

The Appropriation and Reinvention of Japanese Culture in Western Games-Taking Ghost of Tsushima as an Example

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Abstract. This paper explores how Ghost of Tsushima reconfigures the translation of Japanese culture through its gameplay mechanics and visual aesthetics. Combining cultural and game analysis, it delves into the game's binary-oppositional mechanics, examining them within a framework that engages with both 13th-century Japanese history and global popular culture's imaginings of Bushido. The analysis shows that the game deliberately projected the samurai ethics (such as the moral principle of "loyalty and courage") that was systematized in the Edo era into the Kamakura shogunate period, where the mature bushido theory was not yet formed. Through the struggle between the traditional samurai identity and the role of "war ghost", the game created a strong narrative tension, which made players around the world quickly empathize and accept this cultural symbol. On the visual level, it constructs Japanese images in line with Oriental aesthetics with cherry blossoms, maple trees, shrines and other elements, and further strengthens cultural recognition. However, its romanticised treatment of cultural symbols risks oversimplifying historical complexities. This study contends that whilst commercially successful, the work exhibits historical shortcomings.

Keywords: Japanese culture, Ghost of Tsushima, samurai ethics

1. Introduction

Johan Huizinga contends that games as the essence of culture hold considerable value for contemporary civilization [1]. In contemporary society, video games are a branch of gaming, integrating diverse expressive forms such as text, imagery, and sound to offer an interactive paradigm distinct from traditional media. Video games resemble convergently evolved organisms (such as bats and birds): while superficially sharing the label of "interactive entertainment", their core origins diverge, yielding multifaceted influences that cannot be generalized [2].

The profound global influence of Japanese culture has long been widely acknowledged. Whether through the flat compositions and vibrant colours of 19th-century ukiyo-e prints inspiring Impressionist art, or the systematic samurai ethics disseminated via works such as Nitobe Inazō's Bushido permeating Western moral philosophy, these elements have become indispensable Eastern symbols within the world's cultural landscape. Against this backdrop, non-Western multinational corporations have increasingly favoured Japan as a narrative setting in recent years – whether focusing on its contemporary cyberpunk urban landscapes or revisiting the sword-and-spear sagas of its feudal era. Among these endeavours, Ghost of Tsushima, developed by American studio Sucker

Punch Productions, occupies a singular position: it anchors its setting precisely in 1274 during the Kamakura shogunate, the opening year of the Mongol invasions of Japan historically known as the Bun'ei Campaign. Centring its narrative on Tsushima Island, artistically recreating the historical moment when Kublai Khan dispatched a forty-thousand-strong Mongol-Han coalition to invade the East. Armed with gunpowder weapons and employing collective tactics, they overwhelmed the individual martial prowess of Japanese warriors. This campaign, arguably Japan's first confrontation with a "national catastrophe-level" external threat, not only gave birth to the subsequent national narrative of the "divine wind" protecting the homeland but also starkly exposed the generational gap between traditional samurai warfare and continental military technology. Through the transformation of Jin Mikami from warrior to "War Demon", the game reconstructs the individual's struggle against the currents of history. Within a globalised context, it distils and reinterprets Japanese cultural symbols, establishing itself as a benchmark in cross-cultural game creation that harmonises historical weight with aesthetic innovation.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. A critical perspective on cultural appropriation

While such Western-published games centred on Japanese themes have to some extent stimulated interest in Japanese culture, their presentation primarily caters to a romanticised Orientalist aesthetic prevalent in the West, rather than representing a genuine understanding or dissemination of the culture.

In 1997, scholars Bruce Ziff and Pratima Rao defined the concept of "cultural appropriation" in their work *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation* as the manner in which intellectual achievements, cultural expressions, artefacts, history, and knowledge are extracted from the culture of the Other [3].

Such works have, to a certain extent, given rise to decontextualised cultural appropriation—the use or borrowing of elements from other cultures without consideration for their original cultural background and meaning. Certain cultural symbols, attire, or customs are extracted and re-presented, yet their original cultural context and significance are either overlooked or entirely stripped away [4].

