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Hauntological Form: Where We Might Find the New in Contemporary Videogames

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Abstract

This paper will examine a means by which contemporary videogames can recover a *Lost Future*. Central to this is expanding upon Mark Fisher's (2022a, 2022b)¹ and Simon Reynolds' (2012) insights provided around hauntology in the context of popular music. Hauntology begins to provide an answer to the question surrounding the viability of the future, in that nostalgia is instead a symptom of hauntology, a byproduct of media's increasing unwillingness to escape its past compounded by an inability to imagine a different future. This is where my concept of "Hauntological Form" is significant. It serves two core purposes; the first is to acknowledge contemporary videogames increasing dependence on past form and secondly that this can offer a solution to provide a version of newness, albeit at the cost of novelty. A distinction between *newness* and *novelty* is crucial in understanding the extent to which contemporary videogames are beholden to the past as well as what is available to provide something different *enough* to products that have come before.

Keywords: hauntology, nostalgia, videogames, form, new, novel

Introduction

To answer the question "where might we find the new" this paper will provide insight into the circumstances that encapsulate contemporary videogames. Acknowledging that since the start of the new millennium the future has been increasingly difficult to locate, simultaneously, contemporary videogames have been preoccupied with looking towards the past for answers. Nostalgia has often been considered as a potential source for the state of reverie that the past provides, whether that be from history or media form. However, nostalgia is not the source of the increasing reliance on the past, rather it is the identifiable symptom of something else, that being hauntology.

Mark Fisher (2022b, p. 25) asks "is hauntology, as many critics have maintained, simply a name for nostalgia?" The short answer is no, as the two terms are not the same thing, although there is overlap between the two. I argue nostalgia to be the *visible* element of hauntological processes upon videogame form. But, if this is the visible element, then how can we explain its presence, such as instances where consumers of media speak of nostalgia for something they have no memory of and/or exist outside of their own living memory?

If hauntology identifies that contemporary media is as reliant on the past as it is, what does this mean for the future? Is the *new* – and its presence in videogame form – at risk of disappearing, replaced by what might be initially identified as nostalgic longing. Fisher

¹ Both *Capitalist Realism* (originally published 2009) and *Ghosts of My Life* (originally 2014) were republished as second editions in 2022.

(2022b, p. 113) explains that “the kind of nostalgia that is so pervasive may be best characterised not as a longing for the past so much as an inability to make new memories”. This further supports the notion that the presence of what has previously been understood as nostalgia is not consumer-led, as might have been thought. Instead, this “inability to make new memories” is an inability for mediums to imagine not only a different present from what came before but also an inability to imagine a different future.

Expanding upon the work of Jacques Derrida, Mark Fisher, and Simon Reynolds on hauntology, I have identified a specific form that emerges from the relationship between hauntology – which can include identifiable nostalgia – and the efforts to maintain momentum within contemporary videogame form, I have termed this Hauntological Form. How hauntology, as well as nostalgia, is understood can vary based on who is asked as well as how far back one looks for a definition. Fisher, Reynolds, and I go beyond Derrida’s (1994, p. 10) coining of the concept which identified communism’s ability to resurface despite its supposed demise (as argued by Francis Fukuyama (1992)) and address the struggle of contemplating the future of media form. This paper will argue that hauntological form, despite initial appearances, provides *a* future for contemporary videogames (and by extension popular media) even if it is not as revolutionary as would have been expected by those previously imagining what the 21st century could bring.

Did Hauntology possess the new? Where did the future go?

Hauntology itself is not *new* but it is being used in a novel way. Jacques Derrida (1994, p. 10; Coverley, 2020, pp. 7–8) originally coined hauntology as a play on haunting and ontology (*l’hantologie*), outlining that elements of the past can return and continue to *haunt* the present. In *Specters of Marx* Derrida (1994) used hauntology to argue that communism had not disappeared with the “end of history” (Fukuyama, 1992) but was still a lingering presence. Hua Hsu (2018, para. 7) states that Fisher “borrow[s]” (or adopts) the term hauntology and uses it to “describe art that seems to yearn for a future that has never arrived”. Hsu’s statement is appropriate, as not only has Fisher made the term his own, but it also differs from Derrida who is stating that the future has still not been decided and that the past is influential in that process. Whereas Fisher applies hauntology to what can be considered an exhausted present. There is no steam left to power a new future. In practice, this suggests that Fisher’s use of hauntology is a criticism of creative media that seems to have given up on the future, and instead imitates the past, or more specifically, past media forms. Thus, the presence of hauntology treats the past as a repository for content.

