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UNIVERSITY OF
PLYMOUTH

HAUNTOLOGICAL VIDEOGAME FORM: NOSTALGIA AND A “HIGH TECHNOLOGY” MEDIUM

By

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Signed Author's Declaration

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Doctoral College Quality Sub-Committee.

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Abstract

James Sweeting

Hauntological Videogame Form: nostalgia and a 'high technology' medium.

This thesis introduces the term Hauntological Form as a means of examining the contemporary form of mainstream videogames. The increasing presence of nostalgia is deemed paradoxical to a forward-facing high technology medium such as videogames. Yet, this is only a symptom of an underlying problem with the medium. By expanding upon hauntology, as used by Mark Fisher and Simon Reynolds to examine the state of popular music, the thesis will use this to identify what is happening to the current form of videogames and why.

The scope of the thesis is concerned with the current state of the mainstream videogames medium and investigates the increasingly troubled perspective the medium has with the future. It is argued that the medium to compensate for this looks to its past and treats it as a resource to sustain itself.

Aiding this investigation the thesis provides focuses on the contemporary state of the medium as of writing, which is 2023, and is supported by examples across the history of the medium but no earlier than 1983 when the North American videogame market crash occurred. Thus, allowing the thesis to consider the previous time the medium faced a turning point.

Influencing this thesis is that it is not primarily targeting an academic audience. Instead, it aims to also be of benefit to videogame developers, videogame students, and others actively engaged with the videogames medium.

The contribution to knowledge that this thesis is providing is a new understanding of the changing form of contemporary mainstream videogames. One that instead of providing novel experiences is looking to its past to provide resources for remediated experiences so that "new" products can enter the market. Thus, changing the way that the medium presents itself, gradually dropping the pretence that it is a forward-facing medium and instead relying on its past to sustain the medium long term.

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Introduction

The "Problem" and the Paradox

Videogames have fascinated me ever since I played *Microsoft Solitaire* and *Minesweeper* on my mother's Windows 95 PC. Unlike television (which similarly had a 4:3 box to view content) I could directly decide what would happen next. At this time videogames were going through a rapid pace of acceleration and change.

Not long after I received *my* first videogame, *Lego Island* (Mindscape, 1997) – a videogame that could be argued to be a proto 3D open-world game despite being small by today's standards – that enabled me to freely explore a digital island and provide me with a memorable experience unlike any I had encountered before. Interacting with the islands voiced inhabitants and examining every corner of the island made a lasting impression.

The significance of this became clearer when I was given two Nintendo Game & Watch's that my mum had purchased from an airport a few years before I was born. This showed me that in the span of roughly a decade, some, videogames had gone from being about as powerful as a calculator to being able to provide explorable 3D environments. This has stayed with me and has been something that I have been paying attention to for over two decades. However, during the past decade I had noticed something *different* about the medium, something that puzzled me. The medium was starting to operate differently to how it had been doing so for the past couple of decades that I was aware of (and even further based on additional knowledge).

I am cautious to use the word "changed" here, as it could misrepresent the argument that this thesis will be making. Videogames over the past decade have not radically changed, and

that is what I am trying to understand. Some change has occurred, and I will be outlining what I refer to as Hauntological Form has enabled this to still occur yet at the same time act as a direct link to the past. Innovation in the medium has not disappeared but crucially the pace of it has slowed down, especially as can be observed during the first three years of the ninth console generation. The revolutionary change I witnessed as a child and continued to notice as I grew up is no longer. Instead, a much more restrained evolutionary change is just about taking place.

This led to the "problem" facing the videogames medium and the paradox that emerges from it that I am exploring in this thesis. That being a digital medium that for much of its existence has been focused on engaging with "high technology" and providing the next best thing has shifted towards focusing so much on its own past instead. Yet, it is still working to maintain the illusion of being a forward-facing medium, rather than accepting the 'lost future' (Fisher, 2014) that it is working with. This results in a paradox which has been puzzling me and has been one of the underlying forces behind this thesis.

The Writing Approach and Audience

There is not a singular target audience for this thesis rather the intention is that it is accessible for a range of people involved with the videogames medium in some capacity. Whether that be fellow videogame academics (researchers and lecturers/teachers/instructors), developers/creators, and students. The latter for me is important as I want my writing to provide an approachable text for students (including my own) getting into Game Studies and thinking more critically about the form of videogames,

and why they create videogames in the style that they do. I have also considered those who I have not just listed but are still especially engaged with videogames.

With this in mind, the writing style I am using in this thesis is not the most "academic" (as evidenced by this very sentence). Part of this is influenced by the core texts that this thesis engages with, those being *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (2014) and *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (2009), both by Mark Fisher, and *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction To Its Own Past* (2012) by Simon Reynolds. These three books address complex issues affecting popular music (and to a lesser extent other mediums), yet these are not obscured by unnecessary overly complex language.

The writing style also evolves as the thesis progresses for two reasons. One is due to the nature of what is being explored as the term of Hauntological Form and the particular impact that hauntology is having upon contemporary mainstream videogames is the core of the contribution to knowledge that this thesis is providing. Aiding this was the writing itself as a method of researching this phenomenon upon the medium. This leads to the other factor that contributed to the shift in writing style. That being that because what I was researching and subsequently applying was new insights rather than highlighting the crucial work of others (which was more prominent in the first half of the thesis), required a different approach. In practice this meant that I originally tackled the second half of the thesis in a style similar to a web article or blog. This enabled me to write about the different specific parts before later bringing these together in a single word document, linking the ideas together, and refining the text.

Also supporting the text throughout is the use of footnotes. Often these are used to provide additional context, information, or clarification. Whilst not directly disrupting the flow of the

main text. I have also occasionally used footnotes to act as a conversation with the reader as well as to refer to what has been mentioned previously and what is to come.

As suggested by the start of the introduction this thesis could be considered a personal exploration of the medium, but that would be an overstatement. The research has been informed by my observations of the medium over the past two decades, and specifically the past decade. Whilst videogames have been a constant in my life these two decades, it has been since the 2010s that I have engaged with the medium as a journalist/critic and an academic, as a result my writing has been partly informed by an auto-ethnographic approach. Despite a passion for the medium, this thesis is not a "puff piece" as it retains a critical lens with the objective of supporting the medium by addressing an underlying problem that will need tackling. In addition, my academic background in International Politics (which covered a broad spectrum from the Social Sciences – including my first introduction to Game Studies) introduced me to many of the non-videogame academics that also feature in this thesis. Providing additional interdisciplinary variety and support.

What I Mean by Videogame *Medium* and *Form*

Throughout this thesis I consistently refer to the videogames *medium*. Specifically, the mainstream (AAA) side of the medium. I have also purposefully decided not to use the term "industry", with a couple of exceptions. During the first half of my time writing this thesis I had previously considered the medium and the industry to be two distinct but linked entities. However, it was after reading a journal article by Kevin Schut that helped me to realise that using two terms was not only ineffective but could also lead to confusion. Using the example of television, Schut (2007) states that:

> 'It is crucial to recognize that a medium is not just technology…Television is a medium, but it is not just cameras and television sets. The medium of television includes that entire complex of institutions, machinery, and systems necessary for it to be a tool of communication. That means that the medium is constantly developing and redeveloping – it is not static, and it is not independent of human culture and society.'

Schut (2007) continues, adding that television is where it is today because of a mix of 'material realities' and 'extended historical cultural developments'. With these different factors, even with technological advancements, television could not change 'overnight' because there are also the 'complex social developments' that can both facilitate and hinder the implementation of said technological advancements depending on the situation. What this suggests is that a medium is not just one part or one section of something like television in Schut's example or videogames as my focus. Rather the term is used to refer to the multifaceted nature of media. It is also apt for this thesis as it is looking at the interplay between the technological advancements that are still taking place (which contributes to the paradox) and the different factors that impact upon the videogame products that are created, whether that be cultural, political, or economic. As a result, medium is a versatile term that for the purposes of this thesis can be used to refer to videogames broadly when not referring to individual videogames (products). I also refer to videogames as products during this thesis. Whilst I believe videogames should be viewed as equal to other mediums, we cannot escape that the end result that a player (or just as valid, consumer) engages with is a product that has been sold and purchased, even if it is using a different monetisation model.

Mia Consalvo (2016, p. 2) argues that it does not make sense 'to talk about "the Japanese game industry" or even the "game industry" as if it were a monolithic entity'. This will seem counter to my use of "medium" as a singular term, but there are two nuances that support my use. The first is that, as previously stated, this thesis is focusing on the mainstream side

and therefore this very distinction acknowledges that my research is not applying to the entirety of the medium. The second is that "industry" as a term is much more granular as it can be easily segmented, as identified by Consalvo and in my interpretation is more interested in the supporting economic structures linked to videogames.

Brendan Keogh (2023) in his recent book *The Videogame Industry Does Not Exist* also shares Consalvo's argument that a single industry does not exist and that the composition of videogame makers is more nuanced. However, due to the focus on the mainstream (and the publication date of the book) this thesis will not be engaging with Keogh's latest work. Furthermore, Jesper Juul's (2019) book *Handmade Pixels: Independent Videogames and the Quest for Authenticity* provides an in-depth exploration of the "independent games" part of the videogames medium which this thesis occasionally refers to in relation to independent/indie games where necessary.

Throughout the thesis, and including its title, "form" (can be considered as short for "media form" or "videogame form") is used to refer to the "thing" of videogames. That which is directly interacted with during its stages of existence, from development to consumption. What informs the *shape* that a videogame ultimately takes. Expanding upon this is that form will also be understood as representing two component parts that help us to understand a videogame. That being the combination of videogame "core" – the gameplay (mechanics, functions, the way in which the player interacts with the videogame) – and "shell" – aesthetics (visuals and sounds). Frans Mäyrä (2008) came up with core and shell as a means of distinguishing different elements that make up not only individual videogames, and videogame genres, but also the medium more broadly. Which is why it is not only helpful to

use separately in this thesis but also understanding form as the combination of these two elements.

Mainstream (AAA), Console Generations, and North American Market Crash Epoch

As already mentioned, but important for it to be repeated, the focus of this thesis is on mainstream (AAA) videogames. Specifically, the section of the medium that centres around interacting with and availability for dedicated videogame consoles. This means that I am focusing on the medium that is predominantly impacted by the current "big three" console manufactures and platform holders, those being Nintendo, Sony (PlayStation), and Microsoft (Xbox). These are not the only three videogame companies that impact mainstream videogames in the console space, as the large videogame publishers such as Activision[1], Electronic Arts (EA), Ubisoft, Take-Two Interactive, Sega, among others also contribute to the form of the medium. I will not be focusing on the specifics of PC related elements of the wider videogames medium, even if these can be considered part of the mainstream. Increasingly videogames developed for consoles are released on PC and vice versa, but by concentrating specifically on console videogames allows this thesis to focus on the nuances relating directly to consoles due to the dedicated focus of these machines. Mobile games will also be overlooked during this thesis, for similar reason as with PC games, that they are not dedicated gaming machines (not because the games available are being considered as "not real games"). With the focus on dedicated videogame machines that play mainstream games, arcade units would technically fit this distinction, but they are also not being looked

[1] At the time of writing Microsoft is in the process of finalising the purchase of Activision/Blizzard/King (for $68.7 billion) and is going through regulatory approval (Walsh, 2023).

at. Partly because its contemporary relevance is minimal (particularly in the West and has been decreasing in Japan, especially since the Covid lockdowns (Ashcroft, 2021; Imada, 2022)) but also because this is a well explored area by Raiford Guins' (2014) *Game After: A Cultural Study of Video Game Afterlife*, Carly A. Kocurek (2015) *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade*, and Alan Meades' (2022) *Arcade Britannia: A Social History of the British Amusement Arcade*.

Whilst it can be debated that in certain instances independent (indie) videogames can gain considerable recognisability, to an extent that is more frequently found with AAA videogames, this thesis is purposefully distinguishing "mainstream" as referring to AAA console videogames. This is because despite how different sized videogames can be received, it is the intentionality from developers/publishers behind the creation of AAA videogames, as well as the scale, and the means of monetisation that distinguish them from other videogames in the medium.

Furthermore, it is this particular form of videogame that my research is focused on. Other emerging forms of videogame are (understandably) receiving increased attention, yet this leaves a growing gap in understanding what is happening to the comparatively established form of AAA console videogames. Anecdotally I have observed amongst the key demographic an increasing general unawareness of the nuances taking place within the console space due to their focus on creating videogames for and subsequent engagement with PCs.

In addition, I recognise the argument raised by Nieborg and Foxman (2023, p. 19) that 'bigger does not necessarily infer mainstream', despite being one way of categorising AAA videogames. However, the substantial people power that exists behind AAA development

and the budgets that support this contribute to targeting an intended mainstream audience. This distinction is a part of what separates AAA from indie development.

Furthermore, this thesis is not engaging with Nieborg and Foxman's main argument that videogames themselves are not mainstream. Rather, it is my position – and of the thesis – that videogames are another instance of popular culture and share elements with other mediums. Thus, comparisons will be made across different mediums, notably that of popular music (particularly in Chapter 4) as well as film (Chapter 2 uses *Star* Wars as one key example as well as additional case studies for comparison), enabling a better understanding of videogames as the focus of this thesis. This will also contribute to insights that can be applied to other mediums as well regarding the relationship between past and contemporary media form.

The work of this thesis deliberately does not apply to the entirety of the videogames medium. This enables focus on the longer established part of the medium, the insights of which can then subsequently be cascaded across the rest of the medium, whether by myself or others. This approach maintains clarity across the thesis as other parts of the medium such as mobile games have different target audiences and crucially are designed to bring in as many players as possible. This is a necessity due to the different monetisation model used. In addition, due to the platform that these games are available on, the form is inherently different and therefore influences from the mediums past do not have the same impact.

Due to the focus on the console side of the medium the thesis will also be utilising the periodisation of "console generations". Whilst this is not an *official* designation, it is used by many linked to the medium, including journalists, players, and developers/publishers. Sony

Introduction

Interactive Entertainment's President and CEO Jim Ryan has said in an interview that 'we have always said that we believe in generations' (Dring, 2020). Whilst this was in relation to distinguishing the upcoming 'next-gen console' PlayStation 5 from the soon to be superseded PlayStation 4, it shows recognition of the wider periodisation at play. The advantage of this is that a generally agreed upon series of epochs exist which aids discussion and identification of different consoles and videogames. For my purposes it can also act as a shorthand for when I am referring to different time periods, which is additionally helpful as console generations do not align alongside decades as a periodisation.

The use of console generations also helps identify the epoch that is the furthest back that this thesis refers to in the context of videogames[2]. That being the start of the third-generation which saw the introduction of Nintendo's first home console[3] as well as its first home system in the North American market. This was also the first generation to follow the North American Market Crash[4] a consequence of the disastrous results after Atari put too much stock (literally) into high expectations for *E.T: The Extraterrestrial* and a licensed version of *Pac-Man* both launching in 1982 (Sheff, 1993, p. 150). These two videogames were not the sole reason for the difficulties faced by Atari or the rest of the medium in North America at the time, but the damage was done. This left the market open for Japanese videogame company Nintendo to claim the market largely unopposed in 1985.

The arrival of Nintendo in North America and its role in relaunching the home videogame market there has been significant in contributing to how the mainstream videogames medium expanded during the following couple of decades. With its role in "rebooting" the

[2] There are multiple references to human history in this thesis which date back much further.
[3] The first that supported interchangeable videogame cartridges. They had previously created plug and play systems only available in Japan, these had a small selection of games "built-in".
[4] Known in Japan as the "Atari shock".

medium in North America also makes it a more tangible epoch that can be referred back to. As for an "end date" that is considered, this is right up until the deadline[5]. Whilst the medium might be argued to be slowing down, the news cycle around the medium does not share this same problem[6]. As a result, there has continued to be announcements that directly support my arguments.

The Global North, West/Western, and Japan

Whilst videogames are a global medium, the nature of mainstream development is still dominated by publishers and developers located in the Economic North; this includes North America, Western Europe, and specific individual countries from Asia and Oceania including, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand. This informs the distinction used to compare and contrast between "Western" and Japanese videogames because of the notable differences in both form as well as approach.

Using West/Western to refer to videogames from North America, Europe (EU, Eurozone countries, and UK) and Australasia identifies a separation from the Global North. This builds upon the distinction made by Samuel P. Huntington in *The Clash of Civilizations* (Huntington, 1996; Hendrikson, 2022) which defines "Western" as centring in Europe and North America, Australasia can be included due to cultural connections/histories to the UK. Latin America, Central America, and Russia are considered separate. This thesis is not debating these distinctions, instead it is using a pre-established definition that applies directly to the

[5] The thesis was submitted in July 2023.
[6] This is exacerbated by June/July traditionally being the time of year where many videogames are announced. Previously this was because of E3, but since its demise has been replaced by separate presentations held by the different publishers.

countries being referred to in this thesis as “Western”. Huntington also makes a distinction between “Japanese” and “Sinic” which supports my focus on Japan in this thesis (China is also mentioned a couple of times).

Further supporting the distinction that I am using is Mia Consalvo’s (2016, p. 5) work looking at ‘Japan’s videogames in global contexts’. She makes a distinction between ‘Japanese games and Western interest in them’. Later adding that ‘strategically retaining and promoting a certain kind of Japaneseness…can be more successful’ (Consalvo, 2016, p. 211). This does exist to identify a *difference* but, suggesting an otherness, especially regarding Japanese videogames today is too strong a statement to make. There is not a binary separation between Japanese and Western videogames, but there are nuances between them.

In addition, Japanese videogame creators also use this distinction helping them to target their audience and market their videogames effectively. President and COO of Sega and Chairman of Atlus (which is owned by Sega), Yukio Sugino in an interview with Famitsu, identified the differences between the Japanese market and ‘overseas’. Stating that videogames such as *Like a Dragon*[7] and *Persona* ‘are beginning to sell well overseas because Japanese users recognized the value of these games in the first place. In that sense, Japan is an important market, and I believe it is a prerequisite to create games that Japanese people find interesting’ (Reggy, 2023). Therefore, a rationale exists for why videogame journalists, content creators, and players use “West(ern) and Japan” to distinguish between videogames. However, it is important that I substantiated the terms that I use and not just rely on non-academic norms, especially as the terms on their own have different contexts and interpretations.

[7] Previously called *Yakuza* outside of Japan.

"We" – Who Are the Consumers?

Throughout this text there will be the inclusion of "we", this will predominantly be referring to those who play videogames who are based in the "traditional videogame markets", those being North America, Western Europe, Oceania, and Japan. Videogames might be a global medium but how videogames are engaged with differs around the world. Within this is a focus on a broad (but still defined) age range from 16 to late 50s (meaning that the latter would have grown up with videogames in the 1980s). This age range is specified due to the assumption that within that, and those who still actively play videogames, there will be a familiarity with past videogames and at the very least ones they would have grown up with as well as an awareness of videogames that were released before they started playing videogames as a long-term pastime. This also covers those who are more likely (but not exclusively) to engage with videogames via dedicated hardware such as consoles/systems[8].

This "we" does not claim to speak for all people, or even all videogame players, but does aim to cover a large section who play mainstream console videogames and have enough awareness of the medium to exhibit nostalgic tendencies (or at least the appearance of). Furthermore, I refer to myself (as "I") in this thesis. To provide context of this perspective I will often approach arguments made primarily as a videogame academic & lecturer as well as someone who plays a wide variety of videogames and is located in the West (specifically the UK).

[8] This will also likely overlap with those who only (or predominantly) play videogames on PCs/computers as the videogames accessible on different hardware is increasingly available on multiple platforms. But as previously stated, that is not the focus.

The focus is on the videogames and the surrounding medium rather than specifically the players. However, it is unavoidable to refer to them during this thesis, nor is it appropriate to ignore them. When referring to players I will either refer to them as such or I will refer to them as consumers. The latter name will be in instances largely associated when referring to videogames as products, as this shifts the way in which players relationship with videogames are considered in certain instances.

Scope Of Thesis

Even though this thesis is focusing on why nostalgia is present in videogames and identifying the role that hauntology has in the impact that it has upon videogame form, my aim is not, and nor should it be, to cover everything about nostalgia or hauntology. This extends to not covering all applications of both terms in relation to videogames. Ultimately the thesis is concerned about what is happening to the contemporary form of mainstream videogames. Nostalgia is an identifiable symptom of this and hauntology will be argued to be an underlying factor, resulting in Hauntological Form.

Chapter 1: Taxonomy of Nostalgia

Introduction

Nostalgia as a term is one that is often used increasingly in the context of videogames. It is something understood at some level by those who engage with videogames; typically, those that play videogames, but also those who are involved in creating videogames as well. It is also not uncommon to see the use of the term extend to a range of articles, be it academic or journalistic. If, therefore, nostalgia is being talked and written about, then why is this thesis trying to unpack this term? The reasoning behind this is that there is a problem with the term *nostalgia* and how it is understood. Typically, the term is understood in a broad way, evoking a fondness for the past and other positive connotations for recalling something as being better than it was.

This thesis will begin by providing a counter argument to this, identifying how nostalgia in the context of videogames acts as an antithesis to a medium that has previously long seen itself as a forward moving medium; meaning one that has prided itself on chasing the latest technological trends. This also extends to the form of videogames, one that utilises events of the past to take advantage of a collective memory[9] that can exist within the players for a history that they have no personal memory for; recalling the idea of 'Legislated Nostalgia' by Douglas Coupland in *Generation X* (1992). It's not just historical events that this can relate to, as it can be argued that a cultural memory exists within the videogames medium which extends to those who play and create videogames, resulting in a wider knowledge of the medium of videogames that they have not played but inform their understanding of the

[9] Explored further in Chapter 3.

medium; as well as feeding into their desires for new videogames that take elements from the mediums past.

As a term, nostalgia has evolved over the past four centuries since it was first coined, but it has gradually moved away from its original understanding that saw it viewed as a sickness – this will be expanded upon shortly – to today where it is usually understood as a joyful longing for the past. This thesis will partly seek to provide an interpretation of nostalgia that brings it more in line with its earlier understanding, that unchecked nostalgia can be a regressive and damaging. It can also be sign of something larger at play, with nostalgia instead helping to mask the cracks that exist in contemporary society, aiding to generate the desire and longing for either the past or elements from the past that denote *better times*. This also applies to the current state of the videogames medium, as the use of nostalgia in design and marketing could be an industrial solution/strategy/compromise for the medium when it runs out of momentum and tries to appease its audience to distract them whilst it tries to recapture that momentum. The intentionality of this will be explored later in this thesis.

The Nostalgic Sickness?

Amongst those who have written about nostalgia, many have identified the source of the term, that being a Swiss physician named Johannes Hofer who coined the term in his medical dissertation in 1688 (Boym, 2011). Contrary to the Greek roots of the word, which is a portmanteau of νόστος, *nóstos* ('return home') and ἄλγος, *álgos* ('longing'). This is outlined by Svetlana Boym (2011) who also goes on to state that she 'would define it as a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed'. This is at odds with the

original application of nostalgia, as the initial understanding in the seventeenth century was medical in nature, with it considered a disease that could be cured. This was also a case of misdiagnosis with instances of tuberculosis often being the cause of the illness mistaken for nostalgia (Boym, 2011).

In the example above, Boym concentrates on the treatment of nostalgia within Switzerland, but – perhaps purposefully – avoids mentioning the Swiss mercenaries of whom the early descriptions of nostalgia are often applied to. Simon Reynolds (2012) shares a similar foundation of nostalgia to Boym, but makes the connection to it being a condition that afflicted Swiss mercenaries whilst they were on long military tours. Describing it as 'literally homesickness, a debilitating craving to return to the native land' (Reynolds, 2012, p. xxv). This differs from Boym's assertion that nostalgia refers to 'a home that no longer exists or has ever existed' as in the case of the Swiss mercenaries, they are longing for a very real place. Reynolds also identities a crucial difference in the way that nostalgia is understood at this point, that being how it originally refers 'to a longing to return through *space*, rather than across *time*' [emphasis added] (Reynolds, 2012, p. xxv).

Boym's insights into nostalgia highlight how the term has changed, one that Reynolds supports, as he notes that over time the explicit 'geographical associations' are dropped in favour of better times from one's life that has been lost. In addition, these *better times* do not have to refer specifically to an individual, as this can also be a 'collective longing' as well. Yet, unlike the prior *diagnosis* – which Reynolds argues can be remedied by using transport to return home – longing for a time that has past is 'impossible' and that 'the only remedy would involve time travel', thereby making it 'incurable' (Reynolds, 2012, p. xxv).

Both Reynolds and Boym agree that the modern understanding of nostalgia is a longing (or yearning) for a different time, despite the associations with place (space); associations that can still interlink with time. The move away from homesickness might suggest a transition from nostalgia seen as a sickness, but Boym states that instead, it has 'turned into a disease of the modern age'. At first, this appears as a vicious description of nostalgia, but upon continued thought, nostalgia itself it not the problem, rather it is a symptom of the modern age, a response to the obliteration of time[10]. Boym (2011) is cautious to state that her diagnosis of nostalgia is not 'antimodern' and instead sees it as a response to modern progress and therefore a tool to understand time and space.

Unlike the original *diagnosis* of nostalgia, which was specific to an individual and their own relation to a place, modern nostalgia can be dislocated from a time and place in relation to not only an individual, but also a wider group of people (what unites these as a group will differ). Whilst the Swiss mercenaries supposedly had a crippling response to the longing for their actual home, modern nostalgia can be a longing for a time in the past that existed before an individual (or group) was even alive. It might not even be an event that occurred in their own country. Alternatively, it might not even be for something that *actually* occurred at all; or at best has become a fabricated tale. The latter aspect is where the danger of nostalgia lies and where Boym's description of it being 'a disease of the modern age' seems worryingly prescient.

[10] The significance of this will become apparent later in the thesis when applied to the rise of internet connectivity.

Nostalgia and History

The use of nostalgia to misrepresent history for past transgressions is thankfully not the only application. As Boym (2011) identifies that it can be used to recognise periods of history in different ways, giving the example of the *ancien régime* or the fallen empire and acknowledging the progressive changes that came about since. Although, unfortunately, the latter example is one that within the context of Great Britain has been twisted and corrupted, falling in line with the notion that nostalgia can be used to create longing for something that happened before many of those supposedly feeling a sense of nostalgia were born. Nor is the depiction of the time that they are apparently nostalgic for an accurate representation. It is, however, authentic *enough* to play with elements of that time to its advantage, whilst conveniently leaving out inconvenient truths.[11]

Boym (2011) does posit that nostalgia can be used for 'unrealised dreams of the past and visions of the future that become obsolete' and that it could also allow for an alternative exploration of modern history to examine 'unrealised possibilities'. This might enable another opportunity to highlight when and where significant events unfolded from, or it might lead to an exercise in alternative history (glorified *what ifs*). This is one way in which the connection between nostalgia and videogames is notably apt, as videogames allow for the creation of believable worlds and there is a degree of flexibility that the digital spaces created can provide. Therefore, this can take the form of depicting a specific moment in time when and where these changes were occurring, or it can experiment further and provide

[11] This thesis will be exploring the role of authenticity and its connection with nostalgia and videogames in more detail in Chapter 3.

alternatives to these events to help highlight the significance of the actual events that took place.[12]

Boym is not alone in her assertions that nostalgia is a disease and given Hofer's role as a physician – which helped lead to his initial diagnosis – this is not surprising. Richard Lizardi (2017, p. 3), as part of his own research into the connection between media and nostalgia, highlights the argument by Katharina Niemeyer and Daniela Wentz (2014, p. 134) in which Hofer posits that there were 'pleasant symptoms of nostalgia' that could 'be "healed" or at least "calmed" by objects or products of our consumer and media culture'. Niemeyer and Wentz then state this 'is directly applicable to what is encouraged through contemporary nostalgic media'.

