

Blending Myth and Reality: Minamoto no Yoshitsune in the Realm of Video Games (Genji: Dawn of the Samurai)

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Abstract

This study explores the life and legacy of Minamoto no Yoshitsune, an important historical figure from Japan's Genpei War, along with his portrayal in console games: Genji: Dawn of the Samurai. This study employs qualitative historical methods and semiotic analysis grounded in Roland Barthes' theories to explore the reinterpretation of Yoshitsune's historical and mythological narratives within video games. The examination emphasizes visual and narrative components to reveal both denotative and connotative meanings, delving into the convergence of historical accuracy and artistic interpretation. The findings indicate that although game incorporates distinct creative elements, including supernatural powers and improved visual aesthetics, they maintain the core essence of Yoshitsune as both a heroic and tragic character. His portrayals consistently highlight themes of bravery, endurance, and selflessness, reflecting his iconic status in Japanese culture. The analysis emphasizes the significance of video games in enhancing the cultural memory of historical figures through the integration of factual narratives and imaginative storytelling. These reinterpretations captivate contemporary audiences and highlight the dynamic evolution of historical narratives within interactive media. Future studies could delve deeper into the cultural significance of gaming as a means of preserving and reinterpreting historical identities.

Keywords: minamoto no yoshitsune; semiotics; video games

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1. Introduction

Historical narratives have long served as a vital medium for preserving the legacies of key figures and events that shape collective cultural memory. Patrick Gardiner stated that history is a science that studies what humans have done in the past (Gardiner, 1961). Meanwhile, Ibn Khaldun, in his book, explains that history is a record of general human society or world civilization. Moh. Yamin argues that history is a science compiled from the results of investigating several events that can be proven with real materials (Abdillah, 2012). Among

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the many luminaries in Japanese history, Minamoto no Yoshitsune stands out as an archetype of the tragic hero—a brilliant tactician during the Genpei War (1180–1185) who achieved legendary status through his military victories and untimely demise.

The Genpei War marked a pivotal period in Japan's transition from the Heian to Kamakura era, characterized by intense feudal conflicts between the Minamoto and Taira clans. Yoshitsune's tactical ingenuity, exemplified in battles like Ichi-no-Tani and Dan-no-Ura, was instrumental in securing the Minamoto's victory. However, his subsequent estrangement from his brother, Minamoto no Yoritomo, and eventual downfall added a tragic dimension to his legacy. This duality of heroism and tragedy has ensured Yoshitsune's enduring appeal in Japanese cultural consciousness.

Minamoto no Yoshitsune was a figure who played an important role in the Genpei War. He had various military achievements through his ability to lead battles in Ichi-no-Tani, Yashima, and Dan-no-ura, thus making him widely known. In addition to these achievements, his life story, which was full of drama and conflict, became one of the factors in Yoshitsune's legend. Even so, nothing can be claimed to be accurate in the first twenty years of his life; it only contains stories and legends. Some documentation, such as the battle of Dan-no-Ura, is not explained in detail, so most details can only be described by referring to legends and chronicles such as the Heike monogatari and Gikeiki (Morris, 1975). The Gikeiki war story also concentrates on the character's life, admitting a much more significant fictional element than others, so it cannot be fully trusted. Gikeiki is generally classified as a war story (Gunki Monogatari), which tells a historical event by dramatizing the record (McCullough, 1966). Minamoto Yoshitsune (1159-1189) was a half-brother of Yoritomo, the founder of the Kamakura Shogunate and the first shogun in Japan. Yoshitsune was one of the nine children of Yoshitomo, the head of the Kawachi Genji. During the Heiji War, he and his two older brothers, Imawaka (Zenjō) and Otowaka (Gien), lived in Kyoto with their mother, Tokiwa. Yoshitsune, known by his childhood name 'Ushiwaka,' was less than a year old when his father died in the first month of 1160 (McCullough, 1966).

