A legend of decolonial critique in play: A horror RPG in speculative worlds

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This paper is concerned with the online video game, *The Secret World Legends* (TSWL) [1] and asks the question of how game players, game developers and humanities scholars can critique western coloniality within this western Horror Role-Playing Game. This central question urges both players, developers and scholars to center non-western perspectives and frameworks in games. *TSWL* is a game developed by Funcom Inc; a company based in Norway. Originally released in 2012, the game was unique in how it combines folklore and urban fantasy horror elements within an online Multiplayer format. Throughout the game, references to famous horror media, such as Romero's movie *Night of the Living Dead* and H.P. Lovecraft's work, are invoked as players tour the game world which consists of New England, Egypt, Transylvania, Tokyo, and South Africa. A diverse selection of locations, but how can we generate a critique of coloniality from a game made in the West for a primarily western audience? I answer this by following what scholars in the field of critical game studies have been doing in analyzing games.

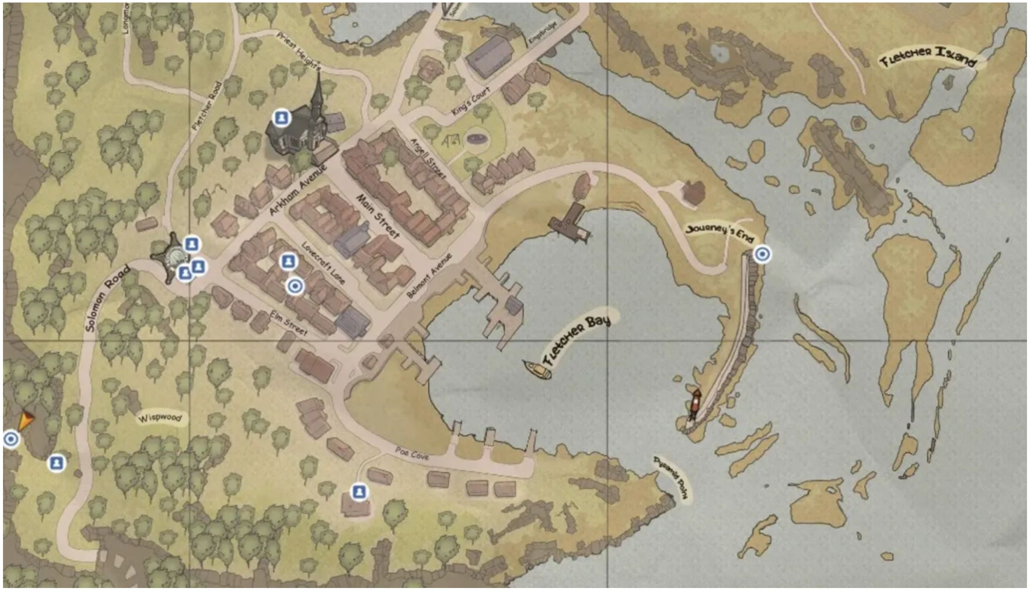
This reveals how games are media that are deeply embedded in large cultural systems of dominance of the West. It is not only important to confront the problematic aspects of colonial games such as *TSWL*, but critical frameworks, such as Stuart Hall's concept of oppositional reading [2] can be used to produce a generative critique of colonialism which aids in efforts to reimaging just decolonial futures through games.