Placing the importance of media into the *treatment* for nostalgia is significant and becomes more so when combined with another understanding of modern nostalgia that Lizardi uses. That it is '…more than the recollection of an agreeable event in the past – rather it is defined as a sense of loss of a once positive experience that in recall carries an ache of longing but also has the feature of concentrated pleasurable contemplation' (Dickinson and Erben, 2016, p. 1).

With these definitions in mind, one could be led to thinking that if nostalgia is indeed a disease of longing for a past – be it one's own past or an *imagined* past – that by providing

[12] The recent *Wolfenstein* videogames (*Wolfenstein: The New Order* (2014) and *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* (2017)) developed by MachineGames depicts a world in which the Nazis have won World War Two and subsequently take over North America. *The New Colossus* is notable as its depiction of certain groups of Americans became increasingly relevant by the time of its release in late 2017. The marketing manager from the game's publisher, Bethesda, Pete Hines, stated that 'Wolfenstein has been a decidedly anti-Nazi series since the first release more than 20 years ago. We aren't going to shy away from what the game is about. We don't feel it's a reach for us to say Nazis are bad and un-American, and we're not worried about being on the right side of history here.' (Batchelor, 2017)

either recreations or depictions of the past in the form of a media product could act as a solution to that longing. Even if it is not, there would still be a significant financial gain to do so for those in charge of creating these nostalgia laden media products and would encourage consumption of them. Seemingly exploiting the desire amongst consumers to relive the past; be it their own or a cultural past.

Cultural Memory

In turn, it could be argued that these nostalgia media products can be used by individuals to help contribute to the perception of their own 'identities in the present' and therefore as a way of navigating the distinction between 'individual/cultural memory and national identity' (Kalinina and Menke, 2016, p. 63). The inclusion of cultural memory in this context here though is contestable as it can be considered as an extension of a shared identity, not necessarily a *national* identity, but one that places an individual as part of a wider group. Although, cultural memory as a field of study has also been described as concerning itself with how a culture constructs its past (Begy, 2015). Therefore, a national identity might also be seen a construction due to the extent it might be informed by an evolving cultural memory based on how the past has been interpreted[13].

The significance of cultural memory is important to recognise in regards to historical events as they move out of living memory; that being that there is no longer anyone living who was alive when these events took place (not that these individuals would have had to be present for these specific events). Cultural memory can be a way in which the past can be engaged

[13] A national identity might be better understood via collective memory which will be introduced later in this chapter.

with beyond living memory (Finney, 2017). Yet, the adoption of cultural memory in media, and videogames are no exception, see historical events such as The Great War continue to be pillaged for its symbols. Which is why, Geoff Dyer points out that despite 'every generation since the Armistice [believing] that it will be the last for whom the Great War has any meaning', it continues to live on as an enduring memory when it should have instead naturally succumbed to a form of amnesia in the general consciousness (Dyer, 2012, p. 18).

The existence of a cultural memory is multifaceted and, in this thesis, will be understood and applied to both a wider interpretation of world history but also the history of the videogames medium (this can extend to other popular media as well). For it can help to explain how individual people who do not have first-hand experience of an event and media can feel as though they have a memory of it that almost seems as if it is their own. Whilst to claim that memory of past real-world events to this degree is certainly too strong – although the statements made by those who supported Brexit would appear to support this claim though (Campanella and Dassù, 2019) – but within the community of those who play videogames there appears to be a permeation of knowledge about the past of the medium. Resulting in many who play videogames to seemingly acquire knowledge about videogames from the past that they have never played inform their desires for the medium as if through osmosis.

Legislated Nostalgia and Vicarious Nostalgia

Legislated nostalgia might help to explain the phenomenon in which those playing and/or creating videogames have a familiarity with elements of the medium that they personally have not experienced. Legislated Nostalgia is a term coined by Douglas Coupland (1992, p.

47) in his novel "Generation X" which he defined as 'to force a body of people to have memories they do not actually own'.

This can also extend to the application of cultural memory in relation to awareness of past media, but what this thesis is interested in is not only the legislated nostalgia that exists for the videogames medium itself, but also the conflation between the application of cultural memory within videogames and whether this results in a stronger form of legislated nostalgia? As whilst players might not have *actually* experienced events of the past, they can claim to have experienced a *depiction* of those events, meaning that they do have a memory of those events, even if they are not really their own, nor are they necessarily accurate.

Legislative Nostalgia could be understood as the culmination of memories that have transitioned from living memory, but in order to reach this, these memories must transition through a previous stage. As mentioned, players might have memories that seem like their own, and the process of acting *vicariously* might account for this.

Amy Merrick (2014), writing for The New York Times on "The Commercial Allure of the Eighties", provides a helpful introduction for vicarious nostalgia, in that 'people can feel [it] for an era they didn't actually live through'. This also identifies that the presence of those who come under the generational categorisation of *Millennial* (those born between 1981 and 1997 (Dimock, 2019))[14] have a greater familiarity of popular culture from the 1980s than perhaps would be expected from a demographic that experienced its childhood and teenage years after many of the cultural signifiers had past.[15] This is in contrast to the understanding

[14] This follows Generation X (1965-1980). This is also the title of Douglas Coupland's book which contributed to the title for this age demographic (Pew Research Center, 2015).
[15] The importance of understanding different generations and the connection to nostalgia will be explored further in the next chapter.

of nostalgia for one's own cultural past, yet the continued recycling of past cultural media – in large part thanks to technology allowing greater access to content – that media is no longer solely fixed to a specific time period and instead can take the form of what I refer to as *Relative Nostalgia* (Sweeting, 2019b).

Before unpacking Relative Nostalgia further, it is crucial to begin to understand Vicarious Nostalgia, for the way in which the execution of Relative Nostalgia can be better understood. Christina Goulding (2002) provides one of the earlier introductions into vicarious nostalgia (which comes from within this current century) and begins by acknowledging a description of nostalgia by Morris Holbrook (1993, p. 104) in which part of his definition includes a preference towards objects, people, places from when a person was younger; this can also include 'before birth'. Goulding (2002) states that it can be argued that 'we no longer need to have lived a past in order to feel nostalgic for it', which certainly sounds akin to that of legislated nostalgia. Whilst in the past interpretations of nostalgia have begun to recognise that nostalgic feelings can go beyond one's own lived experiences, separating it out from the core definition of nostalgia can be deemed more helpful to effectively analyse the elements that contribute to and help determine nostalgia outside one's own personal memories. As well as the impact that this can have more broadly, in this case, the form of videogames and the trajectory of the mainstream videogames medium.

Whilst Goulding sets out to introduce the notion of vicarious nostalgia, it is still tightly connected to the core understanding of nostalgia, in that it is a *type* of nostalgia rather than a distinct form itself that can be deemed separate. Although, Goulding (2002) does make the crucial distinction that 'it deals with nostalgia for a period outside of the individual's living memory'. The definition of vicarious can help to distinguish vicarious nostalgia apart. If

vicarious describes an experience that is the 'result of watching, listening to, or reading about the activities of other people, rather than by doing the activities yourself' (Cambridge Dictionary, no date) then vicarious nostalgia could be interpreted as preferential memories from the past that are being experienced through media (such as videogames) depicting the events of other individuals.

As vicarious experiences can be generated through engagement with mediums such as film, music, and literature, then placing this in the context of videogames is likely to be more significant due to the greater involvement of the player and the necessity of their presence to generate the experience. Despite this difference, though, vicarious nostalgia has also been identified as a powerful tool in advertising and brand awareness, although given the commercial activities of the videogames industry this is not all too different.

Altaf Merchant and Gregory M. Rose (2013) identify advertising activities from companies that aim to generate vicarious nostalgia to help influence purchases from consumers. They too acknowledge Goulding's distinction that vicarious nostalgia exists outside of a lived past, but they also mention that it can 'involve the imagining of a mythical' past. This is to support the creation of desirable fictions by advertisers to seduce consumers into believing the worlds that have been conjured, and that by purchasing these products, they too will be able to participate in this fiction and benefit. Whilst they mention the creation of mythical settings, they also make the interesting distinction of stating that vicarious nostalgia can also be referred to as *historical nostalgia*. Merchant and Rose (2013) mention that historical nostalgia can 'examine the experience of emotionally connecting to and fantasising about experiences and associations from past eras'. This can then be used to influence consumer attitudes, particularly in the case of what can be understood as heritage brands – the focus

of Merchant and Rose's research paper – in which older consumer brands can exploit history (including their own) to make their current products more appealing to consumers new and old.

Historical Nostalgia

The unpacking of the term historical nostalgia – surprisingly – is just as narrow as vicarious nostalgia. Christopher Marchegiani and Ian Phau (2011) compare what they refer to as *personal nostalgia*, which can be from a personally remembered past ('the way I was') to their definition of historical nostalgia, that being 'a time in history before one was born ('the way it was'). Providing further examples for these two types of nostalgia, connecting a 'brand to a consumers' experience in childhood' would represent personal nostalgia, and they state that the 'recent surge in younger consumers' fascination with "retro" items' represents historical nostalgia. Going by this understanding of historical nostalgia also supports the idea that individuals can be nostalgic for something outside of their own lived experiences (personal nostalgia), although given that historical nostalgia can also incorporate "retro" (this will be explored in more detail later) which dates back around the past 60 years, places this within the sphere of living memory. That is not too dissimilar to vicarious memory, because, as previously stated by Goulding (2002), it exists in a 'period outside of the *individual's* living memory' [emphasis added] but still perhaps within the wider living memory[16].

However, despite existing outside of an individual's living memory, it is helpful to distinguish between historical and vicarious nostalgia as separate entities. Given that historical nostalgia

[16] Placing it within cultural memory.

has been placed within the remit of *recent* history, this term shall not be changed, whereas the exact time constraints of vicarious nostalgia have not been fixed as clearly. Therefore, the latter provides a useful term to explain a nostalgia for events that exist outside of the wider living memory, such as The Great War, the Victorian Era, and further back.

The two terms of personal and historical nostalgia can be used simultaneously when analysing examples of media (or other objects), for example the videogame *Battlefield V* (EA DICE, 2018), the sixteenth instalment in the series (despite being titled as the fifth), can now be considered to afford the implementation of both personal and historical nostalgia. The *Battlefield* series for most of its existence – although it has also ventured into modern combat as well as futuristic creations of warfare – has continued to depict battles from across the twentieth century. *Battlefield V* is of interest here, as like other entries it depicts events that are either outside of living memory (The Great War) or events that are about to leave living memory (World War Two) which are therefore examples of historical nostalgia.[17] But this entry can now also serve as an instance of personal nostalgia too due to the addition via an update to the game of a map from past games (EA DICE, 2019; Robinson, 2019) having been originally in the first *Battlefield* game *Battlefield 1942* (Digital Illusions CE, 2002) which featured the map Wake Island. The map itself is a recreation of the battle between the Empire of Japan and the United States in which the latter was defeated in and around the atoll formations in the Pacific Ocean towards the end of 1941. Whilst the map was brought back for the release of *Battlefield 1943* (EA DICE, 2009), its addition via an update to *Battlefield V* seventeen years later after its initial digital creation can be understood as potentially providing an instance of personal nostalgia for some of those

[17] Could also be argued for vicarious nostalgia in a different context – for players to experience something outside their own lived experience.

playing this instalment in the series. Returning to the digital environment that they first visited almost two decades ago. Albeit this time utilising technical advancements that were not present in the original, adding to the visual fidelity and the environmental gameplay factors. This is further supported by the inclusion of the same musical themes which have been incorporated and updated into the current soundtrack of the latest iteration. Therefore, bringing back the past, but without the uncanny effect of it not looking as good as was remembered.

The strategy of appealing to those who have played the original *Battlefield 1942* is unlikely to be at the forefront of the decision process behind the inclusion of these past maps, but it does help to generate excitement from those that did. This can help to generate interest from those who have not played *1942* (or *1943*), having either been aware of the significance of these maps or are intrigued by the renewed interest in an element of the game. The former is of particular interest as not only does it relate to personal nostalgia for some players but posits that this personal nostalgia has developed into a cultural memory amongst those playing videogames. Memories of elements of videogames that they have not played themselves but almost feel as though they have.

This could be seen as something that is potentially being *exploited* by videogame developers and publishers, but equally, it could also be something that developers/publishers are aware of and are using it as a tool to help promote their games, in this instance elongate interest in a videogame a year after its release.

Relative Nostalgia

Personal nostalgia can be considered within the continued marketing approaches when appealing to consumers, then it is also necessary to examine the increasing relevance of Relative Nostalgia. This can be understood as an extension to interpreting personal nostalgia, in that it allows for its application to be fluid. It can account for different individuals having the same personal nostalgia for something, despite this occurring in different decades, and the individuals might also be part of different age generations.

This could make it difficult to directly relate to nostalgic content from a specific time but given that the same content could have also reached players across different decades means that the consumer base is potentially larger than originally thought. This might contribute to explaining (although certainly not fully) why 8-bit videogames – the aesthetic and gameplay style – from the mid to late 1980s continue to remain popular today, even amongst those who did not grow up with them during that time or were even alive. Yet, that does not mean that players did not grow up with them after they were no longer current, a time by which that videogame technology had already been superseded as the medium had a habit of doing. The 8-bit videogame systems and games (also known as the third-generation of consoles) might have been passed down to siblings or other family members/friends, or they were purchased later when the prices for consumers had been lowered further to make way for the new generation of consoles from the 16-bit era (fourth-generation). The 8-bit aesthetic also carried on well into the 1990s via Nintendo's handheld consoles (Game Boy and Game Boy Color) bringing it to a new generation of players whose personal nostalgia[18], whilst different to those who played 8-bit console games, nonetheless also share the

[18] This was also my situation.

fondness for the 8-bit aesthetic even for videogames that they themselves did not play, but are reminiscent of the ones that they did. Thus, enabling them to participate in the wider cultural memory sharing that can take place amongst videogame players.

The novel and film *Ready Player One* (Cline, 2011; Spielberg, 2018) also demonstrate this, as both media pieces appeal across a broad age demographic despite leaning heavily on references from the 1980s. The author of the novel himself grew up during this time and has including many references based on his own personal nostalgia and remediated them for the purpose of his story. Yet, despite the heavy reliance on 80s references the film is still understood across generations. In part because the narrative structure follows aspects of the Hero's Journey – which has been argued to occur 'in every culture, in every time' (Vogler, 2007, p. 4) – but also because from the late 1970s media has become increasingly fluid in how it can be consumed.

Over the past decade this has become increasingly prevalent with vast libraries of content from the past few decades more widely available to younger generations, blurring the time distinctions and turning even more media into relative nostalgia. This is particularly notable with Millennials, who as Merrick (2014) has pointed out 'know more about the eighties than might be expected'. Increasingly nostalgia for media might increasingly be understood as relative, and therefore possibly in a way that nostalgia was not beforehand. It is, therefore, not surprising then that Merrick also mentions that advertisers are now 'strip-mining' the eighties for memories, as these are not just something to *sell back* to Generation X but are just as lucrative for Millennials and possibly Generation Z (born after 1997[19]). It has become

[19] Currently there is no 'chronological endpoint' for this group, but typically refers to those ages between 7 and 22. (Dimock, 2019)

increasingly apparent that the advertising and the business studies side of academia view nostalgic appropriation as an effective tool to appeal across a broad audience that individually might be difficult to target via personal nostalgia but can appeal to the relative nostalgia that draws from the wider cultural memory that exists across generations.

Restorative and Reflective Nostalgia

Having identified the existence of relative nostalgia, particularly amongst younger generations, how does this interact with the core understanding of nostalgia put forward by Svetlana Boym's influential work on nostalgia? In her book, "The Future of Nostalgia" (2002, p. xviii), she identifies two main kinds of nostalgia, Restorative Nostalgia and Reflective Nostalgia; the former protecting 'the absolute truth' and the latter 'call[ing] it into doubt'. Boym (2011) unpacks these terms providing more information. Describing restorative nostalgia as an attempt of reconstructing the lost home, the *nostos* of nostalgia. Whereas reflective nostalgia embraces the *álgos*, that being the act of longing, which both ironically and wistfully delays the homecoming, due to the realisation that truly regaining the home is impossible.

Before unpacking the two terms further, for now it is possible to begin to consider the way in which relative nostalgia provides new contemporary context. This is more in relation to reflective nostalgia because there is an awareness that it is not attempting to reclaim the past, rather instead utilising aspects of it for the present, along understanding that the past is just that, the past. The broad application of nostalgia could be seen as moving past a desire for restorative nostalgia, that perhaps younger generations find greater benefit from the flexibility that reflective nostalgia can provide. That does not mean that restorative

nostalgia has no use, but there might be greater desire from older generations, specifically Baby Boomers (1946-1964), actively seeking elements of the past to go back to. Given the accelerated pace of change that occurred after they reached adulthood, this generation (although certainly not everyone within it) were under pressure to keep up. Whereas the generations that came after having grown up with this accelerated pace are exposed to more frequent cultural and technological advancements that have occurred during a compressed space of time. In addition, these generations are also used to the increased obsolescence of technology with major technology formats being replaced within a decade, with the pinnacle of some mobile phones considered redundant after just one year. But, as previously mentioned, the technological advancements that have occurred have also enabled access to media from across multiple decades and has helped contribute to increased remediation (above that which would have been generated naturally as identified by Joseph Campbell and Vladimir Propp) giving reflective nostalgia a time travel-esque ability. This also begins to explain the significance of nostalgic core and shell design theory in relation to videogames, which will be unpacked shortly.

Helping to enable the ability through media to vicariously engage with elements depicting different time periods might not mean that they engage with the past in the same way. Nor does it mean that they are certain to gain a truly accurate depiction of the past, but there also might be the possibility of interacting critically with the past and recognising the problems from these times. With reflective there is not the same level of fondness or desire for recreating the past, rather instead utilising it in the context of the present.

If players (or those who watch films and/or read novels) can “relive” multiple pasts, instead of constricted to their own, living vicariously through different pasts; can they claim to have

their own past? Relative nostalgia provides a useful term for understanding how players engage with reflective nostalgia (and the past) in that their own is not fixed.

Retro and Nostalgia

When videogames are marketed seemingly for nostalgic reasons, the term *nostalgia* typically is rarely used to actually refer to what is being delivered, although this is starting to change. Retro, on the other hand, does make frequent appearances when, for example, a videogame is being released with 8/16-bit aesthetics. When starting this project there was an initial reluctance to conflate retro with nostalgia, that the former term was reductive and possibly detracted from the arguments and discussions surrounding nostalgia. However, since further insight into the terminology behind *retro*, its significance should not be underestimated.

In the meantime, though, it is informative to note the linguistic origins of *retro*. Colloquially, retro is understood to refer to a style from the relative past, within the past 60 years (although this time could change). Nostalgia, however, can extend beyond relative *living memory*, as one can feel *nostalgic* for events that occurred before anyone who is alive today was even born. This is evident with the nostalgic desire for Great Britain's past, one that imagined a country very different to how it exists today – and different to how it was in the past as well – and using this idealised vision to justify actions and ideas in the present that do not reflect the change that had taken place over the past century.

Retro does not have quite the same implications associated with it, furthermore, the focus tends to concentrate more on aesthetic qualities rather than the connotations that surround it; like nostalgia for a non-experienced past can generate. Although both do of course look

backwards to the past for elements to incorporate into the present perhaps out of a sense of dissatisfaction or postmodernist appropriation. Whilst nostalgia was considered an illness to be cured, retro was originally understood as a 'linguistic spin-off of the Space Age' according to design historian Elizabeth Guffey as it began to be used in the 1960s (Reynolds, 2012, p. xxxi). This a spin-off from that of slowing a spaceships propulsion which required retro rockets to provide reverse thrust. This aspect of 'reverse thrust' is significant – and contributes to the importance of nostalgia in the context of videogames as well – as it clearly presents itself, initially, as a slowdown, or reverse trajectory of the expected forward course of time and culture (and videogames). Reynolds highlights that given the usual negative implications associated with the terms that use the retro prefix, such as; 'retrospection, retrograde, retrogressive' among others compared to that where 'pro' is used, as with 'progress', it can be understood why this assumption has become the standard (Reynolds, 2012, p. xxxi). This is also why the whole concept of retro *should* seem contradictory to the videogames medium.

Yet, retro thrusters are a crucial part of spaceship design, as they are a necessary element required to slow it down as part of the flight process. Therefore, with this recognition, the role of retro trends could be understood as helping to maintain a balance and therefore a natural part of the forward momentum of culture (including videogames). Reynolds (2012, p. xxxi) does begin to also allude to this, mentioning that the 1970s saw a revivalism emerge in response (or a reaction) to the embracement of 'out there' ways of living. The drawn out seventh-generation[20] could be considered the point at which the forward momentum had begun to wear itself out. But, to prevent itself from going off course into a different direction

[20] This generation of videogames consoles was from 2005 when the Xbox 360 launched, followed by the Wii and PS3 a year later, to around 2012 when the WiiU launched with the PS4 and Xbox One the following year.

(potentially the often-hypothesised mobile-future route) the retro thrusters were instead engaged. Activated in time to help steer the medium towards what was considered a stable longer-term trajectory.

Illusionary Nostalgia

Illusionary Nostalgia is not a pre-existing definition of nostalgia but is one that has been identified by me in response to presenting a paper on Vicarious Nostalgia (based off the description used earlier in this chapter). Whilst there was agreement regarding the explanation of how vicarious nostalgia can be present in videogames in combination with the application of collective memory, concerns were raised in response to what was interpreted as a *deterministic* assertion that nostalgia for a time or place that exists outside of an individual's own living memory could only do so within the wider confines of collective memory, which can be argued to extend back primarily to the Late Modern Period (often attributed to the start of the 1800s to 1945). Multiple academics present questioned this examination, with one stating that they themselves felt nostalgia for the Roman Empire. This, however, is all anecdotal, but it did raise the issue that there are those who perceive themselves to possess nostalgic feelings for a time and place that they have no direct connection to.

The question then, if collective memory is unable to provide the source for these supposed feelings, then where? The answer might come from Adam Chapman. His work on collective memory has been helpful at providing insight into the viability of vicarious nostalgia within videogames. Yet, it is his identification of Popular Memory that appears to provide a useful solution to dealing with the apparent existence of nostalgia outside of collective memory.

Popular memory is itself described by Chapman (2016) as a dominant strand of collective memory. Chapman's exploration of the term predominantly tackles the depiction of The Great War, which would also place the perception of this time period within collective memory along with other events from the Late Modern Period that exist outside of living memory. Yet the relative closeness of this time in history means that contemporary understanding can more readily exist beyond depictions within popular culture.

This is not to state that popular culture is the sole proprietor of providing depictions of historical periods, history education within the typical compulsory school system is also a significant contributor towards a general understanding of history. Yet, both examples are equally fractured in their coverage, providing selective cases with differing levels of depth. Compulsory history education differs between countries, but taking the UK example, many individuals cease directly learning the subject of history at around the age of 13/14; at which point popular culture potentially becomes the main source of historical depictions. Neither option is ideal though, as the field of history is itself not immune from criticism, such as that by E.H. Carr outlined in his work *What Is History?* (1986). In this he argues that: 'The historian is necessarily selective. The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy, but one which it is very hard to eradicate' (Carr, 1986, p. 6).

The output from the field of history is therefore at times based on the selective *facts* chosen by the historian which is further manipulated based on the narrative in the text that is constructed. Popular culture that aims to depict a historical setting will utilise these historical narratives as the basis for their stories and will waver from this accordingly to the desires of those involved. Those engaging with these media products, regardless of the

extent to which historical *accuracy* is followed (this will be expanded upon in Chapter 3) this will still have some impact upon informing and constructing a perception of a historical period. It is this miasma of sources that contribute significantly to the formation and existence of Illusionary Nostalgia.

There are multiple subtle definitions and interpretations for "illusion", but the consensus revolves around falseness. This can also extend to a deception – whether intentional or not – and this aspect, conveniently in the context of games, refers back to the 'Latin illusio(n-), from illudere "to mock", from in- "against" + ludere "play"' (Oxford University Press, 2019b). This *playful* deception is apt in the context of videogame nostalgia. Individuals – or groups of individuals – that claim to feel a nostalgia for a time and place they either have no direct connection to or an-indirect connection (that would be afforded by collective memory) do so via engaging with a media text[21]. These media texts provide an illusionary world for those interacting with it, and therefore the memories that they create through engaging become their own, conflating these newly created memories with a false belief (an illusion) of a nostalgia for these places and events from the past. Further contributing to the falseness of the illusion is the previously mentioned bias and inaccuracies identified by Carr (1986) that emerge from the field of history[22] which is therefore adopted by popular culture.

The adoption and adaptation of history by popular culture combined with the engagement from different audiences culminates in the emergence of Illusionary Nostalgia. This result is

[21] Media text in this context is being used in the broadest of terms to encompass almost, if not all, mediums that provide a means of expressing something and therefore supporting this argument, a depiction of past times and places.

[22] This is not intended to be an attack on the field of history, instead it is to bring attention to the use of history to provide accuracy or authenticity to a media text in the belief that doing so will grant it greater authority. This authority is not earned and can result in turning an unintended falsehood into one that is more widely falsely accepted as truth.

not something that is imaginary because there remains the assumption that what they believe is true to an *extent*. That the perception they possess is likely shared by others and is not unique to just themselves. An individual's imagination is not a trick played upon them (although it can still be seen as a trick one might conjure themselves) in relation to this assumed presence of nostalgia. Whereas the illusion is, because the individual has a better ability to identify the source of their perceived nostalgia, which distorts the memory that has been generated.

Popular culture and its utilisation of history is not concerned about portraying history as accurately as possible. This is a misnomer as well being an impossible task. Even if it were to attempt to show the miserable conditions that previous generations had to live through, in which there was no chance for a third act of salvation, there is not enough demand in the market to validate such a media product to be created. Outside of the mainstream there might be attempts to do so, but the key distinction here is the power of *popular* culture and the breadth of coverage for these pieces and the subsequent impact they can have upon forming popular *memory*. Therefore, when individuals claim to feel nostalgic for Roman gladiators, they are instead nostalgic for the *idea* of Roman gladiators as perpetuated by popular culture which is constantly recycled via popular memory, or akin to the cyclical notion of the Uroboros[23] creating and destroying depictions of history, throughout history.

[23] Uroboros (also ouroboros): A circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity (Oxford University Press, 2019c).

Counterfactual Nostalgia

Counterfactual Nostalgia is not well-known type of nostalgia. This is not surprising given that Jesper Juul, who coined the term, has presented it at a panel on Nonlinear histories of independent games (2015) and briefly mentioned it in his book on authenticity in independent videogames (2019). As of now, the term remains to be unpacked further, but Juul has laid the groundwork for this term to explored further. Juul's focus regarding this term is its presence in contributing to determining the form of independent videogames.

This is in line with the wider understanding of counterfactual in which something is 'relating to or expressing what has not happened or is not the case' (Oxford University Press, 2019a). This appears to be a stronger definition than the way in which Juul has connected it with nostalgia. This is because he uses it to help highlight the style of independent videogames invoking elements of past videogames to contribute to a sense of authenticity. Meaning there are elements that did exist that are being used, but there are certainly applications of past elements used in contemporary videogames that attempt to remediate these but in a way that was 'not the case'.

