The use of rules as a defining characteristic of games has continued to be used in nearly every definition in game studies. This can be seen by the definition of a game as “A voluntary interactive in which one or more players follow rules that constrain their behavior, enacting an artificial conflict that ends in a quantifiable outcome” (Zimmerman, 2004, p. 160). Rules are deemed a defining characteristic of games, along with some extra components Zimmerman (2004) has added. Along with rules, Eric Zimmerman (2004) argues that games are at their core voluntary activities that must include an artificial conflict and quantifiable outcome. Artificial conflict refers to the need for a game to have some sort of conflict that the player must face. For example, in Mario where the ever elusive Bowser captures Daisy, Mario (the player) must go on an adventure to rescue her and thus solve the conflict. The solution to the conflict created by a game will always have a quantifiable outcome.<sup>2</sup> Games must have rules and quantifiable outcomes, or they would become unplayable. Similar to attempting to define something as

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<sup>2</sup> While Mario may defeat Bowser by using any number of attack combinations, he is certainly not going to shoot Bowser with a rifle unless this was an option implemented by the game designers.

broad as “play”, what constitutes a game is too comprehensive to ever have a single definition that is universally accepted. Zimmerman’s definition brings us closer to answering the dilemma of how one term can encompass such a wide range of games.

## **1.2 The Field of Game Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches and Players as Analysts**

Just as video games have evolved far beyond simple games like Pacman and Tetris, the field of game studies is constantly evolving and expanding. Similar to other new fields that found themselves thrust into the spotlight (Ex. Film studies), game studies have had to rely on methodologies and theories from other fields to conduct research. It has and always will be an inherently interdisciplinary endeavor (Nacke, L. E., & Deterding, S., 2017). This can be seen by Espen Aarseth’s assertion that “we all enter this field from somewhere else” (Aarseth, 2001, para. 7). Aarseth was far from the only games scholar to believe this, eight years later Frans Mayra agreed with this sentiment by stating that “by necessity the faculty, theories, and methods of today’s game programs are mainly recruited from or informed by other disciplines” (Mayra, 2008, p. 313). Aarseth believes this interdisciplinary knowledge is not only necessary, but unavoidable since “like architecture, which contains but cannot be reduced to art history, game studies should contain media studies, aesthetics, sociology, etc. But it should exist as an independent academic structure, because it cannot be reduced to any of the above” (Aarseth, 2001, para. 10). Decades later game studies is still benefiting from interdisciplinary knowledge as it continues to establish its relevance across multiple disciplines (Nacke, L. E., & Deterding, S., 2017). Put simply, it is impossible to truly understand games without an interdisciplinary approach.

Espen Aarseth noted that game researchers often have to work from the perspective of a player as analyst (Aarseth, 2003). Operating as both a player and an analyst poses several challenges for researchers. The first is that the research is not perfectly repeatable by other

researchers or even the researcher themselves (Aarseth, 2003). Even in the most simplistic games players and researchers are unlikely to make the same choices they did during the previous playthroughs. This dilemma increases exponentially with other players who may play the game in a wildly different way and thus produce vastly different results. Diane Carr commented on this phenomenon by stating that “as anyone who shares a games console knows each player produces a different game protagonist over time, with different traits, achievements, augmentations, inventory, fighting style and experience levels, and the player’s own experience level shifts over time, and these shifts impact on interpretation” (Carr, 2017, p. 230). Players have different game protagonists because they will make a series of choices that are different from others. Some of these are major differences like changing the gender of a character or what their abilities are (wizard, warrior, archer, etc.). Others are minor like changing their style, voice type, or weapon choices. Video games can be complex due to the agency of the player is allowed, but this should not be misconstrued to mean that video games are not worth studying (Asimos, 2018). Implicitly or otherwise the cultural background, life experiences, and various other biases of a player-as-analyst will inform their interpretation of a text, or in this case a video game (Carr, 2017).

### **1.3 The Use of Myths in Popular Culture and Digital Media as a Transmission Tool**

Myth can be seen in various forms of popular culture narratives today (Asimos, 2018). The myths, legends, and folktales of a nation are a mirror of the society itself. As Vivian Asimos (2018, p. 1) states, “[I]f myths are those narratives an individual or communities use to understand themselves and the world around them, popular culture narratives have the increasing ability to fill this role.” In modern times myths are expressed primarily through

popular culture narratives featured in books, movies, and games.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, according to Dustin Kidd (2017, p. 1), popular culture is “the set of practices, beliefs, and objects that embody the most broadly shared meanings of a social system”. It can be concluded that popular culture and myths heavily influence each other. Mythology is so ingrained in our culture that some believe that all literature and entertainment are influenced by myths (Perry, 2012).

Besides the codependent nature of myths and popular culture, myths are commonly used in modern entertainment because they lend themselves well to contemporary entertainment forms. Game developer Dyack Dyack (Perry, 2006, para. 5) noted that "Whether people think so or not, basically, we are immersed in the mythologies in our culture. In some sense, mythology defines culture. It's unavoidable. Any typical storyline almost always falls back to some mythology”. One reason for this is the resemblance between the ancient oral epics and folklore passed down by our ancestors and modern day storytelling devices. “The motion picture resembles the oral epic both in form and function; small wonder that the same themes can be found in both” (Sowa, 1973, para. 33). Movies, books, games, and podcasts all have the ability to replicate the tradition of the oral epic, albeit with modern technology to further immerse the audience.

Of all the modern storytelling devices, digital media is the most responsible for transmitting mythology. Due to the instantaneous and globalized nature of digital media, “myths have ceased to exist as a product of a single culture; new myths are being made internationally due to the unfolding process of globalization” (Koshikina, 2020, p. 24). Digital media has significantly transformed the mechanisms in which stories are made, distributed, and consumed (Hutcheon, 2014). As digital media, such as video games and films, continue to

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<sup>3</sup> The popular marvel superhero Thor (as well as Loki and Odin) is taken directly from Norse mythology. Harry Potter is also heavily inspired by Greek mythology, with one example being the three headed dog (Cerberus in Greek mythology) that guards the entrance to the chamber of secrets. Even most of the characters from the famous Japanese Pokémon games are inspired by myths from all over the world.

overtake more traditional forms of storytelling, such as printed literature and theatre, the mechanisms in which mythology is being transmitted are being transformed. This phenomenon has accelerated the myth making power of digital media, as various versions of myths are simultaneously released, and become part of mythology.

According to Asimos (2018), just as ancient myths took different forms, modern myths are presented in different forms, but one version of a myth should not be interpreted as a more authentic version than another. Koshkina (2020, p. 23) adds on to this sentiment by stating that “the use of myth in pop culture opens it to a wider audience and creates underlying interest to the original myth, but it also disrupts and distorts the image of the myth.” However, Koshkina (2020) warns that while the nature of myths is to be continuously reinterpreted and reevaluated by various storytellers, certain general truths will always be preserved.<sup>4</sup> Mythological reinterpretations that seek to change these general truths are unlikely to be incorporated into the overall accepted mythology.<sup>5</sup> If the changes are too drastic they will be considered a story inspired by mythology rather than adding on to the overall authentic version mentioned by Asimos. Myths typically have a main but not canonical source such as the Nordic Poetic Edda, the Greek Odyssey & Iliad, and the Japanese Kojiki and Nihon Shoki. While Norse, Greek, and Japanese mythologies all include ancient text that are considered as main sources, what is considered as accurate myths for those cultures has evolved significantly past those texts as future authors added to and adapted the myths. The continuing adaptation of myths has allowed them to thrive throughout all human history as the way in which myths are adapted and told change to fit the given time period.

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<sup>4</sup> Thor is the god of thunder (Norse mythology), Zeus is ruler of the Olympians (Greek mythology), and Amaterasu is the sun goddess (Japanese mythology).

<sup>5</sup> Netflix’s *Cursed* is a great example of this. *Cursed* changes major elements of the story of King Arthur, such as the lack of any scene including the famous pulling of Excalibur from a stone by the one true king, and the sword wielder being the daughter of Merlin instead of Arthur himself.

## 1.4 Background of Japanese Mythology

As this study is exploring Japanese myths in a game centered on Kamakura era Japan, it is necessary to have a foundational understanding of Japanese mythology. Japanese mythology is unique in the sense that it is primarily made of two religions that are still in practice today. While it is inspired by a number of cultural traditions, the two most dominant are Shintoism and Buddhism (Ashkenazi, 2008). Shinto is the native religion of Japan and is largely based around the veneration of spirits or *kami* (神) that reside in nature (Ashkenazi, 2008). *Kami* is roughly translated as God. Like other mythologies these *kamis* have unique personalities and mythical tales centered around them. Shintoism teaches that all things (nature, food, items, etc.) have a sort of life essence present in them, these are also referred to as *kami*. For this reason, there are over 8 million *kami*. *Kami* are an unavoidable aspect of Japanese mythology and culture; thus, they are prominently referenced in *Ghost of Tsushima*. Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the early sixth century by a Korean king of Paekche (Ashkenazi, 2008). The arrival of Buddhism in Japan sparked the need to distinguish native Japanese religious beliefs from Buddhism and thus the term Shinto (way of the gods) was born (Ashkenazi, 2008). While Buddhism and Shintoism may be separate religions, Japanese mythology is comprised of both.<sup>6</sup> Michael Ashkenazi's (2008) research provides a detailed foundation from which to understand Japanese mythology. This study furthers his findings by addressing how Japanese mythology is understood and used in video games.

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<sup>6</sup> It's worth noting that local Ainu and Ryukyuan religious beliefs were also incorporated into Japanese mythology, but the large majority consist of Buddhist and Shinto elements.

## 1.5 Myths in Video Games: References, Adaptation, and Continuation

While there is substantial research on mythology and video games as separate entities, there are only a handful of studies that are concerned with the blending of video games and mythology (Koshkina, 2020). Anamaria Todor's (2010) research is one of the first studies to do a deep dive into the topic by researching how all video games replicate mythical structures as well as how games and players themselves play a role in myth propagation and transformation. According to Todor (2010, p. 70), the interactive nature of games and subsequent choices made by the player "add a lot to the process of mythical alteration." In her research about video games as myth reconstructions, Todor (2010) concludes that myths can be identified in every element of game design. While various elements of game design include myths, the textual level is by far the most transparent and obvious to the player (Todor, 2010). This is due to the fact that "the narrative structures behind games closely mirror those of other more traditional forms of media (books or movies)" (Todor, 2010, p. 67). The player's familiarity with traditional narrative structures in books and film result in myth being recognized (and thus passed on) easily in video game narrative. Since mythical narrative structures follow general storytelling structures they are easily picked up by the player (often subconsciously). Another reason for the player's recognition (or appreciation) of myths on the textual level is the identification of prominent mythological names. For example, a reference to the Japanese mythological sun goddess Amaterasu on the textual level would be more easily recognized compared to the structural or symbolic level.<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that myths present in the structural level of games do not play an important role. Myths present in the structural level help camouflage the technologically based mechanics, enhance immersion in the game

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<sup>7</sup> If the player is already familiar with Amaterasu, they would clearly recognize the name, moreover due to the unique sounding name even a player with no familiarity with Japanese mythology may be able to at least recognize its mythological origin. However, a reference to Amaterasu on a structural level, such as a video game quest based around one of her stories in Japanese mythology, would be more easily missed by the player.

world, and add flavor to the overall feel of the game (Todor, 2010). Games that are less narrative intensive, rely on symbols to display their representational elements (Todor, 2010). This can be seen in *Touken Ranbu*, a Japanese collectible card game, which relies heavily on symbolism to personify famous Japanese swords as various anime style characters. Todor's (2010) research revealed that games that heavily utilize mythology will use mythological symbols, myths in the structural level, and incorporate myths into the narrative so as to pull the player into the mythological world. Meanwhile video games that simply borrow from myths for inspiration but do not seek to necessarily have the myths recognized<sup>8</sup> are less likely to include it in every element of game design but rather use myths specifically for the area they inspired (art, character abilities, world building, etc.).

Todor's research explains how even games that seemingly have nothing to do with mythology often replicate myths in more subtle ways. Sports games are a popular genre of video games that appear to lack mythological influence, but Todor (2010) argues that sport games have mythical roots due to their relation to the Olympic games.<sup>9</sup> Sports games here refers to video game versions of baseball, basketball, etc. Video games that are narrative intensive and rely heavily on world building can often make it difficult to discover the mythology present due to the sheer amount of text in the video game (Todor, 2010).<sup>10</sup> Even if the myth has been so integrated into the game that it is hardly recognizable (a common

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<sup>8</sup> An example of this would be Pokémon. Many of the Pokémon are based off of myths from around the world, but most players are not aware of this and the game designers of Pokémon are okay with that.