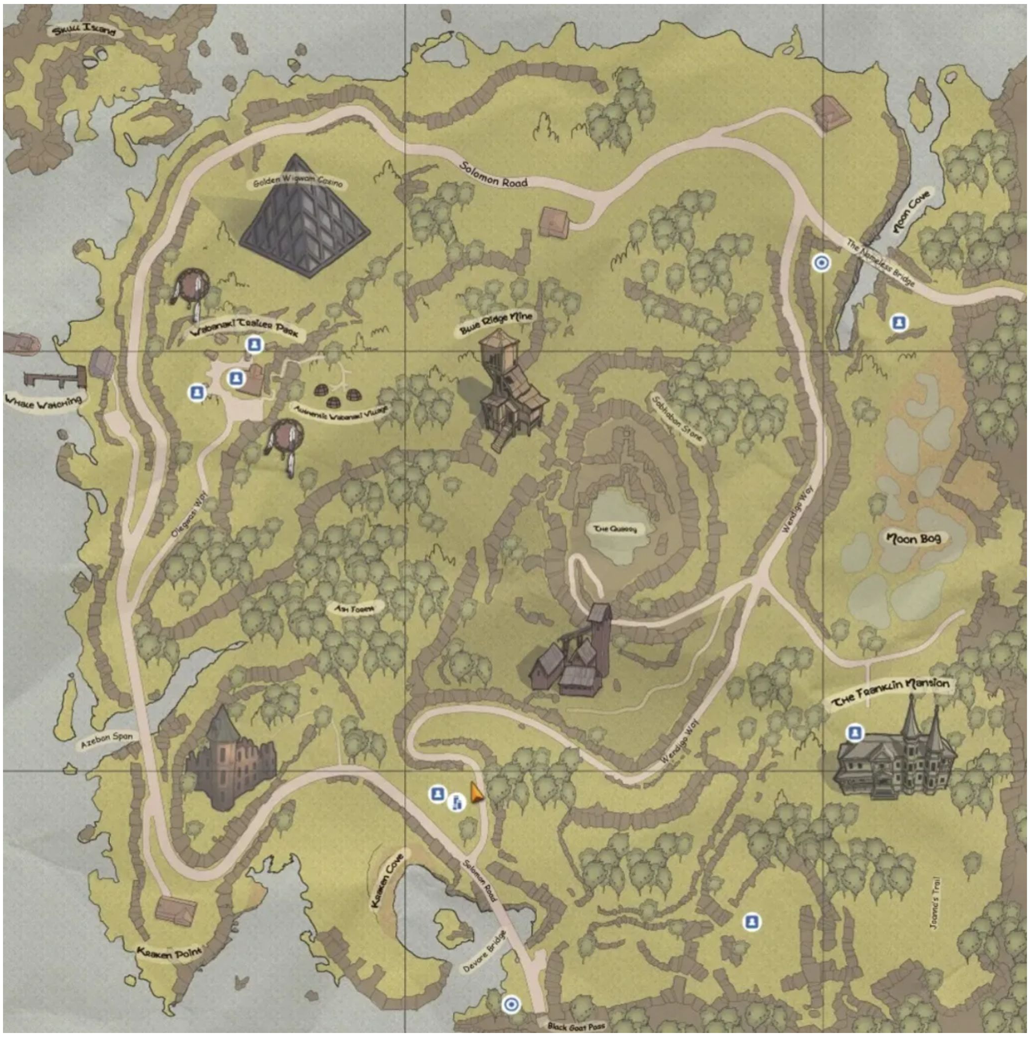
I will show how larger systems of oppression are ever present in *TSWL*. I will then provide a framework of decolonial critique which can be useful not only for gamers and game developers but for scholars in media and the humanities. By close reading the text, narrative, and play of the game, it reveals how *TSWL* both reifies and challenges symbols of colonialism. It is important to confront how western hegemony, ludo-orientalism, and settler colonialism are pervasive to the game. Yet, it is also important to highlight the genuine attempts of critiquing these very systems to lay the groundwork for more inclusive design and narrative standpoints in the future, a conversation that *TWSL* started in a genre so enmeshed in normative game design.

The colonial horror in play

A critical analysis of any horror media must discuss its inherent colonial roots, because it inherits, and continues, the racialized connotation of Otherness and the pervasive violence of settler colonialism in the genre of horror. The first part of this article begins with acknowledging the problematic history of both interactive role-playing games and the gerne of horror which *The Secret World Legends* inhabits as an interactive horror game. Due to its position within horror, the game has a structure of both Othering and extracting from non-western subjects that needs to be challenged immediately.

Figure 1 [3] shows the in-game map of the fictional town of Kingsmouth in the zone of Solomon Island in the Northwestern United States. Kingsmouth Town is the first adventure zone that player agents visit. Player characters are called "agents" in the game. On close inspection of the center of the map, we can see the street names. These names strongly signal the references to prominent horror media and culture. We see "Lovecraft Lane," referencing H.P. Lovecraft. We see Elm Street referencing the film "Nightmare on Elm Street," "Arham Avenue," referencing the Batman comics and "Poe Cave," referencing Edgar Allen Poe. This dreary northwestern setting is complemented with a population of zombies, who are an abundant source of enemies for this adventure zone.