Scholars further subdivide cultural appropriation into two categories: the appropriation of tangible objects and the appropriation of intangible elements [5]. Such works align more closely with the appropriation of intangible (textual) elements. When cultural appropriation targets intangible dimensions—such as aesthetic styles, philosophical concepts, narrative motifs, and emotional structures—and subjects them to commercial logic, this process fundamentally transforms into a systematic consumption of local culture. Within this framework, culture ceases to be a living, evolving practice and is instead reduced to a series of extractable, packageable, and marketable "symbolic resources". Take *Ghost of Tsushima* as an example: the Kurosawa-esque cinematography, the ethical dilemmas of loyalty and righteousness within the samurai code, and even the ephemeral beauty inherent in the philosophy of *mono no aware*—these complex cultural entities deeply rooted in Japanese history and society have been meticulously extracted and reconstructed by game developers into a "Japanese aesthetic" product readily recognisable and comprehensible to a global audience. What consumers (players) acquire through purchase is not genuine comprehension of the culture's deep-seated context, but rather a meticulously designed immersive aesthetic experience and emotional gratification centred on the 'other's' culture. This commercial success is precisely built upon transforming culture's sacredness and complexity into standardised, safe market commodities;

while it may spark global audiences' interest in Japanese culture, its fundamental driving force and ultimate destination remain capital appreciation. Ultimately, the vitality of the culture itself and its social context are quietly extracted. Its symbols become flattened in circulation, transformed into an exquisite dish catering to the global cultural market's appetite for novelty, completing the metamorphosis from spiritual heritage to consumer product.

2.2. An examination of Orientalism

“Orientalism” refers to the image of the East constructed by the West through academic discourse, literature, art, media and other means [6]. Within the narrative framework of *Ghost of Tsushima*, the samurai code is presented as a comprehensive system centred upon personal honour, direct confrontation, and moral principles. However, this artistic portrayal exhibits a significant temporal dislocation from its historical context. The game's narrative is set against the backdrop of the late 13th-century Mongol invasions of Japan. At this juncture, the samurai class essentially constituted a feudal armed faction reliant upon landholdings and military efficacy. Their behavioural logic aligned more closely with pragmatic interests and battlefield survival principles than with the highly philosophised moral code that would later define the era. Historically, the theoretical framework of Bushido emphasising “loyalty, courage, integrity, and honour” was systematically developed during the two-century-long peace of the 17th-19th century Edo period by Confucian scholars and samurai thinkers such as Yamaga Sokō. Its core tenet of “absolute loyalty to one's lord” served primarily as an ideological tool promoted by the Tokugawa shogunate to consolidate its rule. Consequently, the moral dilemma faced by Jin Sakai in the game—choosing between “honour” and “effectiveness”—essentially involves the forced projection of mature, Edo-period (and even modern cultural) conceptions of Bushido onto a historical era that had not yet undergone such ideological enlightenment. While this dramatic reconstruction heightens the narrative tension, it simplifies historical authenticity and the complexity of cultural evolution. Consequently, players encounter not the archetypal 13th-century warrior, but a samurai myth reinterpreted through later values to align with contemporary narrative aesthetics.

3. Cultural integration of game mechanics and narrative themes

3.1. Core gameplay

At its core, *Ghost of Tsushima* reinforces its central theme of “honour versus survival” by establishing a dualistic choice system: the noble path of open samurai combats versus the stealthy, efficient tactics of the Onmyōji. This interactive framework delivers a critical examination of the samurai code. When confronting overwhelming numerical odds on the battlefield, the system implicitly guides players away from rigid samurai honour codes through resource incentives and survival efficiency. This design fundamentally exposes the structural limitations of traditional Bushido in asymmetric warfare: when adhering to principles of direct confrontation risks mission failure and civilian casualties, so-called “honour” becomes a moral shackle. However, this narrative framework—which reduces samurai spirit to a mere “code of honour” and portrays the Onikiri path as “pragmatism”—while heightening dramatic tension, may further entrench popular culture's stereotypical perception of Bushido. It simplistically reduces it to a formalistic code of conduct, overlooking its multidimensional historical connotations of loyalty, introspection, and cultural identity. The game thus functions as a prism reflecting contemporary cultural imagination—what

people deconstruct and reconstruct through interactive manipulation may not be historical Bushido itself, but rather its symbolically reshaped image within global popular narratives.

3.2. Game design

In terms of armor design, the antagonist in the opening sequence wears an Ōsode (large sleeve armor) adorned with a Kōgai (helmet anchoring peg). The Odoshige (lacing cord) bound to this peg should functionally connect to the Tsudesode-tsuno (armguard fastening horn), rather than serving merely as a decorative element as depicted. Additionally, the Watagami (shoulder straps) lack Shojiban (shoulder guard plates). The absence of these critical components Tsudesode-tsuno and Shojiban significantly compromises the armor's protective efficacy for the warrior. Such adaptations, while prioritising aesthetic appeal over functional integrity, fundamentally undermine the essence of armor design. As this work serves as a primary channel for global audiences to understand samurai culture, it bears a greater responsibility to uphold historical accuracy and educational authenticity. If a work grounded in historical context undergoes excessive reinterpretation, history itself gradually disintegrates into a patchwork of disparate elements [7].

