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Untitled. Photographer: Pawel Kadysz (<https://stocksnap.io/photo/OZ4IBMDS8E>).



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

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

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





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

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















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









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

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



















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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