<sup>9</sup> The Olympic game's "origins were attributed to the gods, and competing legends persisted as to who actually was responsible for the Games' genesis" (Kyle 2007:101). In ancient times, Olympic competitors acted as representatives for the gods and were rewarded olive wreaths in their patron's name (Todor 2010).

<sup>10</sup> This can be seen in the games *Skyrim*, *World of Warcraft (WoW)*, and *League of Legends (LoL)*. *Skyrim* is a single player role playing game, in which the player adventures through a massive world filled with inspirations, adaptations, and references of Norse mythology. These links to Norse mythology are buried within thousands of pages of in game text. Some examples of in game text include dialogues between characters, item descriptions, and books that can be found and read within the game. While the game is heavily influenced by Norse mythology, there is so much world building present that the myths become almost indistinguishable from the original narrative created by the game developers. Which admittedly, is often the point with games like this. *WoW* is a massive multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG), while *LoL* is an massive online battle arena (MOBA). Both of these games share similar qualities as the aforementioned *Skyrim* when it comes to the scale of their world building. *WoW* and *LoL* borrow from various mythologies to inform their character design, world building, and narrative but it is almost indistinguishable from the games original content due to the impressive amount present.



phenomenon in fantasy games) it is important to remember that “once the myth has helped with the genesis of the fantasy game world it cannot simply withdraw from creation” (Todor, 2010, p. 69). It has become mainstream for “modern game fantasy worlds, universes or multiverses to use structures and forms derived from preexisting mythological cosmologies and follow in the world-creating footsteps forged in myth systems such as the Celtic, Greek, Native North American, and Nordic” (Krzywinska, 2008, p. 130). Video game technology, culture, and mythical adaptation have come a long way since Todor (2010) and Krzywinska’s (2008) research.

Asimos (2018) in *Playing the myth: video games as contemporary mythology* demonstrates “not only the connection between myth and video games, but also a theoretical approach to the study of the mythic video game” (p. 93). He discusses how video games reference, adapt, and draw inspiration from mythology, then goes a step further by asserting that video games are important forms of contemporary mythology today. While this may seem like a bold claim, thanks to earlier pioneers in the field such as Todor, Asimos (2018) says that it is easy to show video games are myths, but quite difficult to study video games as myths. This is due to the inherent interactive nature of video games that allows for “multiple narratives, and various ways of interpreting and experiencing these narratives, to arise” (Asimos, 2018, p. 93). As mentioned in Todor’s research, the textual level or more specifically the narrative, of a game is where the most obvious and transparent myths are taking place, so it would be impossible for Asimos to accomplish her research objectives without analyzing the narrative. The complex and interwoven nature of video games does not allow for a straightforward narrative analysis. Player’s experience of the narrative can vary drastically from person to person, not only will players be subjected to different narratives due to the choices they make in the game, but they will also experience the narrative in a different order depending on how they play the game. This is also true for the same person playing a game multiple times, as it

is highly unlikely the same choices will be made repeatedly.<sup>11</sup> Disregarding this fundamental aspect of video games and attempting a straightforward analysis would be ignoring how stories in the game are being performed and received by the player (Asimos, 2018). Asimos elaborates on this by stating that “[t]he way the narrative is revealed and experienced by the player is as important to the mythic structure as the scripted narrative” (2018, p. 100).

## **1.6 Critiques against Levi-Strauss, Campbell, and Eliade**

Joseph Campbell, Levi Strauss, and Mircea Eliade are all important myth scholars that are utilized in this research, but their works are dated and have become contentious amongst scholars. In the interest of academic rigor, it is worth briefly discussing the critiques against them and why they are being utilized despite their shortcomings. Mircea Eliade’s academic writings are criticized as being crypto-theological, ahistorical, and fascist (Fu, 2017). Cong Fu (2017) argues against Eliade being crypto theological by highlighting that Eliade writes about the sacred as a part of the human experience rather than an autonomous existence. In regard to Eliade being ahistorical it could be argued that Eliade does not dismiss the manipulation of religion but rather highlights the dynamic encounter between natural phenomena and humans in its origin (Fu,2017). Eliade was indeed a fascist and there are legitimate concerns this brings regarding research that heavily relies upon his work (Stigliano, 2002). However, this research only briefly uses Eliade, amongst others, to elaborate on some of the purposes of mythology.

While Claude Levi-Strauss is a well respected mythologist, his core theories around structuralism have been criticized as fields like anthropology and linguistics developed further. Structuralism has inherent flaws such as dehumanizing and reliance of identifiable predefined structures. By claiming that a collection of something has certain structures that link them all

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<sup>11</sup> Besides being in the nature of video games, game developers intentionally want this to happen to entice players to want to play through the game again.

together it runs the risk of dehumanizing by removing the individual characteristics of something that made it unique. Structuralism also relies on upon the audience's ability to detect said structures. These critiques are valid, but in regard to myths, it does not change the reality that there are certain patterns (structures) that can be observed across myths from different cultures around the world (Doja, 2006). In his research on Levi-Strauss's legacy in anthropology, Albert Doja commented on this phenomenon by stating "If they acted everywhere in such a way, they must have an intellectual deice which leads them to act in that way" (Doja, 2006. p. 96).

Joseph Campbell is another respected mythologist who has come to face increasing criticism as his work has aged. Campbell is a bit of a scholastic anomaly because his work targeted both academia and popular audiences. This led to Campbell being appreciated for his romance with myth, he was called an "evangelist for myth" by Robert Segal, but criticized for his methods (Grebe, 1991). The criticism of his methods centered around his lack of acknowledgment of other theories in the field as well as only focusing on similarities in myths (Grebe, 1991).

Despite the criticisms Campbell, Levi-Strauss, and Eliade are still utilized when researching myths through different mediums. Todor (2010) utilized Campbell and Eliade's theories in her research on myth propagation and transformation in video games.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Koshkina's (2020) research on the reconstruction of Norse myth in videogames uses Eliade's theories to understand myths and heavily relies on Joseph Campbells hero's journey in his analysis. Meanwhile, Asimos (2018) uses Levi-Strauss's implicit and explicit myths to create a theoretical approach for approaching video games as myth. While the criticisms against Campbell, Levi-Strauss, and Eliade are valid, the research of Todor, Koshkina, and Asimos

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<sup>12</sup> Todor's research is discussed in detail in section 1.5

(amongst others) have proven that their theories are still worth using when it comes to exploring myths in video games.

In this literature review, the definition and field of game studies, the use of myths in popular and digital media, Japanese mythology, and myths in video games have been discussed. As has been show in the literature review, only a handful of studies (Todor, 2010) (Asimos, 2018) and (Koshkina, 2020) have researched myths in video games specifically. The research conducted in this thesis will help fill this gap in the literature by furthering the findings of these scholars as well as adding new conclusions discovered.

## **Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework**

This chapter elaborates on theories and concepts that are used to interpret/understand *Ghost of Tsushima*, the video game analyzed in this thesis. First, the original purposes of mythology and modern-day uses are introduced to help inform how to interpret mythology in video games. Japanese mythology is specifically focused because of its use in *Ghost of Tsushima*. Theories surrounding video games functioning as mythology are explained. Finally, Joseph Campbell's concept of monomyth and Levi Strauss's theory of mythical structures are explored to provide a lens from which to understand the myths present in *Ghost of Tsushima*.

### **2.1 Mythology: Its Original Functions and Modern Day Uses**

In discussions on the adaptation of myths to popular cultural forms, the meaning behind mythology is important to understand why myths are so commonly present in popular culture. J.F. Bierlein, Joseph Campbell, and Levi Strauss are mythologists whose research into the definition and subsequent meanings of myths are useful in this study. In *The Power of Myth* (1988), Campbell argues that one of the functions of mythology is to provide divine justification to social institutions and practices. This was rampant in ancient cultures like the Greeks, Romans, Japanese and Norse. Norse mythology was used to justify the Vikings actions (raiding, pillaging, etc.) and glorify death in battle. Greek and Roman mythology was

intertwined with nearly every aspect of their culture, including art, politics, religion, and education. Meanwhile, Japan took inspiration from China and used the emperors supposed descendancy from the sun goddess Amaterasu to justify why the Japanese emperor should be followed without out question. Campbell took this concept a step further by asserting that mythology also serves to harmonize the individual with society and the cosmos (ctd. in Todor, 2010). Mythology is able to simultaneously create and maintain social intuitions while also providing a lens from which people may understand the world around and beyond them. Given the capacity for mythology to accomplish this impressive feat and the human need for belonging and purpose it is not difficult to see why mythology has been a phenomenon present in nearly every society.

In his book *Parallel Myths*, J.F. Bierlein views mythology as archaic attempts at or the beginnings of science, religion, philosophy, and history. He asserts that myths are “the first fumbling attempts to explore how things happen” (Bierlein, 1994, p. 5). While myths do not seek to use any sort of scientifically backed evidence to explain things, they do at least make attempts at logical connections to why things are the way they are. This is still in use today in the form of religion. Finally, Bierlein believes that myths provide a history in the absence of one. Thus, myths become intertwined with history and, depending on the situation and time period, replaces history itself.

### **2.1.1 Mythologization of History and Historical Heroes in Popular Culture**

The entanglement of myths and history can be seen in the mythologizing of medieval warriors such as knights and samurai. Medieval knights are often portrayed as being honorable men who strived to live out the chivalric qualities: courage, loyalty, honor, justice,

etc. While undoubtedly some medieval knights strived to uphold these values, the vast majority often committed horrible atrocities and only followed the code of chivalry when it worked in their benefit (Douglas, 2010). However, overtime knights began to be mythologized in popular culture. Mythologizing refers to the process by which something is exaggerated or idealized to the point that it becomes a myth. Instead of being depicted as warriors who are both honorable at times and commit atrocities, knights were mythologized into larger than life chivalry obeying warriors. The most iconic example of this is King Arthur and his round table of fellow chivalrous knights. The Arthurian legends continue to be told in contemporary literature (Once & Future 2019), film (King Arthur: Legend of the Sword 2017), and even video games (King Arthur: Knight's Tale 2021). Japanese samurai have suffered from a nearly identical mythologization. Similar to knights, the contemporary image of a samurai is a fierce warrior who strictly followed the codes of bushido. This code demanded loyalty, courage, righteousness, honor, honesty, and benevolence. If modern interpretations of samurai life are to be believed, adherence to these codes was so strict that if broken a samurai was expected to commit spiritual and ritual suicide to regain their honor (Rich, 2014). However, in reality the supposed bushido code that samurai so strictly followed was not even codified until 1900, when a book titled *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, was published by Inazō Nitobe. While bushido existed in practice before 1900, Nitobe's book directly contributed to the mythologization of bushido values. The idea of the mythologized bushido put forth by Inazō Nitobe was not generally accepted amongst the Japanese public until the Japanese government took advantage of the rhetoric to help create a national ideology that supported the actions leading up to Japan's involvement in and during WWII (Rich 2014). Nitobe originally published his book in English as it was intended to help change westerns perception of Japan at that time. Historical accounts prove that no such code existed amongst the samurai as it would have been an impractical obstacle to survival,

victory, and comfortable living (Rich, 2014). Like their western counterparts (medieval knights) samurai were in reality members of an elite warrior class who acted based upon their own (or their lords) moral compass and ambitions. Furthermore, Timon screech, a specialist in the art and culture of early modern Japan at the University of London, stated that "We are talking mythologies. The belief that samurai ever fought to the death does not survive investigation, nor the claim that they made the sacrifice of disembowelment when atonement was required. The motto which says the way of the samurai is death was invented long after death had ceased to be on most samurai's minds or a reality in their lives... they were bureaucrats" (Screech as cited in Rich, 2014). The mythologized version of samurai is generally accepted as truth and has been featured in dozens of literature (*Shogun* 1975), film (*The Last Samurai* 2003), and video games (*Ghost of Tsushima* 2020). The mythical image of the samurai in *Ghost of Tsushima* will be discussed further in the analysis chapter.

