

비디오 게임 “고스트 오브 쓰시마”의 게임플레이-스토리의 조화성 고찰

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A Study on Ludo-narrative Harmony in the Video Game “Ghost of Tsushima”

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요 약

클린트 호킹이 정의한 게임 안에서 게임플레이 메카닉스와 서사의 이해관계가 상반되는 “놀이-서사의 부조화”는 많은 오픈 월드 장르 게임에서 발견되는 문제이다. 그러나 비디오 게임 “고스트 오브 쓰시마 (2020)”는 구로사와 아키라 감독의 사무라이 영화 속 서사와 캐릭터의 특징을 본떠 주인공 진 사카이의 여정을 조지프 캠벨의 “영웅의 여정”으로 정의될 수 있는 서사 구조로 만들고, 이를 통해 사무라이 정신인 무사도를 주인공에게 불어넣었다. 또한 “고스트 오브 쓰시마”는 능력치 상승 시스템, 맵디자인, 사이드 퀘스트 등의 게임플레이 메카닉스가 게임 속 서사의 특징을 보조하도록 디자인함으로써, 플레이어에 의해 결정되는 주인공의 모든 행동이 게임 서사의 전제와 상충하지 않는 게임플레이와 서사의 조화를 만들어 냈다.

ABSTRACT

Ludo-narrative dissonance is a prevalent problem among open-world genre video games. However, Ghost of Tsushima (2020) alleviates this issue by designing its characters and narrative structure influenced by Akira Kurosawa’s samurai films. The game’s protagonist represents “Bushido,” a samurai code, and the structure exudes similarity to Joseph Campbell’s “Hero’s Journey,” which heavily influenced Kurosawa’s films. The developers also designed the gameplay mechanics such as level-up system, map design, and side quests based on these narrative traits, ultimately making the goal of the narrative and the gameplay mechanics cohesive.

Keywords : Video Games(비디오 게임), Video Game Narratives(게임 서사), Ghost of Tsushima(고스트 오브 쓰시마), Akira Kurosawa(구로사와 아키라), Samurai(사무라이), Ludo-narrative Dissonance(놀이-서사 부조화)

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1. Introduction

Immersion is often talked about subject when it comes to video games. A famous video game Youtuber, “videogamedunkey,” has made a satirical video on a reviewer of *Marvel’s Spider-Man* (2018). In the video, with his usual brutal sense of humor, he mocks how many times the reviewer monotonously writes the expression that the game makes players “feel like Spider-man[1].” Also, when Eurogamer questioned the quest designer, Patrick Mills of *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020), about the forced first-person view mode, his answer was to put the players “in the shoes and the body of the character[2].” The focus on immersion in video games among both critics and developers seems almost superfluous, but it denotes what makes a video game appealing to mass consumers. The concept of ‘immersion,’ however, did not originate from video games. The idea of immersion, along with absorption, identification, transportation, and engagement in various fictional formats, has long been discussed in literary and cinema studies already[3]. After all, the discourse of immersion in video games stems from evolving 3D graphic technology and developers’ implementation of elements from traditional fictional formats such as movies and televisions, using characters with multilayered traits and complex and thought-provoking storylines.

Sony Interactive Entertainment has established itself as a publisher that focuses on creating movie-like experiences in video game titles. The brand’s focus on

single-player experience has enticed a large fan base who craves both stories with exciting characters and delicate game design that will help them absorb the story in a more immersive manner. Ludologists of game studies argue that only gameplay mechanics would determine the potency of a video game[4]. However, the commercial success of Sony’s blockbuster titles such as *Last of Us* (2013) and *Uncharted 4* (2016) suggest that popular mass seems to have accepted the traditional way of story-telling injected in a video game as a norm. In other words, video game as a unique format that mixes user interactivity with narrative has become a popular transmedia format where stories are told, retold and expanded[5].

However, a severe problem arises as a traditional way of story-telling meets highly interactive video game format. Clint Hocking argues that when the causality of the narrative of a video game contradicts the ludic (gameplay) logic, it causes a discrepancy between the narrative and the gameplay[6]. Hocking defines this discrepancy between the narrative and gameplay logic as “Ludo-narrative Dissonance.” Bumsue Chun using Hocking’s theory argues that *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018) shows an excellent example of this imbalance. In this game, the protagonist Arthur Morgan’s narrative goal is to overcome his past wrong-doings and become a new man to save his loved ones[7]. However, despite the narrative direction, the game still enables players to commit crimes and harvest the rewards that would still benefit the progression of the narrative[7]. Ludo-narrative dissonance like this would

ultimately cause incoherent narrative flow disturbing the overall immersive gaming experience.