From the perspective of its background design logic, *Ghost of Tsushima* deliberately amplifies a highly refined visual aesthetic system—cherry blossoms drifting through the air, vibrant maple forests layered with colour, and majestic shrines concealed within mountain valleys. These elements collectively weave a pastoral tableau that aligns with Orientalist imaginings. While this aesthetic strategy proves remarkably successful in highlighting the unique allure of Japanese cultural symbols and crafting an immersive experience, it inevitably veers towards obscuring the complexity of the culture. The Japan depicted within the game is presented as an eternal, static aesthetic object, its visual order perpetually aligned with Western interpretations romanticising wabi-sabi and mono no aware. The historical realities of medieval Japan—its agricultural humdrum, social tensions, commercial exchanges, and bustling marketplaces—are quietly diluted by this aestheticised filter. This narrative, which reduces culture to a series of iconic symbols, may heighten exoticism and artistic appeal. Yet, at its core, it constructs an exquisitely crafted “cultural specimen cabinet”—one that immerses people in a pure, harmonious illusion of Japan while stripping away the multidimensional tensions and human texture inherent in its actual history. This perspective on Japan does express admiration and identification with Japanese culture. Yet, conversely, the aspects being praised and affirmed often constitute certain stereotypes, leading to a flattening of the culture [8].

4. Controversies and limitations

Players will encounter interactive haiku-writing segments in picturesque locations. The camera focuses on natural scenery as the character kneels in contemplation, while players select verses from a set of predefined options to compose a complete haiku. This ritualistic process, accompanied by melodious music, stands as one of the game's most “artistic” experiences. From a positive perspective, this format aligns well with the game's aesthetic principles, allowing players to compose against backdrops of sunsets, bamboo groves, or falling snow. It also enables many players to personally experience the form of haiku composition. However, from a critical viewpoint, authentic haiku adhere to strict “5-7-5” syllabic rules and seasonal word requirements. The game entirely disregards these core compositional rules, reducing it to a selection of predefined poetic moods. Players are not “creating” but rather “assembling” phrases pre-written by developers. This resembles an imitation of the act of “writing poetry” rather than genuine literary practice.

French sociologist Michel Foucault profoundly observed that “discourse” is “power” [9]. When nations construct excessive self-created imagery within video games and disseminate knowledge through such discourse, it transcends mere artistic representation to become a process of cultural power display. Despite the exquisite design of this interactive segment, it remains a carefully engineered “cultural experience package” serving commercial interests, standing far removed from the authentic complexity of haiku.

From a commercial standpoint, the game *Ghost of Tsushima* is undoubtedly a success. However, as a digital artefact, video games can serve as a medium for generating cultural memories. If this medium were to become excessively commercialized [10]. As Fredric Jameson observed, the penetration of commodification into culture signifies that works of art are becoming commodities, and even theory has been commodified. The logic of commodification has itself become the prevailing mode of thought [7]. This trend will profoundly impact on the depth and autonomy of cultural expression—when creative decisions are dominated by market expectations, the transmission of cultural memory risks being reduced from narratives of historical substance to cultural symbols that can be standardised for production and consumption. Ultimately, this undermines the critical and pluralistic values that games should embody as contemporary cultural vehicles.

5. Conclusion

In the future landscape of globalised game development, creators must transcend superficial cultural symbol borrowing and shift towards deep cultural collaboration and the construction of historical sensitivity. This demands that development teams not only engage cultural consultants for detailed reviews but also establish collaborative relationships with scholars and artists from the source cultural context from the project’s inception. Authentic local knowledge must be embedded within the narrative framework, aesthetic system, and value logic, for instance, when depicting ancient societies, discerning the tension between documented records and folk memory to present the diverse voices within a culture. Simultaneously, vigilance is essential against reducing non-Western cultures to exoticised spectacles, preventing cultural exports from devolving into a new form of Orientalism: compressing living civilisations into decorative elements catering to outsider fantasies, using aesthetic romanticism to obscure historical complexity, and ultimately reducing cultural expression to consumable exoticism. The true breakthrough lies in establishing games as arenas for cultural dialogue. They must faithfully convey the philosophical core and contemporary reflections of specific civilisations while simultaneously stimulating players’ critical understanding of cultural essence through interactive narratives. This approach fosters a vision of civilisation that respects differences and promotes mutual learning on equal terms within virtual experiences.

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