However, using these elements of the past is not itself *counterfactual*. Instead it is the introduction of elements that do not match the intended (or claimed) time from videogame history that makes it counterfactual and therefore results in a videogames becoming a type of 'counterfactual nostalgia' (Juul, 2019, p. 106). He identifies this with the example of *Minecraft* which is perceived by some to have a retro aesthetic due its blocky 3D models (Juul, 2019, p. 39), yet this type of low-poly 3D models was not something that existed during the mid to late 1990s when rudimentary polygonal 3D graphics started to become more widespread. Further contributing to this argument, although not explicitly brought up

by Juul, is that whilst a game like *Minecraft* might *look* like a videogame from the 1990s – even though as mentioned videogames at this time did *not* look like this – the gameplay that accompanies it is one that could be argued as contemporary, due to the completely destructible environment that players are able to explore and interact with.[24]

The simple reasoning behind this split between *simple* graphics and contemporary gameplay mechanics is a matter of efficiency on the part of the developers. In the context of independent (indie) games these are created by a very small team that does not have the money or resources to create a highly detailed world or characters. The simplistic (and older 'retro') aesthetics are a logical choice for these developers to make their game. Yet, this decision can have the added benefit[25] of providing the game with the perceived authenticity of older videogames that some players consider are missing from contemporary videogames.

The use of counterfactual nostalgia can be an economic strategy on the part of the developers, to both reduce their costs whilst also *profiting* on the visual styles of the past. This partly comes under Juul's (2014) wider term of 'independent style' that refers to the attempt to emulate visual styles from the past. Meaning that videogames that had 'clumsy and coarsely textured 3-D graphics [looking like that] of the mid-1990s' which might have previously been considered a poorly/cheaply made videogame now might be considered and viewed 'as a deliberate stylistic choice' (Juul, 2019, p. 252). This does not just refer to past videogame styles though, as it can also refer to other 'cheaper' visual styles such as

[24] The significance of contemporary gameplay (core) and retro aesthetics (shell) will become apparent later in the thesis with the introduction of Hauntological Form.

[25] This is not always received positively though. After a glut of 2D pixel-based videogames, the allure that this style once had is no longer the selling point it once was for retro inspired videogames.

crayons or other arts & craft aesthetics. This further attempts to, as Juul highlights, to 'mimic the desires of the Arts and Crafts movement to create things that embodied older, more authentic ways of working' (Juul, 2019, p. 252).

Independent style helpfully identifies the revival of past visual styles into contemporary videogames, notably within the independent videogame side of the industry, but it does not consider the gameplay mechanics that accompany them. This seems like an oversight, as gameplay mechanics are a *type* of style given that they are significant in helping to define a videogames genre[26]. Yet, it does keep the observation straighter. The other aspect this does not consider are mainstream videogames. This is not surprising given the name, but there is an opportunity for the logic behind this to be taken further, and counterfactual nostalgia could provide this. This could also extend to the rationale behind remakes and remasters of videogames and the extent to which alterations are made to the form that is being brought back to be repackaged and resold to consumers (which will be examined significantly from Chapter 5 onwards).

The role of counterfactual nostalgia can help with supporting the thinking identified in the next part introducing what this thesis refers to as the Nostalgic Core and Nostalgic Shell (building upon the existing Core and Shell theory) and identifying the distinction between gameplay and representational aesthetics (e.g., visuals and sounds). However, that does not definitively mean that counterfactual nostalgia must adhere to and contain a nostalgic core and/or shell as examined in the next section.

[26] In this instance focusing on what I refer to as "mechanic genres" which are exclusive to videogames such as First-Person Shooter, Platformer, Role Playing Game, etc. As opposed to "thematic genres" which can exist across mediums and apply more (but not just) to aesthetics such as horror, sci-fi, western/cowboy, etc.

Nostalgic Core and Nostalgic Shell

Frans Mäyrä in his book *An Introduction to Game Studies* (2008) introduces the distinction between two primary elemental 'layers' that relate to the concept of what a [video]game is. This is between the *core*, which can be understood as the gameplay (mechanics, functions, the way in which the player interacts with the videogame), and the *shell*, the 'representation and sign system' (Mäyrä, 2008, p. 17); the latter also referring to the aesthetics of a videogame, such as the visuals and sounds.

Identifying the gameplay and representation elements as *Core and Shell* is a beneficial strategy of distinguishing different elements that make up not only individual videogames, and videogame genres, but also the medium more broadly. This is a useful tool for Game Studies (as was intended by Mäyrä) yet it is often underutilised. It is also seemingly absent from how others have begun trying to understand nostalgia in relation to videogames.

The idea of core and shell can be applied by both those involved in the creation of videogames as well as those who interact with them as a consumer. The latter in combination with videogame genres can contribute to an individual's decision whether or not to play/purchase a videogame based on the core experience provided and/or the style of the shell that also contributes to defining the videogame.

This is also applicable to our understanding of nostalgia and videogames and how we can refer to them. There are times where it is appropriate to refer to a nostalgic videogame, but that distinction on its own is far too vague. How is it nostalgic? What is it that makes that videogame nostalgic? Distinguishing a videogame as having a Nostalgic Core and/or Nostalgic Shell is a way to begin to unpack the presence of nostalgia in a given videogame. It can be particularly helpful when a videogame only contains one of these distinctions as it

might suggest a deeper impact of nostalgia inherent to the videogame genre or developer involved in the creation of that videogame. Whereas one that contains both is more likely, although not guaranteed, to be some variation of remaster, remake, or spiritual sequel of a previous videogame. Of course, that does not mean there is no worth in analysing videogames that comprise of both elements, as the reason behind the videogame containing both could be the result of circumstances that could be considered contradictory to the wider understanding of the videogames medium. Likewise, the continued presence of remasters and remakes of older videogames is of additional interest[27]. Does this relate to an inherent desire to reexplore an individual's past, an opportunity to learn more about the shared memories of the videogames medium, or a chance to exploit the mediums inherent inability to effectively preserve its own past and therefore sell it back via piecemeal; it could be argued to be all of the above.

As previously mentioned, counterfactual nostalgia can also play a role here when unpacking and distinguishing between these two analytical forms for videogames, also helping to provide clarity upon the implementation and reasoning behind it. There is a difference in logic behind a videogame being remastered/remade and a newly created videogame that is utilising past elements. Whilst there are economic arguments to be made with both examples, the extent to which the *amount* of nostalgia used, and to what extent this is counterfactual will differ. There is not a cover all explanation, but the combination and use of nostalgic core and shell can help to identify both the differences and similarities.

A videogame that as a whole could be considered an example of counterfactual nostalgia would likely represent one of the two nostalgic types (core or shell), for example the core

[27] This will be examined in detail in later chapters.

containing contemporary gameplay, whereas the shell would appear to be nostalgic for a certain time, even though it contains visual elements that were not actually from that time. Whether or not a videogame would be considered counterfactual nostalgia if it contained both a nostalgic core and shell can also be argued. As even though this would appear to represent an attempt to create a past style of videogame, bringing back both representational elements (visuals and sounds) along with gameplay mechanics and controls, unless the developers strived to accurately recreate everything in the same way, it is highly likely that modern *flourishes* would be present; one such example would be *Shovel Knight* (Yacht Club Games, 2014) which despite creating a videogame that would not appear to be out of place running on a Nintendo Entertainment System, contained more colours than would be possible on the system, as well as a save and checkpoint system that also would have been unlikely to be found during the mid to late 1980s.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of different instances of nostalgia, a mix identified by other academics as well as my own interpretations of nostalgia. By identifying this, different ways can be seen in which we can begin to understand the problem afflicting contemporary videogame form. Nostalgia itself is not the problem with videogames, rather it is a symptom of something deeper. As a result, this chapter has begun to introduce elements that will be unpacked throughout the rest of the thesis to help decipher the root of the problem. Whilst not everything stated in this chapter will be directly referred to elsewhere, the ideas put forward can still help to support thought for what is examined in the second half of the thesis.

Nostalgia itself and how it has been interpreted has evolved over the centuries and ironically rapidly over the past couple decades, unlike the form for videogames. The role of nostalgia in the context of videogames presents itself in different ways and this is dependent on what it is about videogames that we are trying to unravel. A later chapter will be directly expanding upon vicarious nostalgia and how history can be utilised in historically themed videogames as well as what this can mean for collective memory. Whilst the final chapters will be informed by cultural memory and the legacy that this is having upon the media form. The next chapter will still be concentrating on nostalgia but will be talking around videogames mostly as it identifies how nostalgia is present across other mediums and industries.

Chapter 2: The Nostalgia Industry

Introduction

Expanding upon the previous chapter, I will now explore what I refer to as the "Nostalgia Industry", or the industry of nostalgia. This thesis as a whole in trying to understand the impact of nostalgia has deemed it to be a *symptom* of something deeper affecting videogame form. This will be explained in detail later in the thesis. For now, though, it is beneficial to understand how nostalgia is directly present in different mediums and industries. Sometimes this is deliberately exploited and the other times it is an unintentional presence that contributes to a cyclical returning of styles as well as processes. The videogames medium has succumbed to the nostalgia cycle that typically affects other mediums as they mature. The significance of which will be expanded upon in the final chapters.

This chapter will also be introducing how nostalgia in the case of *Star Wars* is used to help market a multi-billion-dollar franchise to an existing audience whilst simultaneously still appealing to a new younger audience that has no direct nostalgic attachment to it. It was the shift evident in the announcement of a new *Star* Wars trilogy following the purchase of Lucasfilm by Disney which focused heavily on elements from the Original Trilogy that generated the initial sense of bemusement for me. Why was a previously forward-facing media franchise now looking towards its past as a means of rebooting itself for both an existing but also new audience? Not only this, but why was it so dependent on not only the past, but crucially its *own* past? It was through this observation that I also started to notice something similar happening with the videogames medium. That this supposedly forward-facing medium was also looking towards its past in how it was bringing back past aesthetic

styles and gameplay genres. This puzzled me, in both instances, but by trying to understand early on in this thesis what is happening with *Star Wars* I can also begin to get a better understanding of what is occurring with videogames and build upon what I learnt in the context of *Star Wars*.

Star Wars is also an apt comparison due to the demographic appeal. George Lucas has made no secret that it was to appeal to children around the age of 12 (Loughrey, 2017); this was further supported with the creation of *The Clone Wars* animated series. Videogames, in large part due to the approach taken by Nintendo to rebrand videogames as toys to distinguish them from the failure of Atari's efforts (Orland, 2020), have had the perception of leaning towards a younger audience. In practice this has shifted in the decades since the 1980s resulting in an older generation with fond memories of their youth engaging with *Star Wars* and/or videogames, including those creating contemporary media.

The case study of *Star Wars* is one (although notable) instance helping to inform and therefore understand what is happening to contemporary mainstream videogame form. Unreeling the façade that videogames are not a unique medium and are instead susceptible to similar *developments* as seen in other mediums beforehand. The rest of this chapter will be exploring past developments and identifying the repetition in the context of the videogames medium.

The thesis will return to *Star Wars* in the final chapter, but the core of the thesis will remain on videogames. Overall, this sidestep to another galaxy can be considered a beneficial entry point into helping to understand the problem facing contemporary videogames and what the increased prominence of the medium's past might mean. As a result, *Star Wars* is used as a means of providing insight into the videogames medium as a whole, rather than as a

tool to examine individual videogames. The role of human generations will be unpacked to help understand both how media and products can be targeted to different types of consumers but also how media can have its own form of generational understanding and what this can mean for how these pieces are subsequently understood decades later. This is supported by an exploration into the presence of format wars. Whilst this does not solely focus on videogame examples, these do ultimately affect the videogames medium and in turn helps to consider the impact that format wars had in the formation of console wars, which in turn dictate not only what videogames can be played and how, but also how they are remembered and accessed years later, which in turn can be resold. This will help to contextualise the corporate actions present behind the creative decisions that can be attributed to the presence of nostalgia increasingly present in videogames and other media.

This chapter will not be suggesting that businesses are solely making decisions out of a sense of nostalgia – trying to reclaim a lost glory or position of power – but rather that there is an inherent unintentional nostalgia to the business practices that present themselves and used amongst technological and creative industries. This in turn affects the media form that is subsequently created, sold, and consumed. Therefore, it is possible to begin questioning the relationship between capitalism, nostalgia, and videogames.

Star Wars Nostalgia: Returning to A Galaxy a Long Time Ago

To introduce the role that nostalgia can have upon media form I want to examine a non-videogame example. *Star Wars* was the genesis for identifying the "problem" that this thesis was to begin to tackle. How the thesis has gone about addressing the problem has naturally changed and evolved throughout the process of researching and writing the thesis, but it

was the announcement and the run up to the release of *Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens* (Abrams, 2015) that was one of the biggest single elements of inspiration for this thesis. *Star Wars* as a film franchise was known for its industry leading special effects, with George Lucas creating a separate division – Industrial Light & Magic (Jones, 2016, pp. 195–197) – of Lucasfilm to develop and create the resources needed to support his vision as no one externally could do so. With this in mind, it was a shock to me when J.J. Abrams, who had been selected to direct the first of a new trilogy of *Star Wars* films, revealed he was going to bring back physical puppets instead of solely relying on computer generated aliens, and use film stock instead of digital cameras (Morris, 2015; Burton, 2016), which Lucas had been a forerunner in making this new technology the default for the medium (Jones, 2016, p. 409). It was this development that got me thinking about the videogames medium and how it too was also experiencing a similar sort of reversal in its trajectory. Therefore, I set out to understand how the form of videogames was shifting by not advancing in the way that the high technology medium had done previously for much of its existence. With this in mind, the continued development of *Star Wars* media will be used to help bring attention to how nostalgia has influenced a long running franchise and how it attempts to sustain itself.

Ryan Lizardi's book "Nostalgic Generations and Media" (2017), as the title suggests, focuses on generations, more specifically generations in the context of demographics of humans (those in the Global North). Defining generations can be a helpful means for businesses and researchers to separate populations into more digestible groups, making them easier to analyse and potentially easier to predict. For businesses, it is particularly favourable as it provides a framework to target, be it when creating a specific product, or marketing one product to different generations. The latter is particularly important in the context of nostalgia given the increasing focus for a (media) product to have transgenerational appeal.

Since the purchase of Lucasfilm by Disney in 2012 the subsequent *Star Wars* films released have made a more deliberate attempt to appeal to both a new younger audience and create a new experience for them that did not require the necessity of knowing the events of the previous six canonical films (and animated series)[28] whilst simultaneously appeasing the older generations who do, or at least have some awareness of the overarching narratives. Therefore, a balancing act of nostalgic references must be navigated, as deviating too far away from the previous entries can result in a negative reaction from older generations; which was often the response from Generation X viewers (Green, 2022) of George Lucas' "Prequel Trilogy" (1999-2005) that was criticised for deviating too far from the "Original Trilogy" (1977 -1983). Conversely, the first *Star Wars* film released under the new ownership of Disney, *The Force Awakens* (*TFA*), was criticised for being *too* nostalgic (Robinson, 2015) due to the similarities of its narrative with the first *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977) [later renamed *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*].

It is here that the term "requel", a portmanteau of remake/reboot and sequel coined by Lizardi (2017), becomes relevant. There are increasing examples of this, in part due to the increase of expanded cinematic universes, but the previously mentioned *TFA* is a good example of this phenomenon. The film was potentially a sizable risk for Disney, having paid $4.05bn (£2.5bn) for Lucasfilm (BBC, 2012; McElroy, 2012), the studio behind the franchise; its first *Star Wars* film needed to be a *hit*. To do so though, meant that, in Disney's view, the film needed to have broader transgenerational appeal, and what was deemed the most effective approach to appeal across generations in a way mentioned in this paragraph was to create something along the lines of a requel. This serves the dual purpose of providing a

[28] This thesis is focusing on *Star Wars* content available around the time of *The Rise of Skywalker*'s release.

viable entry point for young and/or new viewers who are not clued in with the rest of the fictional universe whilst also not alienating older viewers by wiping away what has come before or betraying the *sacredness* of the pre-existing material. Lizardi is aware of the economic rationale behind this approach but also recognises that a media product like this can connect with some viewers nostalgically, as well as in terms of identity (Lizardi, 2017, p. 29). The latter point, unfortunately, is not expanded upon to explain the exact context to which he is referring, but it could be in relation to the younger generation who have no nostalgia for it but might identify with some of the characters in the film, perhaps via cultural memory. This also continues the legacy, of George Lucas' approach that ultimately *Star Wars* is meant to appeal firstly to children around the age of 12, the kind of films he liked when he was that age (Loughrey, 2017). Although, the extent to which this was followed by Disney was dismissed by Lucas shortly after the release of *The Force Awakens* (*TFA*) who stated: 'They wanted to do a retro movie. I don't like that. Every movie I work very hard to make them completely different, with different planets, with different spaceships, make it new' (Jagernauth, 2015).

Regardless of the criticism from Lucas, *TFA* was a financial success for Disney making over $2 billion (Pallotta, 2016). Indicating that this transgenerational approach of appealing to both a new audience and a nostalgic one had merit. Lucasfilm has since made a further four films which cumulatively (more than $4.8 billion (Whitten, 2018)[29]) have resulted in Disney recouping the costs of purchasing Lucasfilm six years ago.[30] However, this does not take into consideration the amount spent on producing and marketing each film, it also fails to take

[29] This amount does not take into account for *The Rise of Skywalker* or revenue from Disney+ that could be attributed to *Star Wars* series.

[30] Disney have also produced a number of television series for its streaming service Disney+. This chapter will be focusing on the films that Disney have released. There are also a number of planned upcoming film (Volk and McWhertor, 2023) but Disney have already quietly cancelled a couple (McWhertor, 2022).

account of revenue from the films accrued via the subsequent home releases (DVD, BluRay, digital, streaming) which has a significant long tail (Anderson, 2007), especially with a franchise like *Star Wars*. Then there is the extensive range of merchandise that is also available which generates a lot of profit (Whitten, 2018). The films released after *TFA* have not been as financially successful, although only *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (Howard, 2018) was considered a *failure* making around $400 million in cinemas, but both *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (Edwards, 2016) and *Star Wars: Episode VIII – The Last Jedi* (Johnson, 2017) made over $1 billion worldwide in cinemas (Whitten, 2018). The final entry in the Skywalker Saga (and the Sequels), *The Rise of Skywalker* (Abrams, 2019) had the weakest financial performance of the final trilogy, notably making half of *TFA*'s takings (D'Alessandro, 2020). This was accompanied by low audience scores and the lowest critical rating of all the *Star Wars* films (Metacritic, no date a).

Despite the prominent attention given to nostalgic elements from past *Star Wars* films appearing in both *TFA* and *Rogue One,* this was less frequent in *The Last Jedi* (*TLJ*). There are of course still overt references to past *Star Wars* films, but this can also be argued to serve a narrative that is aware of its own past, rather than instances in the other Disney backed films which could be seen as an attempt to appeal to specific sections of the audience. Yet this helped facilitate a return in the interest of the franchise, restoring confidence that was lost by those wanting to indulge in the nostalgia from the Original Trilogy, who quite possibly brought their own children along to watch these new films. Because the wider transgenerational appeal utilised the groundwork that has been laid out enabled a new generation to get involved with the franchise, as well as putting a claim to a trilogy seemingly being *their own*. As a result, *TLJ* can both rely on the fact that most of the audience would have seen *TFA*, and even if they have not, the onus is on the viewer as this is

a direct sequel, taking place immediately after *TFA* (which is unusual for a *Star Wars* film. This, however, gives freedom to the creative team to not have to depend on nostalgia to drive both interest in and the narrative of *TLJ*.

Whilst this is good for the long run of the franchise, it does highlight the crisis of confidence at Disney that they still felt the need to lean on nostalgia to help support a film franchise of this scale and renown. Furthermore, given the success of *TFA* in international markets poses additional questions as to why there is the need to focus on a past that this audience is less familiar with, irrespective of the transgenerational approach. This transgenerational approach, therefore, could seemingly extend to a trans*national* approach as well. Whereby younger audiences in the established Global North and audiences full stop in newly established markets such as China are catered for similarly in terms of narrative familiarity. Building on this is the ability for *TFA* to act as a form of marketing for the prior films. Characters such as Han Solo and Chewbacca (and their ship the Millennium Falcon) feature heavily in both the film and its marketing. Whilst their presence in the film makes narrative sense, it does pose the question to an uninformed audience member as to why these characters are so important? These questions do not have to remain unanswered for long though, as Disney has six films readily accessible to provide those very answers, aided by its streaming service. Given that *TFA* made more than half of its box office revenue from international markets (Whitten, 2018) suggests that nostalgia need not be the solution that Disney thought it had to be, questioning whether they subsequently needlessly hemmed the film into the constraints of a nostalgic requel? Further supporting this critique is that *TLJ* also took in just over half of its global box office revenue from international sales, which as stated was an actual sequel rather than a requel. Although, conversely, the *Anthology* films *Rogue One* and *Solo* both performed slightly better in the domestic US market and whilst not

requels, certainly utilised nostalgic elements for their narratives. This is not to definitively claim that nostalgia sells better in the United States of America compared to the rest of the world – especially as international sales are comprised of every other market and not broken down by region for example – but it does help to support Disney's actions of utilising nostalgia to support its *Star Wars* films within its domestic market which is still deemed essential for the overall success of the film.

The Rise of Skywalker (*TROS*) was almost evenly split in its revenue between domestic and international ($515 million vs $561 million respectively)(Box Office Mojo, no date). This final entry in the *Skywalker Saga* saw the return of Abrams in the director's chair and with it a reversal of the approach taken by Johnson for *TLJ*. *TROS* restarted the approach previously used by Abrams whereby nostalgia is used as a crux to prop up the film. Unlike *TFA* whose plot closely resembled *ANH*, *TROS* brought back a range of familiar characters (including those supposedly long dead[31]) whilst it desperately tried to tie up loose ends from not only the Sequel trilogy, but the entire Saga. *TROS* depended on the audience to have seen both previous trilogies in order to understand the magnitude of Palpatine's (Lord Sidious) return and the importance to the plot, without doing the heavy lifting in the narrative. With one of the main characters, Poe Dameron, visibly puzzled as its actor Oscar Isaac asks – as if speaking on behalf of the audience – 'Somehow, Palpatine has returned' (Abrams, 2019).

This is significant, not because it could be argued as weak storytelling, but because it highlights the mistaken use of nostalgia as a means of bringing the whole saga to a close, at the expense of concluding the *Sequel Trilogy*. J.J. Abrams and co-writer Chris Terrio looked to

[31] This is not a new phenomenon for *Star Wars* with antagonist Maul returning in *The Clone Wars*, *Rebels*, and *Solo*, despite being cut in two by Obi-Wan Kenobi at the end of *TPM*.

the franchise's past for an answer, but by doing so ignored the journey taken by not only the characters in the previous two films but also that which the audience experienced along the way. Now members of the audience who entered the narrative at the start of the *Sequels* are suddenly presented with an all-powerful evil of whom they have no knowledge of, nor are they provided with an explanation. Even for those who *are* familiar with Palpatine's character, they too are left with very few answers as to how he has returned. Palpatine is set up as being a recognisable foe for the protagonists in the *Star Wars* franchise, but without any substance behind his resurrection after his supposed death in *Return of the Jedi* (Marquand, 1983).

It's also necessary to note that the way in which nostalgia is misused in *TROS* does not make it a nostalgia film in the sense of the way Fredric Jameson (1991) defines the term. *TROS* is not recreating a past, rather, instead, it is remediating past elements from previous *Star Wars* films and reusing them as familiar recognisable points in the film for some audience members to latch on to. It is also an exercise in reusing previously created ideas, themes, and actors rather than creating something new and potentially financially risky. The *Sequels* narratively could be argued to be an unnecessary third trilogy, with the previous two providing a clear beginning and end (a redemptive arc) to Anakin Skywalker's journey (aka Darth Vader). Whereas *TFA* via the requel approach acts as a "soft-reboot" of *Star Wars*. One initially designed to reignite interest in the franchise but without the baggage of decades of an increasingly confusing narrative. The problem Disney has encountered though is that it has tried to use nostalgia to generate interest but has struggled to define to what extent it informs or rather *determines* the content of the *Sequel* films. This balance has broken down in *TROS* instead relying on "squeezing out the last dollar" of the franchise.

Perhaps, unsurprisingly, this approach has backfired in emerging markets such as China. The final entry was considered a flop in the country making only $12 million during its opening weekend (Yuhas, 2020). With the film not strong enough on its own merits, nostalgia can only carry it in markets that have decades of familiarity with it. Whereas for markets like China it is a big ask to expect audiences to have watched at least 8 films in advance[32].

To conclude, this section has explored the recent developments and decisions regarding *Star Wars* and nostalgia. Nostalgia has been used to shape the form of the revival of *Star Wars*, at times making it reflective upon itself rather than reflective upon the film medium, which it was at times during the direction of George Lucas. The rationale behind the focus and implementation of nostalgia can be understood as a way to engage pre-existing fans, who had previously felt alienated by the Prequel Trilogy as well as general marketing to appeal to the latent nostalgia that some audience members might have for the franchise.

The observation that *Star Wars* in the US might benefit from nostalgia is helpful in analysing videogames. This is partly because there are at times a tendency for the medium to follow film. But also, because this instance surrounding *Star Wars* might suggest a deeper nostalgic desire is at play that affects the US more than other nations? If there is something inherent in the US' desire to look back, this would then subsequently be present within US developed videogames as well.

[32] Or 10 films, two animated series, and a live action series to get the full story up until this point.

Human Media Generations

Having identified a possible underlying desire for nostalgia within the United States of America, this gives further relevance to Lizardi's (2017) exploration into the presence and identification of generations. If there is one significant critique into some of the research for generational studies (and this is not aimed at Lizardi) is that the focus revolves around the United States and events which were more impactful on that nation-state than directly others. To a lesser extent, the broader Global North is considered in these generational considerations, but this still predicates that the US is the influential arbiter in the development of generations across these other nations.

Lizardi points out that defining generations in the first place is problematic, but more so since the "Greatest Generation" and the "Baby Boomer" are linked more acutely to significant identifiable global events such as World War II and the following years. However, there has been less consensus regarding the exact placement for subsequent generations resulting in contrasting time scales to define each generation; even the naming of which can differ, for example, Generation Z are also referred to as "Digital Natives" (Lizardi, 2017, p. 5).

Generations that are used to categorise age groups of humans tend to range around 15-20 years. The rationale behind this approach is based on the foundation that those within these age brackets will share similar overarching viewpoints towards aspects such as religion, political ideologies, and purchasing habits. This is an oversimplification, as it is impossible to claim, for example, that every Millennial born in 1996 will share the same views as a Millennial born in 1981 (Dimock, 2019). Then again, generational research could be argued to be concerned about broad strokes rather than an exact science, serving to help market products or to manage political campaigns. The general understanding is that someone who

fits within the Millennial category will be different from someone within Generation X, and even more so against a Baby Boomer. The gap, however, between the edges of generations can be problematic. Lizardi himself, who was born in 1981, falls just within the beginning of the current designation of Millennial by the Pew Research Center, but states that he could be placed at the end of Generation X (Lizardi, 2017, p. 5). The same concern regarding the edges could also be claimed to exist with the overlap between Millennial and Generation Z.

The overlap provides an entry point into trying to understand the placement of nostalgia within these seemingly distinct groups. Göran Bolin's (2016) position is that 'intergenerational experiences' are impossible and that generational experiences can only 'be shared within one's own generation, with those who have similar experiences'. The reason why this '"cannot always be passed on to the next generation" [is] because the media landscape has changed and the newer generation has "developed an own, autonomous identity"' (Bolin, 2016). This, though, is based on the presumption that the media landscape changes over time, which it had done for most of the 20th century. Therefore, resulting in identifiable differences in media available and consumed by different generations. During the latter stages of the 20th century, it became more apparent (although not explicitly a new phenomenon) that the media landscape was not changing to the same extent. *Star Wars* was brought to a new generation at the end of the 20th century (despite its differences to the previous trilogy) and the likes of *Super Mario* and other iconic Nintendo franchises continue to be relevant[33].

[33] The final chapter looks at *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* and its ability to appeal to a broad "multi-generational" audience.