Ghost of Tsushima (2020) is a 3rd person open-world action-adventure game about a ronin samurai developed by Sucker Punch Productions and published by Sony Interactive Entertainment. The game resembles *Red Dead Redemption 2* in several aspects since the game also features a vast open-world to explore, a combat and looting cycle to upgrade weapons and stats of the main character, and a linear story centered around a protagonist faced with a moral dilemma. However, despite the similarities, ludo-narrative harmony in *Ghost of Tsushima* lends itself to a more coherent presentation of the entire game. This coherence mainly owes to the game’s application of “optimization of experience,” heavily influenced by Akira Kurosawa’s films in the narrative and the gameplay mechanics.

This study first examines Carl Therrien’s study on “optimization of experience” in fiction and its pattern similarly applied in video game design, then analyzes how three films, *Seven Samurai* (1954), *Yojimbo* (1961), and *Sanjuro* (1962), use it. Subsequently, it reveals how Kurosawa’s optimization of experience influenced the narrative structure and characters of *Ghost of Tsushima*. Moreover, most importantly, it delves into developers’ efforts to translate the optimization of experience seen in Kurosawa’s narratives into the gameplay mechanics, ultimately achieving the shared causality between narrative and the gameplay. Lastly, this study discusses the linearity of the game’s narrative and its pros and cons in terms of the game design. This

research does not side with either ludology or narratology, which are two divided views in game studies[4]. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate how the developers’ ambitions to pay an homage to a traditional narrative format has ultimately made an impact on the gameplay design that truthfully represents the core traits of the game’s narrative, and how this design alleviates potential ludo-narrative dissonance spotted in many other modern story-driven video games.

2. Preliminary Research

2.1. Optimization in Fictions

According to Therrien, fictional works are a series of mimetic traits in reality well manipulated and structured so viewers can understand and enjoy it as a cohesive form [3]. In other words, common scenarios collectively portray more complex situations conceptually[3,8]. Therrien claims this is “optimization of experience,” and optimization consists of two levels according to his study:

One is the hypernormal quality of the mimetic models integrated into these worlds, and the other is the overt assistance provided by an editorial intelligence to alleviate the production of interference[3].

Quoting Jean Marie Schaeffer’s concept of “Hypernormal,” a mimicry of reality that exaggerates or retards certain mimetic traits of reality to help readers understand[3,9], Therrien further explains elements with “hypernormal” quality in fiction. First, a narrative structure such as Aristotle’s beginning, middle, and the end has hypernormal quality that shapes otherwise disorderly reality into a perceivable

and coherent form[3,10]. Second, characters have hypernormal quality that drives the narrative. Each character in fiction represents a particular idea. Positioning contrasting characters with opposite traits and goals creates conflict, creating a question forward and ultimately driving the narrative. This concept is similar to well-known Joseph Campbell’s “Hero’s Journey” since Campbell states that “mythology is an organization of symbolic images and narratives, metaphorical of the possibilities of human experience and the fulfillment of a given culture at a given time[11].”

Furthermore, Therrien explains that editorial intelligence is extradiegetic guidance that serves as an omniscient narrator that “sees through the complexities of the mimetic world[3].” This guidance would include extradiegetic elements such as subtitles, iris, and zoom-in. However, this study does not delve into it further since it focuses on hypernormal quality in fiction that affects video game design.

2.2. “Hypernormal” Qualities in Video Games

Therrien insists the pattern of “hypernormal” quality is seen in video games also. He claims that simple gestures using a controller in video games such as Nintendo’s *Wii Sports* (2006) translate to much larger movements not dissimilar to how mimetic entities exaggerate their source for viewers’ (or players’) better understanding of the context[3]. However, Therrien’s study mainly focuses on the control side of the video game concerning the pattern

of hypernormal quality in fiction. His study does not investigate how hypernormal quality of the narrative in a video game influences game design aspects such as skill progression and mission designs. Using hypernormal quality elements from Kurosawa’s films and *Ghost of Tsushima*, this study further explores these areas in the following chapters.

2.3. Optimization in Kurosawa Films

Tomoharu Motohashi argues that Akira Kurosawa’s samurai and modern films feature a common theme that binds his body of work together, called “Bushido”[12]. He explains that Bushido is a samurai code that our spirit and mind should unify with virtue and discipline, and requires eight core virtues: rectitude, courage, benevolence, politeness, veracity, sincerity, honor, and loyalty[12]. Rectitude is the power to decide upon action following reason without hesitation, courage is knowledge of righteousness doing what is right, benevolence is love for others enabling one to understand righteousness, and politeness is an economical way to formally express one’s rectitude and benevolence[12,13]. Furthermore, veracity and sincerity enable one to be faithful and truthful with his own words, honor makes one prioritize personal dignity and worth over his life itself, and loyalty is one’s spontaneous desire to pledge allegiance to a clan and maintain public orders[12,13]. In Kurosawa’s three most popular films, *Seven Samurai*, *Yojimbo*, and *Sanjuro*, he captures the essence of this samurai code with two foundations of hypernormal quality: Structure

and Characters.