Japanese mythology is composed of certain mythologized histories. Mythologized history refers to history that has been so romanticized overtime that it eventually became mythical in nature. An example of this can be seen in the mythologized narrative of the historical event of the Mongol invasion of Japan in the 13th century, where in Japan was miraculously saved from overwhelming Mongol forces on two separate occasions (1274 & 1281) by "the divine wind."<sup>13</sup> In his book, *Handbook of Japanese Mythology*, Michael Ashkenazi (2008, p. 20) stated that "The repeatedly miraculous nature of the Mongol defeat, combined with the claims by the clergy that the Japanese victory was due to divine intervention, meant that the idea of the kamikaze, the dive wind that helps Japan defeats its enemies, became enshrined deeply as a national myth." Another mythologized history is the "myth of samurai virtues and strengths" discussed in section 3.1.1 (Ashkenazi, 2008, p.20).

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<sup>13</sup> The divine wind refers to a typhoon that destroyed the majority of invading Mongol forces at sea



Kamikaze and the Bushido code are two examples of Japanese history that have been mythologized overtime.

### **2.1.2 Myths as A Tool to Make Sense of The World**

Ekaterina Galanina (2019, p. 3662) wrote “Myth allowed the archaic era people to comprehend reality and adapt to it, construct the world picture, set the value scale for various phenomena, feel belonging to the cultural world, and ensure the unity and integrity of society”. Strauss (1955) points out that that myths have a peculiar relationship with history through their diachronic and synchronic aspects. Myths simultaneously change through and transcend the barriers of time. “Even different versions of a myth are not to be thought of as falsifications of some true, authentic version, but as an essential aspect of the structure of myth” (Lechte, 2013, p. 86). The different versions of myths that emerge overtime make up the diachronic aspects and the fact that these various versions are still authentic versions of the myth is the synchronic aspect. Eliade adds on to this with his statement that myths can adapt to new cultural fashions (Ex. Disney & Hollywood versions of myths), but they cannot disappear entirely (Eliade, 1959). This dynamic structure of myths necessitates that a myth not be reduced down to a single uniform form (Lechte, 2013). The reshaping of myths overtime is the result of myths attempting to provide a logical model from which to overcome contradictions present in human society (Strauss, 1955). This results in myths being adapted overtime that are each slightly different from the last. This constant retelling of myths is what makes it possible for myths told in ancient Greece to exist in film, literature, and games thousands of years later. Like myths themselves, the definition of myths has “meant many different things at many different times in the history and use of the word” (Asimos, 2018, p. 95).

## 2.2 The Myth Building Role of Video Games through the Player's Agency

In section 2.4, it was shown that video games contain various elements of mythology, but myths are not simply present in video games they also possess myth making power. This is a phenomenon that nearly every researcher studying myths and video games has discovered and subsequently added to. Scholars in game studies have repeatedly emphasized the role of video games in myth building and myth reconstruction (Galanina & Baturin 2019, Asimos 2018, Koshkina 2020). The key to understanding how video games retain mythmaking power lies in the interactive and immersive aspects of video games.

The interactivity of video games places the player in the center of narration and makes them deeply involved in the making of the story (Koshkina, 2020). The level of involvement and agency the player is allowed depends on the game, but it is a fundamental aspect of video games that player's gameplay will impact in game outcomes. This is true for games with zero narrative as well.<sup>14</sup> Since the player is in charge of story development, decision making, and gameplay, it can be concluded that myths in video games are performed rather than showed (Asimos, 2018). This direct interaction with the narrative results in players literally playing with myth and thus demonstrating how player agency directly impacts the experience of the myth (Asimos 2018). Koshkina (2020, p. 30) summarized this phenomenon neatly, when he said that "the player finds themselves in the midst of a myth, yet they are the driving force of the story, they are the one who interact with it and lives within it. They are reconstructing the myth via interacting with it".

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<sup>14</sup> In Tetris, a player's skill in matching the tiles (gameplay) will result in a higher or lower score, level of enjoyment, and various emotional responses based off how they performed.

Popular culture and thus myths are present in every form of popular entertainment, yet video games are a unique case due to the interactivity and immersion present within them. The gameplay element of videogames is itself a form of myth formation (Asimos, 2018). “Like the other popular culture narratives, video games are forms of contemporary mythology, but ones the audience directly plays with” (Asimos, 2018, p. 108). Compared to older media, the interactivity present in video games make them more capable of immersing a person in the space of the myth (Galanina & Baturin, 2019). Video games allow players to live and play with myths through the eyes of characters they inhabit. The players role in creating myths is present both in and outside of the game. Outside the game players may choose to participate in modding (creating software that alters the game content in some way), cosplay, or writing fan fiction. Meanwhile, inside the game players have the ability to help construct the world around them and the characters they inhabit. While cinema and literature also construct content for the audience to relate to, video games uniquely allow players to customize their experience to fit their tastes and preferences (Galanina & Baturin, 2019). Although the level of customizability depends on the game, common examples include character customization (gender choices, fashion choices, haircut choices, etc.), difficulty selection, and the ability to skip through dialogue or cutscenes. This customizability allows players to construct the world image and the image of a person in it (Galanina & Baturin, 2019). Myths often feature supernatural beings and creatures (Eliade, 1959). These supernatural beings and creatures are often utilized by video games to create antagonists and protagonists within the game.<sup>15</sup> Myths also provide neatly packed premade stories, off of which to base a game’s quest. These myth inspiring quests are in fact an opportunity for

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<sup>15</sup> In the game Hades the player inhabits the fabricated son of Hades and fights mythological creatures to escape the underworld. Riot’s League of Legends contains numerous abilities that are directly taken from mythological creatures and heroes.

players to play and interact with myths under the guise of heroic adventures (Krzywinska, 2008).

### **2.3 Levi Strauss & Joseph Campbell's Structural Study of Myth**

Claude Levi-Strauss pioneered the structural study of myth in his book *The structural study of Myth* (1955). In his book, Levi-Strauss points out that myths have a paradox. On one hand myths do not seemingly abide by any logic and have the potential for nearly anything to happen, but on the other hand different cultures often have similar myths (Levi-Strauss, 1955). This phenomenon is what inspired Levi Strauss's research. His research concluded that while the details of myths may differ, the overall structures remain the same (Levi-Strauss, 1955). Levi-Strauss compares mythology to functioning of language. Strauss claims that "myth is language: to be known, myth has to be told; it is a part of human speech" (Levi-Strauss, 1955, p. 430). While he claims myth is language it has unique properties when it comes to translation. Poetry cannot be translated without serious distortions, whereas myths retain their mythical value through the worse translations (Levi-Strauss, 1955).

Joseph Campbell's (1949) concept of monomyth points to a common structure in myths as well. Many myths contain the hero's journey (also known as monomyth), though the details are dependent on the individual myth. In addition, repeated mythological structures are another reason why myths have been present in popular culture throughout history. When conducting research on myths in *World of Warcraft*<sup>16</sup>, Tanya Krzywinska pointed out that "The primary and highly recognizable mythic pattern that informs and structures the game is the epic hero quest, wherein various forces work to help and hinder the

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<sup>16</sup> World of Warcraft is a massive multiplayer online role-playing game by Blizzard Entertainment. It was the subject of Krzywinska's study and is one of the most well-known and successful video games in existence.

hero player en route to achieving particular goals” (Krzywinska, 2008, p. 126). The epic hero question mentioned by Krzywinska (2008) is referencing Campbell’s hero’s journey from *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* by Campbell (1949). The hero with a thousand faces refers to the quest for a hero to go on, which is common across mythologies all over the world. This quest is referred to as the hero’s journey and is split up into three basic parts: Departure, Initiation, and Return. The basic parts and their subsections are listed and described in the analysis section for easier comprehension. Some examples include Achilles from Greek mythology, Thor from Norse mythology, and Ivan from Slavic mythology. In all of these examples the heroes first depart from their home, then have an initiation in the form of a climax that solves why they left home in the first place. Finally, the hero returns in some fashion, whether it be by death (Achilles in the Illiad), returning to their original home (Ivan from Slavic mythology), or moving on to somewhere new. The hero’s journey is seen in nearly every mythology and subsequently is often present in popular culture and entertainment.<sup>17</sup> Another common mythological structure theorized by Levi Strauss is the “myth of the good hero that opposes an overwhelming evil force: the hero is the only one that stands in front of destruction, his destiny being to drive back Chaos and reinstate Order.” (Todor, 2010, p. 24). While there are many mythological structures, the myth of the good hero that opposes and overwhelming evil force and the hero’s journey are the ones most abused by games because they provide ample amounts of narrative, character creation, and environmental inspiration. Some video game scholars, such as Tanya Krzywinska (2008), have already recognized that mythical structures are present in games. This can be seen by Krzywinska statement that “although it is still the case that many game worlds make use of mythic structures, the guiding framework, the mode of delivery, and therefore the nature of our engagement are altered” (2008, p. 63). According to Krzywinska (2008) using mythical

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<sup>17</sup> Some examples include the movie Harry Potter and the video game series Mario and Zelda.

structures in World of Warcraft lended coherency and stylistic character to the game's overall design.

Besides mythical structures that are common across all mythologies, mythologies can have their own unique structures that inform their myths. While these are not well documented structures with specific names such as the ones put forth by Levi-Strauss and Campbell, they are none the less present in every mythology. One example of a Japanese mythical structure could be conveyed as *Nihon damashii* (Japanese spirit). One element of *Nihon damashii* is the idea that one must be willing to stand against insurmountable odds and fight with honor to the point of death. Ashkenazi (2008, p. 65) elaborates on *Nihon damashii* by saying that “Whether one is a samurai or sarariman (salaried office worker), one is expected to fight tenaciously, to be loyal, and if necessary to be ready to sacrifice all.” The working of this mythical structure by means of *Nihon damashii* can be seen in how the defenders of Tsushima bravely died while massively outnumbered defending the island against the invading Mongols, as well as in how Kamikaze pilots sacrificed themselves for Japan. These two portions of history reflect another aspect of *Nihon damashii* in which “The great heroes of Japanese myths are often the losers, but they lost with their eyes open and died in style.” (Ashkenazi, 2008, pg. 65). Mythical structures and mythologized histories unique to Japan are utilized during the textual analysis of *Ghost of Tsushima*.

## **2.4 Recontextualizing Implicit and Explicit Myths in Video Games**

Asimos overcame the complexity of studying narratives in video games, by applying Levi-Strauss's concepts of “implicit and explicit myth” to fit the context of a video game (Asimos, 2018). In the context of a video game, the “implicit myth” would be the personalized

experience of the player while the “explicit myth” is the structured narrative of a game (Asimos, 2018). Examples of “explicit myth” include scripted narrative, cutscenes, in game text, and dialogue between characters. In contrast, implicit myth “would be the direct experience the gameplay has on the player” (Asimos, 2018, p. 100). Due to these elements, “explicit myth” is more likely to be evenly experienced in the narrative presented, while implicit myth tends to be a more personalized experience (Asimos, 2018). When playing a video game, the myth is being experienced by the player both implicitly and explicitly (Asimos, 2018). This is necessary as the more personalized experience of the implicit myth is what gives the explicit myth life and emotional interest on behalf of the player (Asimos, 2018). Asimos elaborates on this concept by using world building as an example. World building is normally done in part by the main narrative and quests of the game (explicit myth) in combination with side quests and exploration (implicit myth) that are optional for the player to complete. The side quests and extra exploration (implicit myth) are not mandatory for the player to complete the game, but due to the extra time put in and subsequent narrative they are exposed to, players feel a stronger attachment to what happens in the main narrative and quests (explicit myth). This is why game developers always utilize both implicit and explicit myths in their video games. World building is subtle, individualized, and can be overlooked by the player, but is also scripted in dialogue, in game text, and cut scenes (Asimos, 2018). To study mythic narrative effectively, the way in which players interact with both explicit and implicit myth simultaneously must be studied. (Asimos, 2018). As such the research conducted in this thesis will also utilize explicit and implicit myth during the analysis.

The levels of explicit and implicit myth present depend on the type of video game. Asimos (2018) lays out four possibilities:

1. High explicit myth/high implicit myth

2. High explicit myth/low implicit myth
3. Low explicit myth/low implicit myth
4. Low explicit myth/high implicit myth.

Video games that have high explicit and high implicit myth usually feature a main story line and objectives that must be completed in order to complete the game, but also have an abundance of side quests and optional activities that are not mandatory. The storylines in these types of games are not forced upon the player and will only resolve themselves when the player chooses to seek them out or accidentally stumbles upon them. Therefore, this style (high explicit & high implicit myth) of game is highly individualized as players will have different experiences dependent on what order they engage the narrative or if they engage certain parts at all. The video game being analyzed in this thesis, *Ghost of Tsushima*, is an example of a game with high explicit myth and high implicit myth.<sup>18</sup> Video games with high explicit myth but low implicit myth are typically narrative intensive games with straightforward gameplay. These games are more concerned with telling a story than having engaging gameplay mechanics.<sup>19</sup> Video games with low explicit myth and low implicit myth are typically strategy and puzzle games where the story is relatively unimportant and there is little to no world building.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile video games with low explicit and high implicit myth are characterized by the world building becoming a highly individualized experience that is dependent on the gameplay of the player. These types of games leave it up to the player to discover the narrative of the story for themselves by taking the time to explore and read clues left throughout the game.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Another example is the famous Legend of Zelda series by Nintendo.