This results in an intergenerational approach which can potentially make it easier to create content as well as market as it could appeal to an even larger pool of people. But the valid critique of this is that the new younger demographic will struggle to have a generation that is truly their own. Instead, a remediated version of what came before. Nostalgia, therefore, could be seen in this instance as not just a more efficient way of appealing to multiple generations at once, but a lack of ideas to be able to effectively appeal to multiple *different* generations at once.

An alternative consideration of this though, is that the sheer cost involved to support a franchise like *Star Wars* can make it prohibitive to make new content explicitly for younger generations, which do not possess significant disposable income. The financial resources required to come up with something new at such a scale contributes to the risk involved being deemed too high. Contributing to the appeal of an existing franchise that can support a multigenerational approach. Furthermore, this can be fragmented with offshoots created to appeal specifically to different generations. Even though this is not *new* material and instead sourced from other elements within the franchise, it can be a way of creating distinguishable material primarily for a different generation, that still feeds into the broader intergenerational core content. Continuing with the *Star Wars* examples, Lucasfilm has used different types of television programmes (including collaborations with The Lego Group) that are designed to help ingratiate younger viewers into the *Star Wars* fictional universe without significantly altering the core of the franchise. These series also incorporate elements of nostalgia from older generations by including references to past films, which are likely aimed at guardians watching these alongside children.

Videogames also utilise this strategy, almost as frequently as film, but unlike film, the videogames medium has created a way of categorising itself into generations, referred to as *Console Generations*. Whilst generations as a form of distinguishing human demographics still apply for the videogames medium, console generations have become a shorthand of distinguishing different consoles apart based on specific time periods and broadly similar technical specifications. Given the tendency in the medium to often favour software obsolescence (for example, PlayStation 3 videogames do not natively work on a PlayStation 4)[34] there has been a necessity to recognise which generation a videogame released during, as often console hardware from that time will be required to play the original version of that software. Meaning that something like *The World Is Not Enough* (Eurocom, 2000)[35] requires a Nintendo 64 to operate and this is the only legitimate way of using this software, as it has not been re-released on another system or received a remake. With this example, there is also the problem of licensing which contributes to the difficulty of this software being re-released in its original form.

The Fallout of Format Wars

The original motion picture version of *The World Is Not Enough* (Apted, 1999) can easily be obtained via a range of formats and be watched on different hardware released during the past decade despite being a piece of media that is over two decades old. There are different aspects to this, one is that it is easier to reproduce visual media onto different physical

[34] Even when console hardware does support Backwards Compatibility it is not always universal. For example, the Xbox One did not support Xbox 360 videogames for the first two years and since then has gradually been increasing the list of supported titles. This is unlikely ever to support the vast majority of 360 titles.
[35] The original example given was *Goldeneye 007* (Rareware, 1997) but in 2023 finally received a re-release for Nintendo Switch and something resembling a remaster for Xbox systems (Linneman, 2023).

formats that are read by different hardware. Another being that despite also being dominated by Japanese companies, in the context of home video entertainment there were consortiums that were formed between these rival companies to come to an agreed standard (Calcei and M'Chirgui, 2012). This then freed companies to concentrate on making different versions of the same hardware that would play the same media, but to specific cost and feature variations. This also pooled together Research and Development (R&D) costs across the companies further adding to the feasibility of financing the new format. In addition, having multiple companies producing similar hardware results in benefits from economies of scale due to adhering to the same base specification meaning similar components will be used therefore increased supply and demand help to bring down production costs over the years.

However, this does not always result in universal agreement amongst the technology companies (and media companies supporting those formats), as there can be splits between different factions, each made up of multiple technology manufacturers and media producers. This culminates in what is referred to as a 'format war', whereby two (or more) incompatible proprietary formats compete for the same market (Calcei and M'Chirgui, 2012). This has been a continued source of disruption within media storage (and has also afflicted other technologies and industries such as rail gauges and electricity current) and has been a common theme when it has come to how most forms of audio and visual media are commercially stored and consumed. Two such instances involving the wider film industry was the 'videotape format war' between Betamax and Video Home System (VHS). Neither was the first video cassette recorders (VCRs) to reach the market but did become the two

main competing formats. JVC, Sony, and Matsushita Electric[36] did initially work together to create their own format for the Japanese market with the aim of being the first to provide a unified standard. Sony and Matsushita later left to create their own formats, with Sony creating "Betamax" and Matsushita with "VX", JVC meanwhile went on to create "VHS".

In 1974 an industry standard did not exist, and the Japanese Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) tried to encourage the Japanese industry to adopt a home video standard so as to prevent consumer confusion (Bylund, 2010). At this time Sony had a working prototype that was almost ready for retail which helped MITI to recognise Betamax as the standard which Sony could then licence this technology to other companies. Meanwhile, JVC argued that an open format should be favoured, where the format and its technology is shared between competitors, rather than having a single company licence it, as ultimately this would benefit the consumer. In order to prevent MITI from formally adopting Betamax, JVC encouraged other companies to accept VHS instead in opposition to Sony and MITI, notably getting support from Matsushita who was Japan's largest electronics manufacturer at that time (as well as JVCs majority stakeholder).

Now that Betamax was no longer the required default format, the collective of companies supporting VHS were free to compete with Sony, and therefore the market would help to decide which would become the accepted format going forward. There were differences in picture quality and the amount of time that could be stored on them, with Betamax favouring quality over quantity (length of footage) and VHS the reverse. Over time as the cassette tapes were improved upon the difference became less distinct, to the extent that

[36] Panasonic's parent company which is now known by this name and was also a majority stockholder of JVC until 2008 (Panasonic, no date; Schumpeter, 2014).

for the average consumer the difference was negligible. However, price did become the main element of separation. As previously mentioned, having more companies manufacture the same technology benefits from economies of scale, helping to lower manufacturing costs which in turn helps to lower the price for consumers. Ultimately this became the reality, and the choice for many came down to price alone (Schofield, 2003). There was also a perceived underlying arrogance on the part of Sony that consumers would want superior quality and should be prepared to pay extra (and accept the inconvenience of changing the cassette to watch the rest of a film). This is relevant, not just as a critique of Sony's approach in this instance, but as a prelude to the company's attitude which has been argued to have hindered its other products in the decades following.

A similar format war emerged in the mid 2000's with the high-definition successor to the DVD format which once again saw Sony trying to claim the standard with its Blu-ray Disc and Toshiba primarily responsible for HD DVD. Unlike the videotape format war, in this instance, both were backed by a consortium. Although this time the stakes were higher for Sony, who now owned a motion picture studio along with a sizable back catalogue and therefore favoured having its films distributed via the format standard developed and partly owned by them. Furthermore, Sony also used the new format as its choice of storage medium for its PlayStation 3 console, due to its increased storage capacity over DVDs. Part of the success of Sony's previous console the PlayStation 2 was attributed to its inclusion of a DVD player, making it one of the most affordable ways to watch films via the format as well as bringing the format into the homes of millions who were primarily concerned with getting the successor to the highly successful PlayStation. Therefore, it is understandable for Sony to try and replicate the approach with the PS3 which was also being positioned as the most powerful videogame console of all time; with a high price point to match, as seen in the now

infamous '599 US Dollars' (Sinclair, 2016) price reveal from Kaz Hirai (who later became President and CEO of Sony). This high price point drew comparisons to the approach Sony had previously taken with its Betamax players, that these were high-end electronics that should be aspirational purchases, despite the success that Sony had achieved with the previous two PlayStation consoles which bordered on utilitarian appeal. The PS3 was an expensive console to manufacture though, having an expensive cell processor created specifically for the console, plus the inclusion of the Blu-ray drive itself further contributed to the cost; despite the high price to consumers, Sony was still making a loss on the system (something Microsoft were able to minimise by including a DVD player instead and using a comparatively conventional processor).

Having dominated the previous two console generations, however, Sony felt they could afford to take this stance, that owners of previous PlayStation's should be willing to 'work more hours to buy one' (Ransom-Wiley, 2005). This approach along with having a more expensive console put Sony behind Microsoft and its Xbox 360 for most of the seventh-generation (Purchese, 2011; Agnello, 2013). Yet, despite how the console war played out Sony's Blu-ray format still won in the high-definition optical disc format war. Whilst film studios and which format they supported was a factor, by having the PS3 come with a Blu-ray drive increased access to the format, compared with HD-DVD which did not come with any rival console. Even though Microsoft was one of the companies supporting the format, in practice, this extended to an optional add-on drive for its Xbox 360 which was used to watch HD DVD films but had nothing to do with playing videogame content. Even though the 360 was the more successful console globally for most of the generation, not including an HD DVD drive and using the format to store its videogames took away the boost it needed.

A problem with format wars is that they can be damaging for the wider industry and especially either side of the factions. This is the result of the impact it can have on consumer confidence, as a valid concern presents itself with consumers afraid of supporting and committing to a *losing* standard. Therefore, many consumers will wait until a standard becomes dominant or de-facto. This slows the initial adoption to primarily what is known as "Early Adopters". This can also have negative implications for the longevity of the winning standard as well, with the time wasted giving other options the opportunity to become established, in this instance, the rise of online streaming. Furthermore, by the start of the eighth-generation with Blu-ray the only high-definition and commercially high-density optical disc-based storage solution, Microsoft also included one in its Xbox One console as well. Except this was more as a concession to those without access to fast and stable internet connections, as already videogames were increasingly making the transition towards a digital future, which was strongly favoured by Microsoft when they first announced the Xbox One to fan backlash (Plunkett, 2013). Five years later Microsoft released a version of its Xbox One S system without a disc drive (called the "All-Digital Edition") to further reduce the price for consumers (Gattis, 2019) (and the cost to Microsoft manufacturing the system) and to keep consumers tied into Microsoft's subscription services; Xbox Game Pass[37].

The DVD format was able to bypass this, having become the de-facto standard early on, which helped it to become widely supported and used across a range of devices, notably on the previously mentioned PS2 but also Microsoft's first Xbox console (2001) using the format for its videogames as well as playing multimedia DVDs, and continuing with the successor,

[37] At time of editing Xbox Live Gold had been replaced by Xbox Game Pass Core.

Xbox 360, four years later. The successor to Blu-ray "Ultra HD Blu-ray" (also referred to as 4K Blu-ray) released unopposed in terms of storage format continuing the evolution in higher visual fidelity.[38] With main development overseen by the board members of the Blu-ray Disc Association rather than led by Sony (with support from the Association) it becomes clearer as to why Sony is not pushing the format as heavily as with the original Blu-ray standard, having decided not to include it in its mid-generation models the PS4 Slim and PS4 Pro, whereas Microsoft included it in both the Xbox One S and X models. Both Sony and Microsoft included it in their ninth-generation consoles the PS5 and Xbox Series X. Although in a sign that increasingly consumers were consuming content digitally, Sony released a disc free "Digital" edition. Whilst Microsoft released a less powerful and smaller disc free console called the Series S.

The Refrigerator and The Invisible Hand of The Market

The Betamax vs VHS format war could be seen as a victory for the average consumer, one where usability won over quality. Yet this is not always the situation, one lesser-known example where the *better* product lost was in the decision behind the technology that formed the core mechanism enabling refrigerators to keep things cold. In an enlightening article by Ruth Schwartz Cowan (1999) she highlights the determining factors that resulted in refrigerators acquiring its signature hum due to the cooling method used; one that otherwise would not had become commonly associated were a different cooling method adopted, one that could be argued was more efficient at the time.

[38] Another benefit that came about from this new standard it no longer has region coding meaning a disc from the USA will work on hardware in Europe and vice-versa. Some Blu-ray's were also region free, but this was varied on almost a piece-by-piece basis.

General Electric (GE) was one company that helped contribute to the success and acceptance of the electric compressor refrigerator, in part due to being active across the electrical industry. Yet after The Great War found it necessary to pivot towards the consumer electric market. This required investment into the air-cooling refrigerators. This was an acceptable cost for GE, not because water cooling could be a problem for customers, but due to GE's 'most important customers…the electric utility companies'. The electric required to run the air-cooled machine was around $1.30 more over six months compared to the water-cooled machine. Therefore, with GE's shift into consumer electricity to benefit its core business – which is generating electricity – it is beneficial to take advantage of a machine that would generate additional revenue primarily for itself rather than relinquish some of that to a different industry; in this instance the water works (Cowan, 1999). Despite recognising that there would be risks involved with pursuing this venture, it was deemed acceptable, and one that GE had the resources required to withstand the necessary initial losses. As ultimately both the electric generation and the consumer elements of GE stood to benefit from this investment.

GE were not alone in manufacturing electric compression refrigerators, with Kelvinator, Westinghouse, and even General Motors entering the market. Cowan argues that due to the large size and the aggressive power exercised by these resourceful companies greatly contributed to compression instead of absorption (gas) refrigerators becoming the standard, rather than because of consumer preference or technical capability. Like the example of VHS, development of refrigerators also benefited from cross-licensing and mass production brought about via economies of scale helping to bring down prices for consumers, further aided by competitive pricing between the manufacturers (Cowan, 1999).

With electricity acting like a subscription cost for the continued use of the refrigerator this approach to extracting continual revenue out of customers has expanded significantly. It is an increasingly common approach, but in recent years it has taken on an increased presence in the videogames medium. Subscriptions for online play for consoles have been around since the launch of Xbox Live in 2002 for the original Xbox[39]. However, the rise of Xbox Game Pass has increasingly become the way in which consumers access videogames. For Microsoft, Game Pass likely has a higher profit margin, meanwhile enabling the Xbox hardware to become a loss leader. Software once again becomes the core, which makes sense for a company like Microsoft which remains a software company. Their hardware is a means of providing more efficient access to its software and services, resulting in efficiencies from vertical integration. An additional example from a different medium will be explored next which can be viewed as being a past instance of the relationship between hardware being the facilitator of content and profit.

Radio Consumption, A Precursor to Videogame Subscriptions

In the US, Tim Wu (2010, p. 130) notes that whilst the launching of more radio stations might have meant more radios sold, that this would be seen as a benefit to the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), who was a major manufacture of radios, it should actually be viewed as a threat. Certainly, the RCA wanted to sell more radios, but they wanted people who purchased radios to listen to NBC (National Broadcasting Company) rather than another radio station, as this radio network was also owned by the RCA. Therefore, by listening to NBC radio listeners were continuing to directly generate revenue for the RCA instead of via a

[39] The Sega Dreamcast also had online subscription services available in different regions for the console.

single transaction. This is similar in theory to the subscription models today, where consumers buy a piece of hardware (whether a single item or repeat) but continue to pay a subscription fee for the duration of time where they use (or intend to use) that piece of hardware[40]. Meaning that the company behind the hardware has a recurring revenue model that continues to make money out of the customers instead of just the once (Carman, 2019). Whilst customers were not paying a subscription to listen to the radio (unlike in the UK with the BBC licence fee), they were a source of revenue from the advertising NBC (and therefore the RCA) made because of people tuning into to that station over a competitor. This is also similar to GE's approach behind using the electric compressor for its domestic refrigerators to support its core electric generation business. In turn, one can then think of the additional electricity that the consumer must pay to run their new appliance as an early form of subscription fee. As if they do not continue to pay their electricity fee then they are unable to continue to use the appliance, and furthermore, GE continues to generate income from the continued use of the appliance. Meaning in practice, if a consumer purchases one of their refrigerators, it is not just a one-time source of income. However, there is not the suggestion that in these instances the hardware acts as a loss leader to entice customers to buy the hardware at a lower price – in that the manufacturer either makes little/no profit or even makes a loss – in order to make the running costs (subscription) easier to accept. Yet this is the direction that the videogames medium has been moving towards for the past two decades with consoles sold at a loss[41] and the manufacturers recouping their investment

[40] This instance is similar to the "Razor and Blades" model in which the razor (handle) is sold at a low price, but the blades needed are sold at a higher price. But here, the hardware is the razor, and the subscription is the blade.

[41] Nintendo remains an outlier as its systems are typically sold making a small profit on each unit.

from the licensing fees made from the sale of each piece of videogame software sold for use on their consoles. Yet, more recently this has started to expand further.

In the console space it is only feasible for the biggest companies in the world to be able to even consider entering the market.[42] Needing to be very careful and realising the needs of getting the right software behind it to get consumers on board to make it a success. The medium, in terms of distribution, is moving in the direction of becoming services based. Similar to how music has transitioned as well as film/TV. Videogames have made significant momentum in this direction over the past couple years. What was holding it back was a combination of resistance from consumers (who vocally pushed back when Microsoft tried to do so when it first revealed its Xbox One[43]) but also limitations in internet capability/infrastructure. Whilst the infrastructure connected to consumers' homes remains an issue (only seeing gradual improvements) the back end at Microsoft (notably its Azure servers) has been expanded significantly and will provide the heavy lifting support necessary to make videogame streaming on a larger scale feasible. Something that music and film/TV has not had to concern itself to the same extent due to less intensive requirements.

Consumption of film/TV and music have become increasingly controlled by the distributors. The rise in competing streaming services has shifted ownership away from consumers and given control back to the distributors that own the studios. It is increasingly difficult for consumers to *buy* content and are at the mercy of either the content owners and their owned streaming services or licensing deals made for distributing content. The console space for decades was constrained due to the control of the console manufacturers having

[42] Google attempted to do so via streaming, with its Google Stadia service, but it was shut down after three years (Peters and Cranz, 2022).

[43] Originally announced as an all-in-one media centre always connected to the internet where players could access their games from any Xbox.

the final say what could be sold for their platforms. The rise of digital downloads changed this in a sense, as a wider range of content became available for sale on these platforms (still with the authorisation of the platform holders). But with the increased success of these digital stores brought with it greater control over software as a whole with physical decreasing.

Console Wars – The New Frontline of Format Wars

Up until this point the chapter has been providing an alternative way of understanding the role that format wars and consumption strategies have had on how consumers engage with different technologies and the *choices* that they have. Notably with audio-visual content to help in turn highlight the significance of how the situation is even worse regarding the videogames medium.

Unlike the format wars, where ultimately opposing factions came together and operated on the same format, the console-based videogame medium has remained at least a three-way competition for over two decades. On the one hand, this could be criticised as an oligopoly and therefore keeping new competitors out of the market; this is exacerbated by the inordinate costs required to enter this market, with the latest entrant Microsoft losing billions of dollars whilst it established itself.[44] Although, each respective company is different from each other in regard to where videogames fit into its portfolio. Only Nintendo predominately depends on its videogames (software and hardware) output, whereas Microsoft is a software company (increasingly services based), and Sony an electronics and

[44] Microsoft has been involved in videogames for many years prior with its own Microsoft Games Studio developing videogames for Windows and providing support for Sega and Atari.

media conglomerate (it also has a strong Financial Services arm that generates a considerable source of profit[45]). Despite the different videogame priorities of these companies, there has existed continued competition between them which has contributed to the innovation that has taken place within the medium. However, the seventh-generation was overly extended compared to previous generations (in terms of the length between new console releases[46]) and it was during this time that innovation from a high-technology perspective moved away from the base console because none of the "big three" were ready to release a brand-new console system. Instead focusing on multiple iterative design releases (e.g., PS3 Slim and Super Slim, Xbox 360 S and E) along with hardware accessories focusing on motion controls previously popularised by Nintendo and its Wii system at the start of the generation. Sony released the PlayStation Move which positioned itself as a more responsive and accurate version of Nintendo's Wii-mote, whilst Microsoft launched the Xbox Kinect which was a hands-free motion-controlled experience that also utilised voice commands.

This approach helped to stave off the necessity of rushing out a new system whilst also releasing new hardware that helped create additional revenue as well as generating renewed interest in the existing consoles – which could now be manufactured at a lower cost. This approach was initially very successful commercially for Microsoft – and to a lesser extent Sony – with the Kinect selling 10 million devices within the first six months (along with 10 million Kinect retail games – although this is only an attach rate of roughly one)

[45] In its home market of Japan Sony's financial arm 'accounted for 63 percent of Sony's total operating profit' in 2012 (Tabuchi, 2013).

[46] Some videogame consoles have long shelf lives where they are still available to be purchased years after the successor has been released into the market. Sometimes this is so that a cheaper alternative is still available on the market which can also be manufactured at a low cost helping to maximise profits. It can also be a useful strategy in other markets such as South America.

(Alexander, 2011). Yet both the Xbox Kinect and PlayStation Move failed to generate significant critical success and eventually fell out of favour with the general audience; and looked down upon with disdain by the core videogame audience, dismissing them as another gimmick.

It is partly as a result of this development during the second half of the seventh-generation that this thesis argues helped to contribute towards the increased prominence of nostalgia and the past as determining factors on the videogames medium. With the ageing consoles still present and owned by a continually growing audience around the world, the previous approach/strategy of utilising the power of these consoles to display higher fidelity visuals and/or more complex technical gameplay mechanics had reached its zenith. It is this that in part helped to facilitate the rise of smaller developers who had access to a platform with a wide audience supported by the developments of internet-connected digital storefronts on the consoles. Given the smaller size of these games – as a result of budget and team size – there was a tendency (not exclusively though) for these developers to create retro inspired videogames which did not require the same amount of resources that the typical AAA 3D videogame required at that time. Meanwhile, the larger established firms of the videogames medium began to fill in the gaps that emerged from the extended development cycle that could result from developing High Definition videogames with re-releases of older videogames, particularly those from the sixth-generation receiving “HD upgrades” and sold at a lower cost than typical *new* releases.

The shift to developing videogames in High Definition alongside the change in trends during that generation was particularly problematic for the Japanese side of the medium which saw its market share drop during that era (Henderson, 2011; Byford, 2014). During the previous

generations Japan had dominated, but with the absence of proper backwards compatibility support, and a market that had shifted towards Western-focused videogames, the conditions were apt for select titles to be brought to the then modern consoles. This appealed not only to the nostalgia of those wanting to re-experience these past games without having to retrieve and/or use ageing hardware but also to a new audience potentially from a younger generation. Now with the benefit of a slightly altered presentation to help enable them to engage with it (and the cultural memory they might also possess). This is partly in line with the approach used by the film medium that has been able to rerelease the same films multiple times; be it for the latest media format or as part of an extended, directors, or anniversary release. Whilst videogames are not quite on this level, previously individual videogames were typically restricted to the platforms they were originally released on, aside from notable exceptions[47]. Now the medium was experimenting with how successfully it could exploit its own history. One benefit for the medium was that it helped highlight the importance of preserving its history, that there was interest in older videogames, but also because of this, it became clear how there was a lack of effective archiving and wide availability of the medium's past. The medium had been so preoccupied with moving forward, that by the time the momentum began to slow down it was almost too late to protect its past. Almost failing to learn from the mistakes of the film industry which has lost decades worth of material from its early years.

[47] Prior to the Wii, Nintendo only occasionally rereleased its videogames on new systems without remaking them. One instance was *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* which originally released on the N64 was brought to the GameCube with Special Editions of the then latest entry in the series *The Wind Waker*.

Conclusion

As identified in this chapter, other mediums and technologies have had internal fights (wars) to determine the future trajectory. The aim of this is to highlight that the "console wars" that have been present in the videogames medium for the past four decades are not a new phenomenon, or even a particularly rare one. Videogames have been in the shadow of film for much of its existence (I will be revisiting this comparison in later chapters), but comparisons extend beyond this visual medium. The surrounding factors that contribute to how videogames are supplied and consumed can be understood before changes applied to the medium even emerge, as we can look to the past. History is repeating itself. Not as a one-to-one comparison, each medium and technology still has its idiosyncrasies. But, as the videogames medium matures, it too succumbs to the business practices of old, albeit dressed up as something new.

It is elements like the format wars and the inoperability between competing consoles and successive consoles from the same manufacturer that contribute to the necessity of console generations in terms of how the medium is both understood and marketed. Whilst the use of console generations to classify console videogames into time spans can be scrutinised, be it for its inelegancy at times or as the mediums tool of control, it does provide a shorthand to help understand and identify the key epochs across the history of the medium.

With the focus earlier in the chapter on generations in relation to human demographics, the thesis suggested that the focus on appealing to individually defined generations was beginning to weaken, with a strategy for larger media franchises to utilise an intergenerational approach. A possible result of this is a reduction in ownership that younger generations can claim as their own, instead, finding that an increasing amount of media they

engage with is essentially a hand down from the older generations, increasing the presence of relative nostalgia[48]. This problem is at play with videogames, which can be considered to have continued to do so almost since its inception, but in part because of the result of the significant technological advancements between console generations. The videogames that are subsequently created can be considered inexorably tied to those console generations; even after receiving remasters/remakes. Which is why the overlap with human generations is important to consider and the lasting impact this can have on what is subsequently created, be it for reasons of artistic, commercial, or both.

The following chapter will introduce the way in which "authenticity" is understood and how it differs from "accuracy". These two terms are often seen as synonyms, but I will be explaining how distinguishing between these two open up how the past can be utilised effectively in videogames. The focus is on historically themed videogames as this provides a solid foundation of understanding what looking at the past can bring and how it interacts with elements such as nostalgic tendencies from players.

[48] In the final chapter I introduce the notion of a "lost generation" which expands upon the situation generation Z find themselves in regarding media style.

Chapter 3: Authenticity – Depicting the Past in Historical Videogames

Introduction

This chapter will be examining the role of authenticity in videogames as a means of engaging with the past whilst also providing its own depiction of history in a way that supports player engagement. It will also explore how this can subsequently contribute to, and inform, the wider understanding of past events that are outside of the lived experiences of the players. This will primarily focus on the historical settings that revolve around modern British history (for this chapter 1837-1945) as there are instances during this time span that have become idealised forming a part of 'collective memory' (Chapman, 2016) that is looked back to, sometimes fondly, which can be expressed through videogames and other mediums.

The core example through which this will be explored is via an examination of *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (Ubisoft Quebec, 2015) which is set in London during the reign of Queen Victoria; specifically 1868. This is the ninth entry in a series that has continued for over a decade. Its overarching narrative revolves around the power struggle between the freedom seeking Assassin Order and the authoritarian Templars who want to consolidate the strength of their power and influence from behind the scenes.

Through this fictional narrative set in a historical setting, an exploration of *Syndicate* will help to explore the validity of an approach within the videogames medium that could be argued to be moving towards a focus on authenticity rather than accuracy in its depiction of the past and how this potentially results in a more effective experience of the past within the context of this interactive medium.

Much like *Assassin's Creed Syndicate,* there are multiple examples of videogames[49] utilising historical settings as the backdrop to the gameplay that is provided and in turn exploit the interest that players have in those time periods. Commonly this has centred around the horrific events that occurred during World War II, which provides a historical narrative that can be easily attuned to the gameplay mechanics of videogames due to its binary participants and distinguishable *heroes and villains*.

With World War II dominating the historical landscape of depictions via the videogames medium, other instances of modern British history have been largely overlooked. It is for this reason that *Syndicate* stands out, despite the era encompassing Queen Victoria's reign (1837-1901) having been explored in other mediums[50]. Therefore, the developers have had to *gamify* the historical narrative presented by introducing a fiction that provides opponents within the game for the player to contend against (which were factions introduced in previous entries in the series). Meanwhile, to legitimise the presence of this fiction, the developers felt the need to create an as authentic depiction of London as technically feasible (budget depending) to help gain the attention of players (consumers).

This chapter will address why the focus on authentically recreating a digital depiction of 1868 London was crucial for the developers and the type of nostalgia that is generated from this approach. This chapter also addresses how this supports the fictional narrative that is created for what still purports to be a *historical videogame*.

[49] A significant number of entries from the *Call of Duty* series (2003-) and *Battlefield* series (2002-), *Brothers in Arms* (2005-2014), *Valiant Hearts* (2014), *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* (2004), and *Total War* series (2000-) are just some examples that use historical settings.
[50] Examples including *Sherlock Holmes* (1887-) and the multitude of depictions across different mediums, *Victoria & Abdul* (2017), *The Elephant Man* (1980), *The Prestige* (1995 [novel] and 2006 [film]), *The Ruby in the Smoke* (1995).