2.3.1 Structure

Motohashi argues that Kurosawa’s depiction of samurais in the turn of a new era signifies modern Japanese society’s rapid economic growth[12]. For this reason, Kurosawa intends to tell cautionary tales where excessive greed and corruption lead to the destruction of our habitats and spirit just as unfaltering economic growth left us with pollution and urban slums in reality[12]. In order to effectively and economically tell these stories, Kurosawa often employs a traditional narrative structure such as Syd Field’s 3-act-structure, which Campbell’s “Hero’s Journey” heavily influenced[14]. Campbell claims a standard mythological template features a hero, who faces a threat to status-quo, willingly or reluctantly ventures into the unknown to find a solution, and learns unfamiliar skills to overcome a series of trials ahead. (It often descends the hero to the lowest point for him/her to overcome) Finally, the hero transforms into a master of both the old and new world [11].

Seven Samurai, for example, mainly follows this concept in 3 acts. Act 1 of the film shows the exposition of the village on the verge of the Bandit’s attack and farmers’ effort to recruit samurais to defend themselves. Act 2 shows the Samurai and the villagers training together under Kambei’s leadership. They face both internal conflict (Some of the farmers’ reluctance to obey Kambei’s order to sacrifice houses near the hill and Manzo’s worry about his daughter’s safety) and external conflict (preemptively raiding the bandits’ base). When

the army raids the bandits’ base, Rikichi, one of the villagers, loses his mind after seeing his wife, taken as a bandit’s mistress, and acts recklessly. Heihachi gets killed by one of the bandits in an attempt to help Rikichi. Heihachi’s death devastates everyone, and Act 2 ends at the lowest point with Heihachi’s death. However, in Act 3, they still decide to push forward and defeat the bandits with great bravery. The village is safe again, and the farmers are not the same cowardly peasants anymore. They have transformed into warriors that will always bravely defend themselves.

In the haphazardness of reality, the battle against the bandits could have lasted indefinitely with no clear winner with much more casualty. However, the narrative of *Seven Samurai* in Campbell’s template in 3 acts forces the story to unfold so that conflict escalates, peaks, and seeks transcendental resolution successively in a precise manner. In return, the clear structure highlights the peasants’ embracement of rectitude and courage through their transformation. Moreover, it also reveals ronin samurais’ benevolence shown through their heroic altruism, essential virtues of Bushido.

2.3.2 Characters

In *Seven Samurai*, a group of ronin samurai fights against bandits that attack a farmers’ village. Motohashi argues their goal to fight against the bandits, to protect the peasants, who were considered lower class than samurai, represent rectitude of Bushido[12]. Furthermore, he claims that Kikuchiyo, played by Toshiro Mifune, a peasant posing as a samurai,

specifically represents the benevolence of Bushido for sympathizing with peasants' desperation in poverty when they stole armors and weapons from dead samurai[12]. On the other hand, Motohashi also argues that the bandits, who are also ronin samurais, represent the anti-Bushido values that show the decay of feudalism [12]. In order to express the idea of Bushido, which Kurosawa meticulously created characters as a tool to represent both sides of values and create conflict to drive the narrative. Characters in *Seven Samurai*, thus, are a clear example of hypernormal quality that leads to optimization of experience in fiction.

Furthermore, in *Yojimbo*, Sanjuro finds himself in an ominous town and faces two rivaling merchant families that have brought a relentless cycle of corruption and violence in the town. Since many Samurais had lost their jobs and started working for the wealthy in this period[15], Sanjuro seemingly desires to profit from double-spying both gangs by using all kinds of lies and trickery. However, his way of survival ultimately leads to altruistic deeds. He spares the young man's life, who rebelled against his father's pleading to join the gang at the beginning of the film and rescues another farmer's wife taken by the merchants as a sex slave and defeating both gangs by risking his own life[15]. Sanjuro, who seems to be a money-grubbing samurai, ultimately manifests many virtues of Bushido through self-sacrifice.

Also, the same applies to *Sanjuro*. Sanjuro's use of his wits and swordsmanship to get young samurais out of trouble demonstrates his rectitude and courage to stand up for the

weak (young samurais outnumbered by older corrupt samurai masters). Also, the fact that he never turned his back against the young samurai highlights his sincerity. In the end, Kurosawa again infuses Sanjuro with hypernormal quality that encapsulates many virtues of Bushido from reality and sets him against villainous characters that represent a corruption of society, ultimately driving the narrative forward.

