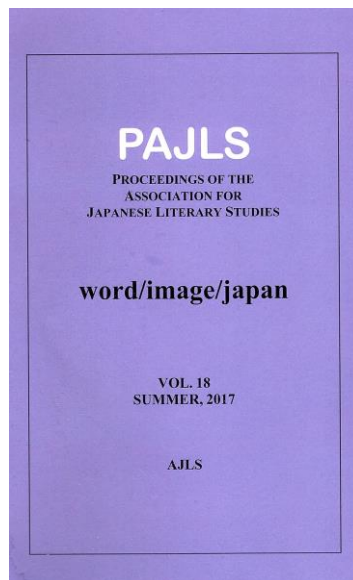


“A Legend of Regret: Fallen Kingdoms and
Postcolonial Ghosts in *Twilight Princess*”

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*Proceedings of the Association for Japanese
Literary Studies* 18 (2017): 47–59.



PAJLS 18:
word/image/japan.
Ed. Charlotte Eubanks, with Kyle Posey.

**A LEGEND OF REGRET:
FALLEN KINGDOMS AND POSTCOLONIAL GHOSTS
IN *TWILIGHT PRINCESS***

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Of course many of you are familiar with the William Faulkner quote that bears repeating: "The Past is never dead. The past is never dead. It's not even past." And so we live with the ghosts of our past. (Davis 114)

I begin this essay with a quote from Angela Davis drawn from a speech she delivered in February 2013 for Black History Month at Davidson College. Davis, a radical activist for global human rights, is of speaking from an American perspective, and it may seem odd to reference her work in the context of a conversation about Asia. However, I think it's important to emphasize the universal relevance of the Gothic genre, as well as to acknowledge that postcolonial ghosts are not a thematic concern specific to a single national origin. The alignment of center and periphery written into the colonial script is not limited to an Atlantocentric perspective, after all, and Japan continues to be haunted by the horrific legacy of its actions during the twentieth century. No matter how assiduously the current neoliberal political establishment attempts to suppress historical memory, conflicts over issues such as the Yasukuni Shrine, American military bases in Okinawa, and textbook censorship and revisionism indicate that the ghosts of the past will not remain silent.

Unquiet postcolonial ghosts have manifested in a wide range of Japanese media, from literary fiction to televised animation serials, and it is not surprising that they have drifted into digital narratives as well. This essay focuses on a video game called *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess* (*Zeruda no densetsu: Towairaito purinsesu*), which was originally released for the Nintendo GameCube and Wii home consoles in 2006. *Twilight Princess* is extremely popular, selling seven million units worldwide within five years of its release and about a million and half more units since then. The game received dozens of perfect

and near-perfect scores in the domestic and international gaming press, as well as numerous industry awards. In March 2016, an updated high definition version of *Twilight Princess* was released for the Nintendo Wii U console to great acclaim. A month before, in February 2016, a manga adaptation began serializing on publisher Shogakukan's MangaOne mobile application, and within four months of the publication of its first installment international manga licensing giant Viz Media announced that it had acquired the English-language rights to the property.

I have referenced the positive critical reception and high commercial sales numbers of *Twilight Princess* in order to highlight the fact that the game is one of the central texts of contemporary gaming culture. The Legend of Zelda series, which consists of more than a dozen titles and is one of the top twenty bestselling gaming franchises, is central to the experience of many gamers who have come of age since the late 1980s. As video games continue to demonstrate that digital narratives are just as compelling as fiction and cinema, it is worth reading *Twilight Princess* as a literary text that both reflects and influences mainstream and subcultural ideologies. For generations of gamers around the world – in North America, Asia, Europe, and Latin America – video games provide the defining stories of people's lives, pushing young writers, artists, and programmers forward to create their own work. Engagement with these texts is rewarding because it is not passive; the stories of video games demand the player's attention and active participation, and it is important to understand what these stories are and how they function.