Yoshitsune was born during a conflict between the Minamoto Clan, also known as the Genji Clan, and the Taira Clan, known as the Heike or Heishi Clan. The two clans competed with each other for military supremacy and political power. The long conflict was won by the Taira Clan, led by Taira no Kiyomori. Yoshitomo and his defeated followers attempted to flee but were overtaken when they reached the city gates and executed by the Taira and their followers (Ozaki, 1909). In contemporary times, Yoshitsune's story has been adapted into video games, which offer a unique platform for retelling historical narratives. Games like *Genji: Dawn of the Samurai* reimagine Yoshitsune's life by blending historical elements with fictional and fantastical features. These adaptations provide a lens to examine how modern media reshapes historical figures to engage contemporary audiences.

This study aims to analyze the portrayal of Minamoto no Yoshitsune in the selected console games (*Genji: Dawn of the Samurai*) to understand the interplay between historical authenticity and creative reinterpretation. By applying Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, this research deciphers the denotative and connotative meanings embedded in the visual and narrative representations of Yoshitsune. Additionally, the study compares these portrayals to historical accounts to evaluate the consistency and divergence in his depiction across mediums. *Genji: Dawn of the Samurai* is a PlayStation 2 console game created by Game Republic and published by Sony Computer Entertainment in 2005. This game is based on the life story of Minamoto no Yoshitsune with the addition of fantasy elements such as amagahane, a magical

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element found in the game. In the game, players can use Yoshitsune and Benkei. Yoshitsune is depicted as a fast and agile warrior with two swords as his weapons. Benkei is described as a strong but slow figure with a large staff that he uses as a weapon.

The research draws upon Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, which explores the relationship between signs and meanings. He believes semiotics is tentative and can be applied to other fields, not just one science. Semiotics can be considered part of linguistics because the signs that appear can be considered language (Barthes, 1981). He explained that semiotics, or semiology, studies how humanity gives meaning to things. In this case, giving meaning (no signify) cannot be confused with communicating (no communicate). Giving meaning means that these objects not only carry information, in which case the objects want to communicate but also constitute a structured system of signs. Barthes thus sees signification as a total process with a structured arrangement. Signification is not limited to language but also exists in things that are not language. In the end, Barthes considers social life a form of signification. In other words, social life, whatever its form, is also a system of signs in itself (Kurniawan, 2001). In his book, Barthes states that every sign system has an expression (E) and content (C). Both levels require a relationship or relation (R) to describe them (Barthes, 1981).

Barthes' denotation, connotation, and myth concepts are pivotal in decoding the symbolic layers of Yoshitsune's representation in video games. Denotation refers to the literal meaning of a sign, while connotation encompasses its cultural and emotional associations. Myth, in Barthes' context, relates to the ideological underpinnings that transform signs into cultural narratives.

Character design theories also contribute to understanding how visual and narrative elements communicate personality traits and cultural archetypes. Archetypes such as "the hero" and "the mentor" often inform the portrayal of historical figures in fiction, reinforcing their roles within the narrative framework (Tillman, 2011). In addition to archetypes, shapes play an important role in character visuals to interpret the traits possessed by the character. Shapes have basic patterns that are divided into three, namely circles, squares, and triangles. The circle indicates a gentle nature because it does not have sharp corners. This shape naturally tends to be gentle and will not hurt anyone, generally depicted as a character many people like. The square shape is depicted as sturdy, brave, and strong. Characters with this shape are illustrated as reliable characters and are generally used for superheroes or large-bodied characters. The triangle shape is associated with strength and threat because it has sharp corners. Bad guys and antagonists are usually depicted with this shape to highlight cruel and aggressive traits (Ekström, 2013).



Figure 1. Map at the start of Genji: Dawn of the Samurai

Color is also an important component when building a character or illustration. (Egan, 1974) explains that, in Europe and America today, there is an explicit assumption that color has aesthetic value. There is also an assumption that color has a level of emotional value. A color can be accurately described, for example, as "cheerful" and "joyful" or as "gloomy" and "sad." In addition to basic shapes and colors, characterization can be seen from other aspects, such as body language and physiognomy. Physiognomy is the science of reading a person's character through the face. Each face has distinctive characteristics that affect a person's attitude (Roberts, 1994). Physiognomy theory believes that the diversity of human types can be interpreted based on their physical differences and that facial structure indicates a person's internal characteristics (Street, 1990).