<sup>19</sup> Examples of these types of games include the telltale series in which the gameplay mainly consists of players making choices in the game that effect the outcome of the narrative.

<sup>20</sup> The puzzle game portal by valve in which a player must strategize how to organize a series of portals to complete the game is one example of this.

<sup>21</sup> An example of this type of game would be the Dark Souls series.



## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

Any research focusing on video games texts would not be comprehensive enough by simply watching a playthrough of the game, the (actual) playing aspect is vital. Compared to watching a game being played, the experience of playing a game is vastly different (Carr, 2017), and crucial to fully understand game as a distinctive form of media. Krzywinska & Atkins point out that “games have rules and they are played, as well as viewed, heard, read and felt; they are played objects that are only mobilized by the action of the playing subject” (Krzywinska & Atkins 2007, p. 3 ctd. in Carr 2017). Playing games results in two unique challenges referred to as a “player analyst” and “reading formations.”

### **3.1 Reading Formations**

“Reading formations,” are an unavoidable circumstance of games research that researchers must contend with. Reading formations refers to the process by which texts, readers, and the relations between them are subject to variable determinations (Bennet & Woollacott, 1983). These determinations include the cultural and ideological values a person holds dependent on their life experiences and upbringing thus far. Carr elaborates on this by pointing out that “play is experiential and ephemeral yet embodied, and culturally situated” (Carr, 2009, p. 2). Recognizing that reading formations exist is useful because it acknowledges that an analysis will inevitably involve omission, that meaning in text may be

activated in different context by different researchers for different purposes, and that these meanings could be accorded by varying degrees of importance in specific contexts and communities (Barthes, 1974).

The methods used in this thesis will follow what has become customary for video game researchers collecting qualitative data. As mentioned in the player analyst and reading formations sections, a researcher in the field of video game studies must actually play the game their researching to conduct accurate research. It is expected that someone researching any forms of media would be well versed in the content they are analyzing, and the same expectation exists in video game studies.

### **3.2 Textual Analysis**

First and foremost a relaxed playthrough of the game *Ghost of Tsushima* was carried out to gain familiarity with the game before conducting a close analysis, then a textual analysis of *Ghost of Tsushima* was conducted. Video game studies researchers who wish to research a cultural phenomenon in video games usually rely upon the tried and true textual analysis to conduct research. It is important to point out that video game texts include interactivity, mutability, and play (Carr, 20014). According to Alan McKee “when we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text.” (2003, p. 3). Mike Allen (2017) elaborates on textual analysis by describing it as a methodology that seeks to understand languages, symbols, and images present in text to gain insight into how a culture makes sense of life and how it is communicated through the text. In this research a textual analysis will be utilized to see how Japanese mythology is interpreted through the text of video games. Krzywinska

(2015) highlights the usefulness of using textual analysis in video games by stating that it embraces representational and story elements as well as the mechanisms intrinsic to games like code, rules, and mechanics. Since this thesis is researching how story elements (myths) are utilized in a video game environment, a textual analysis is the most suitable approach to the research. The textual analysis of *Ghost of Tsushima* is conducted, according to the main elements of Joseph Campbell's the hero's journey and references to Japanese mythology. During the textual analysis, references to Japanese mythology in narrative, visual representation, characters, gameplay, and symbols are analyzed.

The following model of analysis, inspired by Koshkina's (2020) research on Norse mythology in the game *God of War* and adapted to better fit the objectives of this research, is used to help inform the textual analysis:

1. Is it a mythical (narrative) structure or mythological reference being adapted?
2. What purpose does it serve in Japanese mythology?
3. What purpose does it serve in the game?
5. Is it an implicit or explicit myth?

## Chapter 4: Analysis

The analysis in this thesis consists of a textual analysis of the game *Ghost of Tsushima*. The analysis specifically seeks to answer the following questions about the Japanese mythology present in the game: 1. Is it a mythical (narrative) structure or mythical reference being adapted? 2. What purpose does it serve in Japanese mythology? 3. What purpose does it serve in the game? 4. Is it an implicit or explicit myth? The first question regarding mythical structures and mythical references was created after it became apparent that all Japanese mythology present in *Ghost of Tsushima* could fit under these two categories. Mythical references refer to references or adaptations of Japanese mythology that are taken from Japanese mythology with little alterations. These tend to be very surface level and easily identifiable by the player. Meanwhile, mythical structures are reflections of mythological thinking present in the game. These are not straightforward adaptations of Japanese myths, but rather reflect how myths are thought about and utilized in Japanese culture. The analysis begins by looking at the mythical references followed by the mythical structures present in *Ghost of Tsushima*. The sections on mythical references (4.1-4.5) generally begin by describing what purpose it serves in Japanese mythology before moving on to how that purpose is reflected in *Ghost of Tsushima*. Finally, the steps of Campbell's hero's journey in *Ghost of Tsushima* are analyzed. With the analysis completed, chapter 5 directly connects how the findings in the analysis answer the research questions and objectives of this research.

#### 4.1 Shinto Shrines in Ghost of Tsushima: Acrobatic Puzzles and Kami's Blessings

Shinto shrines<sup>22</sup> are a Japanese mythological reference and implicit myth present throughout *Ghost of Tsushima*. Shinto shrines play an important role in Japanese mythology, as they operate as a bridge between people and kami. Passing through a torii gate and into a shrine represents leaving the world of man behind and passing into the realm of kami. This is why visitors are expected to bow before crossing the torii and purify themselves by washing their hands with a chouzuya (手水舎). Shrines play a dual role by operating as both a place of worship and the dwelling of *kami*. *Figures 3 and 4* depict Jin Sakai<sup>23</sup> paying respect and praying to the kami related to the shrines. While shrines operate as a home for kami, it is common for one kami to have thousands of shrines dedicated to them across Japan. Some major examples include Inari shrines, Hachiman shrines, Sengen Shrines, and local shrines dedicated to local specific kami. People may come to these shrines to pay respect to the kami present there and pray for good fortune in their life. This is normally done by making an offering, clapping your hands, then bowing as you silently pray.



*Figure 1(left). A Shrine in Ghost of Tsushima*

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<sup>22</sup> In Japanese, a Shinto shrine is referred to as a jinja(神社). This literally translates to “place of the gods.”

<sup>23</sup> The main character and person that the player inhabits throughout the game.

*Figure 2 (right). A Shrine in Ghost of Tsushima*



*Figure 3 (left). Jin bowing before a shrine in Ghost of Tsushima*

*Figure 4 (right). Screenshot of a prompt asking the player to “honor the shrine” in Ghost of Tsushima*

*Ghost of Tsushima* took inspiration from the real life function of shrines and adapted it into gameplay mechanics. The shrines present in the game provide two gameplay elements for the player. The first is an acrobatic puzzle that players must solve as they jump and climb their way up the mountain to the shrine. This can be quite challenging as it tests the players ability to figure out a way up the mountain as well as their mechanical skills. As *Figure 1* and *Figure 2* show, the shrines are always on the peak of high mountain tops to allow this acrobatic puzzle to take place. The second purpose of the shrines is to provide powerful charms that can be equipped by the player to boost their characters abilities.<sup>24</sup> As *Figure 4* illustrates, after approaching a shrine the text “honor the shrine” appears and if the appropriate button is pressed, the player then claps and bows to the shrine (shown in *Figure 3*). This is of course reflective of how people honor kami in real world shrines. The fact that the player has an active choice on whether or not to honor the shrine and interact with the myth present in the game is an example of how player agency directly impacts the experience

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<sup>24</sup> Charms are discussed in further detail in the “Charms” section of the analysis.

of the myth. After honoring the shrine, the character is then rewarded with a charm associated with the shrine. Similar to how kami associated with shrines in Japan grant blessings specific to them, the abilities the charms grant in game are loosely associated with the kami associated with the shrine. This can be seen as a game version of Campbell's (1988) argument that one of the functions of mythology is to provide divine justification to social institutions and practices. Honoring the shrines serves as justification for a gameplay mechanic that would have otherwise oddly stood out and broken player immersion. Rather than simply showing a menu that allows players to choose from different abilities, immersion is kept alive by gaining charms with different abilities through honoring shrines. Just as a Japanese person will buy or wear a charm with the benefits they desire, the player will equip a charm with the abilities they desire. In this way myths not only serve to help people make sense of the world around them, but also serve to help the player make sense of the game world. There are 16 shrines positioned throughout the game world and each one represents a major kami in Japanese mythology. These 16 shrines and kami can be seen in Appendix table 1.

#### 4.2 Inari Fox Shrines as a Tool to Explore the Game World



*Figure 5 (left). Jin crouched before an Inari Fox Shrine in Ghost of Tsushima*

*Figure 6 (right). Jin praying to an Inari Fox Shrine in Ghost of Tsushima*

Like Shinto shrines, the Inari fox shrines in *Ghost of Tsushima* are also mythological references and implicit myths. Inari is the kami associated with harvest and rice. Inari is one of the most beloved kami in Japanese mythology with over thirty thousand shrines dedicated to Inari across Japan. Inari shrines are decorated with statues of foxes since they are seen as Inari's divine messengers (depicted in *Figure 5*). The overall purpose of Inari fox shrines is to give thanks to Inari as well as provide a place for worship.

Inari fox shrines in *Ghost of Tsushima* serve a similar purpose to Shinto shrines with a small twist. Like Shinto shrines, after praying to an Inari fox shrine (*Figure 6*) the player is awarded with a charm that empowers their characters abilities. However, while the Shinto shrines reward a powerful charm that is related to one of the 16 kami in Appendix 1, the charms rewarded by these shrines are referred to as minor charms and grant less powerful abilities. Another difference is that instead of providing an acrobatic puzzle like Shinto shrines, the Inari fox shrines encourage exploration of the game world by having players follow foxes that take them to the shrines. In *Figure 6* the fox that the player must follow is seen standing to the left of the player while he prays to the shrine. Since the charms granted are less powerful there are a total of forty-nine Inari fox shrines across the game world, ensuring that if players wish to unlock all the charms possible, they will have to explore the full game world. *Ghost of Tsushima* took the myth of foxes being Inari's messengers and turned it into a clever way to encourage players to explore the world around them. Once again it can be seen how the player has agency over and interaction with myths in *Ghost of Tsushima* by choosing if they want to want to interact with Inari foxes. Furthermore, myths as a tool to make sense of the world is also repeated here by connecting the following of Inari foxes to exploring the game world.



### 4.3 The Reconstruction of Myth Through Customizable Charms

Charms are a Japanese mythological reference and implicit myth that provide players with autonomy in *Ghost of Tsushima*. Charms (*omamori* お守り) are protective amulets that can be bought at Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. There are numerous charms associated with Shinto kami and Buddhist figures. These charms have a variety of purposes, some common ones include improving grades, protecting during childbirth, good fortune in business or love, and general good luck charms. Omamori are typically rectangular shaped embroidered pouches and must not be opened or the power inside will be lost.

