

Part I: Monstrous Representations

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1. “Honor Died on the Beach”: Constructing Japaneseness through Monstrosity in *Ghost of Tsushima*

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Abstract

We analyze the depiction of the Mongol invaders in *Ghost of Tsushima* (Sucker Punch Productions, 2020) through the lens of monstrosity, showing how their depiction is used as a frame to construct a notion of “pure” Japanese identity. To underscore how the Japanese in this game are “pure,” the Mongols are dehumanized and made monstrous through various devices, such as a language barrier, a collection of cultural Mongol artefacts, and their brute force as invaders polluting the established community. Positioned between the categories of the “pure” and the “monstrous” is the player character, Jin, a liminal figure who blurs these two categories. Highlighting these depictions of the Japanese, nature, the Mongols and Jin, we consider how the construction of a pure Japan works in favour of bolstering the country’s national reputation.

Keywords: Dehumanization, authenticity, Japan, ethnicity, language, purity, samurai

Introduction

“I trained you to fight with honor,” says Lord Shimura, deeply troubled by the unorthodox tactics of his nephew and ward, Jin Sakai, the protagonist and player character of *Ghost of Tsushima* (Sucker Punch Productions, 2020). “Honor died on the beach,” Jin replies, referring to the near annihilation of Tsushima’s samurai defenders at the hands of the invading Mongol forces. This exchange exemplifies the tension at the core of the game between

steadfast adherence to the traditional samurai code, regardless of the foe or circumstance, and the perceived need to abandon certain values and conventions in order to deal with an overwhelming foreign invasion. For Lord Shimura, defeating the Mongols without honour is not worth it, as the Japanese would then become just as bad as the invaders. For Jin, defending his homeland from the Mongols at any cost is more important. *Ghost of Tsushima* tracks Jin's progression from the honourable Lord Sakai to the eponymous Ghost. His unorthodox and dishonourable tactics ultimately succeed in driving out the Mongol invaders, but also prompt the shogunate, the feudal military government, to disband the Sakai clan, stripping Jin of his nobility and status as samurai and turning him into a fugitive.

Ghost of Tsushima is an open-world, action-adventure game set on Tsushima Island in 1274, the year of the first Mongol invasion of Japan, on which the game is loosely based. The game begins with the obliteration of the samurai defenders at the Battle of Komoda Beach. Jin is one of very few survivors who escapes, but he vows revenge. The player controls Jin as he liberates the island and finds key surviving samurai companions, for instance his uncle Lord Shimura. The open-world structure allows Jin to roam and complete other quests, yet his clearly designated main quest line separated into three acts. While many of the core events and outcomes are predetermined, the player may choose to approach certain tasks in a more “samurai-like” or “Ghost-like” way, for example stepping out into the open and challenging a camp of Mongols to a standoff versus sneaking in and killing them unseen. This reflects Jin's internal struggle between holding onto traditional samurai values and the recognition that holding onto these values will mean a Mongol victory. The developer, Sucker Punch Productions, conducted fieldwork and worked with a number of experts in Japanese history, martial arts, Shintoism, and Buddhism, amongst other fields, in order to produce as “authentic” an experience as possible (Takahashi, 2020). Both authors of this chapter have completed the game and have played it extensively in the course of research.

Here, we analyze the depiction of the Mongol invaders to show how monstrosity is used to frame a notion of a “pure” Japan versus “impure” invaders from the perspective of the US-based developer, Sucker Punch. Understanding the monster as a cultural category predicated on abnormal difference and threat in society, we explain that Sucker Punch constructs an idyllic picture of an “authentic” Japanese medieval society, regulating the image of pure Japanese identity for two different audiences, Japanese and non-Japanese, each of whom has a different perception of the country. To portray the Japanese in this game as “pure,” the developers convey how the Mongols are monstrous through, for example, the language barrier, their

sheer brute force, and the player's collection of cultural Mongol artefacts. The Mongols thus become figures who threaten and pollute the established Japanese purity. Between these two distinct categories of the "pure" and the "monstrous" is Jin, whom the game gradually shapes into a liminal figure that blurs the boundary between the two categories. As a liminal figure, Jin is transformed into the harbinger of category crisis, embodying society's ideals through neither a normative nor a distinct category. Instead, he becomes monstrous, exposing the arbitrariness and fragility of the established categories of the "pure" and the "monstrous." We argue that Sucker Punch bolsters Japan's national reputation and thus risks softening the country's more recent colonial past.

