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# Win to Exit: Perma-Death and Resurrection in *Sword Art Online* and *Log Horizon*

David McConeghy

## Abstract

Trapped inside their virtual-reality gaming worlds, players in both *Sword Art Online* (2012) and *Log Horizon* (2013, 2014) find themselves fighting virtual battles for their real-world lives. This essay looks at the secular approaches to issues of death and dying presented by these Japanese anime television series. Instead of relying on Buddhism or Shintoism, the characters in these shows use gaming mechanics to explain their predicament. Eternal life becomes a source of ennui in *Log Horizon* where players are trapped and resurrected upon death. In *Sword Art Online*, players find new value in their virtual lives, but fear perma-death in both worlds at the hands of players who continue to see the game as solely a game. Video games and anime are powerful tableaux for exploring death and religion, but they are used here to greatest effect to show that social contracts between players do not end when their virtual lives begin.

**Keywords:** Video Games, *Sword Art Online*, *Log Horizon*, Virtual Reality, Death and Dying, Religion and Popular Culture, Secularism, gameenvironments

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## Introduction

You are trapped inside a virtual-reality video game where the stakes are life and death. What do you do? Do you risk everything to try to beat the game and escape the simulation? Or do you settle into a virtual life that mirrors the world you left behind? This is the premise of two Japanese media franchises, *Sword Art Online* (SAO) and *Log Horizon* (LH).<sup>i</sup> Both franchises feature gamers caught inside their virtual gaming worlds and explore the challenges of living in a gaming environment. Among the philosophical issues present in each franchise, one of the most interesting is the

way they explore death and dying.

In this essay, I will introduce the worlds of SAO and LH to ask how they deal with seemingly religious questions: What happens when we die? What is the purpose of life? What are the moral rules our society should follow and why? I contend that viewers are treated to substantially secular answers. Organized religion is not the way the trapped gamers answer these questions. Nor do the shows rely on overt references to religious beliefs connected to either Shinto or Buddhism, Japan's largest religious groups. Instead, the shows opt for secular philosophies untethered to obvious and accessible religious resources used by many other anime series. I contend that this is a reaffirming of the value of gaming environments as creative tableau for exploring new configurations of religion's role(s) in our lives that parallels the strongly secular Japanese society. Though religion appears often in Japanese popular culture products, it is substantially absent here. Perhaps because these shows portray gaming worlds, they have been freer to explore the secular boundaries of potentially religious issues. Video games are adaptable, expansive and flexible, and despite the high stakes of these specific gaming dystopias, they are relatively welcoming environments for creators to test new and old ideas about religion.

### **Introduction to Sword Art Online and Log Horizon**

*Sword Art Online* and *Log Horizon* each began as a novel series before becoming diverse media franchises with manga and anime television series adaptations. The first novel in the SAO series by creator Reki Kawahara appeared in 2009 and continues today with a new anime series announced for fall 2018. LH was written by Mamare Touno in 2011. While its anime adaption ended in 2014, the novel and manga adaptations are ongoing. Both franchises rely on a trope called "Win to Exit."







guilds to provide protection for players from “player-killers” who seek to abuse the in-game world to murder other gamers. An implied chivalric code of honor is evident in the series but never fully realized. Finally, the design of the world features no religious institutions familiar to Japan. Designed to look vaguely mediaeval, *Ainclad* relies on internationally-recognized fantasy tropes from epics and myths such as British legends about King Arthur and the sword Excalibur or Norse figures like Thor, Skuld, Thrym, and the Yggdrasil (World Tree).