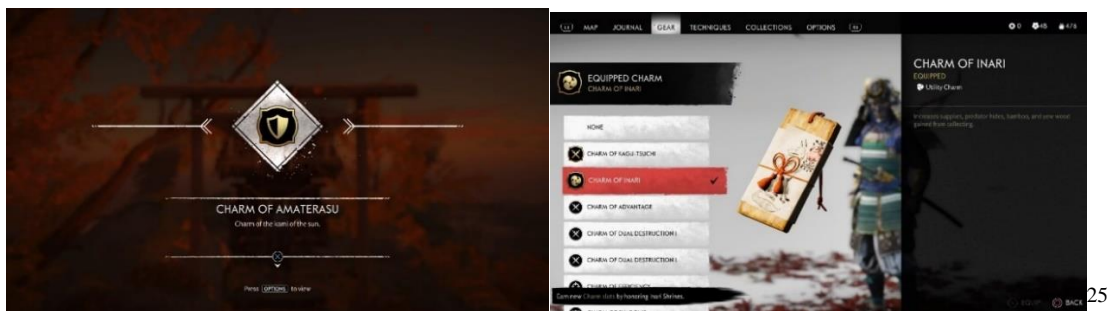


Figure 7 (left). The charm gained after praying to Amaterasu's shrine in *Ghost of Tsushima*

Figure 8 (right). The charm of Inari along with a description of the abilities it gives in *Ghost of Tsushima*

In *Ghost of Tsushima* charms can be equipped to empower your character with powerful abilities. They have similar functions to *omamori* in Japanese mythology. Similar to *omamori* they are found at shrines and grant mystical benefits. Figure 7 depicts the charm one receives when honoring the shrine of Amaterasu. Instead of improving grades or helping

<sup>25</sup> Figure 5 text: "Charm of Amaterasu: Charm of the kami of the sun." Figure 6 text: "Charm of Inari: Increases supplies, predator hides, bamboo, and yew wood gained from collecting."

find love, the charms in *Ghost of Tsushima* provide enhancements to hero's combat abilities or resource collection. The enhancements these charms provide are loosely connected to the abilities of the Japanese kami they are dedicated to. As seen in Figure 8, after collecting charms the player can at any time equip different charms for their desired enhancement. As theorized by Galanina & Baturin (2019), this customizability allows to the player to construct the world image and the image of their character in it. This increases the immersion of the player by allowing them to customize their character and experience to their preferences. In this way the player puts themselves in the game by literally creating their preferred image of themselves in the game world. Furthermore, since the charms in *Ghost of Tsushima* are linked to Japanese mythology, the interactivity present in gaining and choosing charms means the player is actively playing with myths. This further supports the theory that players are reconstructing myth via interacting with it. There are 16 major charms in the game that are gained by honoring the 16 shrines mentioned in the shrines section. Minor charms with less powerful enhancements can also be collected by completing quests. Five major charms and five minor charms can be seen in Appendix table 2.



*Figure 9 (left). The Komainu statue guards the entrance to a shrine in Ghost of Tsushima*

*Figure 10 (right). The Nio Guardians guard the entrance to a Buddhist temple in Ghost of Tsushima*

#### 4.4 Shinto & Buddhist Statues: Player Immersion Through Japanese Mythical

##### Aesthetics

Statues are a mythological reference and implicit myth present in *Ghost of Tsushima*. Statues serve as embodiments and representations of kami or significant Buddhist figures. In temples and shrines they provide the role of guardians for the temple. They also serve as objects of worship, such as the Daibutsu in Kamakura. *Ghost of Tsushima* features the *Komainu* (狛犬), *Nio guardians* (仁王), *Tentōki*, and *Ryūtōki* throughout the game world. In Japanese mythology *Komainu* guard the entrance to shrines and temples by warding off evil spirits (Figure 9). The *Nio* guardians also guard the entrance to temples and are always depicted as intimidating muscular beings (Figure 10). Meanwhile *Tentōki* and *Ryūtōki* are demonic creatures that symbolize the power of the four heavenly kings in Buddhism. *Ghost of Tsushima* is full of Japanese mythological statues, but the most common throughout the game are the tiny *Jizō* statues. *Jizō sama* is most notably depicted as the guardian of children and protector of travelers (Figure 11).

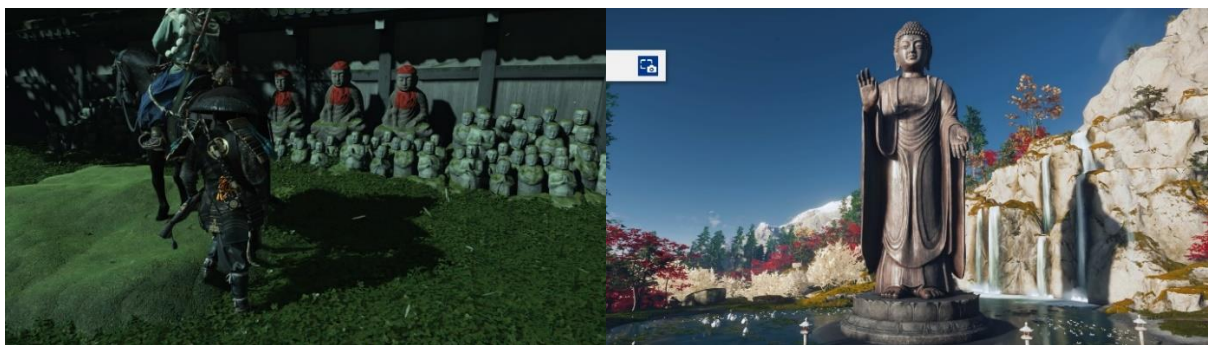
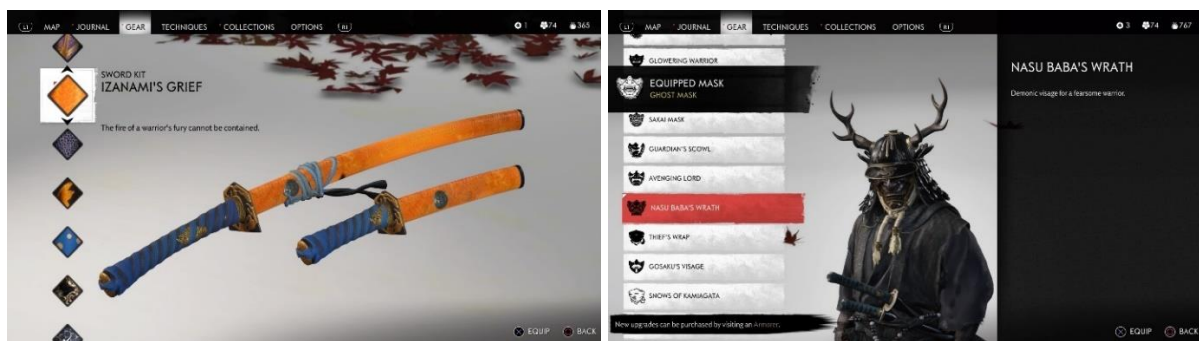


Figure 11(left): Jizo statues in *Ghost of Tsushima*

Figure 12 (right): A replica of the ushiku daibutsu in *Ghost of Tsushima*

The primary purpose of statues in *Ghost of Tsushima* is to enhance the Japanese aesthetic of the game, as they do not play any role in the narrative progress of the game.

Unlike shrines and charms, the statues in *Ghost of Tsushima* do not provide any gameplay elements, but rather serve to further immerse the player in the environment by displaying Japanese mythological elements. By placing the statues throughout the island in the same manner that they would be found in Japan the immersion of the player in Kamakura era Japan is enhanced. Entrances to shrines and temples in the game often have mythical guardians and Jizo statues are placed near frequently traveled roads and cemeteries. One significant statue that stands out in the game is the one depicted in *Figure 12*. This statue is a near exact replication of the largest Buddha statue in Japan, the Ushiku *Daibutsu*.



*Figure 13 (left). A wearable sword decoration titled Izanami's Grief in Ghost of Tsushima*

*Figure 14 (right). A wearable mask titled Nasu Baba's Wrath in Ghost of Tsushima*

#### 4.5 Cosmetic Gear: Enhanced Japanese Aesthetic Through Player Agency

Cosmetic gear is clothing or accessories that players can equip to change the appearance of the main character. While cosmetic gear has no specific purpose in mythology it generally symbolizes various aspects of Japanese mythology. One common example of this are masks representing oni, tengu, kitsune, hyottoko, etc. These are typically worn during festivals and other events in Japan. Cosmetic gear are mythological references and implicit

myths because they directly reference Japanese mythology, but players will only be exposed to it through optional exploration.

The customizable cosmetic options in *Ghost of Tsushima* include headbands, hats, armor, outfits, masks, and sword scabbards. The purpose of having cosmetic options in the game is a combination of the purposes that charms and statues in *Ghost of Tsushima* provide. Like statues the cosmetic gear in the game enhances the general Japanese aesthetic by symbolizing various iconic Japanese myths such as Izanami (figure 13), multiple *yōkai*, and *oni*. Meanwhile it also provides player autonomy like charms, however instead of allowing a player to customize how their character fights it only allows customization of how they look. This can be seen in figure 11 in which a sword scabbard called Izanami's grief and Figure 12 where a mask called Nasu Baba's wrath are displayed. Izanami is one of the *kami* responsible for the creation of Japan and Nasu Baba is a well known *yōkai* (ghost) in Japanese myths. While some of the cosmetic gear is uniquely created by the game developers, a large portion of them are based on Japanese mythology. Cosmetic gear helps situate the player in the world by using Japanese mythology. By actively choosing cosmetic options that are representations of Japanese mythology, it can again be seen how the player is using myths as a tool make sense of the game world by situating their preferred image of themselves in it.



Figure 15 Dialogue mentioning a “tengu’s curse” in *Ghost of Tsushima*

Figure 16. A dialogue with a monk discussion kami in *Ghost of Tsushima*

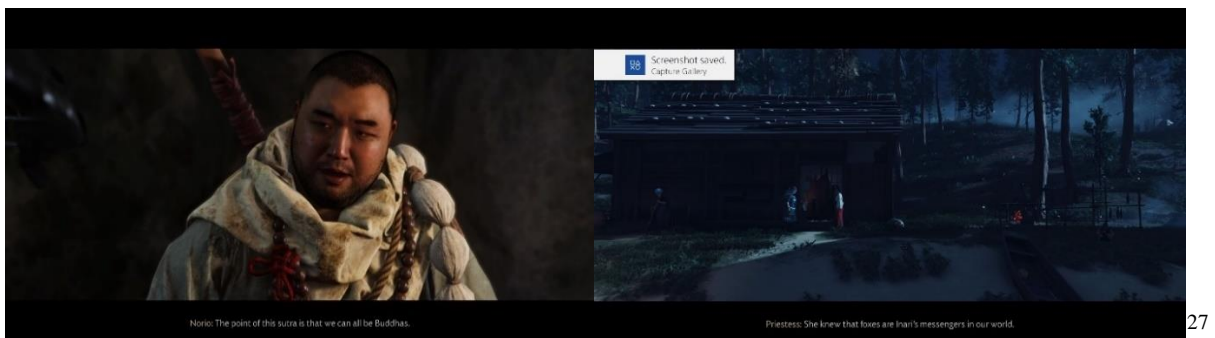


Figure 17 (left). A conversation with a monk discussing Buddhism

Figure 18 (right). A conversation with a priestess discussing Inari foxes

#### 4.6 Revealing Japanese Myths Place in the World Through Dialogue

The dialogue in *Ghost of Tsushima* is rife with references and allusions to Japanese mythology. As *Ghost of Tsushima* is a historical fiction centered around the actual event of the Mongol invasion of Tsushima in 1274, the primary purpose of using Japanese myths in

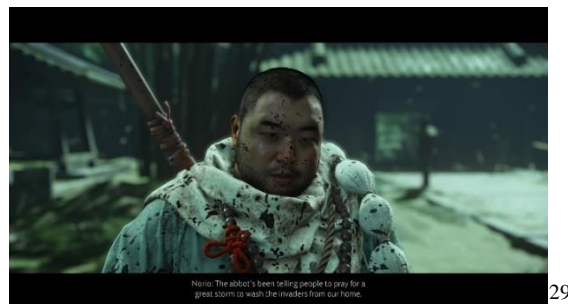
<sup>26</sup> Figure 15 text: “some say he did it because of Tengu’s curse.” Figure 16 text: “It would be wise for you to seek aid from the kami.”

<sup>27</sup> Figure 17 text: “The point of the sutra is that we can all be buddhas” Figure 18 text: “She knew that foxes are inaris messengers in our world”



dialogue is to reflect how Japanese people thought of myths in that time. During that time period myths were used to explain the unexplainable. This can be seen in *Figure 15* where a character is seen stating that another person's actions could be attributed to a curse of *tengu*, a Japanese mythic creature (ghost)<sup>28</sup>. Meanwhile *Figure 16* illustrates how people asked kami for assistance when in dire need.

*Ghost of Tsushima* reflects the dualistic Shinto and Buddhist nature of Japanese mythology by referencing both Shinto *kami* and *yōkai* as well as Buddhist sutras and Buddhas. This can be seen in *Figure 17* referencing Buddhism and *figure 18* referencing Shintoism. Throughout the game various yokai, kami, and other Japanese mythological figures are present in the dialogue. This is done to create an authentic feeling of being in 13<sup>th</sup> century Japan and provide stories that are inspired by Japanese myths.



