

4 *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* and contents tourism in Aizu-Wakamatsu

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Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice is an action-adventure video game developed by FromSoftware. It was one of the most popular games of 2019, selling over 2 million copies in ten days after its release (Baird 2019). Set in a fantasy version of Warring States (Sengoku, 1467–1590) period Japan, players fight as one-armed *shinobi* Sekiro against the Ashina clan. The player must protect Kuro, a boy of an ancient bloodline with magical powers, who has been targeted by the clan. The plot features magical rituals and mythical creatures, and the map of *Sekiro*'s world does not faithfully represent Japan's geography. Fantasy realms, however, do not stop fans from identifying real-life inspirations for the game.

Japanese gaming forums and blogs contain discussions about the game's historical inspirations and real-life locations. Players usually first link the game to Fukushima prefecture, not only because of the snowy mountain landscape but also because of the name 'Ashina'. In the game, Ashina Isshin is the founder of the clan and leader of a small, sovereign state. Ashina's land is being invaded by a military power called the Interior Ministry (*Daifu*). Fan theories are almost unanimous in identifying the Aizu branch of the historical Ashina clan, who were rulers of the Aizu region during the Muromachi period (approx. 1336–1573), as the real-life model for the in-game Ashina. Many fans go one step further and identify Ashina Isshin as loosely based on Ashina Moriujji (1521–1580) (Luggage_Z 2019), who managed to unify most of the Aizu area under his rule (Aizu-Wakamatsu Kankō Byūrō n.d.). Ashina was never a particularly influential clan, so the amount of information that can be exchanged by fans is limited. Twitter user Kagura, who is a Sengoku period enthusiast and *Sekiro* fan, admits that despite her interest in history she did not know much about the Ashina clan – just enough to connect the name to Aizu-Wakamatsu. The game motivated her to research more about local history and the inspiration behind the characters. She discovered events seemingly reflected in the game: conflicts

between the Ashina and Tamura clans, and Date Masamune's invasion of the Fukushima region (Kagura 2021). Fans name the 1589 Battle of Suriagehara as connected somehow to the game since it was the biggest conflict in the area during that period. Some even interpret the plot as 'alternate history', showing what could have been if the Ashina clan won the battle (Diggu 2020). Such online debates suggest that some fans enjoy the hunt for even vague historical references. Nevertheless, accounts of those who visited places related to the historical Ashina suggest that their primary aim was to discover the world of *Sekiro* more fully, and learning actual Sengoku history remains only in the background.

The centre of the Ashina's military power was Kurokawa Castle, today known as Aizu-Wakamatsu or Tsuruga Castle. Originally built by Ashina Naomori in 1384, the castle remained in the hands of the Ashina until 1589. Numerous players express interest in potential links between the in-game Ashina Castle and the historical Ashina clan's residence. However, despite the game being set in the Sengoku period, the huge in-game castle complex reflects the design of an Early Modern period castle. Such images of Japanese castles are widespread in popular culture, but given the game's timeline, this representation is an anachronism (see Chapter 9). The in-game castle is not modelled on any specific real-life building but is a fantasy location firmly rooted in the image of an Edo period castle.

Aizu-Wakamatsu Castle was reconstructed in 1965 in its form from 1639 when it served as a residence of the Katō clan. Since Aizu-Wakamatsu Castle today has Edo period architecture, it shares with in-game Ashina Castle various characteristics, like the keep and stone walls. It does not need to look exactly like the fortress in the game, but as the castle is linked to the real-life Ashina clan, it becomes the real-world counterpart of Ashina Castle for many fans. One fan who visited Aizu-Wakamatsu in March 2020 refers to it as *seichi (mōsō) junrei*, '(fantasy) sacred site pilgrimage', at a place that is not specifically portrayed in the work, but physically represents the core of the narrative (Mizunomi Byakushō 2020).

The lack of real-life game locations does not prevent *Sekiro* fans from looking at the castle complex through the lens of the game. Mizunomi Byakushō regularly mentions game elements during his walk around Tsuruga Castle. For example, the remains of the entrance gate call to mind the terrifying demon guard, and the fosse looks like a place where the Headless (*Kubinashi*) monster hides. Similarly, Kagura, who went to Tsuruga Castle, declared the castle a 'sacred site' (Loc_cos 2019). Even though she had been to Tsuruga Castle before, the post-*Sekiro* visit allowed her to notice new elements. For example, in the game *tsukimi*

yagura, the ‘moon viewing tower’, plays an important role in the opening sequences. During her ‘*Sekiro* pilgrimage’ Kagura noticed for the first time that Tsuruga Castle used to have a *tsukimi yagura* in the past – the tower’s location is now marked with a commemorative stone (Kagura 2021). Hence, Tsuruga Castle can be rediscovered through the comparison with its counterpart in *Sekiro*, even if the connection is mainly through the name of Ashina.