But the references to horror media and zombies do more than excite horror fans; the game continues the legacy of violent colonization that is endemic to horror games. On the intersections of horror and play, David Christopher and Adian Leuslzer write how horror “tends to be highly misogynist and dehumanizing (reactionary) in its representations of prurient violence against women or other marginalized identities.” [4] On systemic violence, feminist scholar Carly Kocurek notes how horror video games normalize violence against monstrosities who symbolically signal non-normativity and the Other. [5] This radiates in *TSWL* where players fight against zombies, wendigos, mummies, soviet vampires, and Oni; all coded as the racialized Other to be fought against in its play design. This echoes how role-playing games continue the analog tabletop legacy of eliminating the monstrous Others that are condemned to die by normative Christian sensibilities. [6] Players, game makers, and scholars need to challenge the visual pattern of eradicating marginalized identities and cultures as standard practice among horror games.

H.P. Lovecraft writes about the fear of the Other, which we can call by its real names: anti-Blackness and colonialism. As the specter of non-normativity, they threaten western hegemony. *TSWL* extends the concern film scholars have with horror media that the racialized, non-normative is seen as abject and horror itself serves the purposes of promoting eugenics through promoting a culture that seeks to eradicate the Other. [7] With particular attention to American horror media, which the game clearly draws inspiration from, film scholar Robin Wood concludes that horror indeed represents capitalist reactionary ideological values but also the possibility of progressive futures. [8] To conclude, the play in *TSWL* enacts the racist and colonial undertones found in the horror genre and extends this in the immersive context of an online role-playing game. The game world may be set in a contemporary post-apocalyptic world on the verge of collapse where capitalism and settler colonialism continue to be enacted, yet radical possibilities can still be found at the end of the world.

Critically Approaching *The Secret World Legends*

In this section, I will challenge the coloniality embodied in the game by applying concepts that fellow scholars in critical game studies have used to unsettle larger systems of oppression seen throughout games. The analysis of all games, including *TSWL*, begins by “examining that infrastructures of gaming as itself a raced project.” [9] Indeed, the game can be understood as a racialized colonial project where logics of oppression are enacted through its narrative and play. Game scholars Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Morie, and Celia Pearce coined the concept of “hegemony of play” where the content and play of games are entangled with the “complex layering of technological, commercial and cultural power structures [that] have dominated the development of the digital game industry over the past 35 years, creating an entrenched status quo.” [10] That status quo being the normative values of capitalism, western hegemony, and settler colonialism embedded within the game.

Game Studies scholar Tara Fickle has coined the concept of ludo-orientalism which is applicable to how *TSWL* operates. Ludo-orientalism is “the design, marketing, and rhetoric of games [that] shape how Asians as well as East-West relations are imagined and where notions of foreignness and racial hierarchies get reinforced.” [11] Remember that players are called agents in the game. They are charged with exploring, and intervening, in areas where marginalized communities are vulnerable due to events in the game. This intervention of Agents that perpetuate colonial institutions, speaks to Fickle’s point of Othering. Games such as *TSWL* continue to demarcate an East-West binary in media narratives. This binary serves as a backdrop of colonial extraction where agents intervene “over there” and assist the “Other” who remains exploited while the agent moves on. While the game thus orients its players towards enforcing hegemony, it is also important to remember postcolonial scholar Souvik Mukherjee’s point of player subjectivity. Mukherjee writes that “The player, too, in the engagement with the game is complicit with the action of the game while at the same time protesting it.” [12]

This protest that Mukherjee speaks of allows player agents to become counter agents that critique the ludo-orientalism embedded in the game. Even if players remain agents and thus firmly embedded within a colonial context, this framework can be generative in countering hegemony as it allows players to “cultivate generative interpretations and ‘affirmative sabotage’ toward new possibilities for how we may imagine ourselves.” [13] This affirmative sabotage allows for acknowledging and troubling problematic aspects of *TSWL* and for generating a compelling colonial critique that lays the groundwork for a more inclusive and accountable game design and storytelling in the future where other scholars in the humanities can take their inspiration from.