When fans and professional gaming journalists write about *Twilight Princess*, they generally focus on the gameplay, which is essential to the experience of consuming and interacting with the text. *Twilight Princess* is also known for its large and colorful cast of characters and its multilayered and engaging story, which leaves a significant portion of its particulars open to player interpretation. This essay will analyze both gameplay features and in-game text and animated sequences to argue that the "evil" of *Twilight Princess* is in fact a manifestation of the horrors of imperialism. Moreover, by defeating this "evil," the hero has not in fact solved anything. *Twilight Princess* delivers a subtle yet poignant protest against neoliberal discourses of empire reflected

in the rhetoric of heroism informing the geopolitical movements of Japan throughout the twentieth century, in which the glorified actions of a colonial and then postcolonial nation have resulted in tragedy and regret.

These themes are tightly intertwined with the main villain of *Twilight Princess*, a man named Ganondorf. In the distant past, the high medieval Westernesque fantasy kingdom of Hyrule launched a campaign of territorial expansion, uniting multiple geographically proximate tribes under its banner. Ganondorf was the leader of the desert-dwelling Gerudo tribe, a matriarchal society that resisted Hyrule's imperialism. After several years of fighting, Ganondorf was eventually captured and imprisoned. The magical Sages of Hyrule were unable to execute him, however, and so they sealed him away by casting him into the Twilight Realm, a world of shadows that exists alongside Hyrule. The events of *Twilight Princess* are triggered by Ganondorf's escape an indefinite period of time later. Ganondorf manages to persuade a prince named Zant to stage an uprising against Midna, the legitimate ruler of the Twilight Realm. Guided by Midna, the player's task is to take on role of the teenage hero Link in order to defeat Zant and Ganondorf and save Hyrule by rescuing its crown princess, Zelda. Many (if not the majority) of players will be influenced by the archetypes reproduced in this heroic narrative to understand Link as "good" and Ganondorf as "evil."

Ganondorf is introduced to the player as a mindless monster; but, when he is allowed to speak for himself, he is revealed to be highly intelligent with motivations that are not unsympathetic. At the very end of *Twilight Princess*, when Link finds Ganondorf in the throne room of Hyrule Castle, he is sitting alone. The world he once knew is long gone, and all he has left is the rage he has directed against Hyrule. Ganondorf has finally succeeded in conquering the kingdom; but, because his people have been killed, driven away, or assimilated, his victory no longer has meaning. As he talks to Link, he gestures toward the symbols of power he has acquired, the magically restrained princess Zelda and the imperial Triforce crest above her throne. The game's camera uses forced perspective to make it seem as if he is holding them in his hand, even though they are high above his head. This is an ironic juxtaposition with his taunt to Midna, who has led Link to this

point. Ganondorf calls Midna's people pathetic and speaks of their anguish, but it is clear he is projecting his own suffering as someone whose own people were similarly "cast aside by the gods," as he says.

Over the stages of the final battle, Ganondorf becomes less of a demon and more human. He begins the fight by possessing the sleeping body of Princess Zelda and using her magic to attack Link. He then transforms into Beast Ganon, a giant boar that rampages through Zelda's throne room, destroying the columns that support the high vaulted ceiling. After this stage of the battle, Ganondorf returns to his own form, leaving Hyrule Castle behind as he fights on horseback while surrounded by the ghosts of dead riders. In the end he faces Link alone in an intense sword fight. In other words, Ganondorf progressively sheds his layers of dark magic, bestial rage, and his past as a military leader to finally stand as a man, armed with nothing more than the sword once used in an attempt to execute him without trial. Throughout most of *Twilight Princess*, Ganondorf is characterized as evil incarnate, a ruthless warlord who attacked Hyrule merely because of his greed and lust for power. As indicated by his monologues and gradual humanization over the course of the final battle, however, Ganondorf represents much more than simply an evil to be defeated, and it is deeply problematic to villainize him without questioning the biases and motives of the characters who encourage the player to attack and kill him without ever hearing his side of the story.