A Digital Depiction of the Past

This chapter does not claim that the core aim of *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (Ubisoft Quebec, 2015) is to provide a radical reinterpretation of the United Kingdom during the reign of Queen Victoria. But it does posit that there has been a conscious effort on the part of developers at Ubisoft Quebec not to create a depiction that satiates the nostalgic desires that exist towards the British Empire and instead provides a contemporary reflection upon that period from the past. However, outside of its own fictional narrative, it does not provide a radical reinterpretation of the past, yet it is cautious in its approach and there appears to be a tacit understanding of its potential power to influence those playing *Syndicate*. Later this chapter will examine the role that videogames like *Syndicate* have within the wider context of collective memory and the significance of this in connection to 'Postmemory' (Hirsch, 2008). As the medium has continued to evolve this recognition has become more implicit, which has seen videogame developers act more cautiously with how they depict some elements of the past. Despite this, it has not yet been universal, and some gameplay genres and time periods have taken longer to adjust their use of the past.

World War II videogames have been a staple within the historical videogame subgenre. In large part, because it can be simplified as a conflict between *good versus evil* with clear binary belligerents. Furthermore, events such as the Second Battle of El Alamein which is depicted in Activision's *Call of Duty 2* (Infinity Ward, 2005) has subsequently been determined as significant within the documentation of history and that brings a value to the credibility of *Call of Duty 2* that the developers do not have to create themselves. Therefore, it has been claimed by Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Justin Parsler (2007) that videogames

are only left with qualifying the extent to which 'war in general is a bloody and unpleasant business'. They go on to state that:

> 'The central tenet of the *Call of Duty* series is not to produce a historically accurate depiction of the Second World War. Instead, it is to present a visually exciting, fast-paced shooter game in which the player kills many bad guys to get to the next level. In essence, then, the core motif of the game is not World War Two at all – it is killing things in the fastest and best manner.' (MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler, 2007).

This type of videogame can, therefore, be criticised for using these important and horrific moments from the past to give the impression of authority, but MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler argue that the game (and the developers) has not earned the right to claim this authority. Implying that the events that are depicted are used to provide shock and awe, rather than a genuine reflection upon the horrors of the past.

Unlike the aforementioned WW2 themed videogames, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* has created a depiction of London that has to justify its overarching narrative. Whilst it shares a story that can be defined as *good versus evil*, its core characters and events that the player undertakes are fictional, except these elements are wrapped up within a *real* historical setting. *Syndicate* is also a very different genre of videogame to *Call of Duty* (*CoD*), both in terms of narrative and gameplay, as the player spends a considerable amount of time in an *open world* depiction of London which they are free to explore at their leisure. Therefore, the player has more time in which they might notice environmental flaws, or geographical inaccuracies, that would likely be overlooked in a First-Person Shooter (FPS) like a *CoD* game. This is likely to have contributed to why authenticity is deemed by the developers of *Syndicate* to be so important for historical videogames like theirs.

Authentic ≠ Real

Before examining further how the developers implemented an authentic depiction of London, it is necessary to state that the way in which the term *authenticity* appears to be increasingly understood by those in the videogames medium (and shared by myself) is only one of the ways that it can be defined. A broader understanding of authentic can be to describe something as being 'of undisputed origin of authorship', or in a weaker sense a 'reliable, accurate representation' (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2014). Although this does not stand in as a universally agreed upon definition for authenticity, in part due to different fields and disciplines appropriating it differently, and because the videogames medium increasingly considers authenticity and accuracy to be separate designations rather than two sides of the same coin. The field of business, on the other hand, understands it in the context of the relationship between businesses and consumers. Yet it does provide a basis that informs the position taken up by the videogames medium. During a TED Talk, Joseph Pine (2004) outlined one of the clearer definitions of authenticity, that it is 'being true to [it]self' and 'being what [it] says [it is] to others', in other words, authenticity is tied to truth and the pursuit of the 'real' as opposed to being 'fake'. Where the significant evolution of the term begins to become apparent is the introduction of 'Real-fake' and 'Fake-real'; the former 'is what it says it is but not true to itself' (where you can see behind the façade) and the latter 'is true to itself but not what it says it is' (such as Disneyland which commits to pretending it is a magic kingdom).

It is this connection between fake and real (irrespective of the sequence between the two terms for now) that is significant to the evolution in how we can think about the term

authenticity and how it has been appropriated when discussing videogames with historical settings. These videogames are not, and do not claim to be, *real*, the fact that the player is engaging with a videogame which provides them with a digital world to interact with is explicit. Therefore these experiences are *fake*, but that does not make them inauthentic, because they are sincerely rendered to be authentic (Gilmore and Pine, 2007, p. 87 and 90). These fakes, as is the case of *Syndicate*, can be argued as both a 'Real-fake' and 'Fake-real', for it appears to be London from 1868 yet makes no effort hiding the videogame that exists behind the digital façade. In addition, it is truthful in its creation of digital depiction which it commits to in its engagement with the player.

In practice, there was a determined approach by the developers of *Syndicate* as to how they constructed their digital depiction of London from 1868 to satiate their desire to provide something authentic enough for those playing the game (aka the consumers). Key landmarks are present, but some receive more attention than others, for notable buildings like Westminster Abbey and Buckingham Palace, Ubisoft aimed for a one-to-one recreation. *Syndicate*'s world designer Jonathan Dumont states that the landmarks in the game are 'mostly authentic', because of the texture work that can be different to the real version, due to the development process and the assets the artists have available (Williams, 2015). Jean-Vincent Roy – *Syndicate*'s resident historian – stated that 'authenticity is important. But it's a video game' (Sapieha, 2015). Roy expands on this during an interview:

> It was clear to us from the start, especially after we visited London and saw how huge and contrasting the city is, that it wouldn't be even remotely feasible to do a simulation of Victorian London. It was much more important to us – and more interesting – to do a highly authentic impression of London. For the most part we've made choices aware of the reality, then we tweaked reality a bit to fit gameplay, aesthetic, and creative decisions that kept the player at the forefront of the experience. (Sapieha, 2015)

The above quote from Roy acknowledges the design decisions that transition the focus away from accurately recreating London and instead attempting to provide an 'authentic impression' (Sapieha, 2015). It would be far too time-consuming and costly to realistically create a digital version of Victorian London, but the developers can only stray so far whilst still claiming to provide a *version* of London. Therefore, the key landmarks are still present, but their position in the London area are not always accurate, distances between streets, and even the location of some of the boroughs is inaccurate, notably Whitechapel. Yet, this does not do enough to pull the average player out of the experience, especially not at first. It is also likely that for many players this will be their first instance of exploring a version of London freely, in turn, this will contribute to defining their perception of the city.



Left: Photograph of Westminster Abbey. Right: Screenshot of Westminster Abbey as recreated in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*.[51]

The development of *Syndicate* suggests a shift towards a focus on authenticity from one on accuracy. This is highlighted based on an interview where lead writer for *Assassin's Creed III*

[51] Photograph sourced from Wikimedia Commons (Σπάρτακος, 2013). Screenshot from *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (Ubisoft Quebec, 2015) captured by me.

(Ubisoft Montreal, 2012), Corey May, revealed that the team 'try to be as historically accurate as possible, technology and fun-factors allowing […] When [they] do diverge from the historical record it's almost always because … it makes the game a better game' (Bertz, 2012). Alex Hutchinson, *Assassin's Creed III*'s *(AC3*) creative director, stated that his aim was to strike a balance between an entertaining and playable videogame that was also historically accurate despite being a work of historical fiction (Elliott and Kapell, 2013a, p. 8). Hutchinson also points out that 'the office tagline is "history is our playground" … we take it very, very seriously. We do a lot of research; we have historical advisors on staff' (Trombley, 2012). This tagline is still in place years later and promoted by Maxime Durand, resident franchise historian, who argues that this approach helps to 'make history accessible' (Batchelor, 2018a).

The way it makes history accessible is a potential strength for the videogames medium as it enables players an alternative form of interactive engagement with history in a way that other mediums cannot. However, this same form of engagement can simultaneously weaken the understanding. By their very nature, videogames require the input of the player, therefore accommodation must be made for the presence of the player in the historical narrative, which is why grand fictitious narratives are interwoven within broad historical narratives to enable this. This is also reinforced by the creative director for the first *Assassin's Creed game*, Patrice Désilets, who stated that from a gameplay perspective '[they] didn't have to do a lot of compromises because [the cities'] architecture is already made for climbing' (Bajda, 2018) (which provides players with the freedom to explore the various locations across the series). At the start of the series, when Désilets was still involved, research was informed by pictures rather than visiting the locations, as was the case with London and *Syndicate*, despite this, the goal for that team was still to be 'as accurate and

thorough in their research as possible'. However, they also did not want the historical background that was supporting the game to become too convoluted, resulting in a '30 second Wikipedia rule', this meant 'if it takes less than 30 seconds to find it on Wikipedia, then it should be the truth' but 'if it takes you three weeks in the old books in Oxford, then who cares?' (Bajda, 2018).

As with other mediums, videogames are 'purchased with the expectation of being entertained', as succinctly put by Andrew Salvati and Jonathan Bullinger (2013, p. 153), which in part has contributed to the criticism that the medium faces when it does address historical subject matter. Salvati and Bullinger (2013, p. 154) introduced the term *selective authenticity* to outline the way in which signifiers from historical texts, artefacts, and popular representations are utilised by videogame developers (for their case study World War II). The aim behind favouring selective authenticity is to propose an alternative to the privileged position of 'inquiry and explanation' whilst also claiming that there can be a benefit to the 'dramatic storytelling'. Videogames provide the player with the ability to engage with and *play* with the past in a self-contained simulation. This can subsequently result in a 'destabilise[d] linear narrative', but selective authenticity enables enough authority to the narrative licence taking place to combine *realistic* historical representations with ludic conventions and *filmic* fictional narratives.

Previously the extent to a videogames accuracy was largely dependent on the technological power available to the developers to utilise in their game to (re)create these detailed locations. Whilst the medium is yet to reach the stage of creating complete simulations that are accurate to the millimetre, they can create a depiction that is visually *close enough*, one that can be deemed *photo-realistic*. A greater risk is posed from the uncanny at breaking the

sense of immersion for the player. Therefore, a focus on establishing authenticity over accuracy is important as the *selective* approach helps to contribute to the experience (Salvati and Bullinger, 2013, p. 157). Douglas Dow supports this approach and adds that a lack of accuracy can help to *enhance* authenticity in a historical context (Elliott and Kapell, 2013b, p. 213). This explains the role of the fantastical narrative of *Syndicate* and the wider *Assassin's Creed* series and is explored via the historical veneers present in *Assassins' Creed II* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2009) which Dow explores further.

Simulacra and Disneyland

Syndicate presents one of the rare occasions[52] where the city of London is depicted in a videogame, unlike the film medium where London is constantly utilised for its iconic landmarks, and in recent years convenient tax breaks (BFI, 2016). Videogame developers either create their own fictional world or very often recreate one of the sprawling cities from the United States of America. It is, therefore, relatively novel for players to have an opportunity to explore a digital playground of London, let alone one set in 1868. The existence of this playground draws comparisons to Jean Baudrillard's description of Disneyland and his wider theory around the simulacrum. Baudrillard states that the famous theme park is:

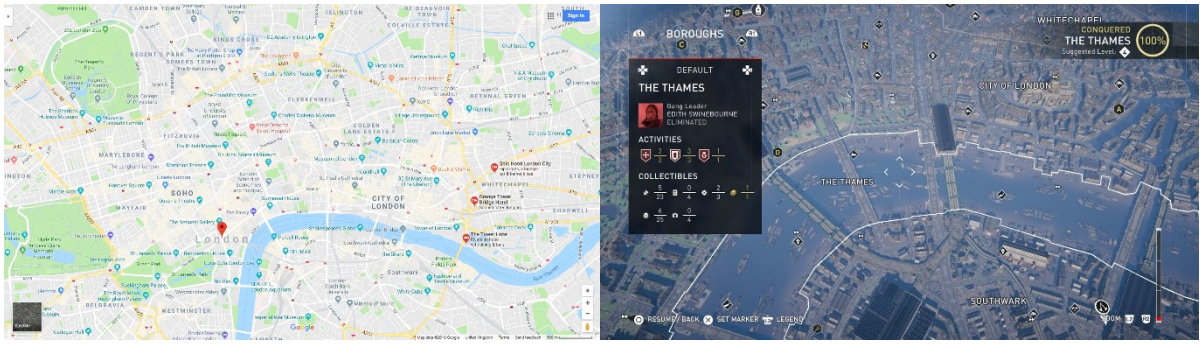
> '[P]resented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. It is no longer representation of reality (ideology) but of

[52] Although not the only depiction in a videogame, other examples include *Midtown Madness 2* (2000), *The Getaway* (2002), and *ZombiU* (2012). More recently Ubisoft returned to London but in a Post-Brexit near future setting with *Watch Dogs: Legion* (2020).

> concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.' (1994, pp. 12–13)

Douglas Dow has also made the comparison between the depictions present in the *Assassin's Creed* series and Baudrillard's understanding of the *real*. Dow argues that via a Baudrillarian perspective exploring the Florence that appears in *Assassin's Creed II* 'immerses the player in a simulation of the city and blurs the distinction [between] the representation and the real' (Dow, 2013, p. 218). Like how Baudrillard sees Disneyland, Dow describes the depiction of Florence in *AC2* as a simulacrum, as this version 'purports to be a true representation of Florence, but that presents a false likeness instead' (2013, pp. 218–219). This is different from Disneyland, which remains aware of its status as a copy, and imitation, instead the focus is on *seeming* authentic rather than being accurate. Dow argues that the version of Florence in *AC2*, which has modified the street plan, lacks some of the major landmarks, whilst adding monuments that were built after the year the game is set, is a 'perversion of imitation itself – a false likeness'(2013, p. 219). In turn, Dow affirms his statement that this Florence is a simulacrum, in line with Michael Camille's description, which 'calls into question the ability to distinguish between what is real and what is represented' (2013, p. 219). Given the inaccuracies present in this depiction it would be assumed that *AC2* fails in its efforts of providing a believable copy, but that only becomes apparent providing the player is *aware* of these inaccuracies. For most players this is not the case, therefore the illusion is not shattered, as they know it is not the *real* Florence, but the illusion they are engaging with is seemingly a real *copy*, which helps them remain engaged in the simulation.

The notion that representations can contribute to determining perceptions and how this relates to the real is one that, perhaps unsurprisingly, has been explored by Baudrillard. Dow argues that Baudrillard would have stated that exploration of *AC2*s representation of Florence would undoubtedly influence a player's experience if they eventually visited the real Florence. Having explored the simulated version players are subsequently denied 'an authentic experience of the city' because they will continue to view it through the refraction of the videogame (Dow, 2013, p. 223). This is at odds with Baudrillard's analysis of the relationship between Disneyland (the simulation) and Los Angeles (the real) in which the simulation is to help strengthen the believability of the real. Dow mentioned that for Baudrillard 'there can be no authentic experience', as what is believed to be real is not necessarily the case (Dow, 2013, p. 224).



Left: Screenshot of London from Google Maps. Right: Screenshot from a map view of London present in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*.[53]

The London that is depicted in *Syndicate* no longer exists, aside from key landmarks and the shape of the Thames through central London, the city today is vastly different. There are some roads that remain today that can be found in *Syndicate*, for those who know where to look, yet ironically it is those very people who will be disappointed, as this is not a to-scale

[53] Both screenshots captured by me (Ubisoft Quebec, 2015; Google, 2018).

recreation. The alternative could be a highly accurate, but hollow experience, a lifeless, but accurate, shell of 1860s London that fails to provide the player with a better insight into London of that time compared to via a somewhat inaccurate, but authentic, depiction. It is this approach that can take into consideration the influence of the collective memory that exists of that period whilst also contributing to it going forward.

Collective Memory

Knowledge, or just a general awareness, of the past is immensely beneficial to both an individuals and wider societies understanding of the circumstances that contributed to the contemporary cultural/political climate that exists. The wide-ranging media that is available can contribute to this understanding and build upon the groundwork laid out during general schooling. This can be understood via cultural memory studies, which Jason Begy (2015) describes as an interdisciplinary field that is concerned with how a 'culture interacts with and constructs its past'. He goes on to state that the importance of bringing the discussion of [video]games as historical texts is because analysis can subsequently begin to consider *how* the past is constructed and *why* it has been done in certain ways. This relates directly to the example of *Syndicate* and its depiction of London in 1868.

Modern history still looms over contemporary society, even though there are notable epochs that no longer remain within living memory. Despite this, the significance of these, such as World War I, has a strong presence in what Adam Chapman refers to as 'collective memory' (Chapman, 2016). Chapman builds upon the understanding of collective memory, that being a 'collective framework that organises and constructs memory' (2016), this is shared in the consciousness of a population; for this case study the United Kingdom predominantly. This is

'commonly supported and reproduced in popular (as well as often official) cultural discourses' (2016).

Chapman also utilises the term 'postmemory', which was used by Marianne Hirsch (2008) to describe 'powerful traumatic historical events' that took place the generation before the current one. The period covering the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901) could be considered traumatic to some, but within the United Kingdom it is often looked back upon fondly; *nostalgically* it could be said. These *memories* present today of Victoria's reign are certainly not as strong as would have been experienced by a second generation following the end of her reign, nor is it as strong as memories following the World Wars. Yet the presence of Queen Victoria's reign does still linger, and continues to contribute to the British consciousness, one that associates the period with that of strength and greatness, a time when the British Empire spanned across the world. With the British Empire no more, for some there is a longing for what has been lost, even though they themselves have not directly lost anything, ironically it could be claimed that in the years since they have gained a great deal.

Syndicate is therefore in a perilous position, as using this period as the backdrop to its brand of ludic historical *simulation* has the potential of unintentionally indulging the controversial aspects of Britain's history and the identity that can form around this, with damaging consequences. However, it also has the opportunity of reshaping the collective memory and therefore the perception of that period. The latter appears to be the approach that the developers have leaned towards. This is altering the narrative of history as it will be putting it through the lens of contemporary society; the significance of which is identified by E.H. Carr (1986) later in this chapter. Therefore, the necessity of authenticity is even more crucial

to help provide the environmental support (in-game) for this alternative understanding of the past to be accepted.

Applying Restorative and Reflective Nostalgia

The reign of Queen Victoria has long since left living memory and now lives on via postmemory and with-it notions of Britain's empire which some would state, experienced a golden era during this time. Yet despite it no longer existing London still does, albeit in a form that both retains aspects from that time whilst also having evolved substantially since then. Recreating a depiction of London from 1868 can be deemed a nostalgic act, but the type of nostalgia it exhibits can be described in one of two ways. This is based on the distinction outlined by Svetlana Boym (2007) between 'restorative' and 'reflective' nostalgia.

As introduced in Chapter 1, restorative nostalgia stresses the home part of the word *nostos* and tries to reconstruct the notion of the transhistorical lost home. Whereas reflective nostalgia concentrates on the *algia*, the act of longing, and delays homecoming via a sense of wistfulness and irony, albeit desperately. Oddly, restorative nostalgia does not deem itself nostalgia, instead considers instilling truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia 'dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity' (Boym, 2007).

Bjorn Schiermer and Hjalmer Bang Carlsen (2017) unpack this distinction further, stating that:

> 'Reflective nostalgia knows it is 'nostalgic'; restorative nostalgia does not. Whereas restorative nostalgia believes in the possibility of arresting the modern acceleration of cultural change and restoring a past 'space' – a past 'homeland' – reflective nostalgia knows it is impossible to arrest time and thus makes the opposite move; it historises what it touches and immerses itself in the melancholy of the ever lost. In short, in restorative

> nostalgia what is past is not entirely lost, and in reflective nostalgia what is entirely lost is not past.' (Schiermer and Carlsen, 2017)

The latter description of reflective nostalgia is apt regarding *Syndicate*, as the London that it is depicting is lost, but it has not past because of its inclusion in media such as *Syndicate* and therefore it can still be addressed and explored. It would be easy to describe *Syndicate* as an attempt at restorative nostalgia, given that it seemingly recreates London of 1868, but that is a by-product of its intent. The game does not try to reclaim 'nostalgic notions' of the height of the British empire as a lost homeland. Rather, in keeping with reflective nostalgia 'dwells on the ambivalence' and 'does not shy from the contradictions of modernity' (Schiermer and Carlsen, 2017). It addresses what is known from that time via the lens of a multi-cultural team of developers that are primarily, but not exclusively, based in Quebec Canada. Although it is worth remembering that Canada has been in a position where the sphere of influence from the UK had a direct impact upon the country and ties between the two still exist today. The result is a piece of media packaged as collective memory that is versatile and the way it can be understood can adapt to various audiences from distinct locations.

With the role of restorative nostalgia trying to reconstruct the 'lost home' (Schiermer and Carlsen, 2017), it could be seen as an exercise of bringing collective memory into action, even though it has forever been lost and cannot be brought back, despite nostalgic longing. Whereas reflective nostalgia is complemented by the inclusion of authenticity as there is an acknowledgement of what has been lost, and as is the case with monuments in Florence, the original is replaced with a replica, resulting in an authentic copy of the past that provides an insight into the history of that location. Reflective nostalgia is not an act of deception, but an open awareness of the corporeal limitations and tries to provide an exercise in exploring the past.



Screenshot from *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (Ubisoft Quebec, 2015) which depicts child factory workers.

Syndicate does not present an idealised past (Greenberg, 2013), children are depicted working in factories and India might be the *Jewel of the Empire* but the subjugation of the country is still addressed directly. Reflective nostalgia is used to address the past whilst also providing a location and narrative to justify the gameplay featured in the game. Like the other videogames in the series (both before and after) there are gaps in the historical depiction, after all, it is telling an authentic, not an accurate tale, but by exploiting these gaps the voice of the game can stand out and provide a more even and engaging experience for the player (Donlan, 2018). They are aiming to create something that is authentic enough to pull the player into the experience and make them *feel* like they have a better understanding of London from 1868, whilst also engaging in a fictional narrative.

Putting the History into Historical Games

There can be a conflation between history, the past, and the truth. That each collates directly to one another. That history describes the past and that is the truth of what took place. Whilst history might be predicated on informing present and future generations what took place in the past, to state that what it depicts as pure truth can be overstating the matter. This concern has notably been highlighted by E.H. Carr during his talks that comprised his infamous book *What is History?* (1986). This work is not a direct attack upon the competency of the work of historians, but he does raise his concern that a historian cannot escape their 'own position in time' (1986, p. 2). Later stating that if a historian looks at a specific period of history 'through the eyes of [their] own time, and studies the problems of the past as a key to those of the present' then the historian will likely result with a 'purely pragmatic view of the facts' which in turn would distort the past to serve the pretences of the present (1986, p. 21). This criticism of the historian can be argued to the approach that *Syndicate* takes, although what pretence of the present it is serving is open to interpretation.

Carr also states that 'the facts of history never come to us "pure"', explaining that these facts have subsequently been 'refracted through the mind of the recorded' in other words our understanding of the so-called 'facts' is dependent upon those who have since unravelled these aspects of the past to compile their historical narratives (1986, p. 16). Although, this is predicated on the assumption that the facts were accurate and/or representative at the time they were recorded. Therefore our image of the past has been predetermined by people 'with a particular view' who consciously or unconsciously decided which facts were worth preserving. (1986, p. 7)

This is where *history* risks being just a *veneer* for the ludic core of a videogame, and why the distinction between accuracy and authenticity is important. The extent to which authenticity is incorporated and how it is done so is crucial to examine, as it could be a *lazy* way of making a normal gameplay genre game stand out, or it could be a way of melding gameplay and history together to explore a time period in an impactful and engaging way. One where devotion to accuracy might be counterproductive but focusing on authenticity can be an efficient compromise. This presents a distinction between a game *just* being *historical* and being one that is an 'authentic historical game', the key being that the extent of its authenticity 'reasonably model[s] the historical systems in terms of both elements and casual and correlative relationships' (McCall, 2018)[54]. Therefore, if the details, 'especially superficial details', are not strictly accurate, but the depiction that is available *feels* 'right' and can still be supported by some historical evidence, then authenticity can offer a more efficient form of providing a successful historical experience. Thus, making the 'authentic historical game' a preferable choice for developers over the stricter historically *accurate* game (McCall, 2018).

Ultimately, the main aspect to consider is the inherent interactivity that the videogame medium provides. Videogames can provide an experience of the past that is unique, putting the player into a world resembling another time and place. The extent to which that experience is *accurate* and/or *authentic* should be dependent on the ludic mechanisms the developers want to utilise. When thoughtfully integrated, the player can have meaningful access to a postmemory that could very well influence the wider collective memory.

[54] This is from part of a Twitter thread that McCall posted as he was trying to re-examine his previous definition of authentic within the context of historical videogames and update it in line with his current writing and understanding.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the use and development of authenticity as an approach by videogame developers to efficiently provide players with interactive means of engaging with a depiction of history. This has used the example of *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (and to a lesser extent *Assassin's Creed II* and *III*) to unpack the ways in which historical authenticity can be used in videogames and how this differs to that of historical accuracy. The distinction between authenticity and accuracy is important to identify for it helps to define the form that historical videogames take. It also provides an alternative approach that attempts to satiate the desires of the medium's audience, despite a vocal minority that calls for, what it perceives as, accuracy at all costs; despite the logistical and/or contemporary issues that are at play. Yet the approach that favours authenticity has become a crucial way to accommodate the player in an interactive depiction of the past.

Selective authenticity has been recognised to provide a ludic piece of media with a sense of authority that can help aid the player in their exploration of a historical period, despite there being gaps within the accuracy in the experience created. This proports the notion that a strict focus on accuracy can itself pull the player out of the experience, in large part due to the player's position within the experience with the potential freedom to disrupt the accepted chronology of events. It is therefore why specific events and historical figures are interwoven with fictional narratives. Both are used to complement one another to provide a cohesive experience that can still provide an insight into that historical period that the player might not have otherwise gained.

It has been argued that history and the past are not strictly one and the same, as regardless of the intentions of an author, there is likely to be an inherent bias in the way that they organise and structure the depiction they create. In addition to this, E.H. Carr (1986) has outlined the deficiencies that can exist with the historical 'facts' that historians often (but not exclusively) depend on. Via this line of thinking, the approach taken by the videogames medium, which can also play quite loosely with its depiction of the past, does not appear quite as radical because of this recognition. This can also give credibility to using historical elements as a basis for myth-making which can provide the backbone of a historical setting in a videogame, which appears to be the approach the *Assassin's Creed* series has moved towards with its more recent entries such as *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Batchelor, 2018b; Ubisoft Quebec, 2018).

Videogames like *Syndicate* can be viewed as an example of postmemory. Whilst the frequent appearance of this in the medium has tended to revolve around World War II to highlight 'powerful traumatic historical events' (Hirsch, 2008), *Syndicate* focuses on a period which more often in today's cultural consciousness in the UK is attributed with misguided optimism. In which there are those who look at the fractured nation of today and compare it with a nostalgically ideal – albeit wildly inaccurate – notion of the British Empire (Younge, 2018). The developers of *Syndicate*, however, have not indulged in this perversion of postmemory, instead, they have engaged with the act of reflective nostalgia, recognising that the past they are depicting has been lost, but has not passed. There is an ambivalence which the videogame unconsciously dwells on resulting in a depiction that both represents Queen Victoria as a benevolent ruler whilst also questioning the subjugation of the subjects across the Empire at home and overseas.

As the videogame's medium continues to grow, and its reach broadens, so too does the potential for more videogames to address other periods from the past. It can also be hoped that more critical and/or alternative perspectives can be explored. Moving in this direction has the possibility of avoiding the disadvantages of nostalgia, as these videogames could be less reliant on creating realistic landmarks or including ludic mechanisms that infer activities that had significant implications in the past (such as colonialism which is a major component of the *Civilization* games). Rather than embracing the longing of outdated notions of what might seem to be the *good old days* (more so from a British perspective) that videogames directly combat and challenge these nostalgic notions instead.