*Figure 19. A monk is depicted referencing kamikaze in Ghost of Tsushima*

The dialogue present also includes deeply imbedded references to Japanese mythology that the average player may miss. One example of this is *Figure 19* where a Buddhist monk tells the main character that his abbot is telling people to pray for a great storm to wash invaders away from their home. While no such storm occurs in the game, this is a reference to the real life storm that destroyed invading Mongol ships. This storm was referred

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<sup>28</sup> A tengu is one of many Japanese mythological yokai.

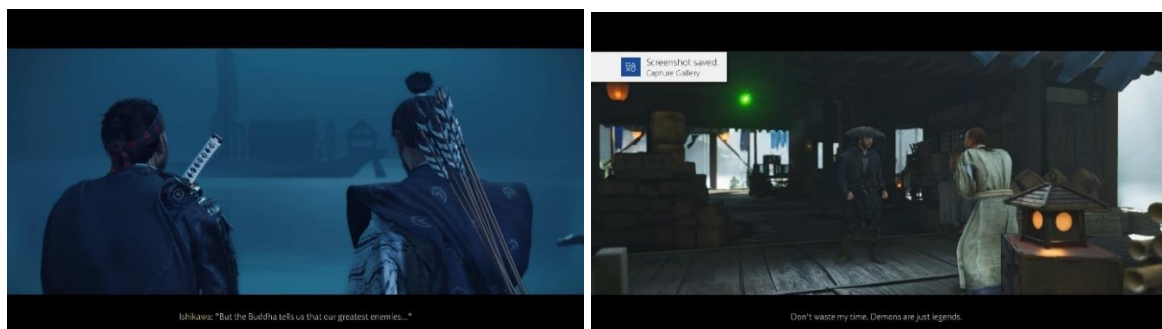
<sup>29</sup> Figure 14 text: "The abbot's been telling people to pray for a great storm to wash the invaders from our home".

to as *kamikaze* (神風) or divine wind, which was believed to be caused by the kami who protect Japan, as explained in section 2.1.1 on the mythologization of history. *Kamikaze* is referred to throughout the game in subtle ways. In an interview with the creative director of *Ghost of Tsushima* it was revealed that Jin Sakai's sword is named Sakai storm because he is the metaphorical storm (or *kamikaze*) that destroys the invading Mongols (Dornbush 2020, 20:30).



Figure 20 (left). Screenshot of Lord Shimura in *Ghost of Tsushima*

Figure 21 (right). Masako performing a Buddhist Ritual while Jin watches in *Ghost of Tsushima*



<sup>30</sup> Figure 17 text: "But the Buddha tells us that our greatest enemies..." Figure 18 text: "Don't waste my time. Demons are just legends."



*Figure 22 (left). Ishikiwa sensei tells Jin a Buddhist proverb in Ghost of Tsushima*

*Figure 23 (right). Jin tells a man that he does not believe in myths.*

#### **4.7 Main Characters in Ghost of Tsushima as representations of Japanese Mythological Thinking**

This section is dedicated to analyzing how characters in *Ghost of Tsushima* manifest Japanese mythological thinking. Lord Shimura (Figure 20) and Jin Sakai (Left side of Figure 21) are the main characters that the plot unfolds around. Lord Shimura is the Jito of Tsushima and Jin's uncle. As the Jito, Lord Shimura's character is the embodiment of the ideal samurai who strives to uphold the bushido code. He is a recreation of the of mythologized samurai who places maintaining the bushido code and fighting with honor before everything else.

Jin Sakai reflects modern Japanese mythological thinking in contrast to the mythological thinking of 13<sup>th</sup> century Japan mentioned in the dialogue section. Most of the non player characters (NPC's)<sup>31</sup> in *Ghost of Tsushima* fully believe in Japanese mythology in the same way modern people believe in religion. However, the main characters, especially Jin, reflect how a 21<sup>st</sup> century Japanese person treats Japanese mythology. Throughout the game, the player (who is controlling Jin Sakai) encounters situations with NPC's who blame yokai for any misfortune that has occurred. Jin faces these situations with skepticism and eventually uncovers the real reason for the misfortune the NPC encountered. (Dornbush, 2020, 32:45). This is shown in Figure 23 when Jin warns the man in front of him not to waste his time and that demons are just legends. However, while Jin clearly does not explicitly believe in Japanese mythology, he still honors kami, visits shrines, and adheres to Buddhist

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<sup>31</sup> NPC's (non player characters) is the term for characters in a game not being controlled by a player.

teachings. This is reflective of how the average 21<sup>st</sup> century Japanese person does not believe in religion nor mythology, but at the same time frequents shrines and participates in other elements of Japanese mythology that have become integrated into Japanese culture. Other main characters reflect this sentiment as well. Figure 21 depicts Masako (right side) paying respect to her deceased sons through a Buddhist ritual and Figure 22 shows Ishikawa sensei (right side) relaying a Buddhist teaching to Jin. Neither of these characters believe in myths the way the minor NPC's do, but they still participate in Shinto and Buddhist practices.

#### 4.8 Japanese Mythic Tales in Ghost of Tsushima



*Figure 24. Screenshot of a mythic legend in Ghost of Tsushima*

Mythic tales are side quests in *Ghost of Tsushima* that pay homage to legends and myths from Japan. Mythic tales are the only element analyzed that can be categorized as an implicit myth and mythical structure in the game. This is because while mythic tales reflect how myths are thought about and utilized in Japanese culture (thus making it a mythical structure), they are optional quests that the player could theoretically ignore (or not discover) completely and still complete the game (thus making it an implicit myth). However, it is an

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<sup>32</sup> Figure # text: "The most renowned archer of his time, who wielded a bow blessed by a kami."

implicit myth by a slim margin because it is highly unlikely that any player would choose to ignore all the mythic tales due to the substantial rewards they offer upon completion. There are 7 mythic tales in the game that all share the same qualities. As mentioned before all of them have Japanese mythological origins or inspirations. They are also all started by listening to a musician narrate the tale through a dramatic cutscene. Finally, all of the mythic tales are related to a legendary weapon or ability utilizing a weapon. By completing mythic tales, the player is awarded with the weapon or weapon ability that the mythic tale is based off. This can be seen in figure 26 that illustrates a mythic tale that is inspired by the *hama yumi*. The *hama yumi* (破魔弓:evil destroying bow) is a bow that was supposedly used by Yorimasu Minamoto to slay an evil demon that had overtaken the imperial palace of Japan. The mythic tale in *Ghost of Tsushima* related to the *hama yumi* is titled *The curse of Uchitsune*. When this quest is started the player is shown a cutscene that narrates the tale. The narrator mentions how “an emperor and his palace were plagued by a winged demon” and how the emperor then orders a famous archer to kill the demon. The archer is able to kill the demon with one shot from his mighty bow. The tale told by the narrator here mirrors the real story of the *hama yumi* but with details changed for the purposes of the game. Contrary to the real legend of the *hama yumi*, the names of the bow and the archer himself are changed and it is stated that the bow is blessed by *kami* (Figure 24). There is also an added element of the archer receiving a curse from the dying demon that is not in the original myth. All of the mythic tales in *Ghost of Tsushima* unfold in a similar manner to the one described here (The curse of Uchitsune). Mythic tales are not only an excellent example of how *Ghost of Tsushima* adapts and utilizes myths, but also illustrates how players play with myth.

#### **4.9 The Hero’s Journey in Ghost of Tsushima: A Reorganized Mythic Structure**

This section of the analysis seeks to understand how video games reflect Joseph Campbell's monomyth theory. As it was discussed in section 3.4 (myths as structures) the hero's journey is split up into three basic parts: departure, initiation, and return. For this analysis the narrative and story arch of the main character is compared against the monomyth theory. In order to fully comprehend this section of the analysis a brief overview of the story in *Ghost of Tsushima* is necessary.

*Ghost of Tsushima* is an action adventure single player game developed by Sucker Punch Productions. *Ghost of Tsushima* is a historical fiction centered around the Mongol invasion of Tsushima in 1274. Extensive research and consultation went into creating a very authentic 13<sup>th</sup> century Japanese environment; however, the realism stops there. The creators of *Ghost of Tsushima* intentionally deviate from historical truth<sup>33</sup>, while consulting Japanese culture experts to accurately represent Japanese culture at that time. The game reimagines an alternative history where instead of the samurai in Tsushima being wiped out by the Mongols, a single samurai survives. This single samurai is the main character, Jin Sakai, and the person that players inhabit throughout the game. The story begins with the initial slaughtering of the samurai and near death of Jin. After Jin is saved and healed from his wounds, he sets out on a journey to banish the Mongols from Tsushima and prevent them from continuing to main land Japan. In the beginning of the game Jin is a typical romanticized samurai who follows the code of bushido above all else. However, he soon realizes that in order to defeat the Mongols he will have to turn his back on honor and resort to cowardly tactics such as stealth assassinations, poisoning, and using the weapons of the enemy.<sup>34</sup> This new way of fighting earns Jin the nickname of "Ghost", hence the game title

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<sup>33</sup> Examples of historical inaccuracies include: weapons used during that time period, armor worn, character names, etc.

<sup>34</sup> While the game never outright states it, Jin essentially transforms from a samurai into a ninja. The game developers have said they didn't want it to be an official part of the story, but what Jin becomes is intentionally hinting at what would later be known as ninjas.

*Ghost of Tsushima*. The transformation of Jin from honorable samurai to the *Ghost of Tsushima* is the core plot of the game. As such, this transformation is the hero's journey that will be analyzed. The three main elements and subsections of the hero's journey are listed and described, then followed by how the game does or does not conform to the theory.

Departure:

1. **The call to adventure:** "Something, or someone, interrupts the hero's familiar life to present a problem, threat, or opportunity" ("masterclass" 2020: para 8).
2. **Refusal of the call:** "Unwilling to step out of their comfort zone or face their fear, the hero initially hesitates to embark on this journey" ("masterclass" 2020: para 8).
3. **Supernatural aid:** "A mentor figure gives the hero the tools and inspiration they need to accept the call to adventure" ("masterclass" 2020: para 8).
4. **Crossing the threshold:** "The hero embarks on their quest" ("masterclass" 2020: para 8).
5. **Belly of the whale:** "The hero crosses the point of no return and encounters their first major obstacle" ("masterclass" 2020: para 8).

Typically, **the call to adventure** is a call that takes the hero away from their home and into an unknown land. However, in *Ghost of Tsushima* the call to adventure occurs when the Mongols invade Tsushima. The **refusal of the call** occurs when Jin is initially extremely hesitant to fight in a way that goes against the bushido code. The person that saves the injured Jin and nurses him back to health is a female thief by the name of Yuna. She saves him because she needs his help to free her brother from Mongol captivity. Yuna serves as the **supernatural aid** by being the person that eventually convinces Jin that he must turn his back on bushido if he is to have any chance at saving Tsushima. The **crossing of the of first threshold** is Jin's acceptance that he must leave behind his honor to save Tsushima. Finally, **the belly of the whale** can be seen when Jin first kills someone in a cowardly way. It can be concluded that every part of the departure stage in the hero's journey is indeed reflected by Jin Sakai in *Ghost of Tsushima*.

Initiation:

1. **The road of trials:** “The hero must go through a series of tests or ordeals to begin his transformation. Often, the hero fails at least one of these tests” (“masterclass” 2020: para 9).
2. **The meeting with the goddess:** “The hero meets one or more allies, who pick him up and help him continue his journey” (“masterclass” 2020: para 9).
3. **Woman as temptress:** “The hero is tempted to abandon or stray from his quest. Traditionally, this temptation is a love interest, but it can manifest itself in other forms as well, including fame or wealth” (“masterclass” 2020: para 9).
4. **Atonement with the father:** “The hero confronts the reason for his journey, facing his doubts and fears and the powers that rule his life. This is a major turning point in the story: every prior step has brought the hero here, and every step forward stems from this moment” (“masterclass” 2020: para 9).
5. **Apotheosis:** “As a result of this confrontation, the hero gains a profound understanding of their purpose or skill. Armed with this new ability, the hero prepares for the most difficult part of the adventure” (“masterclass” 2020: para 9).
6. **The ultimate boon:** “The hero achieves the goal he set out to accomplish, fulfilling the call that inspired his journey in the first place” (“masterclass” 2020: para 9).

