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Special Issue

Video Gaming and Death

edited by John W. Borchert



Issue 09 (2018)

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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 tableaus 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, gamevironments

To cite this article: McConeghy, D., 2018. Win to Exit: Perma-Death and Resurrection in *Sword Art Online* and *Log Horizon. gamevironments* 9, 170-201. Available at http://www.gamevironments.uni-bremen.de.

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). 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

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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 guestions: 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."



Online television trope encyclopedia tvtropes.org explains that this genre features "a character trapped in a game, and the only way to escape is to win" (tvtropes.org 2018). Among the trope's more famous versions is the Walt Disney film *TRON* (1982), where a computer programmer played by Jeff Bridges is digitized into a representation of a computer mainframe. After taking control of the system, Bridges' character escapes and returns to the real world. The trope continues in popularity today, with the 2017 remake of the original *Jumanji* (1995) where characters who formerly experienced a board game come-to-life now get transported inside a video game. One of the central conceits of this trope is that life inside the game matters outside the game. Characters often find meaning and purpose when their hobby or recreational activity becomes their reality. It is a tool for personal growth and often helps turn outcasts into central figures. This is the case in both franchises, whose basic elements I will now introduce based on their anime television series versions.

SAO is set in near-future Japan. Kazuto Kirigaya, ("Kirito" in game), is among the many gamers participating in the launch of a new, fully immersive virtual reality massively multiplayer online role-playing game (vrmmorpg) called *Sword Art Online*. When the first 10,000 players enter the game on launch day, they find themselves unable to leave. The game's creator, Akihiko Kayaba, appears and explains that death inside the game now also means a real-world death. Outside the game, hundreds of players whose virtual reality headsets were forcibly removed have already died.

After making his way through dozens of dungeon levels, Kirito finds allies and even a love interest in a skilled player named Asuna Yuuki ("Asuna" in game). Together they make a home for themselves, but they are eventually pulled back into dungeon-crawling by a guild of gamers devoted to progressing and beating the game. Eventually. Kirito discovers that their guild – the largest and most powerful in the



game – is being run by Kayaba to ensure player participation with the game's content. After some *Deus Ex Machina* plot devices, Kirito defeats Kayaba and releases many of the game's trapped players.

Asuna, however, is one of 300 players who do not exit the game. Kirito discovers that Asuna is one of many players being used for an experiment by the man who took over SAO from Kayaba, Nobuyuki Sugou. Diving into a more magical, fantasy-based gaming world called Alfheim Online (ALO), Kirito works together with his cousin to uncover the plot and foil Sugou. The story continues beyond SAO as Kirito is recruited to help solve a string of murders in another fictional game within the series called Gun Gale Online (GGO). At first, the deaths appear to be VR related, but Kirito exposes them as real-life killings motivated by a handful of former SAO players. The upcoming 2018 release of a third anime television series will catch up to the manga/novelizations where Kirito hunts one of the uncaught killers from the GGO-related murders and finds himself yet again trapped inside a virtual world.

SAO's premise of permanent death as a consequence for in-game death fosters several social consequences for its trapped players. First, since the gaming world, Ainclad, is not populated with non-player characters, the trapped players are responsible for all the elements necessary for long-term survivability. Some become crafts-persons to create high-level gear for raiding dungeons. Others gain cooking skills and purchase homes. Young children who joined the game now require a fostercare system. Second, time passes more rapidly inside the game. Players are trapped long enough to begin thinking of their virtual lives as their reality, but not long enough that the trapped children have forgotten the real-world outside the game. This means that relationships in-game often decide life and death in a world filled with monsters. Third, there are few moral restrictions built into the game. It is up to



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 in 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 vrmmorpg 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 (á 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



to confront an eternity of virtual limbo.

As one of the first to realize that impact of their new reality, Shiroe takes the lead in organizing his local community in the town of Akihabara. First, he uses his high-level gear to rapidly cross the game world to aid a fellow guild, the Crescent Moon Alliance, and retrieve one of its members. He discovers that gamers have taken to player-killing their peers because it returns higher rewards with lower risks than fighting the monsters with the unfamiliar new immersive controls. More darkly, the stronger players suggest they are killing other weaker players merely because they are bored. The gaming reality's adherence to its own logic and rules is a major plot point as Shiroe and his friends learn that a player's chosen character skills matter: only a player who chose the cooking skill will have success cooking tasty food ingame. Sensing profit and the ability to better organize those around him, Shiroe works with the Crescent Moon Alliance to begin refashioning their town to fulfill the many needs of the trapped players. This involves creating business opportunities, entertainment events, and otherwise bringing life and purpose to gamers that were becoming inconsolable in their virtual prison.

