10 Slow Violence in a Digital World

Tarahumara Apocalypse and Endogenous Meaning in *Mulaka*

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"Where There Are Trees, Where There Is War"

> When the tree war started, Jikuli felt very uncomfortable, he said goodbye to the mountains, the hilltops, and the green valleys through which the river flowed, he left for a place with no trees, and where he could find peace.
>
> (*Mulaka*)

According to Tarahumara lore, the first people, born of Mother Sun and Father Moon, danced to awaken the earth and bring about all other life. But over time, the fighting and hatred bred among earth's peoples and creatures grew too intense, and the gods decided that the only way to cleanse the world would be to destroy it and begin again. This is not a tale brought to the Global North either directly by the Tarahumara themselves or through a book or documentary film but is told in the opening moments of the 2018 video game *Mulaka*. In this game, players take on the role of a Tarahumara shaman, a *Sukurúame* named Mulaka, who must journey across the varied Tarahumara lands, facing terrifying and powerful beings, aiding suffering people, and gathering the support of animal demigods to find passage into *Re'le Muchúwame*, the Underworld, a quest to defeat the beast blamed for the bloody conflicts above ground. This, Mulaka hopes, will convince the gods not to destroy the world after all.

This game, which joins a growing number of "indigenous games" or "World games," is the result of a partnership between the Chihuahua-based game development studio Lienzo and the Tarahumara people, known to themselves as the *Rarámuri*, which means "the runners" in their language. They are famed for their long-distance running mostly through documentaries focused on this aspect of their identity. The outside world, however, has little idea of their lives, their beliefs, or their troubles. The preceding epigraph appears on one of the game's load screens, granting a fleeting glimpse of Tarahumara culture. Nevertheless, its context remains concealed. Jikuli's identity is the first of 26 secrets that players

can uncover, and this one can be found in the starting zone, the desert of Samalayuca. When discovered—which can be done only using Mulaka's signature ability, *Sukurúame* Vision—the game reveals that:

> Jikuli, the advice giver, is one of the Rehpa Muchùwame, the ones above. He shares a sacred link with Father Moon and Mother Sun. Disguised as herbage, he guides us, he gives us true sight. After the Great War of the Trees, he left for Samalayuca. This is why if anyone wants to find him, they must make the sacred journey into the great desert: "I'm leaving, from now on I'll no longer live where there are trees, where there is war. I'll look for a place where everything is calm."
>
> (*Mulaka*)

Hidden items like these make the world richer and more alive, and whether they stumble upon them or quest for them deliberately, players will feel a sense of accomplishment when they are rewarded with this deeper information about Tarahumara folklore. But more importantly, *Jikuli*'s words insist on the importance of trees to the Tarahumara and refers to a history of relentless struggle against logging companies that wish to harvest forests on Tarahumara-protected lands. *Jikuli* may have fled to the desert, taking his advice with him, but the Tarahumara refuse to abandon their trees. Environmental activism is a constant imperative in the lives of many Tarahumara—and one that brings violence into their communities.

Again and again, the game *Mulaka* touches on but never directly addresses the real-life struggles of the Tarahumara people while seeking to enshrine the "most exciting" parts of their folklore in this playable landscape (Lienzo website). Distilling an environmentally oriented message from the game relies on players unearthing its endogenous meaning. This term was repurposed from the biological sciences and leveraged by game designer Greg Costikyan in his 2002 article, "I Have No Words and I Must Design," as a crucial aspect of what makes a game a game. The definition of endogenous meaning aims to articulate the meaning that arises from a game's design—its construction in itself—rather than from the content of the game: "a game's structure *creates its own meanings*," he writes (Costikyan 22, emphasis in original). Just as scientists learn to "read" the earth and interpret what it communicates through its rocks, trees, oceans, climate, and creatures, endogenous meaning can be used to "read" game environments for what they might "say."

This chapter will examine *Mulaka*'s representation of the Tarahumara as well as its insistence on the mechanics of violence, with particular consideration of Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence—environmental effects "that [occur] gradually and out of sight . . . an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2)—which can be read in

the game's central threat of global environmental collapse. *Mulaka* comes close to slow violence, paving the way for it but not quite achieving rich engagement with it. One endogenous meaning arising from *Mulaka*—one that undermines its consoling finale—is the irony of using violence to end violence. With the exceptionalism of the Tarahumara hero and his barely salvaged people as evidence, *Mulaka* presents a world profoundly in need of anthro-decentering. In addition, this project will unpack its emergent meaning(s) as a piece of playable ecofiction with attention to its ecorealities, starting with a broad discussion of the role of violence in video games.