However, the characters in Kurosawa's films do not precisely mirror the textbook Bushido virtues. According to James Bowman, Kikuchiyo and Sanjuro from all three movies do not specifically represent the traditional hero type. However, they are instead morally gray figures who do not fully belong to opposing two worlds[16]. By making his characters an imperfect samurai, always an outsider in divided worlds of good-versus-evil or even evil-versus-evil, Kurosawa refuses to seek an absolute moral truth but yearns for redeeming humanity by an act of benevolence[16]. Ultimately, Kurosawa successfully expresses the theme of tainted Bushido searching for humanity in a corrupt world through his characters with hypernormal quality.

3. Hypernormal Quality in the Narrative Told through the Story

3.1 Synopsis of *Ghost of Tsushima*

The story of *Ghost of Tsushima* takes place in Tsushima Island, Japan in 1274. When the

Mongolian army led by Khotun Khan invades the island, they brutally rob and slaughter the residents. Despite the local samurais' efforts to fight back, the Mongol's evasive and cunning tactics nearly decimate all samurais, and the island leader, Lord Shimura, gets taken hostage by Khan. The protagonist, Jin Sakai, Shimura's nephew, one of the last samurais of the island, manages to survive a deadly battle. With help from a former thief, Yuna, escapes the Mongol's territory and finds refuge among survivors. Jin plans to recruit surviving samurais of the island, rescue his uncle, and regain the island's leadership in the hope of quelling Khan's army. However, he learns that the only way to defeat the Mongols is to adopt their cunning tactics along the journey. He would inevitably have to break the traditional Samurai code, 'honor' he and his uncle have always defended. Angled to rescue his uncle and save the island, Jin reluctantly starts to take on enemies using newly learned stealth tactics and eventually leads the rebels to rescue Shimura and take back Castle Kaneda successfully. Reunited with Shimura, Jin prepares for more battles to finally defeat Khotun Khan and save the entire island. While the people of Tsushima start to recognize Jin as a messiah to save them, Jin's use of effective yet unlawful methods by the samurai's code clashes with Lord Shimura's unbending persistence for the tradition. Jin eventually crosses a point of no return by damaging his relationship with his uncle and accepting his newly realized identity as the "Ghost," a fierce vigilante feared by the Mongols and targeted by Samurais.

3.2 Kurosawa's Influence on the Narrative of *Ghost of Tsushima*

Being a game about Samurais in feudal Japan, there is no doubt aesthetics of *Ghost of Tsushima* cosmetically resemble many aspects of Kurosawa's samurai films. The game even pays homage to the director by adding "Kurosawa Mode," which turns the screen black and white and makes the sound effects sound closer to Japanese films from the '50s. However, beyond aesthetics, the director of *Ghost of Tsushima*, Nate Fox, admits his influence from many narrative elements of the Japanese director's works. He says, "The center of it was *Seven Samurai*. That was the foundational concept for so many people about what a samurai story is. For me, it's definitely *Seven Samurai*, and it's definitely Usagi Yojimbo. Probably Usagi Yojimbo, for me, is 40 percent of the mix, and then it's a combination of *Seven Samurai* and *Yojimbo* ...[17]" Fox explains that the selflessness of helping others (benevolence of Bushido) is one of the themes of the game's narrative [17]. However, similar to Kurosawa's theme of humanity, Fox also states that the core theme of the narrative is Jin's transition to become the "Ghost" by rejecting his old samurai values in order to save the people of the island, which would come at a painful cost [17]. This central theme is also well contained within elements of hypernormal quality in the game.

3.2.1 Structure

Fox claimed in an interview that the team intended to create a satisfying narrative

experience by having a clear beginning, middle, and end[18]. This structure ultimately comes from Aristotle and Campbell's idea on a narrative, also sharing similarities with the narrative structure of *Seven Samurai*. The game deliberately breaks the narrative into three acts, through which Jin overcomes a variety of tasks and challenges. At the same time, the conflict level between Jin, Khan, and Shimura escalates, peaks then resolves in the end. Act 1 depicts the Mongol's abduction of Shimura, Jin's initial defeat by Khotun Khan, Jin's reluctant initiation of betraying his old values, and his recruitment of helpers around the island for proper tools and assistance to rescue Lord Shimura. After rescuing Shimura, which is the final mission of Act 1, in the first half of Act 2, it shows Jin's training process by bringing the people of Yarikawa together and joining Shimura and his samurais to take back Castle Shimura. However, in the latter part of Act 2, Jin starts to realize Shimura's adamancy to only face enemies head-on, motivated by the samurai code, is hampering their success as they constantly lose many soldiers in vain. As disagreement brews between two characters, Act 2 ends at the lowest point when Jin successfully poisons a group of Mongolian soldiers. Shimura, unhappy about Jin's unorthodox methods, arrests Jin for defying the clan and the Shogun. This event is very similar to how Heihachi's death causes the lowest point in Act 2 of *Seven Samurai*. Jin, captured by his uncle, with his weapons taken away, still manages to escape, with help from Kenji, the sake seller, and miraculously reunite with Yuna. He then finally beat Khan on his own