Ganondorf is a member of a minority group called the Gerudo, who historically maintained uneasy relations with the majority ethnicity of Hyrule.¹ For representatives of the majority ethnicity

¹ Aside from Ganondorf, no self-identified Gerudo appear in *Twilight Princess*. Many gamers, however, will be familiar with the tribe from *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1997), which has been hailed as one of the most celebrated and influential games of all time. The relationship between Ganondorf and the Gerudo tribe is complicated in *Ocarina of Time*, as is the continuity (or lack thereof) between *Ocarina of Time* and *Twilight Princess*. For the purpose of this discussion, it will suffice to say that the area of *Twilight Princess* called "Gerudo Desert" is uninhabited save for itinerant bands of Bulblins, goblin-like creatures that the game establishes as an "enemy" race. Other than the temporary camps of the Bulblins, the only other point of interest is a large abandoned prison bearing the imperial Triforce crest of Hyrule. Although it is never explicitly

to demonize a member of the minority ethnicity as savage and bestial is uncomfortably close to historical colonial narratives of the supremacy. In addition, the views once espoused by the people in Hyrule concerning the Gerudo are inarguably reminiscent of Orientalist stylizations, in which the peoples of certain “non-Westernized” and therefore “non-civilized” nations are characterized as being either unintelligent brutes incapable of governing themselves or decadent and weak and thus ripe for seduction.



Fig. 1. Ganondorf’s final words at the end of *Twilight Princess*.

Even within an East Asian context, Orientalist valuations are essentially a justification for invasion and colonization, as demonstrated by Japan’s ideological representations of its supposedly equal fellows in the “Great East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere” of the first half of the twentieth century.

When Link finally bests him, Ganondorf speaks one of his most famous lines, “The history of light and shadow will be written in blood!” (*Figure 1*) He is not wrong. As the player has witnessed during the past forty to fifty hours of gameplay, Hyrule is filled with ruins and ghost towns, a mere shadow of what it once was. As Zelda herself apologizes to Link and Midna roughly halfway through the game, “These dark times are the result of our

stated what happened to the Gerudo, the evidence suggested by the skeletons of both adults and children in the prison does not speak highly of Hyrule, which may have perpetuated a genocide against Ganondorf’s people.

deeds, yet it is you who have reaped the penalty.”² As Zelda herself is blameless, she must be referring to historical violence that has resulted in the gradual decline of Hyrule. The kingdom has achieved its imperialistic aim of establishing hegemony over its outlying territories and crushing all rebellion against its militaristic advances, but on the grand scale of history its empire has suffered from cultural stagnation. Without the dynamic diversity symbolized by Ganondorf and the Gerudo, Hyrule is now in economic and political decline, isolated from any contact with the world beyond its borders.

The villainization of Ganondorf and the Gerudo as deceitful and lawless thieves within the world of *Twilight Princess* echoes contemporary neoliberal postcolonial discourse, in which former colonial powers exhibit a longing for “the good old days” of expansive imperial hegemony. Sociologist Paul Gilroy has termed this fabricated nostalgia “postcolonial melancholia,” which is often represented by the Gothic figure of the postcolonial ghost. Ganondorf is a textbook example of a postcolonial ghost – a menacing (and possibly supernatural) figure who represents the frightening native traditions of the past that the supposedly enlightened colonizers tried to fix but were prevented from completely eradicating by the untimely end of their rule. In order for global capitalism to move forward, postcolonial ghosts must be defeated, regardless of whether they are symbolic or actual human beings. Such narratives are not uncommon in the political discourse and popular narratives of Japan, which is still coming to terms with its history of colonial violence on the Asian mainland.³ In essence, the demonization of Ganondorf reflects the historical and contemporary villainization of both specific and broadly

² This speech occurs immediately before Zelda sacrifices herself to save Midna, who has been critically injured during an encounter with Zant after Link purifies the Lakebed Temple.

³ The figure of the postcolonial ghost has been critically and ironically employed by progressive intellectuals, especially authors with an international outlook such as Ōe Kenzaburō, Natsuo Kirino, and Murakami Haruki. In countless examples of more lowbrow culture, people from other countries in Asia and the Pacific are still demonized according to wartime stereotypes, which play to what are assumed to be the xenophobic prejudices and political leanings of a mass-market audience.

defined groups in the real world, including entire nations of people who have been positioned as “enemies.”