Fighting It Out

Violence has been a fixture of digital games from their earliest origins—text adventure games such as *Zork* and *Colossal Cave Adventure*, which concentrate on exploration and puzzle solving but which always eventually come to blows. Partly, this is to be attributed to their predecessors, tabletop wargames and role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons*—and even *Chess* and *Go*. Arcade games intensified the tendency toward violence (and marketing toward men) in the fighting game and bullet hell shooter genres (Cassell and Jenkins). Game studies grew partly from voices pushing away from extreme violence and toward diplomacy and diversity in games, and that branch of the discipline has strengthened over the course of the last decade.[1]

One resounding call, particularly from feminist game scholars, challenges games' reliance on the mechanics of violence. Independent game developer Anna Anthropy describes most games as "men shooting men in the face." She continues: "Surely an artistic form that has as much weight in popular culture as the videogame does now have more to offer than such a narrow view of what it is to be human" (*Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* 3). Nonviolent conflict in games can offer more nuanced and ethical engagement with in-game environments and situations and make the choice to engage in violence more meaningful.[2] Avoiding violence entirely may go too far.

Of the call for alternatives to violent conflict in games, Costikyan has this to say: "The desire for 'cooperative games' is the desire for an end to strife. But there can be none. Life is the struggle for survival and growth. There is no end to strife, not this side of the grave. A game without struggle is a game that's dead" (17). "Struggle" does not have to mean violence, but conflict in storytelling is often violent, regardless of the medium. Games tend to have a worse reputation for violence than other media because they are interactive. Violent movies do not demand that their viewers become complicit in the violence; viewers are merely spectators. But games require players to take action and make choices. Whether wielding sword and shield or choosing dialogue options, the act of participation necessarily changes users' engagement with the content, eliciting feelings of guilt and

responsibility, which are nonsensical in other media (Isbister 8). Feelings of guilt are at least possible; so much depends upon the game in question—and the player. Making "evil" choices in a game like *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* or *Dragon Age: Origins* feels quite different from mowing down aliens in *Halo* or even crashing through pedestrians in *Grand Theft Auto*. Game developers draw on players' complicated relationship with violence, either nudging them to think carefully about their choices to deepen their investment in a game's narrative or encouraging them to rationalize away or even enjoy acting violently. Gameplay, after all, must be well received by players in order for a game to be commercially successful, whether the content is violent or not.[3]

Digging deeper, Tilo Hartmann argues that players often see violence in games as justifiable. He pools a number of studies of video game depictions of warfare and theorizes:

> Videogames are entertainment products—and they are designed in such a way as to make violence enjoyable. Violent videogames frequently embed moral disengagement cues that effectively frame the violence as justifiable. Accordingly, players tend to enjoy videogame violence and related warfare scenarios (rather than feeling guilty or empathetic distress) because they are morally disengaged while playing.

According to Hartmann, players naturally empathize with game characters but at the same time recognize that games are not real—an idea explored more fully in Jesper Juul's *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. One motivation of players who choose violent video games is the ability to do things they cannot in their real lives (Huntemann and Payne). In sum, game designers realize that human beings have strong empathetic inclinations, and in order to make violent stories "fun," they have to invent story-, world-, or character-based reasons for players to put aside their natural empathy and fight their way through a game. Hartmann lists eight tactics enumerated by Bandura (1991, 2002) that work to morally disengage players, some of which include killing for the greater good, attributing blame or greater moral violation to the victim, distance from the corresponding aftermath of the violence, and dehumanizing the enemy (Hartmann). All of these strategies are deployed in *Mulaka*. The literature review that follows contextualizes *Mulaka* within the spectrum of Latinx and Latin American independent (indie) games, and will show its place in the context of representation of slow violence in the field.

Violence in Independent Latin American/Latinx Games

Latin America's real-world violence appears more obliquely in its video games than in games developed in the largest markets—the United States,

Japan, Canada, and Europe. Where games of the Global North tend to use cultures of violence as an opportunity for empowering heroic fantasy, often with no regard whatsoever to the environmental implications—and are more than happy to use Latin American settings to do it (Penix-Tadsen 174)—the selection of indie titles discussed here challenges these norms, aligning themselves more with Nixon's insights regarding slow violence and its repercussions on environments and people. As he writes, "The long dyings—the staggered and staggeringly discounted casualties, both human and ecological that result from war's toxic aftermath or climate change—are underrepresented in strategic planning as well as in human memory" (2–3). Timothy Morton uses the term "hyperobjects" for problems that stretch through space and time and points out how exceptionally difficult they are to represent in media (Morton). In spite of that challenge and the fact that most games do not attempt such depth, the following examples bring slow violence into view in some way.

Colombian Vander Caballero is the head creator and creative director of the Canadian studio Minority Media, developers of the highly esteemed puzzle-platformer game *Papo & Yo*. The landscape of this game is the *favelas* and the negative environmental impacts that all-too-frequently go along with them. Players take on the role of Quico, a young boy whose abusive, alcoholic father's rage pushes him to enter a fantasy world where traversing the *favelas* becomes a puzzle, and this can be accomplished only with the help of Monster, Quico's imagination's rendering of his father. Monster is helpful until he consumes the red frogs that emerge, which cause him to turn violent, and Quico must flee. The violence of the game, while domestic in nature, together with the *favelas*-as-world emphasizes fear and powerlessness and evokes forms of violence in the lives of Latin American impoverished peoples: gang violence, police violence, domestic violence, and the institutionalized violence of the very existence of the *favelas*. In the context of Nixon's book, *Papo & Yo* depicts the human costs of everyday violence, evoking empathy in players and pointing out the interconnectedness of social and—I argue—environmental justice (the *favelas* are an affront to both).

