

# ***Reconstruction of History and Legends by Video Games from the Perspective of Postmodernism: The case of Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice***

**Zhuokun Duan<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Chinese Culture and Literature, East China Normal University, Shanghai, 200241, China  
a. 10200110409@stu.ecnu.edu.cn*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** While being important as a means of entertainment in a digital society, video games also have a serious and profound social dimension. "SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE", released by the Japanese studio From Software on March 22, 2019, once again showed the world the charm of video games with its excellent gameplay design, unique plot narrative, and excellent art design. After in-depth play and a lot of relevant literature, this study will take "SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE" as the research object, based on the theory of "Monomyth" and "Meta-Narrative", analyze the reconstruction of religion and myth in the game. Also, it attempts to explore the connection between games and Japanese postmodern society. At the same time, in the process of research, it can be further discovered that video games are not only a reflection of society but also promote the reflection of social relations and the construction of the spiritual world.

**Keywords:** video game, postmodern, Sekiro, monomyth, meta-narrative

## **1. Introduction**

Just as film and television are media native to the industrial age, video games are media native to the digital age. No longer a niche toy, video games have gradually infiltrated politics, economics, and even medicine. They have been dubbed the "Ninth Art," and something in them can strongly relate to billions of people. Stories in new media are as real as any other, and for those who have grown up in a world dominated by these new media, the stories found in these are fascinating, moving, and deeply meaningful. It must be acknowledged that the way stories are experienced in video games is profoundly different from other mediums, and this fundamental difference makes studying them so important. SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE is a very successful promotion of Japanese culture, and the research on the Japanese history and culture behind the game prototype and game settings has always been a hot topic in game forums. However, although there are studies on the game mechanism and mythology of SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE, there are few discussions on the relationship between the reconstruction of history and mythology in the game, the expression of the game theme, and even the relationship between cultural background and Japanese postmodern society. For example, Jaworowicz-Zimny analyzed how the Japanese medieval elements contained in the game affect tourism [1]. At the same time, in recent years, scholars around the world have mostly focused on the "Dark Souls" series based on Western history and mythology, but rarely involved the history

and culture of East Asia. This is also related to the game background of "Dark Soul" itself set in Western mythology. In addition, the trend of research on video games in recent years is mainly based on neurology or pedagogy. Although it pays attention to the modernity and sociality of games, it ignores the inheritance and creation of traditional culture by video games. Such as the research focusing on the treatment of diseases by games [2], and the research on the association between video games and children's learning motivation [3]. Therefore, in this article, the author will analyze the acceptance of "Monomyth" and "Meta-Narrative" by analyzing the reconstruction of history and legends in "SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE ", and further analyze these processing methods, the game-theme presentation, Japanese postmodernism and connections between societies. At the same time, Huizinga pointed out in "The Man Who Plays" that games are a cultural function for society. Therefore, the author hopes that through the analysis of "SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE ", it will further reveal the profound cultural functions behind video games as a major game form in today's society.

## 2. Theoretical Basis

### 2.1. Monomyth

The "Monomyth" theory was proposed by the famous American comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell. Through the comparative study of important myths around the world, especially creation myths, and using psychological principles, he discovered the common law of myths across continents, races, and cultures, which is the so-called " Monomyth ". At the same time, Joseph Campbell also explained the " Monomyth" in detail in his classic book "The Hero with a Thousand Faces". Campbell divided the narrative mode of hero stories into three main parts: "departure- initiation -return" , under which there are 17 specific stages (as shown in Table 1).

Table 1: Narrative models of heroic storytelling. [4]

I. Departure	1. The Call to Adventure 2. Refusal of the Call 3. Supernatural Aid 4. The Crossing of the First Threshold 5. Belly of the Whale	THE HERO'S JOURNEY
II. Initiation	6. The Road of Trials 7. The Meeting with the Goddess 8. Woman as the Temptress 9. Atonement with the Father 10. Apotheosis 11. The Ultimate Boon	
III. Return	12. Refusal of the Return 13. The Magic Flight 14. Rescue from Without 15. The Crossing of the Return Threshold 16. Master of the Two Worlds 17. Freedom to Live	

Campbell's "single myth" is actually a study of the commonality of religion and mythology from the spiritual level. Religion and myth have served as a shared experience over long periods of history, and both are representations—created by man to explain phenomena and seek refuge in the presence

of. On some levels, religion and mythology have a certain soothing and cohesive effect. The development of science and technology has brought about a return to rationalism, the collapse of human belief, and widespread spiritual nihilism. According to Chang, the Monomyth theory hopes to uncover the deep connotation behind the myth and solve it by returning to the most primitive function of the myth and the spiritual crisis of today's society [5]. From the background of the game settings, SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE can be regarded as a "myth" in the digital age. By comparing the Monomyth with the myth model construction of SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE, it can be effective to reflect on the human spiritual construction model in the digital age.