and subsequently faces his uncle in a duel who has taken an order from the Shogun to execute him. Jin defeats Shimura, and the game provides two options: to spare or kill him. With either choice, he sacrifices his bond with Shimura, whom he has always loved like a father, and becomes a wanted man by the Shogun. Despite the heartbreaking ramification of breaking the code to save the island's people, Jin still sets out to subdue the rest of the Mongols as the "Ghost," a fierce vigilante now hated by both Mongols and the Shogun. Akin to the journey of coward-turned-warrior farmers in *Seven Samurai*, Jin initially faces a threat to the island's peace and reluctantly adopts unfamiliar ways. Through overcoming many obstacles, he finally becomes a samurai-turned-vigilante and defeats Khan as a master of traditional and unorthodox ways. After all, this clear narrative structure embodies hypernomal quality to delineate Fox's vision of Jin's transition to the Ghost.

3.2.2 Characters



[Fig. 1] Young Jin Sakai and His Uncle, Lord Shimura[19]



[Fig. 2] Jin Sakai Captured by Khotun Khan[20]

Like Sanjuro and Kikujiyo from Kurosawa's films, Jin is an outsider from black-and-white morality in search of humanity. As a result, the characterization of Jin falls in the middle of the moral triangle between Lord Shimura and Khotun Khan, similar to Bowman's explanation of Kurosawa's protagonists. First, Shimura is a character of hypernormal quality that manifests the traditional Bushido. Shimura tells young Jin in a flashback scene (Fig. 1) early in the game, "Samurai must always fight with patience and discipline, even when his opponents resort to trickery." In other words, Shimura firmly believes that for a samurai, deception is vice even against deceitful enemies. Young Jin later reaffirms Shimura's teaching by stating that samurais' virtues are "Loyalty to our lord, control over our emotions, and honor to fight bravely and uphold the legacy of clan..." which is identical to Nitobe's Bushido.

On the contrary to Shimura, Khan is a ruthless and cunning general void of mercy for people. He is keen on the samurai code, sees its compassion and rigidity as a weakness. The opening sequence displays the essence of Khan's morality. A samurai warrior, Harunobu Adachi approaches Khan and his army and demands a duel with him. Even facing the perpetrator of the invasion, his attitude is

formal and sincere as a traditional samurai. However, Khan immediately splashes wine over his armor, sets him on fire with a torch to distract him, and decapitates him with no hesitation. Also, when Khan captures Jin and his friend Taka in the mission, "A Reckoning in Blood," He tries to gaslight Jin by brutally decapitating Taka before him and blaming his death on Jin for not surrendering (Fig. 2). These scenes suggest that Khan deems samurais' honor impractical and weak and wants to obtain his goals by manipulation and deception, representing Shimura's morality's polar opposite values.

Between these two moral polarities, Jin chooses the third way. When Khan captures Jin, Khan praises Jin's uncompromising tenacity to win and offers to join him. Jin fervently refuses and insists that he is a "samurai." Judging from his statement, it seems like "Samurai" is still an identity he lives in, a code of which he cherishes. However, he is also critical of the shortcomings of the code in the fight against the Mongols. In the mission "Ghost of Yarikawa," Jin helps clan Yarikawa, Yuna's hometown estranged from Shimura's clan due to their revolt in the past, with rescuing their archers and the resistance against the siege by the Mongols. The night before the siege, Jin tells Yuna, "Sometimes... our only choice is to walk away from everything we know." Subsequently, when the Mongols start attacking the village with their siege weapon, Jin decides to flank the enemies and deal with the siege weapons from behind. Jin's method, which Shimura would consider cowardly and un-samurai, eventually earns him a victory,

and he fully gains trust from the people of Yarikawa as a hero.