By contrast, Bethesda's *Fallout* series could not be a more extreme example of spectacular violence in games; one of the selling points of the newest game in the franchise—*Fallout 76*—is that players can nuke each other's bases. *Fallout Shelter* is a mobile off-shoot of this franchise, which was contracted out to Behaviour Interactive of Quebec, an independent studio that includes a number of Latinx developers. The game takes a much more subdued approach to the postapocalyptic scenario, focusing on survivors in an underground vault. The game's backdrop of complete nuclear devastation is its connection to slow violence: where the main *Fallout* series involves combat against the twisted humanoids and creatures of the postapocalypse, *Fallout Shelter* allows players to micromanage the mundane concerns of survival: "Congratulations, friend. . . . You will have total authority to create the perfect underground community,"

the trailer boasts, an ironic accentuation of the player's lack of control over the political conditions that led to bombs dropping in the first place.

The game *Bullet Boy*, in turn, undermines its own depiction of violence through humor and art style and is described as an "action cannon blaster game" on its webpage. Rocketing through a floating game world of shops, wind turbines, and oversized birds, players try to traverse levels by firing their avatar, Bullet Boy, from one cannon to another, earning power-ups and points as they go. If Bullet Boy hits a bird, he gently bounces off, and each level ends not with an impact but with a ceaseless upward blast. The assumed inevitable destruction of the player-as-bullet dampens the game's lighthearted tone somewhat—but only if players pay attention to their embodiment as the ever disposable missile.

Rock of Ages, by Ace Team of Chile, also relies on player interpretations of its endogenous meaning(s). With its Monty Python–esque art style, the game pits players against one another; one player sets up obstacles in the form of troops, war machines, towers, and beasts of war, and after an allotted amount of time, the other player tries to smash through all the defenses to take down their opponent's gate. The game runs the risk of making a farce of violence in that its fun lies in literally squashing opponents with a giant rock rather than dealing with any of the emotional or physical consequences of actual historical warfare. Even with these critiques in mind, the game emphasizes the metaphor of the rock as a representation of war when players learn in the very first cut scene of the game that this is not just a piece of solid mineral material but rather, and no less than, Sisyphus's rock. Where *Bullet Boy* positions players at the micro level of the single bullet, here, the object of destruction is a geological force on a time scale far vaster than the fleeting conflicts of humanity. The game skips hundreds—sometimes thousands—of years between levels, so it has a much longer temporal reach than most games. Interpretation of the rock as both a force of nature and Sisyphean eternal punishment reveals this game's slow violence, even if this rhetoric is well beneath the surface.

Some games benefit from a more realistic depiction of violence. *Borders* is an arcade game art gallery installation created by three Mexican-American college students that simulates the all-too-often deadly experience of crossing the border into the United States. The game displays a skeleton for every player who perished trying to make the crossing in an effort to illustrate the human cost of militarizing the border. Skeletons litter the game's desert, piled up by the dozens. This game's violence is systemic and institutionalized, born of racism, nationalism, and xenophobia that affects the region's immigrants and refugees, thus connecting it to Nixon's argument. The protracted, seemingly endless buildup of this violence (literally in the form of digital bodies, which build their own grisly wall) makes the persistent visibility of those-who-came-before into a devastating digital memorial to all who witness the game.[4]

Building on this pattern of the significance of in-game physicality, *Bleeding Border* by Uruguayan Curse Box Studios is the darkest of the games described here and, like *Rock of Ages*, must be interpreted metaphorically to develop a connection to slow violence. The border here is not a geographical location but the body itself. The game begins with three heavily armed characters entering a building, whereupon they are immediately attacked; two men are killed outright, and the player takes control of the remaining character, a woman, who has one of her hands bitten off by a twisted, humanoid monster, but when it touches her blood, it instantly dies. Struggling to bandage the wound and hide, now armed only with this knowledge, gameplay becomes a gory balance of bandaging the player-character's arm so as not to bleed out and strategically reopening the wound to defeat enemies. The game tracks blood loss, and if the character loses too much, she will die. In short, this game is in itself an economy of blood. From a symbolic standpoint, the game's twist on the survival horror genre takes the player agency of popular game series like *Bioshock*, *Dead Space*, and *Doom* and links tonally with descriptions of the U.S. military use of depleted uranium, cluster bombs, and unexploded mines. Nixon's examination of the grim realities of a human body turning on itself as "uranium replaces calcium" (215) reflects an instance when any ordinary moment could suddenly turn fatal. The disgust players experience in having to reopen their own body to the horrors that assail it in the desperate hope of saving themselves in *Bleeding Border* is only a brief discomfort compared with the realities Nixon describes, but they represent a powerful dismantling of stereotypical video game violence nonetheless.