Like *SAO*, *Log Horizon* is about a popular vmmorpg called *Elder Tale* and is also set in near-future Japan. After downloading the latest expansion pack to the game, 30,000 players find themselves unable to log out. Unlike *SAO*, however, *LH* players find themselves reincarnated upon death using in-game mechanics. Moreover, the technology used to play *Elder Tale* means that players have been digitized (à la *Tron*) from a purely visual to a fully immersive experience. (In the show this is indicated by the players figuring out how to make their characters perform actions that formerly called for player-input using a keyboard and mouse.) The story centers on Shiroe and his allies Naotsugu and Akatsuki. Since in-game death is an inconvenience and not permanent death outside of the game, players move much more quickly to understand and adapt to their new world. Without the specter of perma-death, the players trapped in *LH's Elder Tale* seem encouraged to view the gaming world as a new permanent reality, since it is entirely unclear what has occurred to make their gameplay fully immersive. One significant difference between *SAO* and *LH* is that *Elder Tale* is brimming with NPCs, all of whom now seem to take on new freedoms and even awareness of the effects gamers have on their shared world. Where *SAO* relies on the drama among its characters as they attempt to escape the game without dying, *LH* instead makes exploring and adapting to the gaming world itself the source the drama. *SAO* anticipates its players’ victory over the system; *LH* leaves its gamers





perpetual limbo to re-evaluate what constitutes play and begin playing to do something with their lives.

Another divergence between the shows is the centrality of the People of the Land in LH, which creates a fundamentally different dynamic in the show’s plot progression. LH players must engage and cooperate with their environment. It is a shared world now. In SAO, by contrast, there are only players and the monsters that threaten them (which admittedly includes other players). In one moment of strategy in SAO the main characters argue they can let the monsters overrun a NPC town to more easily defeat the boss. It is clear in SAO that the NPC and the environment are simply game objects. The gaming world of *Elder Tale* and its peoples are not so much enemies for Shiroe as they are neighbors. Moreover, without the ability to permanently die, the Adventurers seem obliged to take immediate responsibility for the People of the Land who are threatened both by monsters and the trapped gamers. Finally, while death is not permanent in LH, it does have consequences for players. With each death players begin to forget the world they left behind. Moreover, the experience of death seems to provide a glimpse of the non-virtual world. As I shall explore below, this leads to some interesting developments as players kill themselves repeatedly to reconnect to the world outside the simulation.

### Critical Theory of Religion and Gaming Worlds

One of the assumptions of this essay is that SAO and LH are both exploring religious issues without being explicitly tethered to either denominational or institutional precedents. This presumes at least two things about the use of the category “religious” here that warrant clear explanations. First, I follow the longstanding tradition of scholars that see the category of religion as a tool created by the scholar











rightly-earned strength. As the players discover after enough deaths and rebirths, however, dying in-game offers something else, too, a glimpse of the world players have left behind. In a meaningful way, LH inverts the experience of SAO players. The monotony of life within a world where players can never die has turned the game into simply another way of living. By examining the ways the show approach intentional deaths of suicide and murder, we can see not only the approach of gamers to the value of life in their gaming world, but also what they see as the meaning of death.

In the second episode of *LH*, "The Battle of Loka" (2013), Shiroe and his friends discuss the rise in player killings. While the towns prevent players from player killing, just outside the boundary of their protection, players have begun to harass each other. "They attack players, rather than monsters, and then steal items and money," they are told by a guild ally. "It's the worst thing you could do." Shiroe resolves to deal with the issue immediately and sets a trap for the local PKers. After easily defeating them, the group discusses why some players have taken this unseemly turn. They have "no goal to live for," Shiroe muses:

"We have food. By defeating low-level monsters, you can make money. With that money you can stay at an inn. Fighting isn't allowed in towns, so you don't have to fear for your life there. And even if you do die, you'll come back to life... But can you really call that living? Or is it just not being dead?"