The Monster as Cultural Anxiety

We have based our study on the premise that the monster is primarily a reflection of cultural anxieties, a liminal figure exposing and challenging societal boundaries. This is an approach well summarized in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's important "Seven Theses" essay (1996). The first of his theses is "The Monster's Body Is a Cultural Body" (1996, p. 4). Cohen explains: "The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically 'that which reveals,' 'that which warns,' ... the monster signifies something other than itself" (1996, p. 4). The etymological point Cohen raises here has become a touchstone for many monster theorists. Stephen T. Asma, for example, argues that "to be a monster is to be an omen" (2012, p. 13). "The monster ... is a kind of *cultural category*," he claims (2012, p. 13; emphasis in original).

Understanding the monster as cultural is ultimately predicated on difference. The monster reflects culture by being *different* from it. For example, such difference can be physical. Margrit Shildrick states that "they challenge and resist normative human being, in the first instance by their aberrant corporeality" (2002, p. 9). Dana Oswald similarly remarks that "the monster is always read against the bodies of those who are not monstrous" (2010, p. 2). These bodily understandings in particular owe much to Julia Kristeva's (1980/1982) notion of abjection. The abject is that which is "neither subject nor object" (1980/1982, p. 1). "Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either" (1980/1982, p. 2), the abject is that which cannot, or should not, exist according to our systems of meaning and categorization, but nevertheless defiantly appears, and so must be cast out, abjected. The notion of a "body" in these cases can usually be metaphorically applied to the family, group, or

society, from which an individual or a group of people can be abjected. The abject has been developed since Kristeva's theorization, primarily in studies of horror and horror films in particular. Barbara Creed (1993), for example, discusses the woman's "special relationship to the abject" (1993, p. 10), but stresses that this relationship is "a construct of patriarchal ideology" and that "woman is not, by her very nature, an abject being" (1993, p. 83). The abject has been taken up within games by scholars like Sarah Stang (2021) and applied to games. Stang has observed that "abjection helps to explain the ways in which monsters evoke horror ... in order to encourage the player to *want* to kill them, and to not think of them as people" (2021, p. 50).

In part, then, the monster is seen as that which is against nature, or at least our conception of nature. The idea of the "monster of excess" is prevalent particularly in medieval studies and has been deployed insightfully by Oswald to consider the figure of the giant, who becomes "both the norm against which all men are measured (and found lacking) and abnormal because of his impossible excess" (2010, p. 161). Many monsters actually embody *ideals* of society that have been taken to horrifying excess, and thus, through their aberrant existence, prove the need for limits to those ideals.

This conception of the monster as embodying difference and excess returns in some of Cohen's other theses, including "The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis," "The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference," and "The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible" (1996, pp. 6, 7, 12). A cultural understanding of the monster places it on the border of sociocultural norms, values, and ideals. The monster shows us what goes too far, what is horrifying but also unnervingly close to us, and what aspects of ourselves and of society we wish to cast out. It reminds us of the fragility of these norms, values, and ideals.

The Mongols in *Ghost of Tsushima* are analyzed here through this lens of broader monstrosity. They are human in the game, and are never explicitly portrayed as anything nonhuman, like giants, vampires, zombies, and so on. Monster theory does not preclude "fully human" monsters—consider, for instance, serial killers, abusers, or genocidal dictators, to whom the label "monster" is readily applied—and, consequently overlaps significantly with recent discussion dehumanization. Compare Nick Haslam's description of dehumanization with Patricia MacCormack's characterization of the monster:

Haslam: dehumanization is the "denial of full humanness to others" (2006, p. 252).

MacCormack: monsters are "'subjects' who fail to fulfill the criteria of human subjects" (2013, p. 293).

These definitions echo many others in the existing scholarship. Because Haslam’s article is itself partly a review of studies on dehumanization, his description more explicitly represents an amalgamation, while MacCormack’s understanding of the monster builds on the previously discussed conception of the monster as embodying difference and cultural anxiety. It is striking, then, how similar Haslam’s and MacCormack’s definitions are. Nevertheless, a useful contrast between the definitions can be found. Haslam emphasizes “the cruelty and suffering that accompany” dehumanization (2006, p. 252), whereas we might expect monsters to hold some power, even if they are stigmatized and ostracized. A persecuted, powerless minority might be dehumanized, while the powerful, genocidal dictator who persecutes them is a monster. This does not mean that monsters are not dehumanized, or that those being dehumanized are not also considered to be monsters by some. Rather, such a contrast reveals that these concepts overlap significantly, and that a loose distinction can perhaps be made via shifting degrees of emphasis on power and perceived threat.