As Shiroe's plans become ever-larger in scope, he convenes a council of major trading guild leaders to fashion laws and address challenges that loom on the horizon. Notably, the newly sentient NPCs (or People of the Land) attempt to undermine the progress of the trapped players (or Adventurers). Since *Elder Tale* is a world of magic, the skills and technical knowledge possessed by the Adventurers rapidly leads to in-game version of steam power and electricity. Local businesses run by NPCs are threatened by the gamers' entrepreneurship and the rapid introduction of new technologies raise alarms from the People of the Land that the Adventurers will invade. Shiroe plays a major role in defusing the rising tensions and the political



intrigue spans numerous episodes in the series. As the show concludes, Shiroe and others discover that the Adventurers possess the magical power the People of the land lack to effect significant and world-altering changes. What if the Adventurers could stop monsters from spawning and killing the People of the Land? What if the Adventurers could give infinite lives to the People of the Land? How will the two groups come to live together in the future?

LH presents a different set of issues than SAO. Both meditate on the role that life and death play in gaming worlds. Without fear of permanent death or the allure of victory over the game in SAO, the trapped gamers in LH are notably more inconsolable. Weak or ineffective players in SAO resign themselves to biding their time until strong players free everyone. In LH the unknown duration and source of their imprisonment leads to a huge decline in the gamers' desire to engage and participate in the game. This is made clearer in a few ways. First, because Elder Tale operates on a skill-based system, the choices players made prior to becoming trapped now become significant elements of their existence. Poor choices when the game was merely a game now wreak serious consequences. When the players are first trapped, they discover that they get no pleasure from consuming food. They do not appear to need to eat for sustenance, but the act of eating becomes hollow. When Shiroe's group discovers how to make food that tastes normal, it adds considerably to their community's spirit. Similarly, Shiroe's chosen skill of scribe becomes essential in creating binding magical contracts that will reshape the gaming world. Second, not all players saw their imprisonment in *Elder Tale* in such utilitarian terms. Those gamers who joined purely for dungeon-crawling and monster-killing find the arrival of everyday life's rhythms of employment and other responsibilities decidedly unwelcome. Many real-world skills do not transfer or do not transfer easily. Unlike SAO, where continuing to play the game as intended is the path to escape death, in LH players are forced by their



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



to circumscribe an area of study. In his famous essay "Religion, Religions, Religious," for example, Jonathan Z. Smith argued that "religion is not a native category" (2004, 179). It is not a term supplied or even necessarily used by the objects of scholarly study. Scholars bring the term to their subjects. This is especially pertinent given claims by scholars about religion in Japan. Jason Ananda Josephson's The Invention of Religion in Japan (2012), for instance, makes it clear that "religion" was a concept brought to Japan through its contact with the West and especially with Christian missionaries. My claims about religion are thus doubly limited. First, by my definition of religion or religious and how I choose to apply them here. Second, by the serious way in which "religion" fails to capture the Japanese experience. Since my use of these terms establishes my "disciplinary horizon" about what counts and what is excluded (Smith 2004, 194), these choices are significant. Notably, the characters in these worlds make little to no reference to their religious beliefs and occupy themselves not at all with explicitly or recognizably "religious" action. It seems most appropriate to use a definition of religion that meets them halfway. That is, we shall not declare that religion is solely about dogmatic belief or requires predetermined kinds of action. Nor shall we prima facie declare them irreligious.

A useful approach is proposed by Ann Taves (2009), who argues that the nativist problem of the category religion is reduced if we avoid seeking pre-defined religious elements and instead ask what things folks set apart as extraordinary and special that give them their individual worldview. This makes religion into the process of identifying, marking, and relating to extraordinary things. The approach has its opponents who argue that it weakens the field's methods (Curtis 2011, Knott 2011, Fitzgerald 2011). One critique is that it creates too diffuse a horizon. Scholars may have little grounds to distinguish between say, fanatic devotion to a sports team and daily use of the rosary for prayer. Worse still, it may make unstable the binary of



religious/secular and leave both sides of the equation open to ad-hoc ascription by those that use them. This is, in fact, an expected outcome of Taves' approach, since she operates under the assumption that religion is not *sui generis* (i.e., of its own unique type) and that disparate phenomenon can and should be grouped or studied together if they appear similar *and* are treated in similar ways by their users. The value here should be evident. Since in LH and SAO there are few moves toward explicit religion as we might recognize it in west, as observers we can look for phenomenon that are *like* religion in that they are treated as extraordinary or special.