The problem as Shiroe sees it is that players trapped in *Elder Tale* have yet to understand the range of impacts from their full immersion. The risks of dying to monsters have increased, so to compensate they have taken the easier path of killing fellow players. The moral equation that existed when *Elder Tale* was a simple game has not been fully rewritten yet. Shiroe's actions play a decisive role in fostering the community's re-assessment of its moral foundations. Life inside the game now must have the range of meanings that life outside of it had. Nor can player killing be







enlightenment) causes them to engage with the cycle of death and rebirth ever more, as if they could bend the system to their will by aggressive participation. Toyha and other players like him that found meaning by living their virtual life to their fullest are likewise being foolish. In part, they appear like Gods trapped in Buddhist heavenly realms unable to appreciate the rules that govern the system that binds them. For the newly sentient Landers, this is surely the way to understand the Adventurers--they squander the opportunities given to them and fail to appreciate their lack of limitations. They see the Adventurers as careless and thoughtless Gods, whose willful ignorance of their plight echoes the harsh monster-filled landscape of the game. Even in the most generous reading, and only for Toyha and others who come to realize the humanity of the Landers, within the fully immersive *Elder Tale* the Adventurers may appear as Bodhisattvas, guardians and guides for Landers willing to seek the truth of their world and the world outside the game they cannot possibly know.

The promise of the gaming world as escape from the real world also exists in *SAO II* (2014), which occurs after Kirito has freed Asuna from her confinement in ALO. In a story arc called "Mother's Rosario," Asuna is recruited by Yuuki (in-game name "Zekken"), the leader of a small guild of players called the Sleeping Knights who want to memorialize their gameplay on an in-game monument. With Asuna's help, they succeed, but then it is revealed that all the guild members are terminally ill people. Asuna visits Yuuki in the hospital, only to discover that she spends all her time in an advanced medical version of the gaming VR technology. With Kirito's help, Asuna arranges for Yuuki to use a telepresence device to visit her school class. Coming after all the players trapped in *Sword Art Online* were released, the Mother's Rosario storyline blends elements of the characters' lives outside the game with more temporary gaming sessions. It is apparent that Asuna is growing as a person thanks to in-game triumphs. "There are things you can't communicate unless you clash,"

emerges as in mantra in the game when the small Sleeping Knights guild was about to be bullied out of achieving their goal. Asuna feared the guild would demur in the face of resistance, but instead they chose to confront the obstacle head-on. Outside the game, this lesson is quickly put to the test as Asuna faces an escalating crisis of parental resistance to her continued gaming. Her mother fears she is only falling further behind and school and cannot understand why Asuna is so attached to a gaming world so like the one that trapped her for so long. For Yuuki, however, the game is an escape from her medical confinement. As a softer variation of the difference between the Knights and Toyha, Asuna at this point in the story sees the game not as a replacement for but a supplement to her reality.

Much earlier, however, Asuna and Kirito faced a different dynamic of life and death inside *Sword Art Online*. On a training mission for their guild, Kirito found himself face-to-face with one of their gaming world's player killers, Kuradeel. Ultimately, Kirito and Asuna battle Kuradeel and Kirito kills him. As a member of the murder-guild Laughing Coffin, Kuradeel enjoyed their ability to murder fellow gamers under the veneer of their virtual imprisonment. Unlike LH, players killed in SAO died in real life. The challenge of verifying numerous elements of this process left enough questions surrounding player killing to give SAO several ways to explain the motives of its PKers. Perhaps players did not really die. Verification of death outside the game from within it was impossible. Or maybe murder inside *Sword Art Online* was acceptable since it was within the game's mechanics and rules. The punishment--changing a player's character icon from green to orange to red--may have come with some limited consequences, but in SAO the community seemed disinclined to engage in any serious or large-scale social engineering as in LH. Captured PKers are placed in a prison until everyone is released from the game. It is implied that they received legal repercussions for their in-game actions, but it is not discussed in any

detail. Finally, and most gruesomely, perhaps PKers were given a platform to engage in behavior that they always wished to perform but were unwilling or unable to do outside the game. On this final point, SAO has a major storyline that opens its second season.