It is important to remember here that Mongols have for many centuries been the subject of dehumanization. For instance, they were included in the racial groupings put forward by the Göttingen school of history that present “Mongoloid” as a separate, inferior race to the white “Caucasoid” race. “Mongoloid” today is also used as a derogatory term for people with Down syndrome. The dehumanization of the Mongols is part of a broader phenomenon of groups of people being depicted as monstrous by various other cultures in order to dehumanize them. Such practices have been rooted in, for example, the intertwining of European colonial expansion (e.g., Felton, 2013/2016; Van Duzer, 2013/2016), Christian religion (e.g., Davies, 2013/2016; Mittman, 2013/2016), and physical characteristics (e.g., Strickland, 2013/2016). However, while the groups that are dehumanized are usually depicted as inferior minorities, the Mongols in *Ghost of Tsushima* are a powerful, invading force—real and overwhelming to the citizens of Tsushima. As part of a game released in 2020, Sucker Punch’s depiction of the Mongols was doubtlessly influenced by centuries of racist dehumanization. But within the context of the game, and from the perspective of the Japanese on Tsushima, the threat and power implied by the term “monster” are more useful for analysing the depiction and reception of the Mongols. As a result, we consider that which dehumanizes the Mongols to also be the basis on which they can be perceived and depicted as monstrous, and therefore analyzed through this lens of monstrosity.

Japaneseness and the “Pure” Japan

We live by a code of honor. And sometimes ... We die by it. – Jin

In *Ghost of Tsushima*, the Japanese people of Tsushima can perhaps best be described as “authentic,” “untainted,” and, above all, “pure.” The game juxtaposes the Japanese people with the Mongol invaders so that the player comes to understand the pureness of the supposed “Japaneseness” of Tsushima. This purity appears most clearly in the first chapter, when the game introduces Tsushima, a Japanese island in the prefecture of Nagasaki, in the 13th century CE during the Kamakura period (1185–1333). Right at the beginning, the island is invaded by a Mongol fleet. Lord Shimura and Jin Sakai bring an army of samurai to battle the invaders with honourable fighting tactics. However, before the battle on the beach has even started, the Mongol invaders show that they have no intention of adhering to the honourable code of the samurai. When the first samurai appears, instead of battling him one on one, Khotun Khan, the leader of the invaders, lights him on fire and cuts his head off—the methods of a coward without honour, so Lord Shimura screams.

The idea of Japaneseness is a construct that has been heavily regulated by both a Western Orientalist discourse and a self-orientalizing discourse in Japan; it presents the country as an exotic, fearsome, martially or technologically advanced culture (see Iwabuchi, 2004; Morley & Robins, 1995). Because this image is constantly repeated, it creates a dominant view of what counts as an authentic and pure Japan and what does not.

An illustrative example of the idea of Japaneseness as a construct is the Cool Japan campaign, a strategy used by the Japanese government to promote Japanese soft power overseas in order to gain influence as a “cool” media and material culture (Galbraith, 2019, p. 144). Certain aspects of Japanese popular culture are portrayed in this campaign as inherently “Japanese,” although the presentation is heavily regulated by governmental authorities. For example, the country’s *kawaii* (cute) culture (Allison, 2004) or the “non-weird” *otaku* (nerd) culture (Galbraith, 2019) are emphasized by the government. However, in contrast, the sexualized, “weird” forms of *otaku* culture are regarded with disdain, and authorities preferably hide these from tourists’ eyes (Galbraith, 2019, p. 171).

As one of us explains elsewhere (Blom, 2022, p. 79), the notion of Japaneseness follows a historically well-established practice of dichotomizing entire fields of cultural production into Japanese and Western versions, while saying nothing about the Japaneseness or Westernness of the

objects themselves (Tobin, 1992; van Ommen, 2018, p. 30). Video games are no exception. For example, during the rise of Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs) in the 1990s and early 2000s in northwestern Europe and North America, the presence and value of the Japanese RPG was emphasized by casting it as a foreign object that contrasted with the Western RPG (Pelletier-Gagnon, 2018). Under the “Cool Japan” campaign, the juxtaposition of Japanese and non-Japanese objects not only is used by the Japanese game industry to sell their games to a Western audience (Consalvo, 2016; Navarro-Remesal & Loriguillo-López, 2015), but also contributes to the global spread Japanese culture and to the bolstering of the country’s national image (Iwabuchi, 2010). However, even more than simply promoting Japanese culture, as Iwabuchi (2010) warns, such a discourse may “improve the image of Japan to such an extent that the historical memory of Japanese colonialism will be eradicated or softened” (p. 90). That is, because the Japanese government has stressed a positive image of the country, Japan’s colonial misdeeds during World War II might be forgotten in international cultural memory. If we return to *Ghost of Tsushima*, it is not difficult to spot where Sucker Punch, as an American developer, perpetuates and contributes to this idea of Japaneseness that helps to improve the country’s reputation. We will show in our analysis that the game especially promotes the construct of a pure Japanese identity through Japan’s martial arts culture, emphasizing the traditional samurai code and Japan’s victimhood from the beginning of the game’s narrative and throughout the gameplay.

