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JAPN 4010

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May 5, 2022

Ōkami: Transforming the meaning of culture

Literature has always been a timeless medium, with new stories being created every day that are distinct to the time period they are made. As the world continues to move forward, people also tend to look back towards the past seeking new inspiration from what they view as a golden era or a simpler time. That desire to return to a simpler time is what inspired Hideki Kamiya to create the critically acclaimed action-adventure game *Ōkami* for the Playstation 2. As we look towards the past and adapt old works for a modern audience, a question is born: why should we care about modern retellings of old stories? This question is even brought up in the current day with new adaptations of old stories, like the Aladdin and Lion king remakes for the west, and the reception to the recreations of their original works. Modern adaptations like *Ōkami*, however, can transform the original stories in ways that the original never was able to do, like humanizing gods and filling in the context left to the imagination. Furthermore, through *Ōkami's* use of Japanese mythology and folklore, it is able to transform the meaning of Japanese myths and folktales into a fresh modern retelling that goes beyond the narrative limits of the original stories.

Set in the world of Nippon based on classic Japanese history, the story of *Ōkami* tells the tale of a divine white wolf named inspired by the goddess of the same name, Amaterasu. She and a swordsman named Nagi fight an eight-headed demon called Orochi to save both Nagi's village, Kamiki. Unfortunately, the pair are unable to defeat the eight-headed demon. However, they

manage to seal the demon away at the cost of Amaterasu being severely wounded and needing to go into a deep sleep. One hundred years later, a descendent of Nagi named Susano breaks the seal due to him not believing in Orochi's existence, breaking Orochi's seal and spreading darkness across the land of Nippon. Sensing Orochi's reawakening, Sakuya, the wood sprite and guardian of Kamiki Village, calls forth Amaterasu to cleanse the darkness covering the land and defeat Orochi. Accompanied by the one-inch Poncle artist Issun, the two go out on a quest across the land to restore Nippon to its former beauty. However, since Amaterasu's power is much weaker than it once was, she must seek out and collect the celestial brush techniques to regain her true power and cleanse the land of darkness. Eventually, Amaterasu returns to Kamiki Village, along with Susano recreating the events one hundred years prior. However, this time, they are able to defeat Orochi causing an evil black spirit to float northward. Amaterasu and Issun then embark north to investigate the evil spirit and continue cleansing the darkness Orochi left behind while meeting various characters along the way based on Japanese folktales. Eventually, Amaterasu encounters Yami, the demon controlling the evil spirits, who strips Amaterasu of her celestial powers before entering battle with her. However, Issun and the people the duo helped during their adventure send their prayers to Amaterasu, allowing her to regain the strength to fight Yami. After a fierce battle with Yami, Amaterasu is able to defeat him, ridding Nippon of the evil beings forever. With her mission done, Amaterasu departs back to the Celestial Plain.

The first major story arc of *Ōkami* is inspired by the Japanese mythos between Izanami and Izanagi, their three children, Amaterasu, Tsukuyomi, and Susano-o, as well as the story of Yamata no Orochi. *Ōkami* takes many liberties in adapting these characters into its narrative to create characters that can be humanized more than the gods in the original myths. For starters,

Izanami, Izanagi, and Susano-o are no longer gods in this telling; instead, they are made mortals with their counterparts Nami, Nagi, and Susano, respectively. In addition, Tsukuyomi does not make any significant appearances as a character in the story; instead, Tsukuyomi is relegated to a mystic blade bestowed by the gods, keeping her divine relationship. Amaterasu, however, does maintain her divine status serving as the ruler of the celestial realm before her slumber, but a significant difference for her is that she is instead portrayed as a wolf instead of a human being. Amaterasu is a wolf due to a play on words in Japanese with Ōkami, depending on if it's written with one character or two, meaning either "Great god" or "wolf." Amaterasu is portrayed as intelligent and kind, upholding the status of a heavenly being, but also gives her more human qualities like strong opinions and a short attention span. Her intelligence and short attention span can be seen when she deduces that the character Rao in the story is the demon lord Ninetails and when she dozes off throughout the game when someone explains something for too long, respectively. In *Ōkami*'s telling of Yamata no Orochi, the spotlight is placed on Susano and Amaterasu, a significant difference from the original, considering that Susano-o was the only god involved in the original telling. Elements of the original story's events have been brought over into *Ōkami's* new telling, like offering Orochi sake to intoxicate him, Orochi demanding female sacrifices, and Susano's love interest, Kushinada's hair being distinctly comb-shaped. However, rather than focusing on Susano's strength like in the original telling, *Ōkami* chooses to humanize Susano by focusing on his personal struggles of not being able to live up to his reputation as a descendant of Nagi.