Mulaka sits in the middle of this spectrum of lighthearted to darkly satiric depictions of violence. It unquestioningly offers fighting as an entertaining mechanic at the same time its narrative raises questions about the repercussions of such violence and the hatred it signals, as though to say that slow violence is condemnable, but fighting may be justifiable at the individual level. Such privileging of the player-character is near-universal in games but, in light of the game's ending, proves problematic here. An analysis of the game's content and of details of its creation, especially the partnership between the Tarahumara and Lienzo, sheds further light on the game's environmental themes.

Making of *Mulaka*

Of all Latin American nations to be depicted in video games, Mexico is the most common, likely because of its proximity to the United States, the world's leader in game development. Mexican landscapes appear infrequently in games, but when they do, they are mostly sites of searches for treasure in jungle ruins, zones involved with the drug trade (Hartmann), or stereotypes of Mexican cultures. Nintendo's popular title *Super Mario*

Odyssey, for instance, includes a Sand Kingdom zone made up of a mixture of colorful, Mexican-style architecture and a Mayan/Aztec-inspired inverted pyramid in the desert. This zone is populated by sombrero-capped skeleton people and features jarabe tapatío (Mexican Hat Dance) music, eliciting mixed feelings from Mexican audiences. While some players were upset about the blatant stereotyping of Mexican culture, others were happy to see Nintendo take enough of an interest in Mexico to represent it at all, which speaks to players' expectations of the treatment of Latin American cultures and stories in games.

When Lienzo began making games, they first avoided projects related to their home nation. Edgar Serrano, director and cofounder of Lienzo, comments on the state of the games industry in Mexico, which he characterizes as "almost non-existent" ("Mining for Lore"). While there are over a hundred game development companies in Mexico, most of them do outsourced jobs for larger American, Canadian, and European game companies. He notes that of the 15 or so companies in Mexico who do original games, most of them focus on mobile and PC games. "We are actually the first studio to manage to release the same product on the three major gaming platforms," Serrano points out. He explains, "Most Latin American game developers seem afraid of showcasing their Latin roots" and seem to be trying to behave more like game companies of other markets: "They feel that if they present something that's clearly done with a Mexican flair to it, it's going to do badly" ("Mining for Lore"). In an interview with *Variety*, Lienzo lead writer Guillermo Vizcaino comments:

> We want to make games that are ours, we want to make games that have an impact—what better way than to start with something that's local, something that's dear to us and something that speaks to the Mexican folklore and also stays away from the clichés. We don't want to do piñatas, and Día de los Muertos and Cinco de Mayo and all of that, and this was the perfect opportunity to do something like that (quoted in Sanchez).

Across various interviews, Serrano outlines his reasoning for choosing the Tarahumara folklore as the subject of a game: few people, even living in the city of Chihuahua, know much about their neighbors who live in the mountains so nearby. Worse, they often have negative perceptions of Tarahumara people when they see them around the city, stating that they are "no-good vagabonds" ("Mining for Lore"). He explains that "this racism and this discrimination, was hurting the culture a lot" ("Mining for Lore"). Lienzo hopes that *Mulaka* helps to remediate the Tarahumara image locally and demonstrate their cultural worth to Mexico—and to the wider world. To this end, Lienzo collaborated closely with local Tarahumara and anthropologists, meeting to identify folktales that would lend themselves to a playable medium. Eventually, Lienzo enlisted

Tarahumara performers to do voice acting and provide traditional music for the game's soundtrack, as well as soliciting interviews for the three-part documentary video series released in advance of the game for the purposes of education as well as promotion. While the series is an effective marketing strategy, highlighting some of the social issues the Tarahumara face, it does not address any of their environmental struggles.

Like many regions in Latin America, the Sierra Madre mountain range has suffered devastating environmental losses due to deforestation and adverse effects of climate change. Logging companies blatantly disregard regulations barring them from cutting the old growth forests of the Sierras, and ever worsening drought has afflicted the region for over a decade, destroying Tarahumara crops and forcing the community to become more dependent on the outside world to survive. They cannot rely on government agencies to protect their rights. In her examination of Tarahumara indigenous rights with regard to their forest resources, Silvia Romero explains the struggles the group faces in seeking legal support protecting their forests. She writes, "It highlights illegal logging, wood theft and opposition in some ejidos to the commercial exploitation of the forest. . . . The argument of the Tarahumara is that they are culturally assumed as guardians of the forest, because their daily life depends on it" (Romero 252). Even if they do seek jobs nearby, they find it difficult to obtain employment outside of their traditional agricultural techniques and suffer systemic racism from nonindigenous Mexicans (Romero 236). Vizcaino discusses the early struggles Lienzo had making contact with the Tarahumara due to drug activity in the area:

> Back then, it was harder to get to the community because there was a lot of violence, like drug-dealing violence going on in the state and there were a lot of warnings too about going into the Sierra, the mountain-range because you heard stories about people getting kidnapped or straight-up shot. We started working with some NGOs, non-governmental organizations that did stuff for the Tarahumara. . . . [T]he first trips were done with them, in their trucks and they took us into their communities because the drug dealers don't really mess with them because they know they're doing good for their community.
>
> (quoted in Sanchez)

Danger from drug traffickers is only one of the ill effects of proximity to outsiders for the Tarahumara; environmental activism poses risks as well. On January 15, 2017, Tarahumara community leader Isidro Baldenegro Lopez was shot and killed, and his death has been associated with his stance against illegal logging. His is not the first loss suffered by the Tarahumara; in 1983, Baldenegro's own father was killed for standing up to the logging companies, and Baldenegro, then only a child, witnessed his

murder. He nevertheless pursued his father's legacy, winning the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2005. One report of his death adds, "Investigative journalism group Global Witness reports that Latin America had the highest murder rate of environmental activists in 2015, compared to other regions," a staggering 122 of the 185 assassinations that year ("Award-Winning Mexico").

Mulaka does not directly deal with any of these problems because the game is set in a time before colonization. Given the developers' desire to represent an indigenous culture that is still in existence rather than one lost to history, as Serrano notes games so often do, citing the popularity of Viking and Samurai cultures ("Mining for Lore"), it seems odd to choose a distant-past version of the Tarahumara. The nonplayer characters' (NPCs') clothing, dwellings, and daily activities are pastoral and verge on an econostalgia for a simpler human existence free from modern technological encumbrance. The NPCs' lives are deeply dependent on the functionality of the natural world, as their frequent pleas for Mulaka's assistance attest. In this way, *Mulaka* represents indigenous people in a way that nonindigenous players expect to see them, which is disheartening, given that native essentialism is a kind of stereotyping that can be even more harmful than other forms of racism (Wildcat 36). This precolonial context nonetheless maintains the othering of wilderness spaces common to literature and other media by emphasizing supernatural corrupting influences there and locating the animal demigods' shrines in tucked away zones.

Nevertheless, the game demonstrates that a lore-steeped narrative drawn directly from real life is a viable way to enact indigenous ways of knowing, giving players a chance to explore values and customs in a culture not their own. Further reason for the value of a game as cultural preservation, Tarahumara themselves are losing grip on their traditions because their young people are growing up more connected with the modern world than with their heritage. They are less likely now than ever to speak the Tarahumara language or know the stories of their own culture's oral tradition, and their culture could eventually slip away completely ("Mulaka—The Game"). In addition to the folklore that constitutes its narrative, Lienzo was able to incorporate Tarahumara ideas into core game mechanics such as the three-soul health system: the Tarahumara believe that men have three souls (and women, four), so Mulaka's health appears as three glowing, white diamonds in the game's interface. Damage taken blackens each diamond in turn, and once one goes fully dark, the game animates a shimmering ghost of Mulaka being ripped from his body. Mulaka can heal in combat by performing a dance to summon his lost souls back into his body.

Mulaka is one way to raise awareness of Tarahumara culture through a medium that may resonate with a younger audience, meeting them where they are, so to speak. Serrano comments, "I also think that it's kind of naïve to expect people to get into these cultures if you don't present

them in the right medium, which—I think it's video games" ("Mining for Lore"). The game's ability to appeal to an international audience is encouraging; *Mulaka* has been well received in spite of some clunkiness of gameplay, and this bodes well for the World game genre in the future.[5]

Mulaka's Toxic World

Part of the appeal of World games thus far has been their stunning visuals and how gameplay communicates meaning just as much as the narrative does. *Mulaka*'s colorful palette is visually striking, but the world is also deadly, and over and over again the game presents the world's aggression and toxicity as unnatural, altered by outside forces. The demigod Cho'Mari, appearing to Mulaka as a moss-draped elk at the end of the game's starting zone, chooses Mulaka for the quest of preventing the apocalypse after watching him set the desert lands back into balance. Cho'Mari informs Mulaka that Terégori, the Lord of Death, is befouling the world above, and he beseeches Mulaka to seek the support of the other demigods—the woodpecker, the bear, the snake, and the puma—to gain their powers, enough strength to defeat Terégori. The player encounters evidence of environmental corruption across the regions in the game from the struggles of the people to the dangerous creatures inhabiting the lands. At times it is unclear whether the monsters have always been this way or if they are a product of Terégori's corruption, but some are clearly described as such. For example, in the jungles of Hueráach, Mulaka finds purple mushrooms called Wekogi Nori; the game explains: "Unlike other enemies, Wekogi Mori's attacks are not directly physical. This mushroom will create an expanding toxic fog that inflicts damage over time. There is no clear record of these creatures existing in the past. It seems like a new species, evolving in demand to the necessities of modern day survival" (*Mulaka*). The ecological understanding in the language used here could just as easily refer to modern Chihuahua, and while on the surface it is meant to indicate Terégori's influence, it also conveys an analogy between the digital world and the real one.