“Compose Haiku”: Constructing Japanese Authenticity in Gameplay

The main storyline juxtaposes the pureness of the Japanese with the brutality of the Mongols, but it is in the optional mechanisms of the game that the construction of an authentic Japanese identity comes most to the fore. The game offers players quests and activities scattered across the island to obtain technique points so that Jin learns new tactics for driving out the Mongol invaders, gains new equipment, and so on. A particularly notable quest is the *haiku* spot. The island contains several places where Jin can sit down, observe a beautiful scene in front of him, and compose what Western players will recognize as *haiku* poetry. These scenes are peaceful; the camera zooms in on different parts of the scene before Jin, letting the player choose different lines to construct the poem. Once a *haiku* is completed, the player

is rewarded with some vanity gear with which to decorate Jin's swords or outfits.

However, *haiku* poetry did not yet exist in the Kamakura period of Japan. In the English version of the game, the poetry that Jin composes is referred to as “*haiku*,” while the Japanese version of the game uses a poetic form known as “*waka*,” which did exist at the time (Dengeki Online, 2020b).¹ According to an interview with Jason Connell, the game's creative director, the reason for this discrepancy is that players outside of Japan are familiar with *haiku* but not with *waka* (Dengeki Online, 2020a). In other words, the *haiku* quest is attuned to the knowledge held by Japanese and by non-Japanese players so that both audiences recognize the poetry as “Japanese” not because it *is* authentically Japanese, but because it aligns with the image of Japan that the players already have.

Although the *haiku* scenario is particularly developed, other quests and mechanisms contains strategies that allow players to experience certain events that align with their image of Japan as “pure” rather than with what is historically accurate. This interest in the image of Japan is evident during Jin's visits to the *onsen* (baths), where he can reflect on his actions, and during his honouring of the Inari shrines, sacred places dedicated to Inari, the god of rice fields. To find these shrines, Jin needs to follow foxes, or *kitsune*, as they are commonly known in Japan. The *kitsune* is perhaps Japan's most famous *yōkai*;² it appears in the earliest Japanese texts, such as the *Nihonshoki*,³ and is well known even to people outside Japan (Foster, 2015, pp. 177–178). This particular *yōkai*⁴ has many different meanings and incarnations since it can be a shapeshifter and possess people, often taking the guise of beautiful, seductive women, or it can be the standard feature of Inari worship, in which the fox is stationed at the shrine of Inari as his messenger (Foster, 2015, p. 178).

Strikingly enough, the developers of *Ghost of Tsushima* have opted for the latter, more positive incarnation of the *kitsune*—its role of a

¹ *Waka* (和歌) is the term used to refer to poetry in Japanese classical literature. The first character of the term stands for “Japan” (*wa*) and the second for “song” (*ga*). The term *waka* is often used to refer to different forms of poetry. On the other hand, *haiku* (俳句) did not appear before the Edo period (1603–1867) and, though related, is a different form of poetry.

² *Yōkai* can be described as a supernatural force that takes the shape of monsters, spirits, ghosts, or shapeshifting animals (see Foster, 2015, p. 5).

³ The *Nihonshoki* (720 CE) is, alongside the *Kojiki* (712 CE), one of Japan's earliest texts and contains mythohistorical stories about the country (see Foster, 2015, p. 35).

⁴ See also Hutchinson's chapter in this volume for how *kitsune* and other *yōkai* are depicted in other Japanese games.

messenger—instead of portraying it as the deceptive monster that it could also be. This is particularly striking for a storyline set in the Kamakura period: although the fox had been already linked to worship of Inari since the 11th century, it was not until the Edo period (1603–1868) that Inari shrines proliferated across Japan (Foster, 2015, p. 181). It is therefore unusual that the shrines Jin honours on Tsushima are dominated by Inari. Moreover, Jin is the only one who can make friends with these fox messengers; he is able to pet them after he honours the shrine. At some point, he even defends the foxes against the evil deeds of the Mongols, who killed one of the creatures. Thus, not only are the nature and *yōkai* of Japan portrayed as friendly, but the land itself favours the Japanese over the Mongols.