It is not possible for *Sekiro* fans in Aizu-Wakamatsu to take pictures of exact spots from the game, like pilgrims visiting sacred sites of other franchises often do. Nevertheless, Twitter users have posted ‘*Sekiro* impression’ photographs recreating the general style and atmosphere of *Sekiro* visuals. Kagura, for example, shot close-ups of the white castle tower and posted a picture of herself kneeling in a *shinobi*-inspired pose on the wall (Figure 4.1).

During their pilgrimages, fans can also spot references to the game outside the castle. Many result from likenesses in names or the usage of kanji characters. Local *azuki* bean sweets are called ‘Tomoe monaka’, and Tomoe is one of the characters in *Sekiro*. Kagura recommended the sweets and tweeted, ‘[If you’re a fan], you’ll buy it just for its name’ (Loc_cos 2019). In another example, locally made Tatsuizumi liquor, written



Figure 4.1 A fan creates a ‘*Sekiro* illusion’ by making a *shinobi*-pose against the backdrop of Aizu-Wakamatsu Castle. Photo courtesy of Kagura, @Loc_cos.

with a kanji meaning ‘dragon’, resembles the in-game Dragonspring *sake* (rice wine, written with a different kanji of the same meaning); and a restaurant called Jūmonji-ya shares its name with one of Ashina Isshin’s sword techniques, *jūmonji-giri*, ‘cross attack’ (Mizunomi Byakushō 2020).

The similarity in settings can also trigger visitors’ imaginations. Aizu Ashinomaki *onsen* (hot spring) is located deep in the mountains by a river. This place brings to fans’ minds the magical Rejuvenating Waters, especially since the place is marked with a big sign informing visitors of the *onsen*’s link to the Ashina clan (Kagura 2021). The Aizu-Wakamatsu area did not need to directly inspire the game’s art to be perceived by fans as a physical representation of *Sekiro*’s world. Such ‘fantasy pilgrimage’, however, seems to be less prevalent than a pilgrimage to places accurately portrayed in works of popular culture. Tsuruga Castle management did not notice a major increase in visitor numbers after the game’s premiere. They were not aware of *Sekiro* and its links to Aizu-Wakamatsu until asked directly by the author. This suggests the game’s limited impact on tourism in the area (albeit under the severe restrictions on movement caused by the COVID-19 pandemic) in comparison to, for example, Shinsengumi-themed works. Since the castle was the site of a Boshin War battle in 1868, fans of franchises centred on Shinsengumi, like *Rurouni Kenshin* or *Hakuoki* (Chapters 10 and 14) are frequent castle visitors according to the castle’s management (personal correspondence, 2 April 2021).

The game’s producer, FromSoftware, has never confirmed any links between the game and the region. Furthermore, unlike *Ghost of Tsushima* (Chapter 3), there are no municipal initiatives or cooperation with game producers to promote the Aizu region. Still, some of the distributor’s decisions may be seen as an acknowledgement of Aizu-Wakamatsu’s importance. *Sekiro* pre-release try-outs were organized at various stores across the country. As Twitter user Tamori noticed, in the case of Fukushima prefecture the bigger cities like Fukushima or Koriyama would seem more obvious choices, but the try-out took place at the GEO store in Aizu-Wakamatsu. Tamori explains this decision via the Ashina clan’s link to the location (tamori_DX 2019).

Sekiro generates not only ‘fantasy pilgrimage’. Some game locations are inspired by real-life places across Japan. Tōfuku-ji Temple in Kyoto and Itsukushima Shrine in Hiroshima prefecture are considered ‘sacred spots’ by game fans since they seemingly inspired the in-game Sempō Temple bridge and Fountainhead Palace, respectively (ot_Kapoor 2019; suna_game 2019). According to YouTube user Love Thieves, over 30 real-life places that inspired game locations can be named (Love Thieves 2019). Twitter debates suggest that some *Sekiro* fans either visited or

are planning to visit places visually represented in the game. But Ashina Castle remains central to fans' imaginations and is the predominant theme in online discussions concerning 'sacred sites'.

In summary, *Sekiro* is a fictional narrative set in a fantasy world, and this narrative is what primarily captures fans' attention. Even if the fantasy world is not strictly modelled on Japanese landscapes, it still has the potential to generate real-life tourism. 'Fantasy pilgrimage' to Aizu-Wakamatsu cannot provide fans with physical representations of the game's visuals, but it allows them to interact with the symbol of *Sekiro*'s core narrative – the rise and fall of the Ashina clan. Trips by fans and research related to the game become opportunities to learn more about Sengoku period events in the Aizu region. However, the focus of fans' online debates and comments suggests that knowledge about Ashina leaders or the Battle of Suriagehara is primarily a collection of curiosities enriching the game's lore in the eyes of dedicated fans.

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