Part of a wider trend that Fisher (2022b, p. 6) points out via Franco “Bifo” Berardi is “The slow cancellation of the future”. This trend is not a new phenomenon, as Fisher claims the process began between the 1970s and 1980s in wider culture, with those from earlier generations (pre-millennial) likely to be “startled by the sheer persistence of recognisable forms” which is particularly clear in popular music culture. Those growing up with popular music from the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, previously could use music styles as a way “to measure the passage of cultural time” (Fisher, 2022b, p. 7). Yet Fisher notes that when considering 21st century music, the idea of “future shock” (Toffler, 2022) has disappeared because there is nothing *new* to generate such a response (Fisher, 2022b, pp. 7–8). Fisher (2022a, p. 7) also argued “that the failure of the future was constitutive of a postmodern culture scene which, as

[Fukuyama] correctly prophesied, would become dominated by pastiche and revivalism". This brings about a question of whether the revivalism is a response to the "failure of the future" or a contributing factor of it. Or, that this is an inevitability, in which these two aspects grow in tandem.

When reviewing Fisher's work, Tom Whyman (2019, para. 14) notes that politics and culture "seem stuck in the same loop" despite technologies such as mobile communication and the internet having – as argued by Fisher – "altered the texture of everyday experience beyond all recognition". Yet conversely, Whyman argues that because of the rapid changes brought about by specific technological advances have enabled Fisher (2022b, p. 9) to state that "cultural time has folded back on itself". Meaning that because of the accessibility that the internet and interconnected technology provides, not only has "the past lost its lost-ness...similarly the future (and futurism, futuristic-ness) no longer has the charge it once did" as affirmed by Reynolds (2012, p. 245).

Combining access to past media and an ability to recreate the form/style of the past is as Reynolds (2012, p. 247) remarks a "paradoxical combination of speed and standstill". Supported by the observation that:

"In the analogue era, everyday life moved slowly...but the culture as a whole felt like it was surging forward. In the digital present, everyday life consists of hyper-acceleration and near-instantaneity...but on the macro-cultural level things feel static and stalled." (Reynolds, 2012, p. 247).

Whilst the future has become difficult to pursue, the continued presence of the past is at odds with how we can understand nostalgia. Nostalgia can be thought of as a wistful longing for something that has past, which would indicate that it is no longer accessible, and it is the sense of loss that makes it powerful. However, it is via Dom Ford's (2021) consideration of Fisher's (and Reynolds') work that helps to identify the problem with considering nostalgia in this way, given how *present* it is. Ford has also been influenced by Fisher's consideration of "retro", highlighting his reference to the time "lived through since the 1970s of 'not giving up the ghost'". Further explained by Fisher "as a failed mourning" (Fisher, 2022b, p. 22; Ford, 2021, para. 12) meaning that instead of moving on and "mourning" for the time that has past, popular culture (specifically media from the Global North) has failed to do so. Instead holding onto the time that past during the latter parts of the 20th century, leading one to posit whether the past can be mourned if it never *died*? However, there might be a fear or concern that the past could be lost, which is where other connections between hauntology and nostalgia can arise.

Ford (2021, para. 19) supports this, arguing that "the present is suffused with the presence of absence, the haunting of the past that is sometimes literal and crystallised, pointing to a broader spectrality". Ford also mentions the irretrievability of the past, yet, in this instance that is not the issue. The past is all too accessible. I argue that it is *because* of this and a seeming desire to *attempt* to escape – or move on from – the past that has seen this haunting become more problematic. This has resulted in identifying an expansion upon Ford's (2021, para. 12) distinction of "modern sense of nostalgia" which represents the loss of the past, whereas crucially "hauntology remarks upon the loss and absence of the past simultaneously with its presence in the present".

This is apt when considering Svetlana Boym's (2002, p. 8) exploration of nostalgia, notably her description of "[m]odern nostalgia...as a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return". Nostalgia, unsurprisingly, is too focused on the sense of loss that can be attributed with the past, as opposed to identifying nostalgia in the present, which is not the same as hauntology. Nostalgia can represent a more intentional attempt of trying to reclaim the past and transport it to the present. Still, the result will be an anachronism, sticking out from the contemporary setting, appearing as a form where it is apparent that nostalgic elements have been brought to it. Hauntology though is different with the *intent* of its presence.