Several studies have explored the intersection of history and digital media. Aditya's (2020) analysis of the protagonist in Assassin's Creed Origins using Barthes' semiotics revealed how character design conveys symbolic meanings that align with historical and cultural contexts. Similarly, Pratama's (2019) examination of character illustrations highlighted the evolving nature of archetypes in modern storytelling. These studies underscore the relevance of semiotic analysis in understanding how media adapts historical and cultural figures for contemporary audiences.

In the context of Yoshitsune, prior research has predominantly focused on his portrayal in literature and theater. For instance, McCullough's (1966) translation and analysis of Heike Monogatari and Gikeiki provided foundational insights into Yoshitsune's historical and mythological dimensions. However, limited attention has been given to his representation in video games, a medium that uniquely combines visual, narrative, and interactive elements.

Representing historical figures in modern media, particularly video games, often raises questions about the balance between historical authenticity and creative reinterpretation. Adam Chapman coined the term "historical video games" as simulacra of the past (Chapman, 2016). In the case of Minamoto no Yoshitsune, his depiction across various platforms has demonstrated both fidelity to his historical persona and imaginative liberties that cater to contemporary audiences. This raises critical inquiries into how video games reinterpret Yoshitsune's legacy: Do these portrayals accurately reflect his historical and cultural significance, or do they merely use his story as a framework for fictional narratives? Moreover, how do these adaptations influence public perceptions of Yoshitsune and the historical events associated with him? These questions form the foundation of this study, aiming to bridge the gap between historical scholarship and digital media representations.

RED Power Excitement Strength Power Passion Energy	ORANGE Confidence Warmth Innovation, Friendliness Energy Bravery	YELLOW Optimism Warmth Happiness Creativity Friendliness	GREEN Health Hope Nature Growth Freshness Prosperity	BLUE Trust Loyalty Dependability Logic Serenity Security
PURPLE Wisdom Luxury Wealth Spirituality Sophistication Royalty	PINK Imaginative Passionate Transformation Balance Creativity	BROWN Serious Earthiness Reliability Authenticity Warmth Support	BLACK Sophistication Security Power Authority Substance	WHITE Cleanliness Clarity Purity Simplicity Freshness

Figure 2. Color psychology

This research contributes to the growing field of game studies and cultural semiotics by examining how video games reinterpret historical narratives. Focusing on Minamoto no Yoshitsune, a figure deeply ingrained in Japanese history and culture, the study sheds light on the broader implications of adapting historical figures for interactive media. Additionally, the findings provide insights into the role of video games in preserving and reshaping cultural memory, bridging the gap between historical scholarship and popular entertainment.

2. Methods

This qualitative study employs a historical-descriptive methodology to examine Yoshitsune's life and his representation in video games. This research utilizes semiotic analysis to interpret the visual and narrative components in the chosen games. Primary sources encompass *Heike Monogatari* and *Gikeiki*, along with historical chronicles that document Yoshitsune's life and the Genpei War. Secondary sources encompass books, journal articles, and digital media that analyze Yoshitsune's legacy and the design of video game characters. The visual assets and narratives of the games are examined to identify denotative and connotative signs. The study employs Barthes' semiotic theory to discern both denotative (literal) and connotative (symbolic) meanings within the character designs. A comparative analysis examines the historical figure of Yoshitsune alongside his representations, highlighting consistencies and divergences in physical appearance, characteristics, and mythological elements.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Historical Yoshitsune: Life and Legacy

Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159-1189) was a prominent military commander during the Genpei War. His tactical brilliance secured decisive victories but also incited jealousy and betrayal from his brother, Minamoto no Yoritomo. Yoshitsune's tragic demise—culminating in ritual suicide—solidified his status as a cultural icon, celebrated in chronicles like *Heike Monogatari* (McCullough, H. C. 1988). and dramatized in Kabuki and Noh theater.