In short, Sucker Punch engages in this construction of a “pure” Japanese identity by actively regulating the image of Japan for two different audiences, Japanese and non-Japanese players, to reflect that audience’s particular perception of the country. Sucker Punch’s image of Japan also caught the attention of Tsushima’s officials, who named the game’s lead developers, Nate Fox and Jason Connell, tourism ambassadors of the city of Tsushima because of the way they spread the name and history of the island through the game (Lugris, 2021). It was the first time that such an award was been presented to non-Japanese citizens (Lugris, 2021), and this gesture was certainly in line with the Cool Japan campaign’s goal of bolstering Japan’s image overseas.

Impure Mongols and the Pollution of Japan

Send them back to hell! – Lord Shimura

This vividly constructed Japanese identity is directly threatened by the Mongol invaders. Communities such as that on Tsushima often coalesce into constructed identities, reinforcing their core ideas and boundaries, when placed under threat (Anderson, 1983, p. 101). In the game, when the Mongols have arrived and look dominant, but have not yet consolidated complete control, Japaneseness is emphasized and put under enormous pressure. A strategy for reinforcing this “pure” Japanese identity is painting the Mongols as monstrous by contrast. The Japanese people of Tsushima are presented as fundamentally superior to the Mongols through differences in culture and values, especially via an emphasis on the “monstrification” of the invaders. The Mongols are made monstrous with a variety of strategies, some examples of which we will now outline.

“**Bi khuukhduudteishd!**”: The Language Barrier

In the game’s settings, the player can choose between English and Japanese for the spoken language, and from a range of languages for subtitles. But the Mongols always speak Mongolian. Most of the time, their speech is not subtitled at all. When it is—during cutscenes and certain scripted sequences—it is transliterated, not translated, in English subtitles, and translated in Japanese subtitles, but with brackets to indicate that Jin does not understand it. On the surface, this is done because the game is played from the perspective of Jin, who does not understand Mongolian.⁵

Language, however, is not simply a tool for communication. It is always embedded in a culture and the tangle of values, hierarchies, and cultural capitals that come with it. An instructive example is the word “barbarian,” which comes from the ancient Greek *barbaros* and refers to “a babler, someone who could not speak Greek” (Pagden, 1986, p. 16). It is from this lack of linguistic ability that the conception of the barbarian as uncivilized, uncouth, and possessing all brawn and no brains is derived (Pagden, 1986, p. 16). This is a clear instance of the othering of people based on language—an othering that continues to this day in both the US and Japan. Language can act as a foundation or conduit for ostracization because it is inextricably tied with culture, identity and nationalism.

Salam Al-Mahadin examines a similar phenomenon in the Danish film *A Hijacking* (Lindholm, 2012), which depicts a ship hijacked by Somali pirates. The ship’s crew primarily speak Danish, but they sometimes talk in English; the pirates speak Somali. However, in the English version of the film, only the Danish speech is subtitled (and translated into English). Al-Mahadin argues that this imbalance, under the guise of realism and perspective (like Jin, the protagonist of the film does not understand the language of the pirates), “empties the pirates of political valence” (2018, p. 8). She continues:

Dislocated from a locale, disconnected from a backstory, delineated within the confines of the ship, the pirates do not refer to anything but themselves; they are not signifiers of all the multiplicities and conditions of possibility that gave rise to piracy, but a monstrosity, an abjection (2018, p. 8).

The pirates’ speech becomes “*noise* instead of *voice*” (2018, p. 10), encouraging the viewer to see them not as humans but as braying animals.

⁵ Of course, this dynamic is different if the player understands Mongolian. Even so, it is significant that Mongolian is not homogenized into the player’s language selection, but is kept apart.

Ghost of Tsushima is different in that Mongolian speech is sometimes transliterated in English subtitles, and (though only in those same instances) is translated in Japanese subtitles. Nevertheless, the majority of what the Mongols say (in combat, for example) remains incomprehensible to players in both languages. In English, a transliteration leaves players with no greater understanding of the Mongols' remarks, but they can now attempt to “babble” along by following the transliteration. The Mongols are given no voice because the player is assumed not to understand Mongolian. They are thus stripped of the complexity of their motivations and politics. This situation, like that of the pirates analyzed by Al-Mahadin, invites dehumanization.

Such elision of characters' voices can also be part of a strategy of “monstrification” when it is framed not only as a lack of humanity, but also as a threat. Notably, the elites of the Mongolian invaders *do* learn to speak Japanese, and are subtitled accordingly. While most of the Mongols are a horde of noise, Khotun Khan and other Mongol army leaders have a voice. And the framing of this voice is strategic. Khotun tells a subdued Lord Shimura that he learned the language, culture, and beliefs of Tsushima in order to prepare for the opening battle on the beach, in which almost all the samurai of Tsushima are wiped out. Khotun's use of the Japanese language thus becomes an insidious invasion of the pure Japanese identity, leveraging the components of that identity to destroy the Japanese. By contrast, Lord Shimura prepared by “sharpening his sword” and keeping a respectful distance from his enemy so as to uphold the integrity of his identity. This contrast helps to frame the game's politics of voice as threatening and thus monstrous: the Mongols know our language, but we do not know theirs. Like sneaking into an enemy camp in the dead of night, the khan's incursion into Japanese culture is depicted as underhanded and dishonourable, an infiltration rather than an integration.