## 2.2. Postmodernism and Meta-Narrative

Jean-François Lyotard mentioned in "The Postmodern State: A Report on Knowledge", Meta-narrative, also known as a grand narrative, exactly refers to narratives with legitimate functions. In Lyotard's view, postmodernism is the dismantling of grand narratives. Meanwhile, he advocates to develop diverse narrative modes, and seeks a new explanation for existing knowledge and methodology [6]. In the book, Lyotard focuses on the interpretation of "language games". "Language games" were proposed by the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. In his opinion, the fundamental idea is not to regard language as an isolated and static description symbol, but as dynamic human activities embodying life; the legitimacy of narrative is confirmed by "language games", so there is no so-called "meta-narrative" of the highest level. The rise of the Animation, Comic, Game and Novel, which abbreviated as ACGN subculture can be seen as a good example of the dissolution of the meta-narrative. In the ACGN subculture, unified discourse norms are gradually becoming invalid, and "small narratives" have become a way of individual identity and participate in the formation of postmodern society. In the digital information society, knowledge is also legitimized through "language games", and video games are one of the important media. Video games form a set of their own language through their unique representations (such as images, plots, and interactions) system, and this kind of system can arouse great resonance in society.

In the view of Japanese sociologist Hiroki Toh, the secondary creation of ACGN subculture is actually a proliferation of simulacra in the process of imitation. A large number of secondary creations can no longer be clearly traced back to a specific work. In this process, the sublime nature of the meta-narrative is broken, and the pursuit of subculture by the otaku is a microscopic manifestation of the decline of the meta-narrative. Therefore, the author's research on "Sekiro" is actually a research on the discourse of games as a postmodern "small narrative".

## 3. Reconstruction of Religion and Myth in SEKIRO

As mentioned above, religion and mythology have occupied a relatively high position in the discourse system of society for a long period of time. As one of the representatives of ACGN subculture, SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE contains a lot of classic elements about traditional religion and mythology throughout the whole game. However, these elements are different or even diametrically opposed to their original context when they are presented. The author will explore the cognition and discourse system of some people in the postmodern society by dismantling the reconstruction of religion and mythology in the game. Generally speaking, the deconstruction of Japanese history and legends in SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE is mainly reflected in three aspects: the deconstruction of religious scenes, the deconstruction of cultural beliefs, and the deconstruction of mythological characters.

### 3.1. Deconstruction of Religious Scenes

The most representative of Japanese culture in SEKIRO is the various shrines and torii gates. Torii is regarded as the boundary between the human world and the gods, and it is also a must for shrines. The appearance of torii and shrines is deeply influenced by Japanese Shintoism. In Japan, the number of shrines far exceeds the number of convenience stores [7]. It can also be said that shrines have become Japan's "spiritual convenience stores".

There are also a large number of torii and shrines in SEKIRO. This religious scene plays a strong role in narrative and provides game clues, and it is also a typical representative of the deconstruction of religious scenes in the game. For example, the scene near "Divine Dragon" is very similar to Tianyanto in Japanese myths.

Legend has it that for some reason, Amaterasu Omisami hid in a cave called Amaiwato in Takamahara and blocked the entrance of the cave. The world instantly became dark and disasters abounded. So the gods asked Ame-no-Uzume to dance outside the entrance of the cave in an attempt to attract Amaterasu to leave the cave. When Amaterasu put his head out of the cave to explore the reason for the bustling outside, the Hercules Ame-no-tajikarao pulled him out of the cave, and Futotamanomikoto hung a rope at the entrance of the cave to prevent Amaterasu from returning to the cave. As a result, the world is bright again.

However, contrary to the actual legend, in the game, the supernatural Sakura Dragon hides in the cave, and there is no god calling at the entrance of the cave, and the most lively dancer is replaced by the quietest sleeping witch. The longevity power of Divine Dragon did not bless the whole land, and the shimenawa hanging at the entrance of the cave prevented the gods from leaving here, but the outside world tried all means to seek longevity, and false gods prevailed in this land. In front of the rock that is the body of the gods, there are broken jade rings, fallen three sides, and a large area of moss. There are all signs that no one has come to worship for a long time. Therefore, "Sekiro" completes the deconstruction of the classic mythological scene. Perhaps the disaster outside the cave reflects the loss of belief and collective meaninglessness in Japan's postmodern society. The neglect of the true gods implies that the otaku are addicted to a false world and disregard the spiritual values of the real world.