The continued presence of the past in its act of haunting the present does however, as suggested by Fisher (2022b, p. 22), give a "nostalgic quality to [the] haunting" despite this seeming contradictory to the point made previously. Yet, the reason why in practice it is not a contradiction is because by "not giving up the ghost" Fisher (2022b, p. 22) states that the result is "lost futures: looking to the past for a possible future, but a future that can no longer exist". This is a key distinction. We have been fixated on looking at the past and its relationship with the present, meanwhile efforts for a future different (in trajectory) to our present is what is at risk of being lost. Whilst this can be evident across a spectrum of issues, it is no less true with videogame form.

Novelty is dead, but we can still have "new" things.

As stated at the beginning of this paper the question that is being addressed is "where we might find the new". To do so though, it is crucial to distinguish what is actually being referred to when talking of *new*. My research into understanding what is happening to contemporary videogame form gained greater clarity after having deliberately separated how *new* is perceived as opposed to *novelty*. The two terms are often used synonymously, but, separating them enables us to identify what can be done with elements from the past and the impact these can have upon contemporary videogame form (as well as other media forms).

What this means is that mediums such as videogames can still claim to provide new pieces of media, but those media pieces lack the novelty (distinctiveness) that previously was more commonly found. Expanding on this, albeit reductively, *new* can be in the form of a product that has not existed in this exact form before and is available for consumption, a new *product*, whereas *novel* provides something inherently different and unique from what has come before. For example, a videogame such as *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions, 2019) is a new IP (Intellectual Property) and offers unique gameplay as well as narrative elements for players. Contemporary videogames, therefore, can provide novelty, but the past two decades have seen it decline within mainstream output; hence contributing to why questions surrounding the locating of new exist.

Why, though is such a distinction needed? A shortage of innovation and revolutionary change (as opposed to more gradual evolutionary change) can be observed in the videogames medium and can be considered a response to players' consumption habits. Derek Thompson (2018, p. 7) has argued that "[m]ost consumers are simultaneously *neophilic*, curious to discover new things, and deeply *neophobic*, afraid of anything that is too new". This is reflected in the mainstream videogames released that continue to be commercially successful.

Tease something different yet provide familiarity. This is where we can identify hauntological form, as to compensate, mediums are looking towards the past for inspiration as well as a source for alternative elements. These are to make up for the lack of revolutionary change but still enough to either provide evolutionary change (or the illusion of it) or mask the absence of meaningful change via something *different* to other contemporary releases.

There is also access to the wealth of past ideas and content which has been contributing to the facilitation of late-stage capitalism. This is because the direction that cultural media such as videogames, film, and music are going in are engaging with a contradiction of their own mediums as well as that of capitalism; that being the continual production of new things to consume. It is also in line with what Fredric Jameson (1991, p. 20) has identified via what he called the “nostalgia mode”. Resulting in an anachronism that at first “are sufficiently ‘historical’-sounding” but there is also “something not quite right about them” (Fisher, 2022b, p. 11). Rather than providing consumers with “new” (or rather *novel*) products to consume, the past is being mined to extract the last penny (Newman, 2009, para. 5) to provide instead media products that appear new or different enough from what was previously available. Therefore, working to delay capitalism’s end by helping to sustain its existence with the illusion of “new” products to sell to and appease consumers. This highlights late-stage capitalism’s dependency on the past to maintain the façade of forward momentum and squeeze out profits from previous production.

Mainstream videogame franchises have been awash with this approach, with continued entries of long-running franchises (some annually). *Halo Infinite* (343 Industries, 2021) is one such example. The way the game was described during development and subsequently marketed was that this new entry was supposed to provide a new experience by providing players with an “open-world” to explore. Not only had this partly been done in a previous entry (*Halo 3: ODST* (Bungie, 2009)) but the final product was a conventional First-Person-Shooter (FPS) that included tropes that were present amongst other contemporary releases that had come before it.

Hauntological Form: A solution to maintaining momentum in contemporary media form.

Hauntological form is a means of understanding when contemporary form is intrinsically haunted by the past. This *haunting* takes hold in different ways, whether that be from past media forms, historical/past events, or in-game (narrative) past events. Identifying hauntological form does not need to satisfy all these conditions and can be a variable combination. This also does not suggest that contemporary media forms are incapable of novelty or newness, but elements of past forms still linger, and it is this factor that changes how we can understand contemporary form and where changes can be identified.