Based on the stories and records, Yoshitsune is depicted with various behaviors and physical characteristics but not much different from each other, as explained in the history above.



Figure 3. Minamoto no Yoshitsune painting by Kikuchi Yosai and Yoshitsune's armor

Ushiwaka (Yoshitsune's nickname when he was a child) is initially depicted with various behavioral variants, but all stories eventually describe Ushiwaka's character as wild, agile, and reckless in fighting. When Ushiwaka was young, he had a handsome face; his small physical characteristics sometimes made people think he was a woman. This is proven in the story of Ushiwaka, who was at the Kagami station post. As an adult, Yoshitsune's depiction is relatively consistent in each record. This is likely because there is strong evidence regarding his history during this period. Yoshitsune's behavior and story in his military career do not differ much from one record to another. As a teenager, he is depicted as a man who is loving to those closest to him and gentle towards women but still acts like a teenager. He tends to show arrogant, assertive, and courageous behavior when facing enemies. Despite this, he also appears to have a sense of sympathy and concern for his comrades and subordinates, such as when Satō Saburōbyōe Tsuginobu protected him at the Battle of Yashima. Most of the authors of the war stories and chronicles seem to agree that after Yoshitsune became a fugitive, his attitude changed in stark contrast to before. He is depicted as more passive and melancholic; emotions such as anger or happiness are still shown even though his behavior is less active. These change factors are possible due to sociological influences such as feeling shocked after learning of Yoritomo's anger or the influence of Yukiie's suggestion that influenced his actions.

3.2 Representation in Video Games

Genji: Dawn of the Samurai portrays Yoshitsune as a swift and agile swordsman, emphasizing his legendary combat skills. The inclusion of fantastical elements, such as magical powers, enriches the narrative but diverges from historical accounts. In Genji: Dawn of The Samurai, Minamoto no Yoshitsune is one of the two main playable characters. Yoshitsune is Minamoto no Yoshitomo's son, and Minamoto no Yoritomo's younger brother. Yoshitsune is a 16-year-old teenager with a kind but easily emotional personality. Minamoto no Yoshitsune is one of the two main playable characters. He is Minamoto no Yoshitomo's son and Minamoto no Yoritomo's younger brother. Yoshitsune is a 16-year-old teenager with a kind but easily emotional personality. The teenager is depicted in the game as a young swordsman who defends the truth.

This game tells the story of Yoshitsune's career on his journey against the Heishi clan to free Kyoto from Kiyomori's tyranny and avenge his father. On his initial voyage, Yoshitsune met the Tamayoribito clan led by Kiichi Hogen and his daughter, Minazuru, who is the guardian of Amagahane. Amagahane is a magical stone that can give its user the power to release magical powers, also known as Kamui. Through Kiichi Hogen, Yoshitsune learns that he is the son of Minamoto Yoshitomo. With this information, Yoshitsune has a new goal: defeating the Heishi clan. Genji: Dawn of the Samurai is set when Yoshitsune was still young, more precisely, when he did not know his true identity. Yoshitsune's father's true identity is only obtained after meeting the Tamayoribito clan in the 20th minute of the game. This game also has an initial location on Mount Kurama, where Yoshitsune was raised.

Table 1. Yoshitsune In Genji: Dawn of the Samurai

Aspect	Historical Yoshitsune	Game Depiction
Appearance	Samurai attire, katana	Samurai attire with fantasy elements
Abilities	Military strategy	Superhuman agility and magical attacks
Role in Narrative	Tragic hero, loyal strategist	Central protagonist, mythical savior

The difference between the game and the story lies in the naming of the protagonist, where the protagonist is not designated by the name "Ushiwaka" or "Shanaō," the name used by the character during his childhood. In the historical story, the character only uses the name "Yoshitsune" after going through the adulthood ceremony that only occurs during his journey to Hiraizumi. In addition, there are differences in the character's early life, where Yoshitsune in the game is depicted as a warrior dressed as a Heishi Samurai. In contrast, in the original story, Yoshitsune was a servant of the Kurama Temple at the beginning of his life. Another difference is also in how Yoshitsune and Kiichi Hōgen met; where Hōgen in the game is depicted as a Tamayoribito clan chief who is tasked with guarding the mahogany, while in the original story, Hōgen is a high-status priest, the owner of an heirloom that Yoshitsune will later steal.