  With all the discussions of how *Ōkami* adapted folktales and myths to fit its narrative, the question posed earlier remains. Why should we care about modern retellings of old stories? Most older myths and stories are straightforward, serving more so as a telling of the events that

happened rather than trying to serve as a compelling narrative, as Lailia Carter stated in her article "Why turn a myth into a game: How Okami reinvented the Kojiki," "God 1 did this, and God 2 reacted to it by doing X. God 3 created Y, and Y is the reason that (for example) we have seasons". That straightforward telling makes it difficult for the reader to grow any meaningful connection to any of the gods in these myths and legends because their actions are so unlike ours. However, rewriting the myth and adapting the folktale as a new work of fiction allows the context that was left to the mind in the original to be filled in by the adaptation, what Lailia Carter calls "blank space." This blank space can be filled by humanizing the deities that the reader once thought were nothing like them and as a result makes the reader much more attached to narrative. One of the most significant examples of how *Ōkami* filled in a blank space can be seen with Susano, who is stripped of his god standing in the story to make him a much more sympathizable character. Susano follows the same general structure as that of the original myth, being unpredictable and prone to wreak havoc, but the character traits in each story end up being different. The feeling of wanting to run away from one's responsibilities out of fear that one may not be good enough is a feeling that many can understand and makes sense considering the expectations he grew up with. With this feeling, *Ōkami* goes for the message that "You can be a hero even if you're not the strongest," which is only possible because Susano is mortal. It is extremely difficult for the player to sympathize with the struggles of gods as they often have the knowledge and might that goes far beyond us, so the best way to have us sympathize with them is by bringing them down to our standards. The player can see Susano distraught over being unable to protect his village from an evil he released, the player can see his fear of not being able to live up to his ancestors, and the player can see his fear of rejection from his love interest Kushinada. The blank space-filling of Susano as a character and his relationship with Kushinada

lets the story *Ōkami* become much more interpersonal. Susano is able to be a sympathizable being rather than an unpredictable god, and Susano and Kushinada love becoming an actual relationship rather than a hero saving a damsel in distress being a man and his comb.

While the story of the first arc of *Ōkami* focuses much more on Susano, the story fills in the blank space left for Amaterasu, albeit differently from Susano. In her original mythos, Amaterasu is the benevolent ruler of Takamagahara and is adored, not having much of a personality beyond that. In *Ōkami*, Amaterasu has a kind and knowledgeable nature, as mentioned before, but is left much more incomplete and has a much less expanded personality when compared to other significant characters like Susano. However, this is for a good reason, and that reason is that Amaterasu is the player's avatar. In many video games, the protagonist of the story is considered a blank slate and speaks very little, if at all, because they are supposed to be the player's "eyes" to the story, a catalyst so that they can experience the events that take place. Amaterasu similarly serves that role, serving as the eyes for the player and allowing them to be able to explore the land of Nippon and banish the darkness while using her companion Issun as her talking piece. Serving as an avatar for the player acts as a unique way of filling in the blank space with the open nature of being a silent player-controlled avatar. With Amaterasu being the player's catalyst to experience the story and the world of Nippon, her actions become much more personal, as part of the identity created for her throughout the game is created by the player's actions. In tandem with Amaterasu's more humanizing personality traits, like her short attention span, the player is able to feel like they have become the sun goddess herself and feel as if they are the ones saving Nippon and paint a corresponding picture around the goddess accordingly. With Amaterasu serving as the player's eyes for the adventure *Ōkami* is able to create new possibilities for the player to fill in the blank space of Amaterasu themselves without

any direct input from the story and walk away from the game asking oneself, "What did I do in that game?, rather than What did that god do in this book?" as Lalia Carter stated.

Ōkami shows how old stories can be successfully retold for a modern audience as it recontextualizes the characters of Susano and Amaterasu, filling in the blank space left in the original tellings. Humanizing the gods that felt more like things rather than people, the narrative is able to create more of an interpersonal connection between the characters and the audience, creating a feeling of attachment to the story and characters that were not present in the original tales. By adding to the blank space left in the original stories and taking advantage of the video game medium the story is told through, *Ōkami* is able to show how retelling and adding new content to older Japanese tales and legends can transform their meaning into a fresh modern retelling that goes beyond the narrative limits of the original tellings.

Works Cited

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