Furthermore, the content and mechanics of *TSWL* are enmeshed with what critical game scholar Kishonna Gray calls “symbolic violence.” As games are becoming more global and are played across the world, values of western hegemony, colonization, and white supremacy are encoded in the play which are then normalized in popular games. Regarding these systems, Gray states an important lesson that resonates with how many games need to be challenged by writing that “this system thrives on the symbolic transference, from the physical to the digital, of oppressive systems that are perceived to be legitimate power structures. Those who continue to exist in gaming culture perceive this maltreatment as normalized, so this symbolic violence continues to be enacted while the pervading power relations operate in obscurity.” [14]

The possibility of decolonial futures is important to our survival as marginalized people living under capitalism, settler colonialism and white supremacy. Similarly important are bees, which are a community essential to the ecology and survival of the earth. Interestingly, the players in *TSWL* embody the bee. The game’s narrative begins with the player swallowing a mysterious bee in their sleep. The next morning the player agent develops magical powers.

With its newfound power the player agent is forcibly conscripted into choosing to join one of three major “secret societies:” the Templars, Illuminati, or the Dragon. This important story choice is prompted after the character creation menu. At that point player agents are introduced to their main faction handler, a regular contact that gives out missions and contextualizes the game world of *TSWL*. Agents are made aware that earth is not what it seems and is on the verge of collapse. The “secret world” threatens to slip into the “real” world. Thus, the secret world is explained as the occult world made real and apocalypse is imminent on the vulnerable earth and its oblivious population. Like worker bees who constantly access the integrity of their hive, agents are sent out to different zones across the world to access problems within the secret world. The game orients play in a clear normative colonist endeavor in two ways: through its narrative, and its mechanics. The faction handler provides the context of why player agents must tour the world and intervene and when play time begins. On the complexities of play, I invoke play scholar Miguel Sicart who writes: “Games don’t matter that much. They are a manifestation, a form of and for play, just not the only one […] But they are part of an ecology of playthings and play contexts, from toys to playgrounds, from political action to aesthetic performance, through which play is used for expression.” [15]

Counter-agent subjectivities

In this section I will offer a decolonial reading of *The Secret World Legends* and provide ways to scholars, players, and game developers to challenge colonialism in games and to support inclusive cultures in games. We cannot underestimate how much *TSWL* operates in a colonial framework; but an oppositional reading can be done that positions our player agents also into counter agents. Reading hero’s journeys in post-apocalyptic games, Óliver Pérez-Latorre states that in “dystopian videogame narratives the character who symbolizes rebellion and/or struggle for social alternatives may also feed/reinforce certain negative stereotypes or dissonances regarding key rebel movements in the real social world.” [16] This remains true in *TSWL* where the players operate more as opportunists than as heroes, which is why I rather call it an agent’s journey than a hero’s journey. The agents themselves are aware that they are being exploited by their own organization, extracting from Others, and it is through happenstance that they save the secret world. But there are key moments that make an anti-colonial reading possible that challenges the normative values embedded in the game through the agent’s journey. How this is achieved makes a compelling argument about the role of indigenous knowledge and marginalized labor.

After killing zombies, the player agents’ understanding of the secret world is troubled by various indigenous and subaltern groups in the game. This creates an interesting reading that draws attention to how indigenous knowledge is shown to outlast western knowledge and technoscience but remains in this medium of extraction. In the game there is an indigenous group of people represented as the Wabanaki. They clearly represent the Wabanaki community (the Passamaquoddy) which currently lives in the Northeastern United States. In the “About” page of Wabankialliance.com, it is stated that “In June of 2020 the tribes in Maine (Mi’kmaq Nation, Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, Passamaquoddy Tribe and Penobscot Nation) formed the Wabanaki Alliance. The Wabanaki Alliance was formed to educate people of Maine about the need for securing sovereignty of the tribes in Maine.” [17] I seek to approach this reading carefully, as I do not know if Funcom Inc collaborated with the Wabanaki Alliance or took the creative decision of coding them in the game without their consent. It is also important to mention that my analysis does not call for positive indigenous representation in colonial games, but aims to signal anti-colonial and colonial epistemologies behind the agent’s journey. While the Wabanaki offers a critique of western hegemony; the game’s utilization of the Wabanaki remains non-innocent and extractive.