In the game, he is depicted as a young swordsman who defends justice. The game tells the story of Yoshitsune's career and journey against the Taira clan to avenge his father. In his early journey, Yoshitsune meets the Tamayoribito clan led by Kiichi Hogen and his daughter, Minazuru, who is the guardian of the Amagahane. Amagahane is a magical stone that can give its user the power to release magical powers, also known as Kamui.

In *Genji: Dawn of the Samurai*, Minamoto no Yoshitsune is depicted as having a thin body, making his silhouette slim. He also has an undefined face shape like a teenager. In addition, he has long black hair that is tied back. Yoshitsune wears black and white armor with gold and red accents. The armor protects vital parts such as the body, both shoulders, and both wrists and ankles. A gold ornament adorns the chest armor. Behind the armor, there are two layers of loose white and red clothing. Several red ropes function as armor and sword sheath holders.

There are not many descriptions that can prove Yoshitsune's visual design in the game as a character other than his name, handsome face, small and agile stature, and the two swords he uses. In the early days of his life in history, Yoshitsune was described as carrying two swords of different lengths when he was about to leave for Hiraizumi.

In character design, a character's integral form is the main determinant in explaining its archetype and nature at a glance. This form can be seen from the character's pose and silhouette. In the following Yoshitsune silhouette visualization, the character's overall shape tends to be triangular. Triangles generally depict characters who can be cruel and mysterious. Usually, antagonists or evil characters will use this shape. However, the triangular shape is often used to describe characters with agile and fast bodies.



Figure 4. Minamoto no Yoshitsune poses and silhouettes


Based on gestures and posture, Yoshitsune is depicted as having a straight body with both swords drawn from their sheaths, ready to fight. Although covered in cloth, it can be seen that Yoshitsune has a slender body with long legs, indicating that he has strong legs and can run fast. Minimalist armor with a preference for weapons in the form of two swords depicts an agile character.

Through the color palette, Yoshitsune has a bright skin color with dark black hair and irises, like the stereotype of Asian people in general. His clothes are predominantly white and black with red and gold accents that decorate the entire design and show a coherent color silhouette. The red color that contrasts the overall design depicts the character's courage, agility, and optimism. White, the primary color of the character's design, represents innocence and purity. Black, the contrasting color of white, depicts behavior with great determination and desire. Based on this, it can be concluded that the character has the archetype of "the hero" through his depiction of a hero.

Based on the table 2, Yoshitsune has physical characteristics like long black hair tied back. Based on his haircut, the character can be identified as a character with a wild and rebellious personality. This is because, in general, a man has a short and neat haircut; long hair depicts a man who goes against his nature, thus showing rebellious characteristics. The facial characteristics are thick and curved eyebrows, large almond-shaped eyes, a small nose, and a medium-sized mouth with thin lips.

This shows the characteristics of a young man with a friendly, approachable, and action-oriented nature. His overall intense expression shows a strong, temperamental, and serious character. Given that the setting of the game takes place before Yoshitsune knows his identity, it can be concluded that in this game, he is still in his early teens. Compared to historical figures, they have similarities in nature where they are depicted as wild, rebellious, and friendly young men; if you look at the actions from history and the game, they are action-oriented characters. Even so, Yoshitsune, through his facial expression, is depicted as a character who tends to be more serious in the game. The physical characteristics that approach the description of the chronicle are only in the shape of the eyes, which are both described as beautiful, large bulging eyes and bright skin. The depiction of Yoshitsune's long hair is also appropriate both physically and behaviorally because Ushiwaka also had long hair at this time.