Kirito is free from *Sword Art Online* and beginning to rebuild his life outside the game. His victory over the game’s creator Kayaba has been kept a secret to avoid drawing attention to himself. Recruited by a branch of the police, Kirito is asked to enter the new vmmorpg of GGO where a figure known as “Death Gun” appears to have killed a player in-game. After the incident with *Sword Art Online* many new protections have been added to the VR devices, but the police fear these may have been subverted. Kirito investigates and learns that the offending character is played by several gamers, all related to or former members of the Laughing Coffin guild. They have not hacked the game; they are merely using the premise of the game to cover up their real-world murders. These members that escaped imprisonment within SAO for their role in the murder-guild now desire to bring the consequences of playing *Sword Art Online* to GGO – that is, they hoped not only to terrorize the community, but to raise the stakes of the game to make it “worth” playing. The sentiment that only games with real stakes are worth playing is mirrored by Kirito’s motives for accepting the challenging of uncovering the GGO plot. In episode 19, “House in the Forest,” his friends discuss what drives him after seeing his intensive preparation for the detective mission: “Kirito isn’t going to fight like his life depends on it anymore. To put it another way, Kirito will only go all-out when the game is no longer a game, only when the virtual world becomes the real world.” Stunningly, Kirito’s focusing after beating *Sword Art Online* has been to study “mechatronics,” which in SAO indicates a field of robotics with VR telepresence capabilities. It is his invention that allows Yuuki to join Asuna at school and experience the real world

rather than persist in her immersive virtual world. The reversal of the real world as the place of exploration gave Kirito motive and drive to work on his education as hard as he worked to perfect his in-game skills to survive *Sword Art Online* and investigate inside GGO.

When SAO shows its players returning to the world, it is evident that their experience will not be tolerated again. Nearly 4,000 players died while inside the game, and those that survived were treated gingerly by society. They were given their own school, received additional counseling and support, and had a devoted branch of the government to manage their situation before they re-emerged. One of the complaints about LH is that the franchise substantially ignores what must be substantial consequences for so many players to have become fully immersed inside the game. SAO notes that players needed to be given medical attention to prevent their bodies from wasting away while they were inside. LH avoids such discussions by failing to bring the issue up nor discussing how their gaming experience became fully immersive. The Odyssey Knight who pines for his upcoming wedding and new apartment is a rare change of pace for a series that imagines its consumers are better off forgetting the world they left behind as Toyha appears to do. If it is the case that with each death players lose memories of the non-virtual world, then eventually their reintegration would be no different than finding themselves in another gaming world.

Both SAO and LH meditate on the ways virtuality can focus characters on the special meaning of their lives, but neither sees the virtual world itself as responsible for that meaning. It may not just be coincidence that this makes both series profoundly humanist. It is the value of life that can be reasoned for, accessed through effort, or governed by rules that is most special. The double-death of SAO makes reality's stakes more imminent, but it does not change them. LH, by contrast, transforms its



players into Gods, who quickly set about learning the extent of their newfound authority. Shiroe and his allies are held up as heroic not for their strategic planning or battle prowess, but because they are the first to recognize that the sentience of the NPCs demands their attention. Shiroe, who literally draws up a new contract for the world of *Elder Tale* at the end of season two, becomes the arbiter of the new humanistic social contract between Adventurers and Landers. LH thus sees immortality as the instigator of social change. SAO reminds gamers that life is also a game of consequences with seemingly arbitrary rules. Either way, these are not conventional religious solutions to the problem of death such as the construction of methods or rituals to secure a positive after-life or the creation of belief systems to explain why should behave in certain ways in this life because of causal effects after death. They neither consult ready-to-hand Japanese religious modes nor explicitly call their efforts religious.