This aligns with a quote identified by Reynolds (2012, p. 361) that “when the past sounds more like the future than the present does, revival becomes progressive”. As when the past becomes ubiquitous in contemporary form, it is irrelevant whether futuristic (or just forward-facing) media output is present as hauntological form can become the norm and the *new* variations or reworkings of past form are deemed as progressive instead.

What is being argued is that hauntological form is a fusion of Derrida's and Fisher's interpretations. Agreeing with Fisher that the future is difficult to find, especially when the past has become a core point of reference, but also acknowledge Derrida's insights that the past can impact the present which in turn can alter the future. Hauntological form can be understood as when contemporary form is intrinsically haunted by the past. But also acts as a solution to the cultural malaise, that instead of wallowing in the lack of novelty, embraces the presence of the past to provide an opportunity for something different.

Aided by different methods of exploration it can be understood that hauntology provides an insight into how the past is increasingly acting upon the medium's present. No longer remaining as the past, but instead actively *haunting* the present. However, hauntological form is not considered as a solely negative concept. Whilst it can be understood negatively in the sense that it highlights a lack of revolutionary change from the medium, it should also be viewed as a means for videogames to sustain some evolutionary change.

This is argued to be evident with the more recent mainline entries of *The Legend of Zelda* series, *Breath of the Wild (BotW)* (Nintendo EPD, 2017) and its direct sequel *Tears of the Kingdom (TotK)* (Nintendo EPD, 2023) – the latter further evident of hauntological form due to its significant, but meaningful, reuse of many elements from the previous entry. *BotW* successfully managed to break away from the structural conventions that had formed in previous 3D entries of the series, however, it also meaningfully benefited by continuing to utilise elements from across the series as well as objectives and iconography. These elements from the past, rather than holding these new entries back by an adherence to the past, instead benefit from previous creative elements to facilitate novel ideas without having to invent something wholly original.

Recognising hauntology as a source for nostalgia still does not quite answer the problem considering the location of the *new*, which is where the term hauntological form provides the final piece needed to provide *an* answer – or at least a tool to help – to explain “where we might find the new”. Hauntological form provides a means of sustaining contemporary videogames amidst its inability to imagine a different future (as per Fisher's concerns) and the inefficiencies it is dealing with, such as extended development times, which contribute to the medium's reluctance to take risks. Therefore, videogames find safety and support from its past, using it as a resource to maintain relevance and provide the illusion of momentum.

The significance of the past and its reappearance in the present is not just about bringing media *products* back, as crucially in the case of hauntological form, it is also about incorporating elements of it into the present to do something *different*. This aligns with what Matt Colquhoun (2022, p. xiii) clarifies regarding a misconception about Fisher's work: “it was not his position that nothing ever happens or ever changes [in culture]” but rather that during 2006 and 2014 (whilst Fisher was still alive) and from 2014 to 2022 (after Fisher's death) “everything changed, and that's why it is so weird that so much has stayed the same”.

Therefore, with hauntological form, I am providing a concept for contemporary videogames to efficiently utilise past form to sustain itself despite a lack (but not complete absence) of novelty yet still provide newness (in the form of new products), whether that be to a new audience or an existing one. Hauntological form acts as the evolution of Derrida's and Fisher's work, remixing together as something more optimistic than Fisher's

interpretation and more specific than Derrida's application. Hauntological form does not exist without the previous work on hauntology and builds upon it as a response to the ongoing state of videogame form.

Conclusion

In the aim of determining where one "might find the new", hauntological form provides the videogames medium with the means of offering an alternative perception of the past, positioning it instead as a means of ensuring that the medium has a future. Hauntological form provides a more optimistic view than alluded to by Fisher's and Reynolds' initial application of hauntology upon media, primarily music in their case. Whilst contemporary videogames are indeed haunted by their past, this is not a weight holding it back. Rather, it is a means of familiarity to enable survival when momentum is more difficult to sustain. The past provides a wealth of resources that videogames (and other mediums) can utilise. Novel forms are the sacrifice of this as they are inherently compromised by this approach. However, hauntological form enables new variations (remediations) of past forms that can both appeal to those familiar with previous forms as well as entice new audiences; thus, giving them access to new products. The result is that the *new* is more familiar than had previously been anticipated for future forms, which helps provide an explanation as to why it has been harder to find. Previous expectations have been for continued novel experiences to be present in future videogame releases, resulting in bemusement due to its absence. Keeping in mind the initial intentions for hauntology from Derrida, the past can bring meaningful impact upon the present, especially in the face of an uncertain future.

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