Chapter 4: An Introduction to Hauntology – Popular Music's Warning for Videogames

Introduction

This chapter follows on from what has been identified in the previous three chapters in which the paradoxically nostalgic form of videogames has been identified. This is not just the form of videogames, as the supporting industry itself has also been examined to bring attention to its inability to escape strategies employed not only by itself previously, but also other industries as well, whether that be other media or technology industries.

Yet, what has been identified will now begin to be examined via the lens of hauntology as introduced in this chapter. It is helpful to establish its importance first before it can help us understand how we can better expand upon what has previously been identified as "nostalgic" and take it further. Up until this point this thesis has pointed to specific videogames, wider elements in the videogames medium, and other mediums as nostalgic, but without being able to properly explain *why*. This is what the examination and application of hauntology and the videogames medium attempts to correct.

It should be made clear early on that hauntology will not provide the answer to all questions about videogame form, or definitively why nostalgia is as prevalent as it is. What it does do is provide a method of examining and thinking about videogames in a new (or different) way. Whilst videogames have been associated with hauntology by a small handful of other academics, the approach of this thesis falls more in line with the work done by Mark Fisher

and Simon Reynolds, especially their application of hauntology to music (specifically *popular* music[55]).

Exploring their work, as well as how it has been interpretated by others, but now with videogames in mind has resulted in meaningful new ways to understand this medium. Music and videogames are two distinct mediums (even though videogames incorporate music into its wider form) yet looking *back* at music brings to light elements which are also afflicting the videogames medium now. Through a comparison with popular music this chapter examines the changing relationship that the videogames medium has with the future. Not only is this a consequence of the aging medium but also impacted by the very real world in which it inhabits. To begin to understand hauntology and to subsequently apply it to videogames, reflecting on how the (popular) music medium is *haunted* is essential. This helps to investigate videogames in a new way, even if what is happening to the videogame medium is itself not a new process within media, as exemplified with music. This chapter also builds upon other academics who have previously begun to make connections between hauntology and videogames. This allows not only the chapter but the remainder of the thesis to expand upon this work and to make the claim that hauntology is something now intrinsic to contemporary videogames. This intrinsic presence of hauntology can help to explain how the past (both within and outside of the medium) is treated as a resource. A depository to be pilfered in the absence of newer ideas to be utilised. All in the guise of maintaining the illusion of the status quo of a forward-facing medium.

[55] The designation of "popular music" is used as a catchall term for contemporary music. It also excludes music from the classical genre (a term which itself can be problematic) and music soundtracks/scores (which can often be associated with classical music).

What is Hauntology? (Nostalgia Without Nostalgia)

Hauntology as a term has evolved since when it was originally coined, and it is through the evolution and usage of it by Mark Fisher and Simon Reynolds that this thesis is building upon. However, it is also important to note the origin of the term which will help make clearer the approach this thesis will be taking. The backstory of hauntology began as a linguistical pun by French philosopher Jacque Derrida, a play on haunting and ontology (*l'hantologie*) which audibly works better in the original French[56] (Derrida, 1994, p. 10; Coverley, 2020, pp. 7–8). Puns aside, this merging of the understanding of 'being' and the idea of a lingering spectre is a meaningful one. I will only be using Derrida to help provide an initial insight into the role of 'haunting' before expanding on hauntology and its connection to videogames.

What was this haunting that was so significant to necessitate Derrida to coin a new term? In short Derrida was arguing in *Specters of Marx* (1994)[57] that Europe was still haunted by the spectre of communism. That despite the supposed fall of Communism (or the 'end of history' (1992) as stated by Francis Fukuyama[58] around this time) in which capitalism had won over other political and economic systems, the spectre of Marxism still haunted Europe. With the revival of socialist (and other) political ideologies from the 2010s Derrida was

[56] The book was originally published in French in 1993 and was released in English a year later.
[57] This is the correct spelling of the book (due to an American translation), but the UK spelling will be used elsewhere when the word *spectre* is used on its own.
[58] Francis Fukuyama has revisited his seminal work (*After the end of History* (Fasting and Fukuyama, 2021)) in which he acknowledges the weaknesses of liberal democracies. He has also been cautious to not double down on the points made in *The End of History* (Fukuyama, 1992) in the years that followed.

prescient in arguing against an end of history in which true liberal democracy would be the lasting form of governance[59][60].

Although a resurgence of socialism has been absent at this point, simply identifying in the early 1990s at a time when seemingly socialism was to be a thing of the past was daring. How that applies to contemporary times (i.e., the time of writing), and more so videogames, is that this thesis would argue that both Derrida and Fukuyama are simultaneously correct and incorrect. Videogames have reached a version of the end of history in part, in which the AAA (mainstream) part of the medium has matured despite the surrounding appearance still presenting an emergent media form. Given the industrial strategies employed (as identified in Chapter 2) there is seemingly an inability to imagine a different commercial future for mainstream videogames. This is where Derrida is *correct*, or rather helpful, in this context, that the present is being haunted. Not only is the medium inadvertently reutilising tactics from the past, but the mainstream AAA videogames are also haunted by the spectre of their past form. For a medium that is meant to be technologically forward-facing, even when technological advancements are clear, the underlying form is still unable to escape its past.

Fisher (2014, l. 434) asks 'is hauntology, as many critics have maintained, simply a name for nostalgia?' For now, the short answer is no, as the two terms are not the same thing, although there is overlap between the two. Nostalgia could be argued to be the *visible* element of hauntological processes (in this case how it afflicts videogames). But, if this is the

[59] The rise of China also demonstrates the fallacy that liberal democracy would be the path that other developed nations would adopt. However, Fukuyama has addressed the rise of China for further reading. It also demonstrates the weakness in the hubris of many political scholars (this extends beyond Fukuyama) that other nations would adapt their entire system to fall more in line with a Western (United States dominated) system.

[60] Stuart Sim, in *Derrida and the End of History* (1999), provides an examination of Derrida's counter argument to Fukuyama's statements alongside the concept of "endism".

visible element, then how can we explain its presence such as in situations where players speak of nostalgia for something they have no memory of and/or exist outside of their own living memory (as explored in Chapter 1) Previously this thesis has tried to explain this via the use of collective memory and cultural memory. The coining of the term "Relative Nostalgia" (also Chapter 1) in this context has also been used to try and explain how nostalgia is not always fixed to a given time, such as engaging with a media product after it was originally released.

It is here where an interpretation of an individual phrase by Reynolds helps to formulate an answer. Reynolds states that 'what makes hauntology different, what gives it an edge, is that it contains an ache of longing for history itself…Offer[ing] nostalgia with the "algia" – the pain and regret – almost completely muted' (Reynolds, 2012, p. 355). In other words, the presence of nostalgia doesn't request individuals to experience it in person. Suggesting that nostalgia is inherent to the piece of media or media form. As Reynolds (2012, p. 356) then mentions 'nostalgia-without-nostalgia', meaning nostalgia can in fact not just be contained in a *feeling* or memory, rather it can be something almost tangible that can be artificially added or become present. Media forms can be haunted by the spectre of past media forms, and this is where hauntology is the key because it results in nostalgic elements being intrinsic to the form. For the consumer the past becomes inescapable and therefore making nostalgia a by-product. An identifiable element of the deeper presence of hauntology.

Haunted by Lost Futures

Now that we have begun to establish that nostalgia is a by-product of hauntology[61], we can examine what this means for understanding or considering the future. Fisher (2014, l. 1641) notes 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'. Which further supports the notion that the presence of what has previously been understood as nostalgia is not player led, as might have been thought. Instead, this 'inability to make new memories' is an inability for the medium to imagine not only a different present to what came before, but also an inability to imagine a different future.

We can see this in practice, with Reynolds (2012, p. 361) highlighting a quote from a music blog that writes 'when the past sounds more like the future than the present does, revival becomes progressive'. In this instance the blogger emphasises how something – likely unfamiliar to certain consumers – can be brought back to the contemporary period. Due to a lack of distinguishable novelty being released to differentiate from what came before, then past aesthetic (especially ones that originally seemed "futuristic" for their time) will seem new by comparison, even if they are not novel.

Hauntology itself is not *new* but it is being used in a novel way. Hua Hsu (2018) states that Fisher's 'borrowing' (or adoption) of the term hauntology is used to 'describe art that seems to yearn for a future that has never arrived'. This is apt as not only has Fisher made the term his own, but also applied it 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

[61] Therefore, signalling that the videogame form is a hauntological one. This will be explained in the following chapter as "Hauntological Form".

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, treating the past as a repository for content. The key is *media forms*, as it is distinguished from reviving historical events (more in line with historical game studies as seen in Chapter 3) or styles (although that is not to be completely ignored). Fisher and Reynolds both identify how music has looked back upon itself and either remediated past elements into contemporary form or imitated past form in a way that could be difficult to distinguish from the past.

This is part of a wider trend that Fisher (2014, l. 161) points out via Franco 'Bifo' Beradi of 'The slow cancellation of the future'. This trend is not a new phenomenon as Fisher claims the process began between the 70s and 80s in wider culture, with those from earlier eras (seemingly 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'. 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, 2014, ll. 175–180). Interestingly this argument where Fisher points out the future we are now in is also one Fukuyama considered as a possibility. Fisher summarised as arguing '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' (Fisher, 2009, l. 120). This brings about a question of whether the revivalism is a response to the 'failure of the future' or a contributing factor of it. Alternatively, that this is an inevitability, and these two aspects grow in tandem.

Tom Whyman (2019) notes when reviewing Fisher's work 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, it is perhaps – argues Whyman – that because of the rapid changes brought about by specific technological advances that have enabled Fisher (2014, l. 204) 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).

Reynolds (2012, pp. 425–426) also notes (anecdotally, albeit to affirm a point made by William Gibson) that his children are not interested in the Future [the capital F is intentional] as whilst the desire to escape the here-and-now remains, the ability to do so is more feasible and can be satisfied not only via fiction but crucially via digital technology. Reynolds reflects on why should his son care about what the world will be like in 2082[62] when despite moving to a new home far away is still able to 'hang out with his friends in cyberspace'. For them, the Future is already here, so where is the need to imagine a different one? Meanwhile, the past continues to present *new* media albeit via old forms.

Access via the internet might have enabled reach into consumption of the past, but crucially as identified by both Fisher and Reynolds, when combined with digital technology has resulted in past forms of music that belonged to the past not only returning, but as a result of modern recording technology they 'ape' the quality of the time period they are

[62] Whilst Reynolds does not explicitly make this clear it can be assumed he is referring to his children caring about technology and media of the future rather than implying they do not care about the *state* of the world.

emulating. Fisher (2014, ll. 229–231) says this results in something that 'belong neither to the present nor the past but to some implied "timeless era"'. This is unlike when one refers to something as timeless in that it will "always" be relevant/fashionable. Here Fisher uses it to suggest an 'eternal' period, such as an eternal 1960s or 80s, even though it is created after the period it is emulating.

Fisher gives the example of the song *Valarie* which was originally created by The Zutons in 2006. Itself a song that did not exactly sound *modern* when it released but nor was it trying to sound as if it came from a timeless era. A year later Mark Ronson collaborated with Amy Winehouse to produce a cover version. It was this version which shocked Fisher into self-doubt. Not realising it was Winehouse upon first listen, this 'antiqued 1960s soul sound and the vocal[s]' left him wondering whether in fact The Zutons had covered a previous older track given 'the souped-up retro style' utilised by Mark Ronson (Fisher, 2014, ll. 229–231). It is instances like this which 'ape' the time period that they are emulating. Fisher states that these 'illustrate what Fredric Jameson 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, 2014, l. 231). This results in them, upon further reflection (and listens) as belonging to a 'timeless era' as previously mentioned by Fisher. The rise of media encapsulating a 'timeless era' quality can also contribute to the wider period of time in which it is created sharing this dynamic. This thesis will be returning to this, but the idea that beginning from the 2010s and continuing in the 2020s these decades lacking a distinguishable style as had been seen to define previous decades. A timeless decade[63] that is identifiable by its lack of individual style.

[63] Later in the thesis I will refer to this as a 'lost generation'. A response to the lost future identified here.

Combining the access to past media and an ability to recreate the form/style of the past is as Reynolds (2012, p. 427) remarks a 'paradoxical combination of speed and standstill'. This is 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)

There are possible ways to name the outcome of this phenomenon and for this thesis it is considered apt to term it Hauntological Form[64] (this will be formally introduced in more detail in the following chapter) due to the pasts lingering presence that appears in contemporary media. This brings this section full circle with the 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, hauntological form becomes the norm and the *new* variations or reworkings of past form are deemed as progressive instead.

Contemporary Culture Has Run Out of Steam

With reworkings or *new* variations of the past providing the illusion of progressive pieces it is necessary to clarify how this is considered different from just re*using* past media form. To do

[64] Surprisingly neither Fisher or Reynolds have coined or used this term.

so, helping to provide clarity will be the focus on how the *past is treated in videogames*. Supporting this will be to identify similarities between the music and videogame mediums.

As has been mentioned by both Fisher and Reynolds, there are pieces created in the 2000s and 2010s which are almost indistinguishable from decades found in the 20th century. "Almost" is key, but considering these individuals are entrenched within examining music and were self-doubting themselves for a moment (in the instance of *Valarie* and music from The Arctic Monkeys), then a more casual listener of music, especially one who was born in the 21st century is even more likely to struggle to notice the difference at first.

Whilst music of the early 21st century has indeed borrowed heavily from the past; this has also had the side effect of robbing itself of its own defining sound/style. Access to half a century's worth of popular music is all too enticing and has seemingly reduced the need to create something novel, when something distinct enough can still be created out of the old. A point supported by Sun-ha Hong (2014) in relation to videogames, claiming that 'games borrow ceaselessly from the past to constitute themselves'. Further stating that they increasingly 'bring their own configuration of remediation to the table' by combining:

> '20th-century media technologies' obsession with visual, graphic reality with the rules-bound, participatory framework of play and ritual. Games are primarily experienced as trivial, commercialized leisure…The specific ways in which we dream of the past through games become part of our generational search for the bygone real.' (Hong, 2014)

This suggests that mainstream videogames developed in the 21st century in its pursuit of visual fidelity lack the confidence to create its own vision of reality and instead draws from the past to validate and sustain itself. But, the self-remediation also reinforces the identity of videogames. When one thinks of videogames as a single entity, or marketers try to come up with a generic means of latching on to the medium, it is common for this to use iconography

from the 70s/80s. Pixelated beings that defined the early decades of the medium that have the added benefit of standing apart from other visual representations of other mediums.

Fisher gives the example of music during the 1990s, highlighting the 'trajectory of popular music, from Elvis to the Beatles to punk to hip-hop' (Whyman, 2019) before finally reaching jungle. Stating that if you 'play[ed] a jungle record[65] from 1993 to someone in 1989 and it would have sounded like something so new that it would have challenged them to rethink what music was, or could be' despite only a time span of just four years (Fisher, 2014, l. 181). Adding that the presence of 'experimental culture' during the 20th century was 'seized by recombinatorial delirium' which had the impact of making it 'feel' that 'newness was infinitely available'. Whereas 'the 21st century is oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion'. The result is not only does it *not* feel like the future, it does not seem like the 21st century has begun yet, rather we are trapped in an everlasting continuation of culture from the 20th century[66] (Fisher, 2014, l. 183).

We can begin to apply this to the situation with videogames (before expanding further in the following chapter). It is necessary to note that the cultural environment surrounding popular music is not the same as that of mainstream videogames, and whilst videogames have continued to evolve to some extent in the past decade, the extent of which has declined

[65] There is also a connection between Jungle and videogames. During the mid-late 90s a number of videogames – specifically UK and Japanese – were either directly using or were heavily inspired by Jungle music of the time. If Jungle music seemed like the future – as Fisher described – then it makes sense that a medium like videogames that was still relatively young and inherently seemed futuristic, would find Jungle music to compliment it. This was seen on both the Nintendo 64 and Sony PlayStation despite using very different components and processes when it came to how the consoles dealt with music. The connection between Jungle and videogame music has been highlighted by music journalist Nick Dwyer (Drake, 2017; Ombler, 2018, 2023a).

[66] It would be difficult to make a similar claim on this scale regarding technology, despite revivals of past media formats such vinyl and cassettes. I have expanded on Jonathan Rozenkrantz's (2016) work on the resurgence of past aesthetics. These are often tied to aesthetics that are a side effect of certain media technologies. But this is not the same thing as cultural *content* being revived.

(slowed down). Music's definable "style" has often been categorised and distinguished via standard decades allocation (e.g., 50s, 60s, 70s, 80, 90s, 00s). As a loose designator it has its uses and broadly can help to identify one period of music from another. Arno van der Hoeven (2014) supports this distinction by stating that 'Since every generation grows up with different styles of music, popular music makes it possible to identify a group of people as being part of a particular decade'.

Although, there are caveats to this approach. It is not to be used as singular view of an entire decade nor genre. Rather, identifying core trends within. Videogames on the other hand are not categorised in the same way. From the mid-1980s until the late-2000s advancement in the videogame medium went through periods of relatively rapid change, to the extent that referring to the style of videogames in the 90s quickly required expanding upon. With the end of the 90s looking indistinguishable from the start of the decade. In part, this has been avoided via the utilisation of what the medium refers to as "console generations" (Therrien and Picard, 2016)[67].

As the name suggests, periodisation of the videogames medium is organised into generations, which are largely informed by the release of home videogame console systems. For example, the 1990s is mostly divided into two main console generations (technically three)[68] which included the fourth-generation (notably Sega Mega Drive/Genesis [1988/89/90] and Nintendo Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) [1990/91/92]) as

[67] This thesis is concentrating primarily on videogame consoles and the videogames available on those systems. Whilst many of those videogames (increasingly) are available on PCs, this thesis is not examining in detail the implications of console generations on videogames available on PCs. Something which (Garda *et al.*, 2018) state 'seems impossible to apply the notion of generations to PC hardware'. Nor is this thesis providing an approach to define between styles present over time (such as decades).

[68] The sixth-generation started in 1998 with the release of the Sega Dreamcast in 1998 in Japan (a year later in North America and Europe). But it was discontinued by 2001 alongside Sega exiting the hardware market. Between 2000 and 2002 saw Sony, Nintendo, and Microsoft release their consoles which defined the sixth-generation.

well as the fifth-generation (Sega Saturn [1994/95], Sony PlayStation [1994/95], and Nintendo 64 [1996/67]). Moreover, the form of videogames between these two generations is significant. It was during the transition in the mid-1990s that saw videogames widely adopt 3D graphics leaving behind 2D pixel-based graphics that had defined the medium for the past decade. It is partly for this reason that console generations have been helpful both for the medium as well as videogame players to distinguish between different *eras* of videogames. Rather than used to refer to style in the same way that might be inferred when discussing music, generations could be considered a useful shorthand for the form of videogames and the trends associated with them.

As the medium moved into the seventh-generation (Microsoft Xbox 360 [2005], Nintendo Wii [2006], and Sony PlayStation 3 [2006/07]) the distinction between these artificial eras become less significant. It is at this point that the medium can be argued to have begun to have matured into a standard form of recognisable – and consistent – videogames. Jesper Juul (2019, p. 10) stated that 2005 was a time '*when we knew what video games were* [emphasis in original]'[69] and this was especially apparent within mainstream videogames as the generation progressed, even more so when contrasted against the growing independent movement of videogames (which Juul (2019) states helped to begin to change this belief when considering videogames as a whole). It was during what became one of the longer console generations (approximately 8 years instead of the previous 5-6 years) that not only saw the rise of the independent games that Juul is especially interested in but also when the

[69] Juul is referring to a longer period of time which he called 'Normal Video Games' and he views this as ranging from 1980-2005.

mainstream medium began to slow down creatively, its form not making the same dramatic advances as previously seen.

The CEO of Ubisoft, Yves Guillemot, singled out the difficulties that this extended console cycle brought, claiming to have 'miss[ed] a new console every five years' (Morris, 2012). This led to what he considered the lack of desirability on the part of the console manufacturers to bring out new systems more frequently 'because it is expensive' and has subsequently (according to Guillemot) penalised the rest of the industry because new consoles are needed as they help creativity. Guillemot went on to state that it is less risky to create new IPs and products at the start of a new console generation. This is due to the assumption that players seemingly want familiarity and engage with what their friends are playing during the later years of a generation. Whereas the start of a new generation provides publishers, such as Ubisoft, the opportunity to 'reopen [players] minds' and this therefore provides publishers with the motivation to take risks and try something different (Morris, 2012). Guillemot's criticism of extended console generations impacting development of new videogames might have had some merit when he made these statements, but as of the ninth-generation Ubisoft has become dependent on its established franchises. Evidenced by the announcement of multiple planned releases for its 15 year running *Assassin's Creed* franchise (Webster, 2022). Seemingly the new console generation and the extra power it affords is not enabling Ubisoft the ability to create new IPs as expected. Further evidence of this is that one of the upcoming *Assassin's Creed* games – *Mirage* – is acting as a soft reboot of the original *Assassin's Creed* game from 2007 by stripping back the RPG elements and large open worlds that have defined the franchise during its past three iterations (Ramée, 2022).

This trend that is present in the medium saw an increase in elements from the its past make an appearance during the seventh-generation, whether that was in the form of rereleases, remasters, or remakes (this will be explained in the next chapter) or present in the form of then contemporary videogames. It was during the later years of the seventh-generation (around the time span that a new generation would have previously started) that the medium (specifically the mainstream console-based part) began to noticeably adopt what will be explained in the next chapter as "Hauntological Form". For now, this can be compared to the previous example in this chapter regarding music and its adoption (whether deliberate or not) of elements from past forms.

Console generations as a designation are still present but mostly serve to refer to the consoles themselves and the catalogue of videogame releases rather than the *style* of videogames. Distinguishing between the form of videogames across the eighth (PS4, Xbox One) and ninth (PS5, Xbox Series S/X) generations is increasingly minute. Currently the lines between the form of videogames across the eighth and ninth-generations is blurred, in large part because many videogames have received simultaneous releases across both generations during the first three years. Thus, making it difficult to utilise the more powerful hardware to attempt to evolve the videogames[70]. In addition, developers are catching up from delays caused by lockdowns around the world. This is especially the situation with mainstream development studios where the introduction of remote working has not enabled a return to productivity levels prior to 2020. For example, Japanese company Bandai

[70] As of writing availability of components has recently ceased to be directly affected by global shortages with ninth-generation consoles becoming more widely available in stores.

Namco 'reported six times the delays compared to pre-pandemic' (Waber and Munyikwa, 2021).

Despite the lack of evolution between the two recent generations this can be argued to extend back to the seventh-generation as well, a period I argue is the epoch of the slowdown afflicting videogame form. "Better graphics" is a distinguishing factor of the "progress" made, but in terms of *form* it is not a revolutionary change. One such example highlighting this is the release of *The Last of Us Part 1* (Naughty Dog, 2022). A videogame originally released towards the end of the seventh-generation in 2013 for the PS3 and received a remake (on PS5) just nine years later (having previously received a remaster in 2014 for the PS4). Across the span of three console generations this new product in terms of gameplay provided does not seem out of place, a gameplay relic of the past that highlights how little the advancements have been in this space, an example of past shock[71] in action. The focus on this product instead has been the visual assets that have been remade as this is the more efficient way of demonstrating the evolution that has taken place in the medium. Yet, this does not result in a completely different visual experience. As part of the marketing campaign, Sony (PlayStation, 2022) released videos online showing side-by-side footage of the remake and the remaster to highlight the difference, because fidelity alone is not a revolutionary change. One reviewer referred to this remake as a 'boutique product' for either 'hardcore fans' or those playing it for the first time 'who want the absolute best experience of it' (Black, 2022). This follows Black stating that the previous version has not aged poorly and importantly is still readily accessible on different PlayStation consoles. The existence of such a product has implications upon how we can understand nostalgia and the

[71] Past shock will be defined and explored in Chapter 6.

next chapter will explore this further as to what this means in the context of Hauntological Form.

Although – and at first this will appear somewhat contradictory – a distinguishing *form* is apparent across the past three generations (seven [second half], eight, and nine). From 2010s onward increasingly videogames are recognisably distinct from previous generations (before generation-seven), except the difference is that rather than a *singular* definable style (this is not referring to genres) the result is a *blend* of styles, resulting in a *hybrid* style. This hybrid style is unique due to its gestalt nature which is comprised of lingering styles and elements from the past. This does not just mean individual aesthetic elements being reused but the underlying mechanics and genres which form the *core* of a videogame[72]. This also applies to overarching aesthetics that define the *shell*[73] of a videogame. In other words, contemporary videogame form has not created a *new* style that defines it. Instead, its form is assembled from past forms, remediated in a way to provide an illusion of novelty.

Earlier I introduced Juul's (2019) work on independent style and how he saw it as enabling what was understood as videogames beginning to change. This is aimed primarily at independent games (as the name suggests) but as highlighted by the gestalt style present in contemporary form, independent games are just as susceptible to revivals of (or hauntings from) past videogame form. This can be examined further via Fisher's (2009, p. 9) insights. He observed in the instance of music during the early 90s of the 'establishment of "alternative" or "independent" cultural zones'. These 'endlessly repeat' previous elements that are perceived as distinct from the mainstream form at that moment and presented 'as if

[72] This extends from the idea of the Nostalgic Core introduced previously in this thesis.
[73] Likewise, this could present itself via Nostalgic Shell.

for the first time'(Fisher, 2009, p. 9). However, enabling us to question Juul's argument and to understand the issue of contemporary videogames going beyond the mainstream, Fisher (2009, p. 9) states that '"alternative" and "independent" don't designate something outside mainstream culture' and crucially adding that '[these] are styles, in fact *the* dominant styles, within the mainstream' [emphasis present in original text].

Therefore, "independent" can be understood as "alternative". Whilst this does provide differentiation from mainstream it also means, as alluded to by Fisher, that it is also not wholly separate from the mainstream. It is difficult to provide a form that is truly independent from the mainstream or one that is wholly *new* either. The budget or the resources (including staff) is not available, but this can afford more agility to do something novel with what has come before. Enough can be created to provide this alternative to mainstream form, but many elements come from the past of mainstream videogame form, acting as a key source of inspiration. Which is why "independent" can be better understood as "alternative" in the context of considering contemporary videogame form. This is not unique to the videogames medium as music has also struggled to create something distinct from the mainstream. Fisher (2009, p. 9) gives the example of Curt Cobain of *Nirvana* finding himself in 'a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, [where] all that is left is to imitate dead styles' in reference to a paralysis that Fredric Jameson described as akin to 'postmodern culture in general'[74]. This provides an apt application to videogame form given the significance of both genre and aesthetic revivals frequent among many "indie" releases.

Despite this thesis focusing on mainstream videogames, this brief aside on "independent games" when examined via Fisher's interpretation of "independent" and "alternative"

[74] Quoted by Fisher (Fisher, 2009, p. 9).

reveals that that the videogames medium as a whole treats the past in a similar way; that being a resource to be plundered. How "independent" and mainstream go about this will differ, as will the outcome, but it neither can – or seemingly want to – escape the past.

Hauntology and Videogame Spectre's (Time Out of Joint)

This thesis is not the first to apply the concept of hauntology to the videogames medium. However, my understanding of hauntology and subsequent application to the videogames medium both differs and expands upon previous connections made between the two. In this chapter I have previously introduced both the genesis of hauntology as well as what I see to be a specific reinterpretation of it by Fisher and Reynolds. This is the crux of what I am doing with this thesis, which is to take this reinterpretation and explain how it is present in videogame form as well as how it helps us to better understand what is occurring with contemporary videogame form.