“Know Your Enemy”: Collecting Mongol Artefacts

Where it seems as if the Mongols may have a voice is in Jin's collection of Mongol artefacts, which he acquires throughout his journey. However, we argue that while these objects provide an insight into the cultural lives of the Mongols, the mode and means of presentation of these artefacts still work to dehumanize them because of an emphasis on containing, cataloguing, and labelling. This emphasis is conveyed via a focus on the objects rather than the subjects of the culture, as well as via what Jaroslav Švelch calls “contained monstrosity” (2023, p. 14), a concept derived from Janet Murray's (1997, pp. 82–87) description of digital media as encyclopaedic.

The collection of Mongol artefacts is based on the logic of the museum: the object is taken from its context and then displayed and described through a mediated interface (the display and plaque in the museum is echoed in the pause menu and “Collections” tab in *Ghost of Tsushima*). Championing the voice of the static object instead of the voice of the person stresses the notion of the “cultural biography of objects.” Dan Hicks summarizes the core of this idea when he observes: “each new event is an accumulation, so an accession into a museum, like any gift exchanged across cultures or between friends, represents another layer added to the life course of a thing” (2020, pp. 25–26). This conception of an object, Hicks argues, is a perspective overused by museum curators and trustees “to distract our attention from, to relativise and thus to diminish, claims for the restitution of objects collected during European colonialism” (2020, p. 26). He continues, “the only thing that is sure about the sustained popularity of object-oriented life-histories, and the accompanying misplaced concreteness, is that it has deepened persistent colonial inequalities—repeated and exacerbated dehumanizations, reproduced and extended dispossessions” (2020, p. 26).

The descriptions of the artefacts in the game provide glimpses of various aspects of Mongolian culture. It could be argued, then, that the objects are actually counterweights to the elision of voice discussed previously: here, the player *does* learn the Mongols’ story, to an extent. Here is where the Mongols are humanized, given history, and discussed with a degree of respect that one might not expect to be given to invaders. But in this dynamic, as in a museum, the Mongols are allowed to “speak” only through second-hand interpretation of their objects. In combination with the previous section on language, the interpretation of objects takes precedence over the people themselves. As well as this, there is the implication that these artefacts are trophies of some sort (and the collection of 20 of them is literally, in the PlayStation sense, a trophy), or that the Mongols are not the best custodians of their own objects.

Of course, there are significant differences from the usual dynamic of the museum. Foremost among them is that here the objects are being taken *from* the invading, colonial force, rather than by it. But this scenario is further complicated by the context in which the game was created: it was crafted by a developer in a quasi-imperial country and depicts a country which has traditionally been an imperial power, but which the former has occupied in living memory. We also should not forget Japan’s international campaign of “Cool Japan,” of which *Ghost of Tsushima* clearly became a part through the role granted to the developer of official tourism ambassador for the city of Tsushima. So, although the relationship between the invader and the object

differs from that of a museum, the dynamic and the logic of the cultural biography of objects, the resulting decentring, and, therefore, the possible dehumanization of the people to whose culture the object belonged are well situated within the wider context of the game's production, the mythology of Japan that it portrays, and Japan's colonial past.

While the game does not specifically make *monsters* of the Mongols because it lacks the sense of threat and power discussed earlier, it nevertheless dehumanizes them, which is key for the creation of “*monstrous* others” (Švelch, 2019, p. 259). The different power dynamics at play in the caveats mentioned above, such as that the artefacts are taken from the invading force rather than by it, may not entail cataloguing the enemy themselves as monsters in bestiaries to control their bodies (see Stang & Trammel, 2020), but we can still see the collecting and cataloguing of Mongol artefacts as *containment*. Švelch contrasts *sublime monstrosity* with *contained monstrosity*, in which the other is “subsumed into the structures of human knowledge and agency” (Švelch, 2023, p. 14). Drawing on ideas from medieval bestiaries, Švelch describes this kind of encyclopaedic cataloguing as a means “through which a culture defines its borders and distinguishes itself from monstrous others” (2023, pp. 14, 16). *Ghost of Tsushima* portrays this exercise of containment not in terms of Japanese imperial power, but in terms of soft power, according to which Japan is depicted as “pure” in contrast to a contained monstrous other, a representation befitting the image of “Cool Japan” that the country wishes to reinforce. Indeed, the encyclopaedic cataloguing of artefacts may very well be read as another example of the celebration of Japanese culture by the American developer.