The flexibility of this model, which allows a dialogue to occur between the things that are significant to our subjects and the things that scholars view as significant, is one of its strengths. This is true even if it cedes some of the scholar's authority over the field's terms to our subjects. Smith and others press the rights of the discipline's need for control of its terms (or argue that if we define religion too flexibly then we may find ourselves without a field), but this often obscures the ways our subjects understand themselves. This is in great measure the point Josephson makes: "When Japanese translators encountered the term "religion," they had no idea what it meant.... No word then existed in the Japanese language equivalent to the English term or covering anything close to the same range of meanings" (2012, 1). Taves' model at least sets a pathway where we can see how both scholar and subject contribute to the process of category-formation. Nor does it require or absolve scholars of the burden of analysis. Instead, it frames it as a search for middle ground between what the scholar brings and what the subjects present. Demonstrating those differences often turns out to be the substantive contribution of any given analysis.

In the context of these franchises, Taves' approach elevates the most pressing concerns of the trapped gamers in each world without necessarily bringing a pre-



formed category to bear on their activities. Should we require them to be members of churches or engage in meditation, we might miss other forms of religious behavior? By seeing the players' concerns about their lives inside the game and the consequences of death as their central concerns of extraordinary or special merit, we need not find them immediately as explicitly religious from any western framework. Their words about what matters to them can be "experiences deemed religious" even when the term religion is absent (Taves 2010). This is important since like many creative items, the influences that bear on these franchises are a cross-cultural pastiche that resist easy deciphering of influences. Dubbed audio or English subtitles further add to the challenges of presuming authorial intent and may unintentional bridge cultural gaps through translation. Though I may use the short-hand "religious," it is more accurate to say that their concerns are significant enough for them that for us they may be deemed religious or religion-like to describe how serious the gamers are about them. ii

My second presumption is that even as I am wary about how and why I am labeling elements of these shows religious, I can also proceed to categorize other things as secular. I hope to avoid hypocrisy or splitting hairs here in two ways. First, I characterize as secular specific actions and abilities that derive from each world's lingering video game components. Thus, the infinite reincarnation of gamers living inside *Elder Tale* in LH is not a religious mechanic but a secular one. The termination of gamers in the real world upon death in the gaming world in SAO is a secular and not a religious mechanic. This means that powerful bosses inside gaming dungeons and the magic-infused worlds are similarly not *on their own* religious elements. They are instead gaming mechanics being experienced immersively which can be treated (or not) as religious by the gamers. This leaves the choice about whether these elements are or are not religious up to the subjects. Second, I have selected for

analysis instances when players intentionally break the wall between the immersive gaming experience and the real world. These moments when the "magic circle" of the game's commitment to its immersivity is broken are opportunities to categorize the character's expressed concerns (Salen and Zimmerman 2004). They are moments that instigate reflection on both their virtual and real worlds – precisely the opportunity we need to apply Taves' model. Catching players in these unguarded instances avoids the issue that the "serious play" of a life-or-death gaming world could be seen as necessarily or always-already religious and never secular (Wagner 2014). It leaves open the possibility that these issues *might* be secular and does not pre-judge them as religious.

Suicide, Murder and Dying in Virtual Worlds

In the gaming worlds shown in LH and SAO, one activity is seen as decisively immoral: killing other players. Player killing or player killers (PKing or PKers) cross one of the few moral boundaries present in *Elder Tale* and *Sword Art Online*. The stakes, however, could not be more different. In SAO, killing another player is murder. The life-or-death risks of the game bring the legal mentality of the real-world into the virtual one. SAO continues this dynamic in its third spin-off season, where formerly trapped *Sword Art Online* player-killers commit real-world murders using the guise of another vrmmorpg, *Gun Gale Online* (GGO). PKers are interesting subjects here because they bring their gaming mentality across the virtual threshold. When a game became real, life also became a game. In LH, by contrast, killing other players begins as a fundamental gaming move – a power-play or demonstration of force that amounts to bullying to establish strength. It is reprehensible because it is considered beneath the dignity of community standards. Gaining wealth or power from demeaning other weaker players violates unwritten moral rules about fair-play and

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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



tolerated. Not only because it violates basic ethical perceptions about neighborliness, but because it is a grossly inadequate way to exist in their virtual world as its rules come closer to resembling those that govern the real world.