### 3.2. Deconstruction of Cultural Beliefs

The most obvious thing in "Sekiro" is the deconstruction of the cultural belief of "water". In Japanese culture, "water" has the function of "expelling purification and promoting new life". As an important element throughout the work, "water" is significant in game advancement and plot representation. Water plays an important role in the beliefs of Japanese people. Japanese people not only use water to cleanse when they visit temples and worship ancestors, but even if they are attending a tea party, guests must squat in the tea court to wash their hands and rinse their mouths [8]. The meaning of this move is not only to remove dirt, but more importantly, to use water as a tool to purify the mind, so as to better enter the holy place [8]. Moreover, the Japanese will also hold water in their mouths when they are dying [8]. The purpose is to purify the soul of the deceased with water and let the soul of the deceased enter a better soul. The role of "water" in promoting new life in Japanese culture is mainly derived from the myth of "Kiji". It is said that after Izanami's death, Izanaki chased to netherworld, and after witnessing the terrible world, he went to the water to cleanse himself. During this process, Amaterasu, Tsukiyomi, and Kenhasusu were born, and water was endowed with the meaning of new life [8]. And because of its continuous flow, it is further used to represent longevity.

However, the religious meaning of "water" in "Sekiro" has been deconstructed. In the game, it can be found that the water source of the residents of the "Minamoto no Palace" in the lower reaches of the river is called "capital water", because they believe that this "source of water" can bring them

eternal life. However, the power of longevity does not come from the "water" itself, but from the parasites in the lake. People in the upper reaches will be parasitized by the worms because they drink the water with worm eggs, and thus become immortal. In the downstream area, as the concentration decreases, ordinary residents will turn into a kind of murloc after drinking water, and will become their bait after being brought to the upstream area. This is not only a deconstruction of the belief in water purification and longevity, but also a satire on people who blindly pursue immortality.

### 3.3. Deconstruction of Mythological Characters

In "Sekiro", players can find many prototypes of Japanese myths and legends. The game boldly deconstructs these myths and legends. The following will take the deconstruction of "Sura" in the game as an example. In the game, due to too many killings, the in-game character will absorb a large amount of "resentment" and eventually become "Sura". Apart from the player, the most relevant plot related to "Sura" is the Sculptor who creates prosthetic limbs for the player at the beginning of the game. In the game, the Sculptor also called Demon of Hatred, whose act of the Buddha sculptor carving the Buddha is not out of his own belief, but to suppress the "fire of resentment" and avoid becoming a "Sura". From the dialogue between the player and the Buddha sculptor, it can also be understood that the Buddha carved by Buddha carvers are all hideous, and they cannot carve real Buddha statues. The "Sura" in the game may originate from the "Asura" in the Six Paths of Buddhism. In Indian mythology, "Asura" is regarded as an evil god and a fierce and aggressive ghost. The explanation of "Asura" in the "Buddhist Dictionary" has "the persistent thoughts are strong. Although they are educated by various teachings, their hearts are not moved. Although they hear the Buddha's teachings, they cannot be enlightened." This can also be corroborated with the behavior of the Buddha carver in the game.

However, the depiction of the image of the Buddha sculptor in the game does not follow the theme of "evil". The first time the Sculptor fell into "Sura" was in the "war of stealing the country" (in the game, it refers to the war of robbing the land stolen by the inner court). After he was suppressed, he lived in seclusion in dilapidated temples carving Buddha statues and studying ninja tools. At the end of the game, facing the departure of his former friends, the death of his lover and the comeback of the inner government army, he once again became "Sura" and was stationed at the main gate of Reina Castle. When the player kills him, he will sincerely express his gratitude, because the player helped him get relief. Even in the "Sura", the player can see the positive side of human nature. Perhaps the creator hopes to alleviate the fear of "others" prevalent in Japan's postmodern society by breaking the stereotyped perception of traditional disaster characters.

## 4. Reflection and Return to Postmodern Society

Similar to From Software's previous "Dark Souls" series, "Sekiro" also reflects the plight of Japan's postmodern society. This article mainly discusses the interpretation from the perspective of "meta-narrative". In addition, "Sekiro" also has a different meaning from the "Soul Series". In the author's opinion, it is mainly reflected in the positive thinking about human nature and spiritual values.

### 4.1. Reflection of Postmodern Society

"Monomyth" is not only a practical template but also a prototype that runs through history and mythological narratives, so it can be regarded as a "meta-narrative" at the level of mythology [6]. Although Campbell once expressed his dissatisfaction with modernity in his works and attacked the roots of some modern symptoms, his ideas are not enough to reach the level of postmodernity. Nevertheless, Campbell advocates returning the spirit of modernity to the most original meaning, this

is just a reflection on modernity, because he ignores the existence of "small narrative" and the confirmation of its legitimacy.