When players meet up and talk with Wabanaki, many Wabanaki characters criticize the existence of the secret world to begin with. There is an interesting critique that troubles the idea of the apocalypse. Throughout the game, many indigenous and marginalized characters criticize the demarcation between the real world and the secret world as an explicit product of colonial thinking. Indeed, the game attempts to illustrate how dominant epistemologies erasing and suppressing indigenous science and ways of knowing lead to eventual failure. This is exemplified in the juxtaposition of how the game represents the U.S military and the in-game Wabanaki community. In the game, the United States military is seen as losing and no longer in control of the land as the hubris of western technoscience offers little aid in the zone. In contrast, the Wabanaki community in the game remains largely successful as far as an apocalypse goes, and the reservation is a major location in the zone. Admittedly, reading the game as putting forward an anti-colonial critique is a generous interpretation of the situation. The Wabanaki in the Blue Mountains remain stranded on the island while players acquire and make use of their knowledge and move on. In the case of the United States failing in controlling the area, the game illustrates the eventual limitation of its military and cultural hegemonic power. Yet the game fails to extend that critique to the players who operate in a similar fashion to historical and modern U.S imperialism and settler colonialism.

This is an example of the complexity of hegemony: the agent’s journey is embedded in a narrative of subversion but simultaneously remains situated in the extraction of indigenous knowledge. My close reading will now jump towards the end of the game for a weird but powerful instance of anti-colonialism. The game never ends but the agent's journey does pause in South Africa. The last DLC (downloadable content) was released in April 2018 titled *Dawn of the Morninglight*, which is about a cult that has set up a compound in South Africa. The player is tasked to infiltrate the cult and uncover the truth behind the religious organization called the Morninglight. Doubling up as a critique of cult, religions, and volunteer tourism, there is an interesting moment involving another enemy in the game, the nuclear family. [19] It is possible to read this moment in a queer fashion. Indeed, the nuclear family is a nebulous construct that is used to maintain oppression and heteronormativity. In the game, the family of Marquard, the cult leader of Morninglight, are monsters from outer space that represent the western nuclear family. The players are charged with destroying the nuclear family in order to reveal Marquard's mission of evangelizing the world; actually a scam for another bid for apocalypse, which thus signals how the politics of heterosexuality is a façade of destruction. Unfortunately, the game unofficially ends after this, not in a narrative sense as many story gaps and questions remain, but Funcom has simply not updated the game since 2018. *TSWL* essentially operates as a ghost town with minimal updates.

No secrets never alone

Recently, I played a game titled *Never Alone*, where the player explores the Artic as a young girl named Nuna and as a fox spirit. On its official website it states "*Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna*) is the first game developed in collaboration with the Iñupiat, an Alaska native people. Nearly 40 Alaska Native elders, storytellers and community members contributed to the development of the game." [20] While *Never Alone* is different in genre and scale compared to *The Secret World Legends*, the politics of accountability, authorship, and line of "crafted in partnership" is crucial and should resonate with audiences of gamers and non-gamers. Both games put a strong emphasis on narrative, storytelling and foreground indigenous peoples. The development, marketing, and game content of *Never Alone* has been a collaborative effort with Alaskan natives who are named and accredited in a clear and transparent way. To reiterate, throughout *TSWL* many real indigenous cultures are referenced from the Wabanaki to the Roma people, but it is unknown if the game's content is crafted in partnership and the game's ties to these peoples are obfuscated. If *TSWL* was crafted in partnerships with the many marginalized groups it represents, what would the game look like? As a Latinx scholar from the state of Texas, it is apparent to me that *TSWL* relies on the extractive side of representing marginalized cultures. *Never Alone* sets out a great example for future games to follow in terms of involving collaboration with native peoples and being transparent of where the game's content and narrative derive from.