Shiroe's next moves – to begin organizing community leadership, developing the world's economy, and even opening diplomacy with the sentient NPCs – are all designed to implement missing social structures into the game. What's noticeably absent is any sense of obligation to effect explicitly religious elements. There is no move to build religious sites more appropriate for the trapped Japanese gamers. No community organizing is conducted to arrange prayer or worship sites. No time is spent discussing the ethical implications of moral misconduct, only the legal framework for preventing it is introduced. Player killers are a criminal element whose sociopathy is boredom and not malevolence. The solution for the immorality is to heighten the secular structures that are available to deal with boredom – create incentives for meaningful daily action, opportunities for entrepreneurship, and provide a steady stream of entertainment through parties and festivals. Even the festivals, which might have been a means of introducing religious elements, are stripped bare as they become tied to the changing seasons such as the autumnal "Scale Festival." Japanese festivals (matsuri) are indeed often secular, but frequently include strong Buddhist, Shinto or imperial symbolic elements, as when the religious and secular calendars coincide during the New Year festival of Shōgatsu (Ashkenazi 1993). Festivals are routinely bifurcated in their ritual and celebratory elements, and LH keeps the exuberant cultural celebrations while eliminating their religious and ritual components. If festivals help make life worth living inside Elder Tale, then that life's meaning has also become divorced from any ritual or religious obligations it previously held. The force of religion as a background for the festivals (that they do possess in real-life) is blunted in favor of their merits as a good party. Even cultural



imperatives for these as traditions that link to religious heritage are similarly ignored. Presumably, and this is the strongly implied logic of the main characters, players with much to look forward to will desist in turning to PKing to entertain themselves.

Eventually another group in LH finds a more compelling reason to exploit the games' infinite lives mechanic. It had been months since the players have been trapped inside Elder Tale. Shiroe's allies have become essential in negotiations with the leaders of the surrounding NPC communities to avoid war and protect the People of the Land from the monsters that spawn due to the presence of the Adventurers. In episode 19, "The Red Night" (2015) The Odyssey Knights have gained a favorable reputation with the Landers as berserkers willing to die to protect NPCs from monsters. During a major battle, the Knights rush onto the battlefield hopelessly outmatched and begin rapidly dying. "I'm here," one of the Knights calls to the attacking wyverns, "Now, take me!" He is revived nearby, and what appears insane at first – carelessly welcoming death after death – is revealed to be something more. "They desire death," a nearby character named Roe 2 observes. As they are revived they see "their life flashing before their eyes, like a drug." Shiroe's ally Toyha is appalled. The Knights seem hellbent on not only slaying monsters but dying while doing so and ignoring any impacts of the fight. "Why are you sacrificing your own lives," Toyha asks one of the Knights. "In this world, there is no death," the Knight replies:

"It's impossible to take your own life. We want to go back. We're going home. Did you know? When you die, you can see your family. When you die, you can see a little bit of the old world. You can see that world. I'm sure that place is somehow connected to it. If we die, and die, and keep dying... Someday, we'll be able to go home. I was supposed to get married in the summer. I was going to quit this game then. I even went to an open hour for an apartment. I'm going to have a wife. I can't keep playing around with this nonsense. When my lease is up, I'm going to move. She's a real handful, that girl.... She complains every day,



because she wants to leave her parents' house. I need to get her out of there.... You understand, right? You hate this stupid farce, don't you?"

Toyha's reply is telling: "This world is real, too!" To the Knight this is more than naive. "A world where you can't die," he scoffs. "That's a game. A world like that cannot be real! It's because people like you keep living. Because not everyone is dying that we can't leave this world!" Then it's revealed that Toyha was a promising athlete before he had an accident in the real world and lost the use of his legs. For a moment, he had been dead. The gulf between the Knight's longing for the world he left and Toyha's relief that he has escaped it to find meaning again suggests that neither the virtual or real world carry greater weight in *LH*. It is up to each player to decide how the new rules of death and dying matter. For the Knight, the farce of the game world is that his real life was one of unfulfilled promise. The game is a nightmare that he cannot wake from and the glimpses of that world he gets when he dies both allure and provoke him. For Toyha the restoration of his physical well-being replenishes his lust for living. The lack of a penalty for death for Toyha is a boon that allows him to press forward, rather than an albatross reminding him of his imprisonment or the imprisonment, which he would return to in the real world.