The "Monomyth" theory has become a "biblical" existence in today's film and television creation process, and the subjectivity of game creators has been imprisoned. "Sekiro" breaks the Monomyth theory very well, which is mainly reflected in two aspects. First of all, in terms of structure, the "Sura" ending of "Sekiro" is actually a destruction of the "return" part. In this ending, the protagonist's adventure ends up in a world of chaos in which he loses himself, which in author's opinion is a blurring of the "return" part. As Menezes said, this is a manifestation of the general anxiety in today's Japanese society [9], and this is also a postmodern aspect of "Sekiro".

Secondly, from the perspective of the creation theme, the theme of "Sekiro" has a strong rebellion against modernity. For example, the setting of the plot of "absolutely immortal" in the game is a reflection on biopolitics: In a society where the overall worldview and rulers seek immortality, those with the power of immortality embark on a quest for death. Biopolitics has been regarded as one of the symbols of modern society since its birth, so the plot and worldview settings in "Sekiro" can be regarded as the game's impact on modernity. At the same time, "Sekiro" does not advocate the return of primitive beliefs. The declining gods in the game and the tragedies brought about by beliefs can be seen everywhere. This is a rebellion against the "single myth" theory from the starting point.

## 4.2. The Return of Subjectivity and Spirituality

However, unlike the previous soul series works, "Sekiro" also has people's return to subjectivity and spirituality in contemporary society. The most notable point is that the influence of "Cthulhu Mythos" in this game is significantly reduced. In addition to the game setting has a certain historical prototype, what is more important is that the storyline of this game mainly revolves around people, and the mutual confrontation between non-gods, although "Sekiro" still has a strong anti-religious nature, the characters in the game with Cthulhu style are personified, not "depersonalized" in the sense of Cthulhu. In addition to the personality mentioned above, which endowed the Buddha sculptor who became "Sura", the lion ape controlled by the parasite still guarded the person he loved. Forced to resurrect Ashina Isshin still eager to have a showdown with the protagonist between the ninja. These all show a return to the subjectivity of being born as a human being, rather than an unknowable fear. The core of postmodern consciousness is a systemic anxiety about the cognition that "human society will inevitably decline" [9]. In "Sekiro", the author brings the familiar time, scenes, and character shapes into the game, which is different from the post-apocalyptic fantasy features of the "Dark Soul" series. During the game, players can clearly feel the relationship between this world and their own sense of mission (for example, if the player dies too many times, the NPC will suffer from "dragon cough"), which will trigger players to think and reflect on the real world from the game world.

On some levels, in the process of deconstructing religion and mythology, Sekiro completes the salvation of these two in the postmodern sense. What Campbell thinks is that the function of religion and mythology to cohere and comfort people points to the most primitive fear of human beings towards nature. However, in postmodern Japanese society, people's fear is increasingly derived from society and real life. In order to get rid of the spiritual crisis, they are more inclined to create an "other" that suits their own preferences, and thus form an internally cohesive false self. This forms the isomorphism with the self-cosmic center of otaku self-discipline. And the meaning of "Sekiro" is not just a utopia to escape from reality, but to show the painful objects and experiences in postmodernism in the form of representation, anthropomorphism and combat. Although the gameplay and settings of the game are full of deconstruction of local religions and myths, by packaging the relief of pain with victory, "Sekiro" hopes to tell players that nothingness, pain, and anxiety can be visualized and then temporarily conquered after they are concretized. Huizinga pointed out in "Homo Ludens: Study of the Play-Elements in Culture": Electronic games inherit traditional history and culture,

but at the same time they are also the carrier of modern social culture, which creatively demonstrates the reflection on history and the thinking on current social culture [10]. The significance of "Sekiro" is far more than a game, but a rewriting and reconstruction of Japanese religion and mythology in a postmodern sense.

## 5. Conclusion

By analyzing the reconstruction of religion and mythology in "Sekiro", this article highlights the significance and value of video games as a "small narrative" medium. Creating a fictional world is only one of the tasks of video games. More importantly, it allows players to reflect on the real world during the game. Such games are worthy of the name of "Ninth Art". Video games have been controversial since their birth, it is an extension of the real world rather than a utopia, just like "Sekiro" can be used as a slice to understand postmodern society. However, this research also has imperfections. First, the selected object is only one game, which may not be very universal and representative. Secondly, in the absence of fields and data, the analysis of the meaning of video games from a postmodern perspective is too theoretical. Finally, the author does not have a particularly in-depth understanding of Japanese traditional culture, and the analysis of traditional culture may be somewhat blunt and mediocre. surface. The prospect of future research is to investigate the player groups after further study and understanding of intercultural communication and related theories, and to explore what postmodern meaning video games really bring to players from the perspective of players.

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