While some of the low-level monsters seem to be acting in accordance with expectations for their actions, larger enemies have darker roots, a trait that underpins their aggressive behavior. Like many cultures across the globe, the Tarahumara believe that the afterlife is an inverted version of life and that the spirit world is ever present in our daily lives. Many of the monstrous creatures Mulaka encounters are the product of imbalance between the two worlds. Wa'ruara Watakari (the emperor bullfrog), for example, is described this way: "The Guardian of the mystical lake. . . . It generally stays away from people and other creatures, living an isolated life far from the other dwellers of these lands. While generally tranquil, recently, the beast has shown unnaturally hostile behavior" (*Mulaka*). Another example is Ganó, the most ancient and formidable of the Ganoko (giants made of

stone, earth, or plants), who has been corrupted by the evil he sought to imprison by guarding the gate to the Underworld. Once defeated, Ganó opens the way for Mulaka, who journeys into the Underworld and faces Terégori, who appears as a wolf-shaped creature half-submerged in an oily pool that is also his fur, which sometimes parts to reveal sharpened bones and a bulbous red heart beneath.

Once Mulaka defeats Terégori, however, all is not well. Mulaka learns that the gods intend to go forward with the destruction of the world, in spite of his efforts. Mother Sun and Father Moon themselves deliver the brutal truth:

> You have assumed that Terégori, the cursed one, was spreading foulness and corruption around the world. . . . The truth is that it is not because of Terégori that people's hearts became cold and dark. It is because life became corrupted and creatures turned against each other that Terégori came to be in the first place. He blossoms from that corruption, he is indeed born from foulness and hate, not as a cause, but as a consequence. You can defeat him as many times as

Figure 10.1 Terégori Esqueltico, the Lord of Death, as he appears in a cutscene (in-game cinematic passage during which the player does not have control of the player-character).

> you want, he will just be born again, fueled by the corruption of the world. . . . At this point, a new start is the only solution. A new start where we use what we have learned to make a better world.
>
> (*Mulaka*)

Terégori is a literal embodiment of human hatred, violence, and abuse of the creatures with whom they share the world. Consideration of the game's endogenous meaning here invites us to conclude that the looming apocalypse is therefore human caused. Having reached the tipping point, the gods have no choice but to act, regardless of the admirable efforts of one man. Our interconnectedness with all life entails that we cannot remove ourselves from the consequences of our actions, and in Mulaka's case, the violent conflicts and related environmental degradation arising from human greed mirror our own.

The subtext of this moment is significant because of what Mulaka has done to get here, namely killing dozens of creatures and taking on the powers of the animal demigods. Progressing through the game requires both. Mechanics communicate values and hierarchies and, when focused around a character's prowess in combat, reinforces messages sanctioning that physical force is admirable and that killing is not only an option but also yields rewards. *Mulaka* mediates these moral lessons somewhat with a focus on exploration of the world to find the stones that unlock each subsequent zone, but the impetus to proceed is always to defeat the next enemy (always an animal or elemental being) in combat; such a practice is hardly based on an environmental ethic.

Furthermore, ending the game on this dispiriting note is a surprise. Games may sometimes wrap up their narratives leaving behind loose ends or lingering questions. Sometimes the hero dies in the process, but games do not usually have the hero fail in his quest. The consequences of failure feel more real when they cannot be circumvented—and especially when players cannot just try again to change the outcome. In this regard, *Mulaka*'s ending is profoundly environmental; it takes a standard narrative arc, which sets up players to expect success, and refuses to deliver a tidy conclusion. Players will not be able to save the world with the strength of their combat skills—not this time. The game does grant Mulaka the consolation prize of saving his people; however, while the Tarahumara may survive the apocalypse, the aftermath will be a desolate rebeginning that they will have to face alone, leaving players with a mixture of regret and hope as the credits roll. The danger here is the myth of the "new start": many films and other media[6] on this subject soften the blow of climate cataclysm by positioning viewers with the survivors, but the vast majority of us will not be so lucky—the poor certainly will not. We will not be gifted with a pristine new world from the gods. To consider this direction gives us a false sense of satisfaction when we should be feeling disturbed to the point of taking action.