Table 2. Yoshitsune's Upper Body In Genji: Dawn of the Samurai

	
Denotation	Long black hair tied back. Thick, arched eyebrows. The face has almond-shaped eyes with black irises, a small nose, a medium-sized mouth and thin lips.
Connotation	A young man with long hair and a focused and intense expression.
Myth	A friendly, strong, active personality, but wild and rebellious.


Yoshitsune wears two pieces of clothing covering his entire body, with the first layer red and the second layer white. In addition, he also wears armor plates that protect all vital parts of his body. His armor has the characteristics of samurai armor, which also has plates stacked in layers and connected using silk ropes. This characteristic shows that Yoshitsune is a fighter with strong physical abilities. The color of the clothing, which is dominated by white, red, and black, shows the character traits of courage, determination, and a pure and pure heart.

Considering that Yoshitsune was Yoshitsune before meeting Yoritomo, this game's clothing depiction is not the same as the existing records. At this time, Yoshitsune was never described as wearing armor because of his role as a temple servant. The depiction of a strong and courageous character with a noble heart in the game accurately fits the story of Yoshitsune at that age, where he is always depicted as a hero.

Based on the character's pose, Yoshitsune is seen using two katanas as weapons (Figure 2). This shows that Yoshitsune prefers katana with dual techniques over other weapons. Dual techniques are sword techniques that require high sword skills and rely on the user's speed.

Based on this, Yoshitsune is someone with agile fighting abilities. In his childhood, Yoshitsune was said to have agile sword skills. The character's dynamic pose in the game depicts activeness and agility by Yoshitsune, his age, who was entering his teens. The weapons used in the pose are also accurate, namely two swords, with slight differences in the color and length of the sword.

Table 3. Yoshitsune's Clothing In Genji: Dawn of the Samurai

	
Denotation	Two-layered clothing with red on the inside and white on the outside. Layers of armor with white and black colors accompanied by golden accents that form a pattern on the chest. On the bottom there are red sandals with black socks.
Connotation	A warrior
Myth	A warrior who is full of courage and noble heart.

4. Conclusions

Yoshitsune is a war leader who has won many battles and brought the Minamoto clan to glory. He achieved great success in several wars through his unique tactics and strategies, which were reckless and required courage. Yoshitsune is a heroic figure known by many people, which can be proven by the many games that adapt the figure's story. Thanks to his skills, heroic nature, and tragic story, Yoshitsune's achievements, accomplishments, and legends can be formed.

Through analysis, various signs were found in the character design of Minamoto no Yoshitsune in the console game *Genji: Dawn of the Samurai*. The character in *Genji: Dawn of the Samurai* has similarities in the story with the characters in history, weapon preferences, handsome and small physical forms, and character traits that both are proactive, agile, aggressive, kind and also defenders of truth. The difference also lies in the character's background, where Yoshitsune, in the game, is depicted as a swordsman dressed like a Heishi samurai. In contrast, the original story describes the character as a temple servant.

The difference also lies in the weapon preference, where the game character uses a sword as a weapon of choice, while the historical character uses a bow as his weapon. Despite the differences in physical characteristics and appearance, the characterization of Yoshitsune in the game is similar to the historical figure according to Yoshitsune's age at that time. Console games also depict Yoshitsune as a hero and defender of truth. The representation of Yoshitsune in console games is not entirely accurate and only takes most of the behavior from his story and legend. Even so, Yoshitsune's character in the game is depicted in various ways so that it is not fixated on just one type, making him a character with different characterizations and designs. It is hoped that this research can be a reference material and material for further study, such as the depiction of historical figures in media other than games. This study highlights how video games reinterpret Minamoto no Yoshitsune's historical narrative for modern audiences. While artistic liberties introduce fictional elements, the games preserve his heroic and tragic essence, reinforcing his cultural significance. Future research could explore broader implications of historical representations in gaming and their impact on cultural memory.

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