Brutes, Corpses, and Pollution

The Mongols are shown to be a polluting force at odds with the natural balance of the island—in contrast to the harmony Jin finds with the island. MacCormack describes monsters as “‘subjects’ who fail to fulfill the criteria of human subjects” (2013, p. 293). The Mongols, as invaders, are positioned in stark contrast to the facets of Japanese life on Tsushima that are essential and fundamental, such as honour and harmony with nature. The Mongols thus fail to fulfil the criteria of what it means to be an inhabitant of Tsushima, if not also a human; they are dehumanized because they are presented an impurity beyond the borders of society.

For example, at the beginning of Act 3, Jin travels to the game's final area, Kamiagata. This region is bleak and desolate, colder in climate but

also utterly ravaged by the Mongols. Forests are burning or are already chopped down. The corpses of peasants and horses litter the path. *Torii*, which throughout the rest of the game lead to stunning natural areas inhabited by *kami*, are also burning. The first mission in this area is to reunite with Yuna at the Sacred Tree, also burned and defiled by corpses and litter. The scene is a portrayal of the Mongol's blatant disrespect for and disregard of the island's nature, and the spirituality infused into its nature, which was discussed earlier.

This scene is not an outlier, but a culmination of the pollution and destruction wrought everywhere on the island. *Kitsune* lead the player to Inari shrines, *torii* to Shinto shrines, and golden birds to *onsen*, Pillars of Honor, and other points of interest, while arrow-littered corpses, black smoke, and ruined carts are indexical of the Mongols' presence. With the purity of the island's nature established and harmony with it championed, the Mongols' disrespectful, violent, polluting, and industrial use of the island is marked clearly as impure.

Even more explicit is the portrayal of Mongols in the game's subsequent, multiplayer mode, *Ghost of Tsushima: Legends*. In the storyline of this mode, the Mongols, because of their lust for power and control over the island, ally with Tsushima's evil and supernatural forces. For example, by harvesting the hearts of twins, the Mongols learn they can use *oni* warriors (who in modelling and fighting behaviour are almost identical to Mongol soldiers, though stronger than them) who are linked to each other, able to share a life force, and revive each other when downed, forcing the player to kill them almost simultaneously.

The alliance of Mongols and literal demons in *Legends* is only the most explicit depiction of the Mongols as monstrous. Monstrosity, we have argued, is predicated on difference and dehumanization, together with threat and power. Monsters are “never unto themselves” (MacCormack, 2013, p. 293). They embody the fears and anxieties of a society—what is not or should not be. Therefore, monstrosity can only be defined in relationship to the context in which it is monstrous. In the first two sections of this chapter, we have outlined first how a “pure” Japan is established. The values, practices, and beliefs of Tsushima's residents come to constitute the norm not only as a neutral “is,” but also a moral “ought.” The depiction of the Mongols, via the various strategies considered here, comes into conflict with that established norm. Through the mechanics of monstrosity, the Mongols are both politically hostile invaders and pollutants jeopardizing the purity of the tranquil, ordered island.

Jin between Worlds

Face them as a warrior with honor. Not a monster. – Lord Shimura

It's all they understand. – Jin

In the previous section, we used the beginning of Act 3 as an example of the Mongol's monstrous behaviour—noting the corpses littering the path, the burning forests, and so on. What the player learns, however, is that this more intense destruction wrought on the northernmost region of Tsushima was possible because the Mongols reverse-engineered the poison Jin had used in the previous act to retake Castle Shimura. This exemplifies Jin's role in the game: he is a figure who forsakes traditional samurai values for the sake of expelling the Mongol invaders. In this way, Jin acts as a bridge between the two depictions we have established: the “pure” Japan and the monstrous invaders. He is a liminal figure who blurs the boundaries between the two.

In this way, Jin is a problem for both the Mongols and the Japanese. To the Mongols, as the khan admits, he is unpredictable. To the samurai, he threatens the integrity of their values, exposing them not as essential qualities of noble-born samurai, but as fragile and ultimately contingent attributes. Jin demonstrates that there is nothing inherently superior about the samurai; there are simply two sides of a brutal war. If the Mongols are the monstrous other, or the monster without, then Jin is the monster within, fulfilling in particular Cohen's (1996, p. 6) conception of the monster as the harbinger of category crisis. “Ghost” is an apt moniker in this sense: the word suggests a figure between worlds, an identity that cannot quite be grasped, something not exactly human but not inhuman either. The ghost is undeniably *of* this world—the “pure” Japan and the samurai order—yet it has departed it.