As a medium, video games require challenges for the player to overcome. Narrative-based games such as those in the Legend of Zelda series tend to be relentless in their construction of a “bad guy” whose ostensibly evil deeds propel the hero into action. In *Twilight Princess*, as in many digital texts broadly classified as “role-playing games,” there are two primary categories of characters with whom the player can interact: NPCs, or non-player characters, who offer material assistance and advice on how the hero can proceed through the quest, and monsters, who must be attacked and generally yield tangible rewards when defeated. This clear-cut division is almost a direct facsimile of Gilroy’s explanation of imperialism, in which “the ruthless logic of colonial government placed black and white, settler and native in mutually antagonistic relation” (Gilroy 51). In other words, the fundamental elements of gameplay reflect a worldview built on the foundation of a battle of “us” versus “them,” which is given literal expression in the dichotomy between who cannot be attacked and who must be. Many players take it for granted that any given game will present a class or race or species of being that innately deserves to be destroyed, and the widespread lack of alternative options for interaction suggests that it is still quite radical to suggest that perhaps the player-character is not entirely justified in the demonization and abuse of people who don’t look or think like them.⁴

Video games are adept at engendering a sense of subjectivity, meaning that one of their functions is to give players a feeling of controlling their movement through the gamespace while enacting their will via the actions of the player-character. This player subjectivity has interesting implications on reading games as literature, as it might be argued that the player acts as the narrator of the story. Many games with an emphasis on story feature a

⁴ There are several exceptions to the standard gameplay dictate that enemy characters must be killed, although they tend to feature in independently-developed games. A notable example is as *Undertale* (2015), in which the player is given the choice to talk with randomly encountered enemies instead of attacking them.

narrator. *Final Fantasy X* (2001), for example, is narrated in the form of a voiceover. Other games, such as *Final Fantasy VII* (1997), have a decidedly first-person narrative perspective that is limited by an emphasis on the subjectivity of the main player-character. None of the games in the Legend of Zelda series has a narrator, however, and the player-protagonist Link remains largely silent.⁵ In addition, the Zelda games are structured in a way that subjects Link to endless items of hearsay as he is guided by characters who are clearly biased and never give him more information than he needs to carry out their directives. In an expansive game such as *Twilight Princess*, which can easily take more than forty hours to complete, Link can miss any number of details if the player is not thorough in her exploration of the diegetic world. One might argue that the player herself functions as the narrator, but this is not precisely accurate, as the player is not presented with a wide range of choices. The player is not allowed, for example, to talk to monsters instead of attacking them. It is therefore worthwhile to consider the gameplay itself as functioning as the primary form of narrative structure. If the gameplay demands that Link defeat enemies to advance, then Link must kill. If the gameplay demands that Link ransack ancient temples to progress through the story, then Link must become a marauder. The gameplay does not allow Link to ask questions, nor does it allow him to converse with or otherwise pacify the creatures and people who attack him. As a narrator, the gameplay is unreliable, and the characterization of Ganondorf as purely evil is suspect. At the end of the game, Link must fight and defeat Ganondorf, no matter how much sympathy the player may feel for him.

The gameplay elements of *Twilight Princess* therefore perform abjection, the process by which we demarcate the boundaries of

⁵ The “silent protagonist” is a common video game trope used to facilitate player identification with a character. In many of the games in the Legend of Zelda series, Link is occasionally offered binary dialog choices (for example, to confirm or deny whether he has understood a set of objectives), and the player can trigger verbal responses non-enemy NPCs by positioning Link next to them and pressing the “Action” button. Actual conversations are not possible, however, as Link is not intended to be a character in his own right but to exist as a “link” between the player and the world of the game.

the whole and wholesome “self” by setting up a contrast against a fragmented and unclean “other.” As individuals, we employ this process to construct monsters that violate the sanctity of our bodies; and as cultures, we employ this process to construct enemies that violate our sense of belonging to a shared identity. Unfortunately, the dualism of “the pure” and “the abject” causes us to become blind to the nuances and possibilities denied by the artificial division of the world into “good” and “evil.” Ganondorf’s cultural barrier-crossing, his protean physical form, and his occupation of the liminal spaces between one world and another place him squarely in the realm of the abject. The postcolonial narrative of the game, as conveyed by the narrative functions of the gameplay, therefore demands that the abject ghosts of the empire be purified and expelled.