Moreover, in the last mission of Act 2, Shimura confronts Jin and rebukes him for poisoning the enemies saying, “You are acting like the enemy. This is not our way.” However, Jin argues back to Shimura, “Your way can’t save our people.” Jin’s actions and remarks from these examples strongly indicate that his very purpose is not to serve the Shogun but to serve the island’s people and save their lives at the expense of defying the code. The flashback mentioned above foresees Jin’s betrayal of the code where Shimura asks young Jin to define what ‘honor’ means. Jin says honor means protecting those who cannot defend themselves. However, Shimura insists that serving the Lord and Shogun should come first regardless. Like the samurais in *Seven Samurai*, who raids the bandits in sleep, and Sanjuro, who double-sides to delude enemies in *Yojimbo*, Jin refuses to take side with absolute morality, and he flexibly adopts Mongol’s shrewd and cunning ways to kill enemies. However, he only does so to help the weak, which is also a key component of Shimura’s teaching. In the end, Jin’s refusal of an absolute morality creates conflict with the other two characters constantly, which is the heart of the narrative in *Ghost of Tsushima*. Thus, the triangle formed by Jin, Shimura, and Khan is a crucial component in the narrative of *Ghost of Tsushima* with hypernormal quality that encapsulates the various values surrounding Bushido.

4. Hypernormal Quality in the

Narrative Told through the

Gameplay Mechanics

According to Chun’s study, in the case of *Red Dead Redemption 2*, the gameplay mechanics often have conflicting logic from the narrative direction[7]. For example, the protagonist Arthur’s ultimate narrative goal is to help his friends escape the unlawful lifestyle and seek redemption from his wrongdoings in the past [7]. However, for the entire game duration, the sandbox gameplay mechanics still enable Arthur to commit various crimes. Doing so rewards him with money and items that would make the progression of the narrative much easier[7]. As mentioned in the introduction of this study, Hocking defines the narrative and the gameplay with contradicting goals, as seen in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, as “ludo-narrative dissonance[6].”

On the other hand, in *Ghost of Tsushima*, The game’s narrative structure and Jin’s characterization influence the design of its gameplay mechanics. It eventually lends itself to a common logic and goal between the narrative and the gameplay. This chapter explores four systems that exemplify the game’s ludo-narrative harmony.

4.1 The Map Design



[Fig. 3] Castle Kaneda blocking access to Toyoyama[21]



[Fig. 4] Scenery of Port Izumi in Kamiagata [22]

Fox argues that to design a satisfying narrative experience, the open-world map in *Ghost of Tsushima* is designed with significant geometry unlocking events to aid the narrative structure [18]. Each Act of the game has its area on the map, and each area unlocks as Jin clears an entire Act. For example, in Act 1, Khan captured Shimura at Castle Kaneda, which is located right in the middle of the map, blocking access to the upper region, called Toyoyama (Fig 3). For Jin to cross the Castle, Jin has to a) use a grappling hook to climb the castle's wall and b) clear the final mission of Act 1. Jin can only acquire the grappling hook from Taka as a reward for rescuing him in an earlier mission, and this tool helps Jin sneak into enemies' bases more efficiently. Fox explains that Jin goes through moments of transformation where he makes a choice he cannot undo as he unlocks regions and progresses in the story[18]. Since using

the grappling hook would be considered taboo for samurais, gaining access to the next region also means a significant moment of transformation with no return for Jin. In the region of Act 2, Jin can visit his old house, meet his old nanny, and acquire poison darts as a new weapon. If Jin already had access to this region and this weapon in the context of Act 1, when he is still hesitant about breaking the samurai code, it would cause disharmony between the narrative and the gameplay. It is also similar in transition from Act 2 to Act 3. Shimura arrests Jin and puts him in prison inside Castle Shimura. When Jin finally escapes the castle, a final nail in the coffin to end the relationship with Shimura, his horse dies in the wilderness, and Act 3 starts as the next region opens. Unlike the colorful nature that previous regions featured, the northern Tsushima island, Kamiagata, in Act 3 is a primarily monochrome tone in snowy weather (Fig. 4), resonating with Jin's desolate circumstance where he had to turn against his uncle. In other words, the game purposefully puts Jin in environments that would only support the 3-act progression of the narrative by preventing Jin from access to a new region before the end of each Act. This design ultimately contributes to cohesive progression between the narrative and the gameplay.