In *Ghost of Tsushima* the **road of trials** can be seen when Jin challenges the leader of the Mongol invasion, Khotun Khan, in an attempt to save his captured uncle. Jin is easily defeated by Khotun Khan and nearly killed when thrown off a bridge into the ocean below. While the player is in control of Jin during the duel with Khotun, the game is designed in a way that guarantees no matter how skilled the player is, defeat by Khotun is inevitable. This defeat is what forces Jin to realize that conventional methods will not work against the Mongols. The **meeting with the Goddess** occurs when Jin meets his allies who help him retake Tsushima from the Mongols.<sup>35</sup> The **woman as temptress** comes in the form of Jin’s uncle, Lord Shimura, who also happens to be the Jito<sup>36</sup> of Tsushima. As the Jito, Shimura is

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<sup>35</sup> These allies are all present in the main story quests. They also serve as catalysts for side quests that follow the stories of the individual allies.

<sup>36</sup> Jito were land stewards appointed by the shogunate that would provide military support when required.

the epitome of the honorable samurai that would rather die in battle than turn his back on the bushido code. Shimura is Jin's surrogate father and as such they are very close in the beginning of the game, but the issue of how to deal with the Mongols creates an increasing wedge between them throughout the game. Shimura believes that the Mongols must be defeated while upholding the bushido code or die trying. Meanwhile, upon seeing how the samurai were so quickly defeated by the Mongols in the first place, Jin believes that adapting new ways of fighting is the only way to save Tsushima. Shimura serves as the woman as temptress by continuously trying to convince Jin to return to his honorable self and cease his dishonorable behavior. **Atonement with the father** occurs when Jin visits his ancestral home and finally accepts being a Sakai (by donning his father's armor) and internalizes the shame he feels for his actions as a boy. A flashback in the game reveals that when Jin was a boy he hid in fear while he watched his father killed by a rival samurai. Jin blames himself for his father's death and he is raised by his uncle Shimura. Lord Shimura eventually offers to adopt him as his own son and thus make him into a Shimura, as well as his direct heir. Up until the point that the atonement of the father takes place, Jin was ecstatic to become Shimura's heir. However, after disagreements in ideologies with his uncle and accepting himself as a Sakai he rejects his uncle's offer to become his son. The **apotheosis** takes place when Jin publicly accepts himself as the ghost and directly defies his uncle's orders by poisoning the enemy. Jin was aware that the Mongols had laid a trap knowing that the samurai must fight honorably and thus fall for the trap. By sneaking into the enemy camp and poisoning them, Jin saves hundreds of his comrades from dying pointless deaths. The **ultimate boon** is the final attack on the Mongol stronghold hosting Khotun Khan. In a climatic final battle, Jin kills the Khotun and burns the Mongol ships assuring they can't continue to mainland Japan. Based on this analysis it can be concluded that the initiation stage and its all steps are also reflected in *Ghost of Tsushima*.

Return:

1. **Refusal of the return:** “If the hero’s journey has been victorious, he may be reluctant to return to the ordinary world of his prior life” (“masterclass” 2020: para 10).
2. **The magic flight:** “The hero must escape with the object of his quest, evading those who would reclaim it” (“masterclass” 2020: para 10).
3. **Rescue from without:** “Mirroring the meeting with the goddess, the hero receives help from a guide or rescuer in order to make it home” (“masterclass” 2020: para 10).
4. **The crossing of the return threshold:** “The hero makes a successful return to the ordinary world” (“masterclass” 2020: para 10).
5. **Master of two worlds:** “We see the hero achieve a balance between who he was before his journey and who he is now. Often, this means balancing the material world with the spiritual enlightenment he’s gained” (“masterclass” 2020: para 10).
6. **Freedom to live:** “We leave the hero at peace with his life” (“masterclass” 2020: para 10).

Rather than Jin refusing to return home, it is the Shogun that brands Jin a traitor and orders Shimura to kill him. Thus, the **refusal of the return** is provided by the Shogun rather than from Jin himself. While Jin did successfully save Tsushima, he did it dishonorably and unintentionally gathered a following that was more loyal to him than the Shogun. The **magic flight** is not present in *Ghost of Tsushima* as there is no object Jin is trying to escape or return with. The **rescue from without** comes in the form of Jin’s uncle Shimura. Normally the rescue from without is characterized by someone helping the hero finally return home. However, in *Ghost of Tsushima*, Shimura does not help Jin (quite the opposite) but his last meeting with Jin does bring a close to the overall story and allow him to return home, thus serving the same function of the rescue from without. Shimura is ordered by the shogun to kill Jin for his dishonorable behavior and while Shimura has no desire to kill Jin he is duty bound to do it. After defeating Shimura, the player is offered a choice to spare his life or kill



him.<sup>37</sup> Immediately after this choice and the resulting dialogue the player enters the **crossing of the return threshold**. In the context of *Ghost of Tsushima*, the return is referring to returning from his journey to save Tsushima rather than a literal journey to foreign lands. This is shown by the Jin waking up in a broken down hut surrounded by memorabilia encountered throughout the game. The **master of the two worlds** is depicted in a scene where Yuna expresses that she is sorry he was branded a traitor and no longer a samurai, but Jin is comfortable with his sacrifice and accepts his new identity as the *Ghost of Tsushima*. Finally, the **freedom to live** can be seen by how the game ends. While the main story ends with the previous final conversation with Yuna, the player is free to roam Tsushima and finish uncompleted side quests or explore areas not explored yet. This fits the freedom to live because the player, and thus Jin Sakai, is free to do whatever he wants. This analysis revealed that only the stage of the return not present in *Ghost of Tsushima* is the magic flight.

The analysis revealed that the mythology present in *Ghost of Tsushima* can be grouped under mythological references or mythical adaptation. The large majority of mythology in the game can be categorized as both Mythological references and implicit myths. Of the three mythical structures, two of them function as explicit myths. The implications of these results are examined in section 5 (discussion). Japanese mythology present in *Ghost of Tsushima* served a variety of purposes. One common purpose is giving players autonomy by providing options for them to customize how their character looks and fights. These options were given through Shinto shrines, Inari fox shrines, charms, cosmetic gear, and mythic tales. All of these either provided different ways to change the players appearance or combat abilities. The next most common purpose is to encourage exploration of the game world and enhance the aesthetic of being in 13<sup>th</sup> century Japan. All of the

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<sup>37</sup> The overall outcome of this choice is the game. The only difference is in what Shimura says to Jin based off the decision. If the player chooses to kill Shimura, then he essentially thanks Jin for doing the hard but honorable thing. If Shimura is spared then he insults him and tells him he has no honor as Jin disappears into the forest.

aforementioned options encourage exploration of the game world because the only way to gain said options is to find them through a form of exploration. Meanwhile every mythical reference and adaptation contributed to creating an environment of 13<sup>th</sup> century Japan, since they all reflect elements from that time period.

The analysis of the hero's journey revealed that all elements of the journey, except the magic flight, are present in *Ghost of Tsushima*. However, there is a unique aspect of the hero's journey in *Ghost of Tsushima*. The steps of the journey do not always happen in the order originally laid out by Joseph Campbell. For example, the road of trials occurs very early in the departure stage of the game instead of at the beginning of the road of trials. This is due to video games having interactive narratives that can be experienced in the order preferred by the player. It's likely that video games that are not subject to a linear narrative (most are not) would also result in steps of the hero's journey being rearranged. In contrast to this research, when analyzing the hero's journey in *God of War*<sup>38</sup> Koshkina (2020) concluded in his research that the first two stages of the hero's journey (departure & initiation) are present, but the last stage (return) is missing from the game. This is likely due to the difference in genres between *God of War* and *Ghost of Tsushima*. *God of War* has a fairly linear narrative structure with a hard ending to the game. Meanwhile *Ghost of Tsushima* is an open world game that theoretically never ends. Open world games all have a main storyline, but after that main storyline is finished the player is free to roam the world, complete side quests, and do whatever they want. Due to this *Ghost of Tsushima* must have the return stage so that the player may continue playing the game, however since *God of War* finishes after the main storyline is complete the return stage is not mandatory.

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<sup>38</sup> *God of War* is full of references to Norse mythology.

As discussed in the literature review there is a substantial lack of research explaining why mythology is so prevalent in video games. This analysis fills this gap in literature and adds on to the existing research on myths and games. Notably the conclusions of Koshikina (2020) and Todor's (2010) research are discussed.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### 5.1 Incorporation of Myth in *Ghost of Tsushima*

*Ghost of Tsushima* incorporates myths by utilizing Japanese mythology for both world building and gameplay mechanics. Incorporating Japanese myths helps create the desired world for the game. In the case of *Ghost of Tsushima*, they helped create an authentic 13<sup>th</sup> century Japan. While the game went to great lengths to get the details of 13<sup>th</sup> century Japan correct, they also incorporated mythical structures that fit the romanticized image modern people have with ancient Japan. The need to include the romanticized image of Japan is due to reading formations. As reading formations in a text are based upon the cultural and ideological values a person holds, players will project what cultural and ideological values they believe a samurai to have onto *Ghost of Tsushima*. For most players the aforementioned values reflect those of the mythologized samurai and thus it was more important for the game to fit the image of a mythologized Japan rather than a historically accurate one. Nate Fox (director for *Ghost of Tsushima*) stated in an interview that one of the reasons they initially chose the Kamakura period is because of the deeply romanticized and fantastical image of ancient Japan (PerFunctory, 2020). Therefore, the mythical samurai<sup>39</sup> is a major component of *Ghost of Tsushima* that reflects how people imagine ancient Japan to be. Another mythologized history present in *Ghost of Tsushima* is the references and allusions to Kamikaze. Even the mythical structure of Nihon damashii was incorporated into the game. Throughout the game the inhabitants of Tsushima are encouraged to uphold the Japanese spirit (Nihon damashii) by being brave and standing against the overwhelming Mongol forces. The

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<sup>39</sup> The romanization/mythologization of samurai is discussed in further detail in section 2.1.1

Mythological references present in the analysis were also incorporated to enhance world building on a more visual level.

Incorporating myths into the game also allowed *Ghost of Tsushima* developers to camouflage technologically based mechanics. Todor (2010) reached this same conclusion in her research, however she stated that this occurs for myths present in the “structural” level. The analysis conducted in this research revealed that myths present on all levels can be incorporated by video games to camouflage gameplay mechanics. For example, Shinto shrines in *Ghost of Tsushima* (a mythical reference not structure) cleverly camouflage an acrobatic puzzle for players, encouragement to explore the game world, and ways to customize abilities. The shrines in *Ghost of Tsushima* achieve this camouflage by placing the shrines on top of mountains with paths that have been damaged by the mongols. Thus, the player must figure out how to reach the shrine and have the mechanical skills to make their way to the shrine. Smoothly camouflaging gameplay mechanics is perhaps the most significant reason to incorporate myths into a video game because it increases player immersion in the game. The player is immersed by living and playing with Japanese mythology through the eyes of the character they inhabit (Jin Sakai). The player at this point is not only in the midst of a myth but find themselves as the driving force of the story through the agency they are given (Koshkina, 2020). By using Japanese mythology to camouflage gameplay mechanics, the immersion of being in 13<sup>th</sup> century Japan is kept alive. A samurai praying to a shrine is contextually expected and the abilities granted to the player can be interpreted as kami answering their prayers, thus the immersive experience of being a samurai in 13<sup>th</sup> century Tsushima is not broken. Myths are also used to create and inform the game world. Every mythical structure and mythical reference in the analysis plays a hand in world building. For example, as discussed in the analysis section, the purpose of charms in *Ghost of Tsushima* are to provide the player with options on how to enhance their character’s

abilities. However, the reason that these options are presented as charms and not simply a menu of abilities to choose from is due to the fact that using charms helps build the world of 13<sup>th</sup> century Japan and thus further increase immersion. World building and camouflaging gameplay mechanics are two ways *Ghost of Tsushima* was able to successfully incorporate Japanese myths into their narratives.

## **5.2 The Adaptation, Continuation, and Creation of New Myths**

### **5.2.1 The Continuation of Myths in Video Games**

As discussed in the literature review, video games have the capacity to adapt, continue, and even create new myths. *Ghost of Tsushima* continues Japanese mythology by simply having it present in the game. It is worth noting here that *Ghost of Tsushima* was the highest rated game of its generation<sup>40</sup> (Tassi, 2020). This rating implies that *Ghost of Tsushima* will be exposing Japanese mythology to a substantial amount of people. Rather than learning about myths from ancient texts or storytellers like our ancestors, many people will be exposed to mythology through video games. The feats that myths seek to accomplish are reminiscent of the same feats that many video games are also trying to accomplish. Similar to mythology, video games also want to provide the player with a lens from which to understand the game universe. Games that use myths often use them to justify or inspire narrative, character abilities, and art. *Ghost of Tsushima* is certainly a fantastic example of this.