### **Secularity and Religion in Gaming**

Of the many challenges facing religious studies today, one of the most public is the dialogue about the relationship between the religious and secular. In the United States, surveys appear and note with alarm poll responses, which reveal a decline in religious affiliation and a rise in those willing to say they are not religious or members of no religion (Jones 2017). These are the eponymous “nones,” who threaten Christian denominationalism as the bedrock of American religious fabric. In Asia, however, the situation is considerably more complex. The discourse of modernity in which East met West was an opportunity for significant cultural exchange, but one of the strangest elements has been the uneven use of the term religion for Confucianism, Shinto, Taoism, and Buddhism. The rise of the field of comparative religion gave scholars tools to describe a constellation of world religions, but this process was fraught with

the trappings of colonialism and Western hegemony (Smith 1991). While scholarship by Masuzawa (2005) and many others have shown the ways in which the category of world religions was an imperial export of the West, other scholarship has traced “secular” to similar roots (Asad 2003). Sacred and secular are western categories alongside religion that run roughshod over Asian attitudes and practices. This is particularly the case when, as theorists like Veikko Anttonen argue, “we need a special explanatory perspective in order to display the logic governing... sacred-making characteristics” (2000, 272).

The problem for any analysis of Japanese sources is that thanks to its history, Japan is substantially more westernized than many of its other Asian counterpart like India or China. As Jason Josephson exhaustively details in *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (2013), Japan began the process of legally demarcating Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shinto as “religions” in contact with American missionaries after the Meiji instituted religious reforms in 1871, but it escalated during the remaking of Japanese society after World War II. This process was not unilateral. Again, Josephson’s thesis parallels Taves’ approach to religious experience in its claims about the secular. “Considered only as an academic descriptor favored by anthropologists and sociologists,” he writes in his introduction, “the history of the category ‘religion’ appears secular, but looked at internationally and diplomatically, ‘religion’... [was] a cover for Christian missionary activity. It was simultaneously secular and Christianizing in different registers” (2013, 4). Following both authors, it would be fairest to say the Japanese ascribed special value to elements of their culture in dialogue with the West, not merely at its direction.

For LH and SAO, among the many implications of a study of their seemingly secular approach to death and dying in virtual worlds, is the ease with which these items

reduce strongly religio-philosophical questions to issues of social contracts. In LH, the sense of fair play and duty to one's community are unspoken wellsprings for Shiroe's actions. Toyha's surprise that a Knight would willingly march to his repeated death hinges on the fact that the Knight seems wasteful of his resources and blind to impact of his action on the community. Both player-killing and suicide in LH are markers of cowardice because they are greedy and selfish. They do not violate sacrosanct religious rules (at least in the player's claims about them). Instead, they break the community's unwritten social contract.

In SAO, the Laughing Coffin's player-killing is a criminal issue since one Japanese citizen is murdering another, even if it is occurring within a virtual environment. None of these deaths takes the opportunity to raise the issues in overtly religious tones. In fact, the sense of legalism pervades both franchises as they attempt to show players understanding the rules of their new virtual worlds. The characters debate their affairs and seek to control what they can of their circumstances. After Kirito defeats Kayaba in episode 14 of the first season of SAO, the creator remarks that he set out to create "a world that surpassed all our laws and all our restrictions." In defeat, he notes of Kirito's *deus ex machina* victory, "now I've been able to see something that surpassed my own world's law."<sup>iii</sup> This "world" (of Aincrad) was made to give the virtual real consequences, but even its creator saw it as a system of laws and rules. It ended when a player finally subverted those rules. LH concludes instead with its players welcoming the opportunity to have a chance to rewrite the rules that govern their world--but even in that moment they agree that they exist in a system they can access and understand.

Though secularism is a hotly debated term, one of its many common uses is to describe the attribution of rules and laws to non-religious sources. Secular sources

are those that need not rely on religious origins. As Charles Taylor explains in one his many critiques of this version of the term, it leaves us fixated "on religion as the problem. In fact," he continues,

"we have moved in many Western countries from an original phase in which secularism was a hard-won achievement warding off some form of religious domination, to a phase of such widespread diversity of basic beliefs, religious and areligious [sic], that only clear focus on the need to balance freedom of conscience and equality of respect can allow us to take the measure of the situation" (2010, 33).