In LH the lack of resolution of the player's dilemma means infinite lives (or death) is both a blessing and curse. It magnifies the value of the virtual world for those who played *Elder Tale* as escapism, or it amplifies the inanity of having ever entered the virtual space to forsake the real world in the first place. Reading the value both sides place on life and death as religiously significant, there are obvious references latent for any observer but never made explicit in the show. For the Knights death in the game appears much as the trap of samsara in Buddhism. Forever locked in a cycle of rebirth and karma, every player must answer for their actions, but without the resources necessary to escape the system. Their very desire for escape (i.e.,



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. The 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 murderguild 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 vrmmorpg 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 Antonnen 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." This "world" (of Ainclad) 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) netword mild.) produced with some the state of the state

media products like manga, video games, and television. SAO and LH are not the first anime to explore religious questions surrounding life and death. What is striking about these franchises, however, is their reluctance to engage in almost any of the obvious allusions that other anime reference on such subjects. Series brimming with Shinto, Buddhist, and Japanese spirit beliefs made for Japanese include Ghost Hound (2007), Natsume's Book of Friends (2008), and Gingitsune: Messenger Fox of the Gods (2013). These and dozens more anime and manga rely on Buddhist imagery, Shinto myths, and Japanese folklore. Discussing this trend in Anime, Religion and Spirituality, Katharine Buljan and Carole M. Cusack argue that the international market for manga and anime has produced concrete effects in the presentation of culturally-specific religious elements. "Mu-kokuseki (literally, 'the absence of nationality')," they explain, "is used by Japanese commentators to describe [the] process of removing Japanese cultural markers from manga, anime, and video game characters" (2015, 40). Linking this move to the Peter Berger's work on the secularization thesis, Buljan and Cusack call the absence of obvious religious elements in some anime one move in the "'Westernization of the East'" that inverts the acceptance of Eastern spiritual themes in the West (ibid., 49). The conceit that anime would consciously labor to remove spiritual and cultural material is widely accepted in the scholarly community. Anthropologist Koichi Iwabuchi (2002) argued that part of Japanese popular culture's appeal was its cultural "odorlessness." Susan Napier, in her Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle (2005), highlights similar elements in discussions among the critic Ueno Toshiya and creators Oshii Mamoru and Ito Kazunori. A culturally nonspecific aesthetic is described as a "deliberate de-Japanizing" of anime to provide "an alternative world to its Japanese audience" (ibid., 25). This marks one of anime's appealing features: "because it so often highlights characters and settings that are neither clearly Western nor clearly Japanese... [anime] offers a space for identity exploration in which the audience can revel in a safe form of otherness" (ibid., 27).

The absence of Japanese religious elements is striking, but also part of a trend within Japanese popular culture to present content that transcends cultural barriers, especially when the goal is to advance an item's popularity outside of Japan (McKevitt 2017). Similar effects occur when the gaming worlds depicted in SAO and LH use western medieval tropes. Rabia Gregory (2014) has convincingly argued that these items – such as knights, castles, and cathedral-style churches – appear as what Umberto Eco called "neomedievalism" (Gregory 2014, 135). They exist not as historical artifacts but as partial signifiers to train gamers on the rules of their gaming world. They are not religious per se. In many games, she argues, medieval fantasy helps justify violence against the world's monsters and eases recognition of symbolic features western religious elements stand in for within games. The cathedral players respawn at in LH is one such latent association with in-game healing and revitalization. No effort is made by LH to extend or connect to this explicit religious imagery. It exists, characters use it without comment on its specific features, and then they move on without apparent consequence.

So what Gregory sees as natural cues to gamers that ground their participation in the virtual world are posited to be immaterial religiously for the gamers forced to live with them. That the resurrection cathedral never becomes an object of reflection or sustained attention in LH confirms it is mere window-dressing. Following practices of *mu-kokuseki*, such elements may even be further sanitized to their barest elements. Perhaps both SAO and LH show that neomedievalism meets its limit when players grow in control of their worlds and begin to act upon them, but even here the players only efforts at re-added Japanese elements is to include seasonal festivals. Unfortunately, even the festivals in LH seem robbed of their cultural significance, another mark of "odorlessness." For their part, these franchises seem to do little to



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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ⁱ I will use abbreviations for the franchises and their anime adaptations. Further appearances of the unabbreviated *Sword Art Online* refer instead to the video game characters play in the first season of the anime series SAO.

ⁱⁱ Taves model falls somewhere between Paul Tillich's view of religion as "ultimate concern" and anthropological models that see religion as an effort to establish significant symbols that order existence (like Clifford Geertz). Her model's advantage, and it may frustrate some readers, is that it allows us to postpone or even evade the specific question of how to define religion before we fully examine our subjects.

iii Asuna is killed by Kayaba just prior to Kirito's victory, which includes a moment where he overcomes a paralyzing command that Kayaba uses to incapacitate the players around him. Kayaba then appears to kill Kirito, who vanishes for a moment before returning to the gaming area. There is little commentary on whether this is miraculous in terms of a player breaking the mechanics of the game. In a private epilogue to congratulate Kirito and Asuna, who both appear to have survived, Kirito admits to Asuna that he died, but they do not discuss it further or explain what happened.