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<sup>40</sup> Generation here refers to the generation of video game consoles, so in this case: Xbox One, PS4, and Nintendo Switch.

### 5.2.2 The Adaptation of Myths in Video Games

The way in which video games adapt mythology has already been partially discussed in the 6.1 incorporation of myth section. While video games adapt mythology to fit their unique purposes, in most cases this is to camouflage gameplay mechanics and inform world building. Video games are rarely striving for complete mythological accuracy, so they can take great liberties with myth when needed. At the same time, since these reimagined myths are repetitively and extensively disseminated and experienced by players, the popular version of myths are steadily settled, while also always being in motion. This can be seen in *Ghost of Tsushima* by the earlier example (mythic tale section of analysis) of a mythic tale being inspired by the *hama yumi*. The mythic tales in *Ghost of Tsushima* are all adaptations of Japanese mythology, but the game changes and adds elements for the purposes of the game. For example, the owner of the *hama yumi* is cursed by a demon in *Ghost of Tsushima* (something not present in the original myth) in order to narratively justify an in game duel that serves as the concluding act of the mythic tale. This same phenomenon can be seen in how *Ghost of Tsushima* adapts the myth of kamikaze<sup>41</sup>. Meanwhile mythological elements in *Ghost of Tsushima* such as Shinto shrines and Buddhist statues are relatively unchanged. Players are also adapting myths themselves by “reconstructing the myth via interacting with it” (Koshkina ,2020, p. 30). Players in game choices will subsequently result in how they experience the myths and thus pass them on to others.

### 5.2.3 The Creation of New Myths in Video Games

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<sup>41</sup> Discussed further in the dialogue section of the analysis.

In the context of this research creating new myths refers to video game's ability to add on to existing mythologies. This can be a small addition such as a new weapon or change of hair color to a more substantial addition in the form of an entirely new story based on an existing mythological character. As discussed in the literature review, adaptations of mythology should "not be thought of as falsifications of some true, authentic version, but as an essential aspect of the structure of myth" (Lechte, 2013, p. 86). Adaptations of myths in video games are in fact forms of new myths due to the nature of mythology lying in its continual adaptation. Levi-Strauss (1955) asserts that all versions of myths are valid because they represent the deep structure of myth. The myth making power of *Ghost of Tsushima* was touched upon by *Ghost of Tsushima*'s creative art director, Jason Connell. In an interview (Dornbush, 2020) he talked about how the mythic tales present in the game are representations of famous legends and mythical tales in Japan. The player themselves then becomes part of this phenomenon as characters in the game begin to tell tall tales and actively create the myth of the Ghost in front of the player. (Dornbush, 2020, 32:40). This legitimacy of mythical adaptations in video games can also be seen by zooming out from the game itself and focusing on the player. Players could theoretically pass on what they learned about Japanese mythology in *Ghost of Tsushima* through word of mouth, by writing a book, or discussing it on a podcast. The retellings of myths from players are informed by their reading formations, as meaning in text may be activated in different context and purposes by different players, and these meanings have varying degrees of importance in specific contexts and communities (Barthes, 1974). This continuing retelling of myths that originated from *Ghost of Tsushima* could sneak its way into the general subconscious over time and thus be added into accepted Japanese mythology. Therefore, according to Levi -Strauss's theory the myths present in *Ghost of Tsushima* have the potential to be accepted as new myths. This is especially true for the mythic tales in the game due to its close proximity to established



myths. Since video games are now the world's largest entertainment industry it is likely that video games will continue to adapt, create, and continue new mythology.

### 5.3 Myth Structures in *Ghost of Tsushima*

The most significant discovery that the analysis revealed was that *Ghost of Tsushima*, released in 2020, supports the theories of Levi-Strauss's *Structural Study of Myth* (1955) and Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Both Levi-Strauss and Joseph Campbell believed that no matter what form the myth took they were subject to certain mythical structures that link all mythologies. These mythical narrative structures are structures that can be found in every mythology, although the way in which they manifest will vary (as seen in the hero's journey section of the analysis). Categorizing the Japanese myths present in *Ghost of Tsushima* as either implicit or explicit myths and incorporating the steps of the hero's journey was instrumental in making this discovery. Not only were Asimos's implicit and explicit myth instrumental, her theory that "the way the narrative is revealed and experienced by the player is as important to the mythic structure as the scripted narrative" is supported by the analysis done in this research (Asimos, 2018, p. 100). Every aspect of mythology in *Ghost of Tsushima* that was an optional experience was an implicit myth, while the only two parts that every player was guaranteed to encounter were the explicit mythical narrative structures. This shows that mythical structures are so embedded that it could not be avoided by any player, while theoretically all Japanese mythical references in the game could be missed or outright ignored. This is because the explicit myths present in the game reflect the purpose of myths discussed in section 2.1<sup>42</sup> as well as inherent

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<sup>42</sup> 2. 1 Mythology: It's Original Purpose and Modern Day Uses.

mythical structures theorized by Levi Strauss. Meanwhile the implicit myths present in *Ghost of Tsushima* are the ways that Japanese mythology specifically manifests the purposes of mythology. For example, one common mythical structure in mythology are stories that serve to explain the unexplainable (explicit myth and mythical structure). One way that Japanese mythology accomplishes this is the existence of *yōkai* (implicit myth and mythical reference) that are blamed for all sorts of unexplainable supernatural occurrences. Therefore, the need to explain the unexplainable would be a shared mythical structure that all mythologies adhere to, while *yōkai* are part of the details that change for every mythology.

The hero's journey and the myth of the good hero that opposes an overwhelming evil<sup>43</sup> are two additional mythical structures present in *Ghost of Tsushima*, which support the theory of shared mythical structures. While elements of the hero's journey were altered, *Ghost of Tsushima* contains the perfect example of a good hero that opposes an overwhelming evil. Jin Sakai is a quintessential hero who strives to save his people regardless of the risk or cost to himself. He also opposes an overwhelming evil in the form of the invading Mongols. The Mongols murder and plunder their way through Tsushima and number in the thousands, while Jin opposes them with a small handful of allies. On top of existing mythical structures theorized by Strauss, this research revealed that localized mythical structures are apparent in Japanese mythology as well. The Japanese mythical structure of *Nihon damashii* can be seen throughout Japanese myths and in *Ghost of Tsushima* as well. Many of the myths present in Japanese mythology follow the values present in (alleged) "Nihon *damashii*." The relationship between mythology and Nihon *damashii* can be described as intrinsically linked. Myths and mythologized history seemingly serve as the bases from which the Japanese spirit (Nihon *damashii*) was born, while at the

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<sup>43</sup> Discussed in section 2.4

same time *Nihon damashii* serves as the inspiration for future integrated myths. This can be seen in *Ghost of Tsushima* as it is active in the making of new myths and the myths present in the game are heavily influenced by the belief of *Nihon damashii*. Levi-Strauss (1955) believed that while the content in myths vary, the structures remain the same through different cultures and times. This analysis of myths in *Ghost of Tsushima* confirms that even though this theory was published 65 years ago with no knowledge of what video games would become, Levi Strauss's structural myth theory is applicable in contemporary (digital) popular cultural mediums.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to address the lack of research concerning why mythology is so prevalent in video games and how mythology is being utilized by video games. The research conducted in this thesis was accomplished by conducting a textual analysis of the case study *Ghost of Tsushima*. Specific analytical questions as well as theories by Levi Strauss and Joseph Campbell formed the framework from which to situate the textual analysis. Interviews with the developers of *Ghost of Tsushima* were then referenced to help inform the analysis and discussion.

The research revealed that world building and camouflaging gameplay mechanics are common ways *Ghost of Tsushima* incorporates Japanese myths into their narrative. The relationship between video games interactive nature and the adaptation of myth can be seen in how players in game choices have a direct impact on how they experience myths and thus their adaptations. The research also illustrated how video games are able to continue, adapt, and create new myths. *Ghost of Tsushima* is able to continue Japanese mythology by simply having it present in the game and passing it on to the players. Since most video games are not striving to be as accurate as possible to the myth their borrowing from, adaptations of myths can take major liberties depending on the objectives of the game. *Ghost of Tsushima* left some Japanese myths relatively unaltered, while others were adapted to provide a specific gameplay element the developers wanted in the game. These adaptations of myths in video games are forms of authentic myth, thus it can be concluded that video games create new myths as well. Finally, it was discovered that *Ghost of Tsushima* conforms to Joseph Campbells monomyth theory. However, steps of the hero's journey are out of order due to the interactive narrative in video games.

The research conducted in this thesis has both contributed to the field of video game studies by addressing a gap in literature and also confirming the theories of Joseph Campbell and Levi Strauss. The analysis uncovered how Joseph Campbell's monomyth theory and Levi Strauss's structural myth can be seen in video games. The research conducted also adds to Levi Strauss's structural myth theory by theorizing that in addition to world wide mythical structures, localized mythical structures may exist as well. Levi Strauss theorized that myths would be unable to escape mythical structures, regardless of the time or culture. The research proved this by showing how Japanese mythology in a video game released in 2020 obeys certain mythical structures theorized over 60 years ago.

Unfortunately, due to time limitations, researching only one game and one mythology was possible. Future academics could contribute to this research by conducting a comparative analysis between these results and the results of similar analyses on different genres of games and mythologies. It's worth noting that a few months after *Ghost of Tsushima*'s initial release a multiplayer mode was added. This mode is called "Legends" and is heavily influenced by Japanese mythology. Whereas *Ghost of Tsushima* was intentionally developed to not be high fantasy in nature, the legends mode went in the complete opposite direction. This mode has no continuous story, but rather players team up to go on short mini adventures influenced by Japanese mythology. This part of the game was not covered because it was not included in the original release of the game and operates drastically different from the main game. However, follow up research on the legends mode by future scholars would be enlightening. Another interesting avenue would be to conduct similar research that focuses on the player instead of the game. This would allow researchers to answer more psychological research questions such as: How does interacting with mythology in video games contribute to a person's understanding of myths?

An unintended but interesting finding in this research was the transformation of history into myth. While conducting the research necessary to complete this thesis a reoccurring phenomenon became apparent. History is often romanticized to the point that it becomes what could be considered mythologized history. In the context of this research, this can be seen by the mythologized image of the samurai. History can be boring and cruel, but myths leave inspiration and are fantastical in nature. Since myths are more palatable, they often overshadow and replace what was real. Video games capitalize on this by utilizing myths that are intrinsically viewed as entertaining and exciting.

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## **Appendixes**

**Appendix Table 1**

Shrine Name	Associated Kami
Arrow Peak Shrine	Inari: Kami of agriculture
Winding Mountain Shrine	Izanagi: Kami of creation
Golden Summit Shrine	Ameratsu: Kami of the sun
Plum Blossom Shrine	Kagu-tsuchi: Kami of the fire
Stone Dragon Shrine	Susanoo: Kami of storms

Spring Falls Shrine	Mizu-no-kami: Kami of water
Mending Rock Shrine	Okuninushi: Kami of medicine
Marsh Rock Shrine	Izanami: Kami of life and death
Scarlet Rock Shrine	Tsukuyomi: Kami of the moon
Lush Peak Shrine	Shinatsuhiko: Kami of the wind
Hazy Cliff Shrine	Ryuujin: Kami of the sea
Cloud Ridge Shrine	Azumi-no-Isora: Kami of the seashore
Turtle Rock Shrine	Hoori-no-Mikoto: Kami of the hunt
Frost Cliff Shrine	Nigihayahi-no-Mikoto: Kami of the sky
Crane Mountain Shrine	Ikazuchi-no-Kami: Kami of lightning
Snowlit Peak Shrine	Takemikazuchi: Kami of the sword

**Appendix Table 2**

Charm Name	Charm ability
Charm of Inari	Increases supplies, predator hides, bamboo, and yew wood gained from collecting.
Charm of Izanagi	Landing a headshot has a 40% chance to return an arrow.
Charm of Ameratsu	Killing enemies restores a Moderate amount of health.
Charm of Okuninushi	Slowly recover health outside of combat.
Charm of Ryuujin	Recover one Kunai after a Perfect Dodge.
Resistance I	Reduces all damage by a Minor amount.
Unyielding I	Moderately reduces damage taken while at 50% health or less.

Advantage	Ghost Weapons deal 20% more damage.
Dual Destruction I	Attacks have a 5% chance to deal double damage.
Ferocity	Moderate increase to Melee damage.