Players in both LH and SAO experience this transition, too. The initial and latently existential religious questions about their virtual prisons give way to a diversity of coping strategies. Shiroe organizes the chaos around him. Kirito loses his impulse to defeat the dungeons before finding that his feelings for Asuna are an even stronger motive to fight and escape. Even the hard-won achievement Asuna gains alongside the Sleeping Knights is diminished by her realization that all her comrades are terminally ill. The secular model of these worlds demands that players learn the rules of the system that governs them – either to defeat it or to better control it. The worlds themselves offer little apart from what the characters themselves supply. Thus, Toyha and Yuuki see VR immersion as a respite from their realities, while the Odyssey Knight, and eventually both Asuna and Kirito, learn that the game sheds new light on the opportunities outside the simulation.

### Conclusion

One of the great challenges for religious studies today is to understand the changing dynamic of sacred and secular. Ideas and questions that once were considered the exclusive purview of religion now frequently find expression in (and analysis through)





embrace religion from any source, even when presented with as well-worn a set of tropes as those of medievalism. Chivalry is divorced from its Biblical roots. Magic is freed from dialogues about the influence of Satan or discussion of God’s laws and the natural order. Knights may quest, but not to reclaim the Holy Land. Excalibur defeats a boss but is otherwise unremarkable. Even the appearance of Norse elements are just empty references without serious invocations of text, culture, or myth. Every potentially latent symbol seems hollow and inactive – even to the players who offer nothing substantial in response to their presence. It is, as the Odyssey Knight lamented, a kind of farce.

What elevates these shows is instead the care with which they approach to problem of virtuality itself as an opportunity to reflect on the value of life and death. If virtual existence is absent of religion, then it does seem a metaphor for the rise of secularism that mirrors Japanese society (Josephson 2013). When items do appear, as Buljan and Cusack remind us, “this content in anime (borrowed from the major religions) is frequently stripped of sacred meaning and value, so that anime aficionados may devise personal understandings of that content” (2015, 195). The production itself is meant to give symbols to audience that are unfilled with the expectation that this creates more opportunities for viewer to insert their own understandings. Western audiences – and SAO undoubtedly has a western audience after receiving an English-language dub and appearing on Netflix in the United States region – fill in the gaps for themselves, or, perhaps for Japanese audiences, fail to fill in the gaps. The shows and their characters avoid doing this labor for viewers. Another form of analysis might consult the consumers of these products to assess what religious or secular lessons were drawn, but as far as what SAO or LH provide themselves, there are intense discussions of life and death but never any explicitly religious interpretations. Taves’ model of extraordinary value calls on observers to

recognize as 'religion-like' that great effort being expended by the shows and their characters to address issues such as the meaning of life and what happens after we die. We seem unable to classify them much further or even to have the resources to declare them religious using conventional definitions. If these magic worlds have such denominational or institutional religious roots, they have been discarded in favor of technology (literally in the case of LH) or simply a commitment by the trapped players to negotiate their virtual worlds in parallel with the kinds of legal rules they were used to outside the simulation. The tools they had at their disposal seemed inclined, as Taylor remarked, to "balance freedom of conscience with equality of respect" (2010, 34). After all, these players were all trapped in worlds designed for choice – what class of character, what race, what guild, which skills, and so on. Is it any wonder that their approach to death and dying was to embrace it as another gaming decision rather than something truly existential? That they declined to move in openly religiously modes is apparent, but their choices still speak volumes and invite audiences to make their own decisions. They could embrace the risk like Kirito. They could revel in the lifting of limits as for Yuuki and Toyha. They could see life as worth taking like the murderous PKers. Or they could see life as worth dying for as the Odyssey Knights did. In the end in SAO and LH, even for trapped players, life and death were just another part of the game to be mastered.

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