Those who have previously examined videogames through the lens of hauntology have stuck more closely to Derrida's "original" version of the concept or have taken it in a direction that aligns more literally with its namesake. There are elements of this approach which will still be applicable and beneficial to the arguments I will be making in this thesis and others which I will discount as they serve a different purpose. Christian McCrea (2009) is notable for being one of the earliest writers to associate hauntology with videogames and subsequently is often cited in later texts that continue to explore this connection. However, both McCrea's text and those that cite him examine hauntology and videogames primarily in the context of horror. Which take a literal approach in its understanding, albeit in a slightly different direction to Derrida but still building upon his original work. Also, crucially, McCrea's

approach is not interested in the contemporary form *of* videogames, rather instead the remediation of past media forms *inside* of (or depicted in) videogames.

That does not mean though that McCrea's insights are irrelevant to contributing to how hauntology is understood in this thesis. McCrea (2009) evokes the work of Friedrich Kittler (1999) by stating that 'There is no concept of the dead without the trappings of memory' and with each new development in media technology there is a 'fascination with contacting and representing the dead [that] erupts'. Kittler also adds that 'the more we advance into modernity's apparatuses of capture and display, the more fascinated we are with the dead and their imprints'. Considering McCrea's focus, it is understandable how looking at Kittler's work would help to explore the recycling of past technology and media being depicted in the then *futuristic* medium of videogames. Remembering that McCrea's text was published in 2009 and therefore likely written a year or two prior. As stated in the previous section of this chapter 2010 is deemed a turning point for the videogames medium, an epoch for when the momentum behind its revolutionary changes began to slow.

This raises a point of debate. If, as proposed by Kittler, 'that the more we advance into modernity's apparatuses of capture and display, the more fascinated we are with the dead and their imprints' (McCrea, 2009). This suggests an inevitability that technological mediums such as videogames would ultimately look back at past media technology – including its own – and therefore contribute or facilitate this slow down. Or that the medium has "run out of steam" due to hardware constraints that result from extended console generations, hardware shortages, or protracted development times that have seen the medium resort to relying on elements from past media to maintain momentum. These points can be considered to overlap in that the result is the same, but the route to this has subtle

differences. Alternatively, though, could it be that the issues from the console hardware side that are impacting the medium over the past decade be part of the inevitability that is suggested by Kittler? And whilst Kittler himself does not write about hauntology, we can see it as providing an explanation of this occurrence within the videogames medium (and perhaps others).

McCrea afterwards introduces Derrida's conception of hauntology relating to videogames and establishing 'the paradoxical state of the specter, which is neither being nor non-being' (Derrida, 1994, p. 4). Hauntological 'specters' can be understood as 'beings that are "out of joint" with their time and place' (McCrea, 2009). Given the context that McCrea is utilising hauntology, this is apt, as the presence of older media forms in relatively contemporary videogames (at the time that McCrea was writing about them) fits these criteria. This also has relevance for this thesis in examining the wider *form* of contemporary videogames. The *spectre*[75] in the context of videogame form haunts the medium, but not in the act of horror or frightening contemporary players (whether those playing it later in time – R.E. "relative nostalgia" – or contemporary videogames). Rather, contemporary videogames are haunted in the sense of a lasting spectre, an inescapable element from the past that has since resurfaced in being relevant to the creation of the contemporary videogame.

McCrea expands upon and applies Derrida's hauntology to his own analysis by stating that it is typically visible within the borders of the horror genre within videogame culture and design. Yet, also when there are not overt inclusions, the spectre becomes apparent via the traces which represent the dead, whether that be overtly dead *things* or media pieces. Despite McCrea focusing on overt depictions of the past *haunting* the present he also

[75] When not directly quoting sources, such as Derrida, will be using the British spelling "spectre".

provides a profound connection between Derrida's hauntology to how hauntology can exist within videogames (or 'gaming' as McCrea refers to it). That being a change in 'intent' to 'a way to see what remains to be seen' (McCrea, 2009). Hauntology in a videogame context is argued in this thesis to, in part, acknowledge what exists in contemporary form underneath the surface. How a strategy is in place – either intentional or not – to mask the existence of past elements which are increasingly necessary to facilitate contemporary videogame design.

Videogame Spectres

Dom Ford is a videogame academic who has also examined the connection between hauntology and videogames more recently compared to McCrea. Whilst not investigating as an overt link to horror, Ford does latch onto Derrida's mentioning of the ghost. This is different to the spectre/specter that are also mentioned by both Derrida and Ford (and by this thesis). Ford echoes a point made by McCrea (via Derrida) that 'the ghost is both present and absent. While clearly in some way *here*, the ghost is simultaneously of an earlier time: the irretrievable past acting on the present' (Ford, 2021).

The "presence" of ghosts has a lasting Impact on Ford's exploration of hauntology within videogames and particularly the two case studies of the *Mass Effect* trilogy[76] (*ME*) and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (*BotW*) (Nintendo EPD, 2017). Ford expands upon McCrea and Derrida's remarks of ghosts and the past acting on the present via Peter Buse and Andrew Scott (1999, p. 14), that 'ghosts do not just represent reminders of the past – in

[76] From 2007-2012. Excludes *Mass Effect Andromeda* (2017). The *Mass Effect* trilogy was remastered and released as the *Legendary Edition* (BioWare, 2021).

their fictional representation they very often demand something of the future'. Later referencing Derrida, Ford (2021) notes that 'the ghost in hauntological thinking meant that past, present and future cannot be neatly compartmentalised. Each act on each other constantly, they are "always-already-there"'. Whilst acknowledging that 'hauntology is not primarily about actual apparitions' Ford does admit that his examination concerns 'more literal spectres' than what can be referred to in relation to hauntology; or how this thesis is expanding upon the term. In part, this is because Ford is primarily concerned with what is depicted *in* videogames, rather than how hauntology affects the *form* of videogames. Both *BotW* and *ME* include the reappearance of 'ancient technologies and civilisations' as well as variations of ghosts that contribute to the gameworlds as well as the 'presence of absence' that exists in these videogames in which 'the haunting of the past … is sometimes literal and crystallised' (Ford, 2021). When analysing the intentional diegesis in *BotW* via the in-game "Seikah Slate" with the physical Nintendo Switch tablet (and originally intended sole platform of the Wii U and its unique gamepad) Ford recalls McCrea's highlighting of the 'hauntological assertation that it is rule rather than exception that "forms and beings are 'out of joint' with their time and place"' (McCrea, 2009; Ford, 2021).

Ford has also been influenced by Fisher (and Reynolds) regarding his consideration of "retro", highlighting Fisher's reference to the time 'lived through since the 1970s of "not giving up the ghost"'. This is explained further by Fisher 'as a failed mourning' (Fisher, 2014, p. 22; Ford, 2021) meaning that instead of moving on and 'mourning' for the time that has past, as a culture (specifically media from the Global North) has failed to do so, 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 a particular connection between hauntology and nostalgia can arise.

This is apt when considering Svetlana Boym's exploration of nostalgia, notably her description of '[m]odern nostalgia…as a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return' (Boym, 2002, p. 8). Ford expands on this with an apt separation between nostalgia, which 'mourns the loss of [the] past' and hauntology which 'remarks upon the loss and absence of the past simultaneously with its presence in the present' (Ford, 2021). Such a distinction not only supports the argument being made in this thesis but also contributes to why concentrating on nostalgia alone in the context of videogames is not enough. Nostalgia, unsurprisingly, is too focused on the past and the sense of loss that can be attributed with it. When identifying nostalgia in the present it is not in the same way as hauntology. Nostalgia can represent a more intentional attempt of trying to reclaim the past and transport it to the present, but the result will likely be an anachronism, sticking out from the contemporary setting, appearing as a media where it is apparent that nostalgic elements has been brought to it. Hauntology though is different with the *intent* of its presence. Whilst it would not be appropriate for either nostalgia or hauntology to be referred as occurring solely by *accident*, the presence of hauntology is more subtle. It is not always obvious to a casual observer (one not deliberately looking) that elements considered lost to the past are also simultaneously present in a contemporary setting. The form of media *afflicted* by hauntology is also able to *keep up with the times* rather than being held back in the same way that can be seen in media intentionally (or unintentionally) adopting nostalgic tendencies or elements. In practice this means that whilst videogames have taken advantage of newer more advanced hardware, design elements and/or aspects like genre conventions are still haunted by the mediums past. Going against the assumption (regardless of whether correct or not) that

types of videogames or videogame elements have been lost, when these have either been incorporated into different videogames or eventually return in a new[77] guise.

The continued presence of the past in its act of haunting the present does however, as suggested by Fisher (2014, p. 22), give a 'nostalgic quality to [the] haunting' despite this seeming contradictory to the point made in the previous paragraph. Yet, the reason why in practice it is not a contradiction is because by 'not giving up the ghost' Fisher (2014, 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 at being lost. Whilst this can be evident across a spectrum of issues, it is no less true with videogame form.

Something to bring attention to though is that the identification of hauntology and the relationship with the idea that the future is "lost" is currently being applied to the Global North in this thesis. The phenomena of the past haunting the present in a way that prevents a previously possible future from occurring and instead resulting in a continuation of a past-informed-present is being identified in the nations typically associated with the Global North for this thesis[7879].

The fear of loss can be seen to contribute to the desire for the revival of elements (such as aesthetics and genres) from the past presented via the umbrella of nostalgia. With the present continuing to provide increasing pressures and challenges, the thought that the

[77] What is understood as "new" in this thesis will be unpacked in the following chapter.
[78] The advantage of using this term is that it goes beyond the West and includes Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand.
[79] At present, I do not want to definitively state either way whether this phenomenon is occurring in other nations which have advanced significantly in the past two decades, such as China. The presence of hauntology within the Chinese videogame medium is one that can be explored in a later project.

future could be any better is justifiably for many something difficult to imagine, and one where a desire to think about something else is understandable. This is not a new trend as it has been presciently explored by Fisher since the early 2010s[80] but it has intensified over the past few years since the start of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis that followed. The result is what is now being referred to as "permacrisis"[81] which describes 'an extended period of instability and insecurity' (Collins English Dictionary, no date) and can result in the 'feeling of living through a period of war, inflation, and political instability' (Bushby, 2022). Ironically now, nostalgia could be considered to act as a treatment to help ease the *pain* of contemporary existence by providing a window to perceived "better times" from the past. A contrast to the original identification of the term as a *disease* to be treated.

Hauntology and Music: A Warning

What was identified in the previous section regarding videogames is not wholly unique, as aspects of this trend developing within the videogames medium have previously afflicted popular music (and continue to do so). This section will examine the trajectory that music has gone through and identify not only the similarities that have become apparent with videogames, but also what can be taken away from this comparison. Music has offered videogames a warning. Fisher identified and highlighted what has afflicted music from the early 21st century, but this warning has not been heeded within videogames. It is therefore my aim to apply those warnings to videogames so that the medium can learn from it and continue to still be able to provide some evolution to the media form.

[80] Notably in his books *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative* (2009) and *Ghosts of my Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (2014).
[81] Permacrisis will be explored in detail in Chapter 6.

Popular music as a medium has been one of change during its history, embracing newer technology that impacted both its style as well as how it was consumed. However, as noted by Reynolds (2012) and Fisher (2009, 2014), by the early 21st century popular music was no longer providing the same "newness" it once was. In the next chapter this is identified in more detail, but for this section the crux of the point is that popular music was either sounding as if it belonged to an earlier decade (but with better fidelity) or remediating past sounds/styles in ways providing a different sound style to other contemporary music[82]. Both developments are also present within the videogames medium. It is for this reason why it is important to look at popular music as what has happened to this medium is a precursor to what is currently happening to the videogames medium. Also, important to note that what has happened with music does not mean that videogames will provide a direct 1:1 parallel. Popular music is comparatively more distinct geographically than videogames (which I argue is the closest the world has to a global medium[83][84]), consequently there are notable differences in the West and Japan in how music has altered over the decades. Yet, with the latter point, it could be argued that because of the parallel changes between West and notably Japan has subsequently contributed to the trajectory videogames are now facing as a comparatively more unified medium.

[82] As identified by the *Valarie* example earlier in the chapter.
[83] This is because videogames increasingly can have a global appeal, even if taking inspiration from the developer's home nation. Genre distinctions such as *Japanese* RPG (JRPG) are not seen as relevant and is called out as unnecessary and considered offensive (Hashimoto, 2023).
[84] Since the rise of music streaming, there has been an increase in 'home bias' and a preference towards national artists, and this is a global trend (Bello and Garcia, 2021).

City Pop and Hauntology

During the past few years of researching for this thesis, the presence of the music genre (Japanese) "City Pop" has been an emerging influence in the background[85]. Whilst not strictly central to my initial research topic of videogame form and nostalgia (before it evolved to focus on hauntology), given the importance of Japan and the 1980s on the development and understanding of the videogames medium, it is not too surprising that a music genre from the same time and place would generate some comparisons in my mind. However, this led to me asking the question regarding one of the most popular City Pop tracks, "why do we still listen to *Plastic Love*?" Attempting to answer this question might provide insights into why do we still play *videogames* from the 1980s?

The resurgence of City Pop as a music genre from Japan and its *emergence* in the West has been largely attributed to the popularity of the track *Plastic Love* by Mariya Takeuchi and users of YouTube being exposed to this track due to its recommendation algorithm. From there it was also shared via other online services such as Reddit. When researching different individuals exposed to City Pop, Cat Zhang found that *Plastic Love* was their 'gateway to the genre' and YouTube's algorithm was what brought it to their attention (Zhang, 2021b). There are different elements that contribute to what YouTube's algorithm will determine relevant for its users, but in this instance those with interests in Japanese culture, such as videogames and/or anime (Zhang, 2021a), would be primed for having 80s Japanese music recommended to them.

[85] In addition to the initial inspiration from the then upcoming *Star Wars* sequel trilogy mentioned in Chapter 2. Although it was around the time I began properly looking into hauntology that City Pop became known to me separately. It would not be until writing this chapter that I was able to begin examining the connection in detail between the two.

City Pop as a genre is not one that provided a "new" sound style as it was heavily influenced by multiple different Western styles; this meant there is not one *singular* City Pop sound. New wave, jazz fusion, and AOR (Adult-oriented Rock[86]) from the United States were reinterpreted by Japanese artists who created different variations of pop music to their home audience (Arcand and Goldner, 2019). Rather than create something "new", City Pop can be seen as one of the early examples of a music style that took what came before and remix it for a new/different audience[87]. What was done with those influences still managed to be distinct (even if it would be a stretch to call it *unique*) and even *within* the different styles of City Pop there manages to be a certain quality (even if it is hard to quantify) that links them together.

During its revival, City Pop managed to generate success without initially being available on dedicated music streaming services such as Spotify until 2021 (Zhang, 2021b). A combination of being available beyond just fan uploads to YouTube, an official upload by the rights holder Warner Music Japan, and a physical re-issue saw it reach the Japanese top ten chart for the first time (Ashcraft, 2021). Despite the millions of views the multiple versions of *Plastic Love* uploaded to YouTube received, when the track was first released in Japan in 1984 it only initially sold around 10,000 copies (Zhang, 2021b), whilst not a failure, it certainly belies the reach and success it has experienced in recent years. There are various reasons that could explain why it was not a massive success at the time, though most likely that by the time of release City Pop was at its peak, having started around the late 1970s and fizzled out by the early 90s alongside the economic bubble bursting (it would not be

[86] It can also be referred to as Album-oriented rock.
[87] This could also be argued to be a pre-curser that is happening with contemporary videogames which is also why it is a helpful example.

surprising if people were not at keen to listen to highly polished tracks celebrating the "good life" when the national economy is collapsing around them). During that mid-point plenty of other tracks existed which were also competing for attention.

As *Plastic Love* was not a massive hit in the 80s, and did not become a cultural touchstone in its native Japan, then what is it about not only this song but also City Pop as a genre that resonates so much today and crucially in the West? Also of note is that *Plastic Love*, as mentioned, only found success in Japan more recently *after* gaining success in the West. Thus, the Western service of YouTube *importing* the track back to its homeland. I will now provide an extended hypothesis to explain not only the relevance of this genre but also its connection to contemporary videogames.

Something that can be noticed in the comments across various different City Pop songs posted online, as well as blogs/forums/Reddit etc, are mentions of how these songs generate a strong sense of familiarity within listeners. This *should* strike as odd, as City Pop never truly left the shores of Japan during the 80s. In addition, this music, whilst mainstream, had associations with Japan's equivalent of the "yuppie"[88] as it was seen as the soundtrack to the excesses of the economic miracle/bubble (Arcand and Goldner, 2019). Whilst acts such as *Yellow Magic Orchestra*[89] gained some notoriety overseas, they were never as internationally successful as their oft comparison West Germany's *Kraftwerk*, plus it is debatable whether *YMO* fit into the definition of City Pop – despite all three of its members Haruomi Hosono, Yukihiro Takahashi, and Ryuichi Sakamoto each being influential

[88] A name for young urban professionals popularised in the 1980s. Typically working in finance and living a life of excess.

[89] *YMO* were also the forerunners of what would become "Chiptune" music, being the first band to sample sound effects from a videogame (*Space Invaders* and *Exidy Circus*) on their self-titled debut album. Hosono also released *Video Game Music* in collaboration with Namco. (Ombler, 2023b)

across the genre appearing in the liner notes of many notable releases from across the genre.

For all of Japan's cultural exports, it has been its music, that until now, has struggled to make the transition with the same success as other mediums[90]. This, though, is not surprising. Japanese food is largely (although certainly not universally) accepted, but that took time. Until the early 2000s Japanese anime were still renaming foods such as rice balls and instead giving them familiar, albeit inaccurate, Western names like doughnuts. Yet, Japanese music had *already* made its way West, just not directly by itself. This has been via the mediums of videogames and anime. The names Koji Kondo (Nintendo) and Joe Hisaishi (Studio Ghibli [primarily] and more) are just two examples of famous Japanese composers who have been well known among certain communities in the West for quite some time due to their work for, respectively, successful videogames (*Super Mario Bros.* and *The Legend of Zelda*) and films (*Spirited Away* and *My Neighbor Totoro*). There are many other well-known Japanese composers who work in these mediums that Westerners will be familiar but not many that the "person on the street" might name. Even less so when it comes to popular music artists from Japan.

Now to explain where this sense of familiarity might come from. My hypothesis is that this comes not from City Pop music itself (where somehow Westerners could have been directly exposed without realising), rather instead it has done so indirectly via videogame and anime music. Those who are listening to City Pop today likely grew up playing Japanese videogames and/or watching Japanese anime. Whilst the music in those two mediums is not necessarily

[90] Whilst J-Pop has seen some success, it was never a big mainstream breakthrough and certainly nowhere near the success seen with K-Pop. Although an argument could be made that J-Pop laid the groundwork.

the same as City Pop, there are times where there are significant similarities, or they will literally include pieces of City Pop. These similarities might not always be immediately obvious, but listen closely and similar melodies, cues, and sounds can be noticed in some pieces of videogame music[91]. It is rare that these are lifted directly from City Pop, but rather it is apparent that these Japanese videogame composers grew up with City Pop[9293]. Subsequently, this has influenced *their sound*, which they create for the videogames they work on. This is more noticeable in Japanese videogames released from the mid-1990s to mid-2000s when the medium made the shift from 2D to 3D (and before Japanese videogames struggled for a few years during the transition to High Definition (Henderson, 2011; Byford, 2014)). This does not mean that the subsequent sound is a copy but there are elements of remediation going on, whether consciously or not. This also extends into the thinking presented around hauntology in this thesis. This presence of remediated elements existing in videogame music[94] is the likely source of familiarity for contemporary listeners of City Pop. Even though they likely have never heard that piece of music or that artist before (let alone the genre itself). Rather, that sound has been remediated through another medium, laying the clues that one day will be revealed.

Another way to look at this though, which directly fits with my wider research, is that the spectre of City Pop lingers upon digital media. It can also be argued that Japanese videogames (although certainly not all) are haunted by City Pop. The sound of the 80s becomes "out of joint" (to loosely quote Derrida) with its presence remediated in 90s/00s

[91] Music by videogame composer Masafumi Takada is one such example. Especially his work on the niche cult title *killer7* (Grasshopper Manufacture, 2005).
[92] In an interview with Takada, he mentions listening to both Haruomi Hosono and Ryuichi Sakamoto.
[93] Mat Ombler (2023b) states that Nobuo Uematsu (*Final Fantasy*) and Koji Kondo (*Super Mario Bros.*, *The Legend of Zelda*) both cite *YMO* and Sakamoto as influences.
[94] I am side-stepping anime to keep things straightforward.

videogame music which now had the technology to recreate similar sounds rather than the previous limitations of 8 and 16-bit sounds. Consoles such as Sony's original PlayStation brought "CD-quality sound" to videogames (Collins, 2005), a sound technology that mostly found its peak the decade prior[95].

This *haunting* has gone beyond videogame sound found in videogame form from the 90s-00s and has subsequently haunted the players of those videogames. City Pop as something that is listened to is not the only thing to have been revived, which also very much fits in with the wider elements of hauntology (rising from the dead), but *new* City Pop has also emerged. However, this is an imitation form that is either an extension of the other internet influenced music genre of vaporwave, or sticks too closely to the original form. The latter again supporting the notion of hauntology and specifically Reynolds and Fisher's concerns with the lack of revolutionary change within the medium of popular music. Yet, whilst this might sound like a criticism, it is an instance of culture going international and intermixing with other cultures to potentially create something *new*, supporting a *trans*national culture perhaps.

To answer the question posed at the start of this section, "why do we still listen to *Plastic Love*?" Because there is recognisability/familiarity in the past. Helping to provide an illusion of safety during a time of permacrisis. In addition, the future seemingly is currently incapable of providing novel experiences, let alone new ones. Whereas the past is ripe for providing a source for what can be perceived as *new* experiences for new audiences, whether they are young or just from different parts of the Earth.

[95] CD quality has improved since the 80s, but not radically.

"(No) Future Music", (No) Future Videogames?

Music has embraced digital technology[96] which has impacted its form and how it is consumed by users/listeners. As mentioned, the evolution of music provides points of reference for what is happening to videogames. The wider music industry has embraced the transition to digital quickly (Bello and Garcia, 2021) and can be seen as a forerunner for other mediums that transitioned from analogue/physical to digital. Although, it has not meant the complete abandonment of previous analogue or physical formats, as these have held on or have seen revivals – contributing to other discussions around nostalgia. Other mediums are also in the process (at various different stages) of increasingly embracing a digital online format. There are differences though due to the *type* of media and technical specificities that they bring. Business models and licencing arrangements (as well as shopping habits during the pandemic (Norman, 2022)) also alter the direction and execution of how mediums have developed digital online formats and therefore how these are presented and consumed by consumers. The impact of these developments might alter the business models associated with these mediums, but interestingly the *form* of these mediums has not evolved significantly as a result. Rather there are many instances where media form is more akin to what has come before which will be identified further in the following chapter.

Expanding upon this is Reynolds (2020) unpacking of Fishers work on 'the slow cancellation of the future'. The "slow" part of the statement is key as the change that is happening to popular media (videogames, music, film, TV) is subtle despite the advancements in

[96] Chapter 2 previously explored the connection between technology and audio specifically in the context of radio.

technology that are facilitating these changes. However, previously with these technological advancements would also include the 'belief and expectation that the future would be different from the present in some dramatically improved way, or even in just some dramatically strange way'. This results in what Reynolds argues is the disappearance of the 'idea of the Future with a capital F'. This has resulted in a cultural disappointment in Reynolds' (2020) view. In his example of music, stating that 'for many of us there's a feeling that things are stuck, that they haven't leap[t] ahead like we thought they would.' Adding that instead he has observed 'music is coming up with incremental shifts within basically static forms'. As a result, is the loss of 'tomorrow's music today feeling', that being music that gave the sense 'you felt like you were already in the future somehow'.

In the context of music, decades prior to the 2010s saw the introduction of new types of music unlike what had come before. Whether that was due to introduction of new technology that enabled new types of sounds incapable of existing before, or the use of the instruments/equipment in ways never used before. Some music genres created a sound that was not only unlike anything heard before, but also did not sound as though it *belonged* in that time period, as if it was providing a window to a time from the future. This also provided the belief that the future was in reach, that culture and society were moving in a forward motion. Whereas now, that window is argued to have been closed. New forms of music that can help define a decade are no more. The 'incremental shifts' that Reynolds speaks of provide enough of a difference to facilitate consumption but no revolution. Yet, this is also a reflection of the cultural climate that the medium exists in.

Videogames too, are experiencing this shift. Whilst not in the exact same way, in that a style can be attributed overwhelmingly to a particular decade, but instead via medium self-

defined "generations"[97]. Videogames for much of its existence as a medium has been providing a window into the future. Even if looking back many of the videogames that once seemed as if they belonged to another time (in the future) seem archaic today. The crucial difference though is that today, it is no longer the norm but also increasingly rare, that a contemporary videogame release provides players with the feeling that they are playing something not only ahead of its time but providing a glimpse of the future.

Rather, contemporary videogames are more likely to be providing a window to the past, or more specifically, an *idealised* version of the past. An exercise in authenticity rather than accuracy[98]. This approach represents whether the focus is on world history, or the mediums own past. The future can be argued to be *unknowable* but that does not mean that predictions cannot be made, or ideas imagined. This exercise was present during the 20th century with author William Gibson making the observation that 'In the 1920s, the phrase "the 21st century" was already pop-ubiquitous. How often do we see the phrase "the 22nd century", now?' (Reynolds, 2020). Reynolds also expanded on this observation, adding that whilst he had 'mental pictures of the 21st century' when he was young, he does not have 'any sense of 2050 or 2100 – except as a deterioration or a collapse' (Reynolds, 2020). This is something that the videogames medium has been willing to provide as an experience, with numerous titles depicting various different instances of global collapse from humanities future. Some instances, such as the *Fallout* series depict an apocalyptic future through the lens of 50s retro aesthetics and Cold War iconography and terminology. Even Gibson himself is not immune to this, with his novel *The Peripheral* (Gibson, 2015) and its subsequent TV series adaptation (Smith, 2022) showing another instance of humanity grappling with the

[97] Explored earlier in this chapter.
[98] These terms can be understood in the same way they are described in Chapter 3.

before and after of aspects of global collapse. Yet, when Gibson previously provided a vision of the future[99], even if it was not entirely positive, has itself become a way of depicting a future through the lens of the past. As is evident in videogames such as *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red, 2020).

Therefore, we have passed the point mourned by Mark Fisher. That being 'the loss of an alluring cultural image of the future', which Reynolds sees as a 'sense that we've gone past the future somehow' (Reynolds, 2020). I, however, interpret this as reaching a roadblock – an inability – but also a lack of desire to consider a different future. Instead, the past is something comparably obtainable and becomes a point of desirability. Even if what is being considered is not as accurate in its depiction as led to be believed. In the context of videogames, the medium can be argued to have peaked[100] regarding what players might imagine the future to be. In the 1980s players could imagine that graphics can improve. Given the increase in visual fidelity seen between console generations (as well as within), there was a supported belief that videogames in the 21st century would be visually superior to what was in the 80s and 90s. This belief did initially come to fruition with a clear advancement in graphical fidelity by the start of the sixth-generation in the early 2000s. Whilst graphics have improved since then, the pace of this advancement has slowed, albeit with some caveats. The sheer level of detail possible is reaching levels of *realism* unlike what has come before. Yet conversely, the perceived improvement between the past three generations as they transition has not brought the same revolutionary leaps as had been seen prior to the seventh-generation. The shell (Mäyrä, 2008) of videogames seemingly then

[99] Such as in his 1984 novel *Neuromancer*.
[100] In this instance regarding the imagination of the future, "peaked" is apt compared to previous use of the term "matured" when talking about the medium as a whole.

has peaked, but so too has the core. Alongside the advances in visual fidelity, new gameplay mechanics were being created. However, this too has also peaked. During the past two generations as consoles and PC become increasingly homogenised, so too have the videogames that run on these pieces of hardware. Wholly new genres are rare with most instances either sub or hybrid genres that remix existing genre conventions together[101].