4.2 The Skill Progression System



[Fig. 5] Indication of Technique Points Earned[23]



[Fig. 6] The Skill Tree of Jin's Sword Techniques[24]



[Fig. 7] Jin's Ghost Weapons[25]

Upon every victory of a battle or completion of a quest, Jin earns experience points, named “Legend” in the game. Accumulation of Legend will enable him to earn “Technique Points (Fig. 5),” which will enable Jin to learn new tricks or skills (Fig. 6). Jin can improve his swordsmanship such as new combos or deflection techniques or upgrade skills helpful for stealth such as better hearing, more effective assassination, and better aiming for archery. Furthermore, when the meter of Legend fills up, Jin levels up to the next rank, and usually, this will grant him an option to

choose a new “Ghost” weapon such as Kunai, sticky bomb, wind chime (Fig. 7). These “Ghost” weapons are designed to be used against a large group of enemies behind their backs. Fox once claimed in an interview that the narrative of Jin’s transition from a samurai to the Ghost influenced the design of Jin’s skill tree[18]. As Jin kills more Mongols or finishes more quests to progress the narrative, the reward in the form of “Legend” enables Jin to be more adept at skills that would foster his transformation to the “Ghost,” which is also the same goal of the narrative. More importantly, the fact that Legend enables Jin to upgrade his traditional Samurai skills and stealth skills indicates that Jin’s transitioning to the “Ghost” does not simply mean learning sneaky tactics but improving as a traditional samurai simultaneously. The fact that Jin is growing to be a master of both ways shares similarities with Sanjuro, who utilizes his traditional swordsmanship as an unconventional samurai, and the peasants from *Seven Samurai*, who become brave warriors yet still maintain their occupation as farmers. Ultimately, this connects to Campbell’s Hero’s Journey, where the hero eventually becomes the master of two worlds. The skill progression system influenced by this ultimately avoids disharmony between the narrative and gameplay, helping the game achieve ludo-narrative harmony.

4.3 The Guiding Wind



[Fig. 8] Wind Blowing toward a Set Destination[26]

In well-known open-world games such as *Red Dead Redemption 2*, *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017), a mini-map is used as a UI tool to indicate the character's location in the map and the desired direction to which the character intends to travel. However, in *Ghost of Tsushima*, instead of resorting to an extradiegetic tool, the game features a visually diegetic feature, the guiding wind. It blows in Jin's environment toward his set destination to give Jin directional guidance (Fig. 8). According to Fox, it serves to immerse players in the environment and enhance the feel of a "wandering samurai" from Kurosawa films[18] similar to *Yojimbo* where Sanjuro throws a stick and sees the wind guide it to determine his direction. Just as this helps to shape Sanjuro's freelance nature without a clan, the guiding wind alludes to Jin as the "Ghost," a wandering vigilante without a master[18].

In open-world games, it is often challenging to balance the open gameplay mechanics and the narrative. It often leads to disharmony, where players often travel to locations out of context in the narrative sense. In *Red Dead Redemption 2*, most parts of the open-world map open up from Chapter 2, allowing Arthur to travel to areas even when the narrative

does not call for it. For instance, even when Arthur is in the context of Chapter 2, where he is supposed to explore the town of Valentine, he can travel to Saint Denis, the city located on the other end of the map. Arthur then can familiarize himself with the urban environment and gain access to new items and side quests. However, in Chapter 4, when the narrative finally calls for Arthur's presence in the city, the narrative alludes to the context that Arthur is new in town even though he may have visited it quite a few times before it owing to the free nature of the gameplay mechanics. In *Ghost of Tsushima*, Jin can also travel to potentially out-of-context locations that seemingly deviate from the narrative progression, such as a haiku spot, hot spring, a shrine, or strangers. However, Jin's identity as a masterless samurai merely following the wind justifies his haphazard traversal. In the end, it lends itself to ludo-narrative harmony, where the gameplay decision by Jin is technically always in the context of the character in the narrative.

4.4 The Side Quests

Like many other open-world games, *Ghost of Tsushima* features various side quests all around the entire map. The most notable side quests are related to Jin's fellow warriors, such as Sensei Ishikawa, one of the remaining samurai of the island, Lady Masako, a widow of Adachi whom Khan killed, and Yuriko, Jin's caretaker from his childhood. According to Fox, in these optional side quests, each character represents an aspect of Jin's transformation from a samurai to the Ghost[18]. For example, Lady Masako is

desperate to avenge her late husband, Adachi. Through a journey with her, Jin learns about her incessant grudge for revenge that turns her into an irrational killing machine, and it serves as a cautionary tale for Jin, lest he was to take his violent measure too far[18]. Also, the journey with Sensei Ishikawa informs Jin that severe disagreement between Ishikawa and his student Tomoe on how to deal with the Mongols destroyed their relationship. Fox claims side quests of Ishikawa intend to reflect Jin's relationship with his mentor, Shimura, and how his transformation is negatively affecting the relationship[18]. In other words, in *Ghost of Tsushima*, even sub-characters from the side quests serve as a tool of hypernormal quality that expresses the narrative's central theme. On top of it, rewards from completing a side quest always grant Jin a reward to help him grow as the Ghost. It may be a charm that would improve his defense or offense, or even a new weapon or outfit that gives Jin a new ability to fight the Mongols more efficiently. For example, initiating Yuriko's tale unlocks the blow dart for Jin to shoot poison, and choosing to complete her tale further would unlock hallucination darts for his blow dart. Also, completing Ishikawa's side quests rewards Jin with charms that improve Jin's archery skill.