The *Seeló* and Animal-Being

A further core tension of the violence in *Mulaka* is the smaller-scale, yet no less significant conflict between the Tarahumara people and the Seeló, giant mantis-men, and further tension arises from Mulaka's own similarity to them. Mulaka's ability to shape-shift seems to bring him into closer relationship with the nonhuman natural world; however, this connection does not go beyond the functional properties of these creatures: leaping (puma), flight (woodpecker), strength (bear), and swimming (river snake). There is no depth to play-as-animal in this game. The game also does not try to reconcile the killing of Seeló with Mulaka's transformational abilities, but the endogenous meaning of those abilities—communicating that animals are powerful protective forces with admirable traits that humans can learn to emulate—clashes sharply with the vicious Mantis-men. Mulaka's powers are evidence of his privileged position as Sukurúame: only he is capable of winning over the demigods, always through the core mechanics of violence, always justified via one of Hartmann's eight ways to engender moral distance in players. Enemies are rendered monstrous by their descriptions in the game, which pop up each time the player encounters a new one. These text descriptions explain the enemy's nature, often providing direct links to Tarahumara mythology, and give hints at how to defeat them. Most of the killing is justified by the explanation that Terégori has driven them mad and made them dangerous when they naturally would not be. This is only a partial justification, however, for the Seeló.

The Seeló are part of Tarahumara mythology. Enrique Servín, the cultural anthropologist with whom Lienzo worked, remarks that the Seeló are likely a symbolic representation of the Tepehuanes, with whom the Tarahumara had conflicts ("Mulaka—The Mythological Creatures"). Christophe Giudicelli describes these conflicts in detail in an article, explaining that the Spanish worked to turn the two peoples against one another for their own purposes of colonization and religious conversion. The two groups do differ in their worldviews: the Tarahumara worship the sun and moon, while Tepehuanes do not. However, it seems that much of the conflict between them was instigated by their colonizers as the Tepehuanes were brutally subjugated by the Spanish while the Tarahumara were granted peace treaties and lands. This history deeply problematizes the monstrous nature of the Seeló, if they do indeed represent the Tepehuanes.

Developer Alan Márquez comments on their design, thinking for the Seeló: "Because they are the only humanoid enemies, you get to feel hand-to-hand combat more. So they are, like, civilized, but when it comes to walking and jumping, they are very animalistic" ("Mulaka—The Mythological Creatures"). The game itself frames the Seeló leader, Wa'ruara Gu'wi, as an antagonist whom it is perfectly justifiable to kill:

> After rising through the ranks of the Mantis-men forces, this Seeló has led their armies through what has been considered the golden years of the Mantis reign. Though, the passing of time has clearly taken a toll on the mantis leader's state of mind. The once mighty, wise and sound general is now sickly, unpredictable and severely bipolar. The mantis attack on the city of Paquime came out of nowhere, no provocation no real reason to invade. Even amongst the army's troops themselves, a deep sensation of confusion could be felt. Although some might question Wa'ruara Gu'wi's sanity, he is still a formidable fighter and a very dangerous foe to face. He will try to use his expertise with magic to try and vanquish his enemy.
>
> (*Mulaka*)

While the description expresses respect for the general, it sets out a clear rationale for the unavoidable violence that must ensue between him and Mulaka, which the player needs to hear in order to accept this course of action from a spiritual leader like the Sukurúame. After Mulaka defeats the Mantis-men, E'láwi, the woodpecker demigod, tells him that the Seeló have acted in this irregular way because "they know the world's destruction is looming near and they are rampant, blinded by rage" (*Mulaka*). This layers on further justification for murdering them while at the same time inviting pity for them. A greater spiritual quest for Mulaka may have been an attempt to free them from this rage as he later does with Ganó, but the option does not exist.

Perhaps the most unsettling aspect of the perceived necessity of destroying the Mantis-men is their dehumanized representation in the game. Lienzo was being true to Tarahumara lore when they chose to include

Figure 10.2 Wa'ruara Gu'wi, the Seeló boss in the town of Paquime.

the Mantis-folk as they did, but by the game's end, the revelation that the world will be destroyed in spite of Mulaka's efforts calls into question the human–animal relationship that had seemed to be well established by his acquisition of shape-shifting powers from the demigods as well as the gods' perspectives on violence. After the Rehpa Muchúwame explain the true nature of Terégori, they say: "It is because of you that we now see the value of the Tarahumara people. And that is why we have decided to allow your people to transcend into the new world. A world where they shall thrive, for as long as they can follow your footsteps" (*Mulaka*). This Noah's Ark scenario means that everyone the player helped along their journey—the only everyday people the game depicts, all unambiguously good, victims of the Seeló and Terégori—will be saved, but the Mantis-people, the creatures, monsters, and beautiful landscapes will be destroyed utterly. With that, any remnant of the hatred between the peoples (homogeneity is the only path to peace?) and any environmental devastation they might wreak via warfare will be erased, gone from existence as well as from Mulaka's conscience—but perhaps not from the player's—and therein lies *Mulaka*'s greatest potential as a text engaged with slow violence: its potential impact on players.