Never Alone - Launch Trailer
Share
Watch on YouTube

TSWL is an example of how scholars can intervene to challenge colonialism embedded in the media and produce anti/decolonial which challenge problematic aspects of games and its inspirations, in this case horror. *TSWL* may perhaps fall into obscurity in the history of gaming, but by naming its raced and colonial infrastructure and narrative, a critical reading of colonial narratives and play can be generated. In his article titled 'Using Video Games to Think about Distribute Justice,', Marcus Schulzke states that "making the problem of distributive justice a prominent part of gaming can present a clear challenge that will encourage players to take a more critical perspective on their experiences of games. There is also a theoretical value in using games to explore the implications of abstract concepts." [21]

As scholars and players work to unveil the Western hegemonic underpinnings that games normalize, a multidisciplinary effort can be made that mirrors the development of major game projects. The spiral of liberatory politics and politics of extraction are always in flux with big projects such as *TSWL*. This is not a call for non-gamers to immediately play games but rather to reveal how powerful epistemologies of hegemony and decolonial readings may operate in tandem in media spaces. I do remain hopeful of continued collaborative efforts and communal storytelling that lead to projects such as *Never Alone*, next to continued efforts of challenging colonialism and hegemonies embedded in media and of reimaginations that work towards just futures for marginalized communities represented in media, games, and beyond.

Notes

[1] Funcom Inc. The Secret World Legends. Funcom. PC. 2017. https://www.secretworldlegends.com/

[2] Hall, Stuart. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Sage in association with the Open University, 1997.

[3] Map screenshot available on the IGN website of Kingsmouth Town.

[4] Christopher, David, and Aidan Leuszler. “The Doors of Perception: Horror Video Games and the Ideological Implications of Ludic Virtual Reality.” *Games and culture* (2022): https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120221097414, 11.

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[11] Fickle, Tara. *The Race Card: from Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities*. New York, New York: New York University Press, 2019, 3.

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[14] Gray, Kishonna L. *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming*. Baton Rouge. Louisiana State University Press, 2020, 166.

[15] Sicart, Miguel. *Play Matters*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2014, 4.

[16] Pérez-Latorre, Óliver. Post-apocalyptic Games, Heroism and the Great Recession. *Game Studie*s. 2019. http://gamestudies.org/1903/articles/perezlatorre.

[17] Website for the Wabanaki Alliance, https://wabanakialliance.com/who-we-are/

[18] Map screenshot available on the IGN website of Blue Mountain.

[19] This is shown in a picture taken by online user Syp, posted on their gaming blog “Bio Break:” Secret World: Marquard’s Mansion. Biobreak. 2018. https://biobreak.wordpress.com/2018/06/21/secret-world-marquards-mansion/

[20] Upper One Games. *Never Alone*. E-Line Media. PC. 2014. http://neveralonegame.com/

[21] Schulzke, Marcus. “Using Video Games to Think about Distributive Justice.” *Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy* 2: 1-19. 2013. http://jitp.commons.gc.cuny.edu/using-video-games-to-think-about-distributive-justice/.

About the author

Luke Hernandez is a Ph.D. Student in the Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communications (ATEC) program at the University of Texas at Dallas in the United States. His research work centers on how video games impact marginalized communities, specifically online Latinx communities, in addition to how play intersects with systems of race, gender, colonization and sexuality. Luke had presented at conferences such as SCMS and DIGRA with work such as How Visual Novel Games Colonize sexuality to situating sexualities. Luke can be found on Instagram (Lukio_andrews_hernan) and on Twitter (Histokaloka).

Abstract

How can scholars approach *The Secret World Legends* (2017), an obscure game rooted in colonialism, as a source of critique that inspires decolonial futures in media broadly? By applying critical frameworks towards the horror genre and RPG format the game inhabits, this essay continues the work of naming and challenging oppressive systems and narratives embedded in video games and their network. At the same time this essay works to produce subversive readings where both player subjectivity and the game challenges colonialism and imagine decolonial futures through its play. This essay conclude that the combined efforts of play and critique, playing against colonial games, and playing games that deliberately center marginalized experiences, voices and communities, work towards just futures in media that players and researchers must be attentive of.

Key words

Game Studies, video game, play, post-colonial studies, narrative, representation.

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