To sum up, side quests help Jin understand his transformation better in the narrative sense and provide him with proper material rewards that help him improve as the Ghost in the gameplay mechanics. It ultimately brings about a common logic between the narrative and the gameplay: If Jin helps and learns from his

peers, he will improve as the warrior he set out to be.

5. Linearity of the Narrative in

Ghost of Tsushima

The ludo-narrative harmony in *Ghost of Tsushima* mainly owes to Sucker Punch Productions' meticulous design of the gameplay mechanics that reflect the theme of the narrative in many aspects. However, the narrative of the game only offers a linear story without any diversification of story beats. This linearity, as a result, creates limited space for gameplay mechanics to alter the narrative potentially. On the other hand, *Red Dead Redemption 2*, which often suffers from ludo-narrative dissonance, shows its effort to have the gameplay choices affect both the narrative and gameplay mechanics. For example, an accumulation of his moral choices determines Arthur's "honor" level, and it partially affects the gameplay mechanics as well as the portrayal of Arthur[7]. However, in *Ghost of Tsushima*, not only is there no such feature that gauges Jin's morality, but also it shows no sign of variations in the narrative whatsoever. The game does offer dialogue choices in some instances that seemingly intend to trigger different results. For example, after defeating Khotun Khan, Jin travels along with Yuna, and Yuna says to Jin, "I used to know what my new life would be. Now I'm not even sure who I am." Jin has an option to either tell her "A good person" or "a strong warrior." However, despite the options, either choice ends the dialogue with minor tweaks of

Jin’s remarks to console Yuna over her worry. It brings about no influence to either Jin’s transformation or the plot.

Furthermore, after Jin’s last duel against his uncle, Shimura, the game gives Jin options to either spare or kill him in the last story mission. Although this design choice intends to give players authority to put a period at the end of Jin’s long journey[18], it does not substantially alter anything besides cosmetics in the post-ending gameplay. Storytelling in video games has much potential to have players’ inputs diversify gameplay mechanics and narrative outcomes, which differentiates video games from the linear storytelling in traditional media[27]. However, *Ghost of Tsushima*’s ludo-narrative harmony owes to the game design and the linearity of its narrative, which hampers the game from fully capitalizing on one of the most significant traits of the video game format: interactivity to alter the narrative.

6. Conclusion

At last, characters and a conventional narrative structure enable storytellers to capture messy reality and mold it into a legible form of fiction. Akira Kurosawa’s films were a manifestation of this concept for their similarity to Joseph’s Campbell’s Hero’s Journey in their structure and portrayal of characters to represent a triangle of morality surrounding Bushido, a traditional samurai code from Japan. Paying homage to Kurosawa’s films, *Ghost of Tsushima* also successfully tells a samurai story in a conventional structure with a similar theme

and moral positioning of characters. It is a formerly traditional samurai’s journey to becoming a devious hero to save the weak by breaking his relationship with his old self, code, and even a family member. Furthermore, the game boasts carefully designed gameplay mechanics that appropriately reflect the narrative:

1. The map design with geometry locks always puts Jin in the context of the narrative.
2. The skill progression system implicates Jin’s growth as both a traditional samurai and a sly assassin.
3. The guiding wind narratively justifies the haphazard nature of Jin’s traveling in the open world.
4. The side quests enrich Jin’s narrative with their cautionary tales and enhance his ability accordingly.

These gameplay mechanics influenced by the narrative ultimately help the game achieve ludo-narrative harmony, which is rare in open-world games. However, the linearity of the game’s narrative sets a hard limit on how gameplay mechanics affect the narrative, which significantly reduces any chance of ludo-narrative dissonance. Also, it eventually limits the game’s possibility of diverse narratives driven by gameplay mechanics, which is one of the hallmarks of the video game format.

Video games are an interactive format, after all. David Jaffe, the director of *God of War* (2005) mentions that the future of storytelling in video games lies in artificial intelligence. He says we may see the peak form of interactive storytelling once A.I. gets to autogenerate a

story according to players' input in infinite ways while staying within the boundary of the game designers' intended theme[28]. The current technology is far from achieving such a level. However, along with improving technology, developers' better understanding of the anatomy of fictional storytelling designed to intrigue human beings and efforts to make gameplay mechanics duly support the narrative will make those days sooner than later.

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