Conclusions

Mulaka is part of a larger and ongoing conversation among originary nations about the world's social and environmental crises. In *Red Alert! Saving the Planet with Indigenous Knowledge*, Daniel Wildcat of the Euchee people—part of the Muskogee nation in the American Midwest—cautions us to consider that "[t]he peoples on the planet who have had the least to do with the climate crisis and yet are the most vulnerable to its destructive impacts should rightly lead these discussions" (60). Wildcat goes on, "Because indigenous people have paid attention to our Mother Earth, it is important to listen to what we can share with humankind. These knowledges are bound in unique lifeways—customs, habits, behaviors, material and symbolic features of culture emergent from the land and sea" (Wildcat 17), which, I would argue, can be especially effective when expressed through narrative in interactive media like games. Games "show, don't tell," as it were, and putting the responsibility for meaningful choices in players' hands is a powerful move, as proven by neuropsychologists, who in one study have found stronger similarities between playing games and doing physical activities than between consumption of games and watching movies (Isbister 3). *Mulaka* could be a crucial piece in the rhetoric of indigeneity to communicate the dire situation we are in.

With endogenous meaning foregrounded, successful games like Mulaka could pave the way for more explicit interactive media engagements with elements of slow violence that could help illustrate Nixon's connections between postcolonial and environmental themes as well. Consumers in the

Global North seem infatuated with the idea of human capacity to overcome the worst imaginable scenario, which is likely linked to our need for hope in dire circumstances, to see ourselves as victors over the worst nature has to offer (even if its worst comes from our own actions), including full-scale global catastrophes like climate change. Even our postapocalyptic media tend to ignore the lingering devastations of slow violence on the surviving population. But why not, for instance, use mechanics that richly simulate the effects of nuclear radiation and dirty bombs, as some survival games have done?[7] Why not place players in environments ravaged by "[climate] change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnification, deforestation, the radioactive aftermath of wars, acidifying oceans" (Nixon 2)? Why not tell stories of characters who must become ecological detectives,[8] determining the cause of disease and death in their postapocalyptic communities and enacting solutions to improve life for all? And why not engage with stories from outside the Global North to illustrate these ideas, rather than sticking to the American canon of games? Nixon indicates that scholars benefit from being more inclusive of marginalized voices of the Global South (235); he writes, "There is much to be said for a bioregional approach. . . . However . . . [all] too frequently, we are left with an environmental vision that remains inside a spiritualized and naturalized national frame" (238). It would behoove us, therefore, to think globally in our games as well, as addressing slow violence in any form that requires us to do.

Mulaka's bittersweet ending is powerful rhetoric in our cultural imagination, but it fails to fully embrace the risky, unsatisfying tactic of denying audiences the "reset button;" the world may end, but the player-character and his people live on. Still, the game opens important questions of how game structures can be leveraged to create meaning for players. It is all too easy to write off the depth here as mere entertainment, but the endogenous environmental narrative carries weight—if players are open to it. According to Tarahumara lore, the first people danced to awaken the earth and bring about all other life. And we may be able to alter the course of slow violence, if we pay close attention to the endogenous meaning arising from games like this—and from the earth itself.

> Mulaka's efforts have proven that humanity has courage. But sometimes it is wiser to simply start again.
>
> (*Mulaka*)

Notes

1. Controversy over depiction of gender in games dates from the 1980s. See Cassell and Jenkins (*From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*, 1998), for example, and the post-#GamerGate explosion of books on this topic, one of which, by Kafai, Richard, and Tynes, directly updates Cassell and Jenkins's text (*Diversifying Barbie and Mortal Kombat*, 2016). Coverage of this subject in scholarship and journalistic media is vast.

2. See, for example, Anthropy's games *Dys4ia*, *Triad*, and *Queers in Love at the End of the World*.
3. The controversial game *Postal*, for example, positions the player as a disgruntled postal service employee who goes on a shooting spree. The game was poorly received, not because of its level of violence (although it is often cited for this) but because of its average gameplay.
4. Greg Ulmer's book *Electronic Monuments* explores the concept of public and personal memorialization in digital media including concepts of peripherals—attaching digital artifacts to existing monuments, for example, with the use of augmented reality technology—and testimonials—websites that explain the monument and all of its various elements. Since the book's release in 2005, numerous examples have arisen such as memorial Facebook pages and memorialization for fallen soldiers in Iraq (www.ndsu.edu/pubweb/~kbrooks/memorials.html).
5. The first World Game was arguably the widely acclaimed *Never Alone*, made by Upper One Games in partnership with the Inupiaq people of Alaska in 2014.
6. Examples of this trope include the climate-themed apocalypse films *2012* and *The Day After Tomorrow*. It is also common—though much darker—in zombie media. For zombie media, such rebuilding may take hold briefly, but it nearly always comes apart.
7. For example, *Metro 2066* and, to a lesser extent, games in the *Fallout* series.
8. Sara L. Crosby's term for several of Edgar Allen Poe's protagonists and a healthier engagement with ecohorror than the ecophobia common in American media (520).

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