Jin's liminal position is reflected in the narrative arc. By the end of the game, he succeeds in killing the khan and driving out the Mongol forces. In the process, however, he is abjected from the Japanese side, signalling their categorical breakdown. Act 3 begins with Jin in exile after he has poisoned the Mongols. Imprisoned by his uncle, stripped of his status as a samurai, and with his clan, Sakai, disbanded by the *shogun*, Jin is expelled from all his positions in Japanese society: samurai, clan leader, and family member. It is telling, therefore, that the game ends not with the killing of the khan, but with a duel with Lord Shimura, who has been ordered to kill his nephew.

Jin's liminality is also reflected in gameplay. The player has the option to play more “samurai-like” or more “ghost-like” (except for in key scenes such as the poisoning in Castle Shimura). Players can take a Mongol fortress by

stealth and with dishonourable tools like poison, or they can walk to the front gates and initiate a standoff. In these ways, the Mongol invasion acts as a catalyst for the real tension of the game: winning at all costs versus remaining true to one's traditions and established sense of identity. The implication, particularly with the Mongol's use of Jin's poison in Act 3, is that the Ghost is perilously close to becoming the monster he sought to drive off the island, if he has not already crossed that threshold.

It is worth noting, though, that Jin's critique of the samurai order is only strategic. As the Ghost, the problem he poses is not whether samurai values are *right*, but rather whether they can be *upheld* in the wake of opponents who do not respect them. Kazuma Hashimoto argues, for example, that “Sucker Punch's game lacks a script that can see the samurai as Japanese society's violent landlords”; instead, the game lionizes them (2020). The samurai way is still *better*, even if it cannot be maintained strategically. Through Jin, Sucker Punch attempts a shallow critique of samurai culture. Outwardly, the game shows that Shimura's steadfast refusal to abandon traditional samurai ways leads to Tsushima's occupation by monstrous, foreign invaders. Jin shows that those values must be abandoned in order to protect what is really important: the people and the island. However, Jin as a liminal figure demonstrates only a superficial critique. The samurai code is not subjected to any fundamental attack. What is attacked is an overly dogmatic adherence to it. The samurai are still lionized; their fatal flaw was simply to not compromise. This attitude is shown throughout the game by Jin and the samurai's affinity with nature and the island itself, by the Mongols' monstrous negation of that harmony, and by the fact that the people still adore the samurai, with few hints of a less than harmonious relationship (for instance, the former rebels in Yarikawa, though even their rebellion is atoned for when Jin liberates them during the game). In contrast, the island's residents are treated barbarically by the Mongols. Ultimately, it is no coincidence that the game has been well received in the Japanese market and that Tsushima officials want to collaborate directly with the developers and the game for tourism. *Ghost of Tsushima* offers a picture of the samurai that is deeply flattering, while masking the intense praise with a superficial critique.

Conclusion

Though not obviously fawning, Sucker Punch's construction of Japanese identity implies a critique of the samurai values they depict in their game,

but only at a superficial level. In our analysis, we have shown that samurai ways in *Ghost of Tsushima* are seen not only as good, but as fundamentally connected with the island itself as well as with metaphysical forces. These connections naturalize the good of the samurai ways. The Mongols, by contrast, are political and military opponents, and are depicted as monstrous because they defile natural and metaphysical forces and revel in an excess of cruelty and pollution. Jin problematizes the samurai ways, yet only on a strategic level: the Mongols are *so* monstrous that good values must be compromised to defeat them.

Through Jin as a liminal figure, Sucker Punch constructs this favourable image of Japanese identity for two different audiences: a Japanese audience and a non-Japanese, primarily Western, Anglophone audience. At the end of the game, however, these audiences merge into one; although Jin has become a monster to both sides—the Mongols and the Japanese—he is forced to choose between being an honourable samurai and becoming the dishonourable Ghost. After he wins the duel with Lord Shimura, the player has to choose whether Jin gives Lord Shimura an honourable death in line with samurai values or keeps Lord Shimura alive, more in line with the category-defying Ghost persona. It is at this point that Sucker Punch comfortably leaves their responsibility up in the air; what “pure” Japaneseness is, what kind of monster Jin is, and what the game’s ending will be all depend on the player. Consequently, while the developer’s quest for “authenticity” may win praise from the Japanese audience, it most of all shows that the quest not only compromises on authenticity and historicity for palatability within a Western audience, but also tends to soften Japan’s more recent colonial past in favour of a positive image of a “pure” and “authentic” Japan.

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