Link’s victory is bittersweet, however, as it is not characterized as a triumph for him or for Hyrule. At the end of *Twilight Princess*, Princess Zelda barely looks at the young man who supposedly rescued her. Midna, whose people were once banished to the Twilight Realm for opposing the royal family of Hyrule, takes her leave of Link, shattering the gate between their worlds after she departs. Midna explains her decision by saying, “Light and shadow can’t mix, as we all know,” and Zelda responds with, “Shadow and light are two sides of the same coin... One cannot exist without the other.” As Link and Midna’s friendship throughout the game has demonstrated, light and shadow can indeed coexist, and many players have expressed confusion and frustration concerning this less than triumphant turn of events. Neither Midna nor any other character in *Twilight Princess* explains why she would choose to destroy the Mirror of Twilight that connects the Twilight Realm to Hyrule, but it is significant that this occurs immediately after she has witnessed the fight between Link and Ganondorf. Perhaps the violence of Ganondorf’s defeat has convinced Midna that there is no room for monsters in Hyrule, and it may be that she fears her people will always be seen as abject outsiders, just as Ganondorf and his people once were. It is not clear to whom the title of *Twilight Princess* refers, and it could easily designate Midna, who emerges from and returns to an abject and liminal space. The title could also apply to Princess Zelda, however, as the supposed victory

over the forces of evil at the end of the game does not presage an end to her kingdom's decline. Before the end credits roll, Zelda sends the hero back to his village and returns alone to her empty castle.

Despite the narrative arc of Link's growing competence as an adventurer, this element of sorrow and regret has been present from the outset of the game. Unlike the other games in the Legend of Zelda series, *Twilight Princess* begins not with Link waking in the morning, but with him returning home in the evening. The opening scenes are suffused with the golden light of the setting sun, and the first spoken line is delivered by Link's mentor Rusl, who asks, "Tell me... Do you ever feel a strange sadness as dusk falls?" (Figure 2) The player's first few minutes with *Twilight Princess* thereby establish melancholy and lament as two of the major themes of the game. The people of Hyrule are entering the twilight of their civilization under the rule of an ineffectual monarchy that has not allowed its people to be revitalized by change and diversity. The slow apocalypse suggested by the environment of *Twilight Princess*, such as eroded ruins and decaying ghost towns, is not presented as an opportunity for renewal, but as a definitive ending. The potential for energetic dynamism represented by Ganondorf has been violently denied in favor of cultural and ideological purity, and the severity of this loss is reflected in the somber tone of the game's closing scenes.



Fig. 2. The opening line of *Twilight Princess* establishes a melancholy tone.

This is an intriguing portrayal of the concept of empire for the developers at Nintendo to present to its global market, the largest and most influential component of which is the United States. Although *Twilight Princess* is not overtly political, its gameplay elements present a clear statement on the dichotomy between “good guys” and “bad guys,” and the fairy tale quality of its story lends itself to allegory regarding the real-world implications of this worldview. In an essay on the Wild West themed open-world adventure game *Red Dead Redemption*, Matt Margini evokes Hayden West’s 1974 study *Metahistory* to argue that a pessimistic attitude regarding the narrativization of history is “at the core of the game’s narrative of coerced self-destruction; it’s at the core of the gunplay and horseplay that results, often in the words ‘DEAD’ in caps on a blood-red screen” (Margini 93). The violent gameplay therefore does not necessarily romanticize the violence of history, but can serve as a critique of the lack of choices any given player has as an actor in larger historical currents. In a similar manner, by humanizing Ganondorf but then forcing the player to fight him anyway, *Twilight Princess* employs various tropes relating to the figure of the postcolonial ghost not to invoke unironic neoliberal postcolonial melancholia, but rather to force the player to experience the violence of these tropes in a subjective and visceral way. *Twilight Princess* is therefore not so much a heroic legend of triumph over “darkness” as it is an elegiac legend of regret in which the lingering traces of imperialistic ideology are the true evil threatening the player.

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