With this in mind, videogames too are becoming akin to music in which it is difficult to imagine what they will *be like* (*look like* and interact with) in the next twenty years. How will we look back at the current generation when it can be considered "vintage" (or more likely in the usual parlance of videogames, *retro*)? Will there be a noticeable difference when the transition is not actively happening around players? Despite the increasing similarities between videogames and music in how the two mediums both are increasingly haunted by their own past, the two mediums outside of this research are not considered as close in the same way that videogames and the film medium are. Whilst there is a relationship between videogames and music, this is often a partnership with the latter supporting the former. Whereas film can be understood as an oedipal relationship that videogames have with the older medium. This is likely due to both mediums containing moving visuals and accompanying audio. Despite videogames including direct interaction from its audience, the younger medium has looked up to the film medium. Film is also afflicted with nostalgic tendencies which could be considered as hauntological. However, that is not something for this thesis. But the significance of past media form upon contemporary form in the instance of franchise films such as the Disney era *Star Wars* films (and to a lesser extent the television series') were a contributing initial influence for this thesis. Videogames, therefore, are not

[101] Even within genres, "newness" is difficult to come by. The racing genre is one example that in its drive for "realism" has struggled to innovate (Raycevick, 2023).

only haunted by its own past but also by that of the film medium which it has been remediating. In contrast, the (popular) music medium is itself not the focus of remediation, but the hauntological process that has afflicted music has also stricken videogames as well despite the indirect relationship between these two mediums.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the concept of Hauntology from its initial understanding in relation to Marxism through its revival in the context of popular music, and finally its subsequent application to videogames. Hauntology as a concept shares similarities with nostalgia, yet nostalgia has been the go-to term for describing and trying to understand the relationship that the videogames medium has had with the past. Yet, as a concept nostalgia is lacking the depth required to better understand what is happening to the videogames medium. It is not enough to continue to identify that elements from the past are present in contemporary videogames. Hauntology provides the means to distinguish that the mediums past have increasingly become something inherent as a response to both the medium maturing as well as influenced by difficulties in the real world such as the sensation of permacrisis. Access to the mediums past is a contributing factor to both aspects. As it provides elements that can be reutilised in contemporary videogames – something which will be explored in much more detail in the following chapter. In addition, it also provides an escape from the present via the past. Whether that past is a familiar one or provides the perception/illusion of a "better time" will be dependent on the individual (person and/or videogame), but it provides an escape from the present as well as a distraction from an inability to imagine a future; a better future increasingly difficult to consider.

The other major point of exploration in this chapter has been the identification of the comparison between hauntology understood in popular music and how a similar process has crucially been noticed within videogames. Popular music reached maturity before videogames (although the overall age is not the single determining factor) with Fisher and Reynolds outlining that after a few years into the 21st century they noticed a trend within popular music in which new styles were no longer forming like had been seen in previous decades. Not only this, but increasingly the mediums past existed as a repository for contemporary music to replicate or utilise. Despite being a comparatively younger medium, videogames have reached a level of *maturity*[102] more quickly than expected. For a medium that is around 50 years old (although this thesis is concerned with the past 40 years), to be already looking to its own past to sustain itself is a surprise. This is the problem that this thesis is working to understand, given that videogames is still a medium that presents itself as one that is forward-facing. Despite technological advancements still occurring in relation to videogames, this is not having the same revolutionary impact it once did. The increasing inherent nature of hauntology present in videogames will help us to understand not only the potential *why* but also the *how* upon the state of contemporary videogame form.

Videogame's inability to imagine a different future, both in the depiction of the worlds it creates as well as for its own form, is essential for understanding the inertia that the medium is facing. The next chapter will explore this further and help underpin how this is directly impacting the contemporary form of the medium.

[102] Maturity in the sense of the mediums ability to evolve, rather than the "maturity" of its content. A lot of which can still be argued to be "immature".

Chapter 5: Hauntological Form

Introduction

This chapter formally introduces the concept "Hauntological Form" which I have coined for this thesis. This is to aid in providing an alternative understanding of the presence of nostalgia in contemporary videogame form. Also supporting this chapter is the use of the thought experiment "The Ship of Theseus" when identifying the difference between videogame remasters and remakes. These two types of videogame *product* act as notable examples of nostalgia, but this chapter will highlight how hauntology enables us to see them as more than just vehicles of nostalgia. Through this we can also begin to consider the difference in approach between Japan and the West in terms of how the past is *dealt with* in the present. This applies more broadly to heritage sites but can ultimately be helpful in examining different approaches to videogame remasters and remakes.

A look at the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 will explore how hauntology can refer to something that is simultaneously alive and dead, existing and not existing. There are two accompanying videogames for this event, which not only offer a different version of the event that eventually took place, but in the case of *Mario & Sonic* a further distortion of time is offered.

With the crux of the chapter focusing around Hauntological Form it will provide additional context about nostalgia and contemporary videogames. This will be supported by unpacking how "newness" and "novelty" are understood and how this applies to contemporary releases. Combined with hauntological form gives insight into how the past is treated as a repository to support these products.

This will be examined primarily via two case studies of videogames that both were released within the past five years. Both are part of long running franchises and therefore make use of their own past, but it is the execution of this that helps analysing these two releases together that highlights the application of hauntological form for contemporary releases in different use cases.

Ship of Theseus (Theseus' Paradox): Remakes and Remasters – a Distinction

The philosophical thought experiment referred to as the "Ship of Theseus", also known as "Theseus' Paradox" (which will be the term used throughout the rest of this chapter) in short explores the idea of whether something can be considered new or not, if after replacements have been made it still resembles the original.

In more detail, Theseus' Paradox refers to the ship on which Theseus travelled to their destination. During the journey, the original planks of wood were replaced due to general wear and tear with new stronger wood. By the end of the journey, whilst the ship resembled that which originally began its journey, it was no longer the same ship in terms of the physical components of its construction. This led to the philosophical question, and therefore debate, of whether this ship remained the same or if it is considered a *new* ship.

Later in this chapter, the relevancy of "Theseus' Paradox" and the connection to videogame remasters and remakes will be made. In that section, it will primarily further explore the differences between "new" and "novelty", which expand upon what will be identified in this section. A remaster would not be considered a new *videogame* but can be considered a new *product*. This is because it is likely to be on a new platform and technically serve a slightly different function to what came before but otherwise is the *same* game. For example, the

HD remaster of *No More Heroes* (Grasshopper Manufacture, 2021) for Nintendo Switch is the same game as what was originally released on the Nintendo Wii a decade beforehand, albeit now with HD graphics and improved frame rate. Otherwise, the gameplay, mechanics, level design, aesthetic style, and soundtrack/sound effects remain the same (with a couple of exceptions).

A remake though is a different proposition. For the time being, I will focus on *new* rather than confusing matters by addressing *novelty*. Like Theseus' Paradox, a videogame remake will resemble the original, as the core will remain mostly intact (usually aside from some quality-of-life updates), and the aesthetics will also bear resemblance to the original style (but recreated with more fidelity). Not all remakes are created equally though, and this makes it difficult to provide a definitive statement concerning Theseus' Paradox and remakes[103]. If we take *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico and Japan Studio, 2005) as an example, the PlayStation 4 remake very closely resembles the original PlayStation 2 videogame. So much so that if one were to look at a screenshot of the two side-by-side from a distance they would be forgiven for thinking it was the same image. Of course, up close the differences become apparent in terms of fidelity, but ultimately, there is no mistaking that these are the *same* videogame.

This would then make us inclined to state that this closely aligns with the same problem identified with Theseus' Paradox. *Shadow of the Colossus* (Bluepoint Games, 2018) has had all of its "components" replaced with better ones, but what we can see looks and plays the *same* as the original. Can we still call this remake *new*?

[103] An additional alternative example, *Resident Evil 4* remake, will be explored in the final chapter.



Screenshot from a Sony promotional trailer for *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico and Japan Studio, 2005; Bluepoint Games, 2018) shows how intentionally similar each version is whilst also improving the fidelity (PlayStation, 2017).

Considering how this is a commercial product that has been packaged and sold (with the original only purchasable second hand) it is new in that sense, but considering when a film goes from DVD to Blu-Ray the film itself is rarely *new* (unless perhaps it is something like a Director's Cut, but even then it is not completely different), then this can be disregarded. But where it gets more complicated is that the remake has taken considerable person-hours in which this version has been newly crafted. The level design, gameplay mechanics, and aesthetic style might remain the same, but otherwise (in this instance) many elements have been remade from scratch.

This also brings us to the same conclusion that emerges from the original Theseus' Paradox. A similar process has taken place as with the ship. The caveat here though is that Theseus' ship was consistently repaired, was *Shadow of the Colossus* repaired? No, as it was not broken, yet in its former form, it was not possible to continue to "operate" it on modern

hardware, which is the problem. The intention behind this then is not to provide something new (or novel), rather it is about providing access in the present to something that otherwise might be lost to the past (which also brings hauntology to mind and therefore nostalgia as a side effect).

Like all good thought experiments, Theseus' Paradox will have academics arguing in circles, but it does help us to better consider whether remakes are new or not. I have aligned on the side that a remaster is **not** new because it does little to distinguish itself from the original. It is like a classic car that has a new coat of (appropriate) paint. Designed to look like it did when it was first made but in a contemporary setting rather than having been left to rust. Or, another way of thinking, as if it had been hermetically sealed. A videogame remaster is akin to applying rose-tinted glasses to the game itself to live up to players' memories. In the case of the ship, a remaster would be considered to still be the original, as very little has been replaced, mostly polished and it still resembles the original.

A remake though is where this is trickier. For now, this chapter will side with the argument that it is new, as many elements have been replaced, it looks nicer (in an objective sense) than before and functions better. Sticking with the vintage car analogy, it is like replacing the engine with one from this century so that it is more reliable. Bringing it back to the ship paradox we would therefore consider it to be new. However, whilst a remake might be deemed new, it certainly does not qualify as novel for it retains too many features of the original. "New and improved" is not meaningfully different and that is the crux of understanding the role of remakes. This will be revisited later in the chapter when "new" is unpacked further and contrasted with "novelty".

Japan and the West – Rebuild or Preserve

Expanding upon the existing examination of Theseus' Paradox is an additional exploration driven by political philosopher Thomas Hobbes' expansion (Britannica, 2021). This initially seems like a further complication as it introduces the assumption that the old planks of the ship are saved rather than just discarded. Then taking those previous planks to put together a whole other ship that is constructed in the same way resulting in a duplicate version of the original ship.

This is where the crux of this extended experiment comes in. Now we have *another* ship, but, as it is made from all the original parts, does that make *this* the original? The inclination is to say yes it does, if one were to truly use all the original discarded parts to recreate it. This has similarities to something being taken apart completely and re-serviced. However, what does this make the version that is seemingly identical but made from new parts? A recreation? A replica? This is the distinction that needs to be made when referencing the past. Are you recreating it as accurately as possible (using the same/similar materials and techniques) or are you creating an authentic product (one that looks very similar but has made meaningful concessions to improve the quality)?

Such a choice might differ depending on who is being asked, the producer or the consumer. Consumers might say they want an accurate recreation of something from the past (akin to restorative nostalgia (Boym, 2002, p. 41)) but actually, they do not want the negative aspects (components or connotations) that come with them (similar to reflective nostalgia (Boym, 2002, p. 49)). Likewise, producers (in this instance any kind of creator) might want to create something as close to the original as possible, but production techniques, feasibility, and/or cost of doing so might not be feasible, therefore changes are made. It is important to note

that the explanation given will not always play out that way, but it is helpful to note that intentions and reality when it comes to creating products can have such links to the past.

When looking back at other texts on the Ship of Theseus one example came up that is particularly relevant to the research that for a while was influencing my earlier thinking on nostalgia and videogames (especially the distinction between Japan and the West), but I had struggled to fully integrate meaningfully. This example is the Ise Jingu's Naiku shrine which – in Shinto tradition – is completely rebuilt using new wood every twenty years to the same specifications and similar construction techniques (Levin, 2020, p. 205). As of writing the shrine has been rebuilt 62 times (Jingushicho, 2022) meaning that this process has been going for over a millennium. It is not difficult to understand why this would be included as an example for the Ship of Theseus, because it is a living example that puts the *thought* experiment into practice.

In the West, a historic building will often (but not always) be preserved in its already decayed state. Whereas this Shinto shrine suggests that in Japan, the *thing* itself is not the important part that needs to be preserved, rather it is the *idea* that needs to be preserved, which can only be done by the ritualistic rebuilding to maintain the passing on of knowledge and skills between generations, so that they are not lost to time.

It is this distinction that leads one to think about how this could apply specifically to videogames. Is there an identifiable difference between how the two sides approach remasters and remakes[104]? What about the presence of nostalgia in contemporary videogames? Can the resultant hauntological videogame form be understood differently or a

[104] Chapter 6 expands upon this.

variation in trajectory to this point be identified? For now, what will be explained as hauntological form will be explored further.[105]

Hauntological Games with Mario and Sonic at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics

Hauntology as a concept is still being developed (Ahlberg, Hietanen and Soila, 2020), especially in the context of videogames, as explored via the previous chapter. Its origins, whilst not relatively old, began as a bit of comical wordplay. A portmanteau of haunting and ontology, which takes on a double form is you imagine a French person saying it in which they drop the H, and it sounds like ontology. Therefore, it is not surprising that hauntology has a relationship with ontology. If ontology is the study of "being", existence, and reality, then hauntology can be broadly understood as the opposite of this. In short, things that do not exist tangibly, are therefore more akin to a spectre.

However, there is more to the term than highlighting what does not exist. In keeping with the theme that one might imply from the *haunt* part of the name the concept also considers that which is simultaneously dead *and* alive, kind of like a ghost (or spectre). To help explain this dual element this chapter will now use the Tokyo Olympic Games (both the event and its accompanying videogames) as an example.

The Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 does not exist. Except it does. Is this being pedantic? Not really, because a year later than scheduled the world did get to compete in an Olympic Games that took place in Tokyo, except for the year "2020" that was splashed all over, this obviously was a very different event to what was meant to have been. Given everything that

[105] The distinction between heritage approaches between Japan (possibly extending across the region) and the West could be explored further in future research.

was going on, perhaps for some the inclusion of new sports such as skateboarding and speed climbing might have distracted viewers from the general lack of spectators, the disappearance of mascots, and a general absence of festivities.

That is unless you played *Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 – The Official Video Game* (Sega, 2021). This might be an official depiction of the Olympic Games, but realistic it is not, which also seems at odds with how it can draw attention to how what we got was *not* the Tokyo 2020 Games (also reinforced by the fact this videogame did not release outside of Japan until 2021). *The Official Video Game* is more of a sports-themed arcade game than anything close to resembling a simulator, which helps broaden its appeal. It is still a challenging game (mostly due to the computer-controlled opponents) but learning the controls is often mostly straightforward [Unlike *Mario and Sonic*'s version which this will get to]. The more one plays it the more it becomes apparent how this is depicting an alternative event, one that never took place.

This thought became even more pronounced, paradoxically by going back to *Mario & Sonic at the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020* (Sega, 2019). This originally came out in the *before times* of late 2019 and despite being Mario and Sonic themed, it was depicting an event that was *going* to occur. Playing it in 2021 this notion blends with the videogames *plot* of going back to a digital version of the previous time Tokyo hosted the Olympics back in 1964.

Roughly half of the videogame is set in 2020 and featured 3D depictions of sports and venues whilst the other half is set inside a videogame recreation of 1964 Tokyo with 2D depictions of sports and venues. It is the 1964 setting that is particularly interesting in this whole context. The rationale behind the 2D pixel look is to help distinguish and reinforce that part of the videogame is taking place in the *past*, yet in 1964 videogames barely existed,

as *Spacewar!* had only been developed two years prior. Furthermore, the 2D sections features the original pixel depictions of Mario and Sonic, except these both come from separate generations and visual styles, resulting in a weird disconnect between 8-bit and 16-bit respectively. Gameplay-wise this works well enough, but the clash between 8-bit and 16-bit with no rationale for this reinforced the notion of time being out of joint. Could they have used the 16-bit versions of Mario and Bowser (et al.) to better complement the 16-bit Sonic and Dr Eggman (et al.)? Whilst it might be even further away from 1964, it is not as if the original *Super Mario Bros.* was close, as there is still a 20-year gap.

What we are left with is a videogame that simultaneously features depictions of an anachronistic past (be that of real Tokyo *and* the videogames medium) and a depiction of what was meant to be a forthcoming event that did not take place and instead replaced with something similar yet still different. In the years ahead if one comes back to those two videogames, it will be a reminder not of the Olympics Games Tokyo 2020, but of 2021 which featured a sporting event that simultaneously existed but did not.

Relative Nostalgia: What is the Future When It and Nostalgia Are Relative?

Simon Reynolds' (2012) *Retromania: Pop culture's addiction to its own past"* is a particularly important book for beginning to understand how one considers the existence of the future and what relationship this then has with the past in the context of not just media (more specifically music in Reynolds case) but also technology. A term I previously coined, "Relative Nostalgia" (Sweeting, 2019b) and was expanded in Chapter 1, was inspired by an introduction to Reynold's work in Jonathan Rozenkrantz's (2016) article *Analogue Video in the Age of Retrospectacle: Aesthetics, Technology, Subculture*, due to highlighting how

artefacts from media in the 1990s have gone on to be used by creators in the 21st century. The crucial difference being that it evokes nostalgia for specific *media* rather than a particular time. Therefore, I argue that relative nostalgia results in something that is not dependent on a specific time. An individual can be nostalgic for something based on when *they* first came across it, rather than when it was first created/released.

In a previous text (Sweeting, 2019b), I have used the example of *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo EAD, 1998), a videogame that is often considered one of the greatest of all time (Metacritic, no date c)[106], one that many players might understandably be nostalgic for, or at least be familiar with[107]. Yet what decade are they nostalgic for? Presumably in this instance, the 1990s, which is when it was first released on the Nintendo 64 (1998 to be precise). But what if you did not play it until the following decade? As it was for me, having played the Nintendo GameCube rerelease around 2003. Furthermore, there was also the remake for the Nintendo 3DS (Grezzo, 2011), which quite likely could be the first time a new generation played it. It is for these reasons that the example of *Ocarina of Time* highlights that relative nostalgia can be particularly helpful, contributing to how we might understand the scope and agility of nostalgia. Media does not exist in a vacuum, which perhaps also helps partly explain how past videogame aesthetics live on today.

This brings us back an example given by Simon Reynolds mentioned in Chapter 4. Towards the end of the *Retromania* (Reynolds, 2012, p. 425), he reflects on a point made by author William Gibson regarding how the younger generations viewed the future. Reynolds provided his own anecdotal confirmation that his children are 'not the least bit interested in

[106] *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* still retains a "Metascore" of 99 and is currently top of the "Best Video Games of All Time".
[107] Linking to cultural memory.

the capital ‘f’ Future, [they] barely even think about it.’ Whilst this was in reference to escapism that current media and technology provide, and that current technology already feels rather *futuristic* today if we think about it (the near-endless online video meetings during and following the lockdowns demonstrate that), today we also have access to past (or rather, recent past) media like never before.

Just before highlighting how his children do not care about the future, Reynolds also mentions how the past has lost its ‘lost-ness’ because of the availability of access to the past. Preventing media (as a whole) from fading into obscurity, or in the case of videogames succumbing to obsolescence like the manufacturers and publishers previously wanted. There is a reason why for a long-time, videogames were poorly preserved, because publishers saw little to no interest in them (Newman, 2009), instead the priority was providing the next *new* thing to be sold. Old things do not sell (in the context of technology) it was all about the future. Today though, it is a different story.

Reynolds’ observation helps to suggest that our understanding of nostalgia is shifting because of the technological changes that have enabled greater access to past media, suggesting a historicisation of the term. Nostalgia has already evolved from a crippling longing for a place to ‘a yearning for a different time’ (Boym, 2007). Now it is something to be exploited, another resource for capitalism to use up. Nostalgia is finite, there is a limit something can be remediated, not a fixed number but a relative point in which overfamiliarity takes hold. In the next section, I will introduce “hauntological form” which demonstrates how different elements of the past provide the sources for contemporary form.

Media Haunting and Technological Access: An Introduction to Hauntological Form

The previous part concluded on the point that whilst previously the prevailing wisdom was that "old things do not sell" in the context of technology (and by extension videogames), today the narrative has changed. To examine this shift, how can *we* (players/consumers of videogames) be nostalgic for videogames that are not lost? Understandably, this would appear to be oversimplifying the issue. As for many, there are certain videogames which are in effect lost for them due to the difficulty in obtaining not only the videogames themselves but also the hardware required to play them. In addition, videogame preservation is a real concern (it was briefly mentioned how publishers have done a poor job of preserving videogames). However, we are currently in a time where access to past videogames (in some form, not necessarily the original) is greater than ever before. Or to apply a previous point outlined by Reynolds (2012, p. 425) videogame past is in the process of losing its 'lost-ness'. But, if the gap in time in which this occurs shortens, would this negate any nostalgic desire for the past? Is that gap where something is lost to time needed to generate the nostalgic desire? I would argue yes, but it is not about *nostalgia*, instead nostalgia has become a by-product, beneficial but not essential. Rather, the past, as mentioned, is instead a source of content to be exploited again. Providing sustenance for the videogames medium to continue.

This is a significant shift from how the videogames medium operated in previous decades in which a sense of loss was facilitated by the transition between console generations. However, that loss was used as a means to generate interest and desire in the new videogame hardware and software that was being provided. A tactic deemed necessary due to concerns that players would stick with what they had. In later console generations, to

alleviate the sense of loss due to the inaccessibility to the past, publishers would provide small slices of access in the form of remasters and remakes (as exemplified earlier in this chapter). This gave publishers the power over the medium's past, something to wield when necessary or rather financially beneficial. Engaging in the activity of 'wring[ing] the last pennies of profit of their IPs' from the back catalogues that James Newman (2009) queried back in 2009 as to why this was not yet happening to a greater extent. Now the medium has changed resulting in the need to provide greater access to the past to cover up the lack of[108] contemporary releases and to generate interest when there are "new" releases. Ultimately though, this will be on the publishers' terms and not at the request of players (Doolan, 2021)[109].

Increasingly the three main console manufacturers (Nintendo, Microsoft, and Sony) are making it easier for players to access videogames from past systems. However, the approach taken by the three companies differs, and in many instances, there is an additional cost involved. Microsoft has provided a technical workaround allowing owners with discs dating back to the original Xbox to be playable on the current Xbox Series X for selected videogames. In addition, Microsoft also offers additional options via its Game Pass subscription. Nintendo and Sony, meanwhile, can only take a digital approach (backed up by a similar subscription method) due to technical reasons, those being games for all of

[108] Temporarily there will be an abundance of releases as the backlog resolves itself after Covid.
[109] This is evident with Nintendo's continual approach of providing limited timed remasters of classic videogames such as the *Super Mario 3D All-Stars* (Nintendo EPD, 2020b) collection for the Nintendo Switch. This contained *Super Mario 64* (1996 – Nintendo 64), *Super Mario Sunshine* (2002 – Nintendo GameCube), and *Super Mario Galaxy* (2007 – Nintendo Wii) in one package with each game receiving different improvements (of the kind found in remasters such as widescreen support). However, this was only available on the Nintendo eShop digitally for 7 months and physical versions ceased being manufactured. This was to coincide with *Mario*'s 35th anniversary but also to artificially generate scarcity to increase sales (Doolan, 2021).

Nintendo's previous systems are incompatible with the Switch[110] and likewise games for Sony's PS1, 2, and 3 are incompatible with PS4 and PS5. Instead, with the exception of specifically ported/remastered/remade videogames, a subscription service is required to access past videogames from a curated catalogue. Not only is this a monthly cost, but to add confusion, is an *additional* layer on top of the base PlayStation Plus subscription[111].

This is about accessing past videogames, but another part of nostalgia is the aesthetics from past videogames that contribute to relative nostalgia. Whether that be the *iconic* pixels, the chiptune beeps, bleeps, and bloops, or more *recent* low-polygonal 3D graphics and MIDI sound scores. These aesthetics for a short time had for the most part been replaced with "better" graphics and sounds. Yet, today, these are remarkably present once more. Whilst, pixel effects will not be found front and centre in something like the latest *Assassin's Creed* game, it is also not very difficult to come across a wealth of games in the "independent style" (Juul, 2019) on any digital storefront with an abundance of pixels and beeps. Most likely from smaller independent developers.

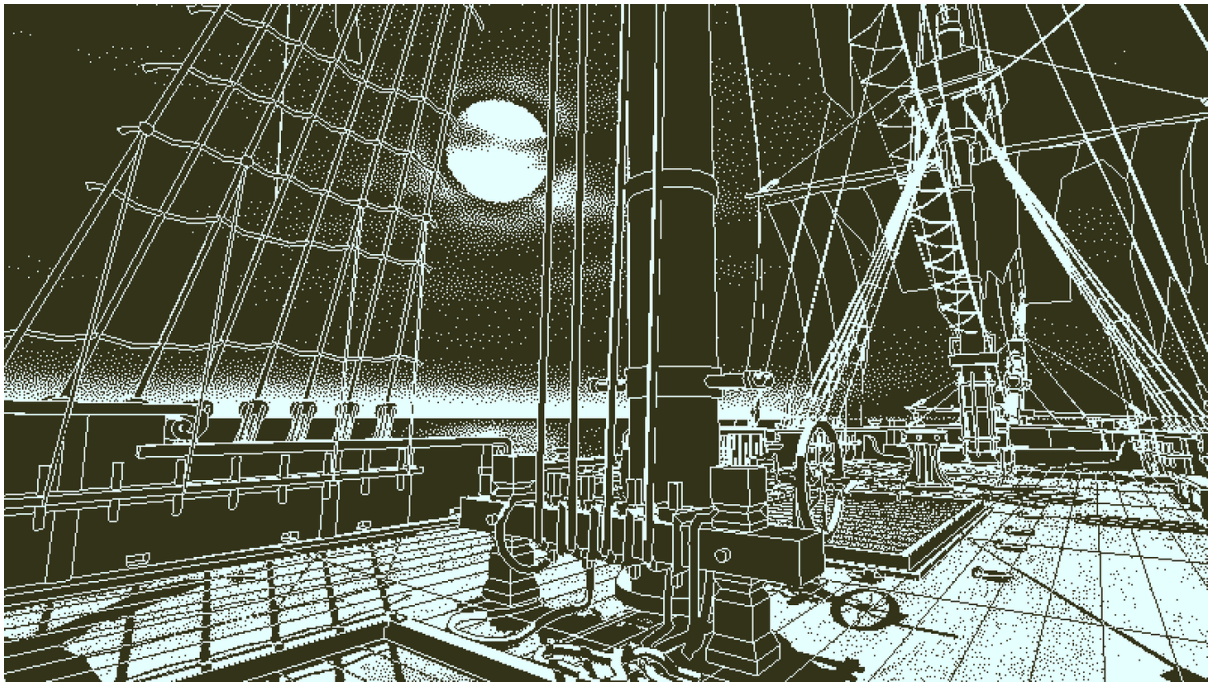
What is important to consider is those deliberately visible pixels and the two to three waveforms that comprised all chiptunes were *originally* the result of technical limitations of a specific time. Developers were making the best with what they had. It was not a *choice*. There will always be limitations that will impact the development of a videogame, although time and financial limitations will be the biggest consideration for the larger studios. Technical limitations will always exist, but they are not the main element they once were. What is important to note here, is that today there are many developers who have *chosen* to

[110] This is due to physical reasons, the past three Nintendo home consoles were disc based, and also system architecture, as the Switch uses an Nvidia Tegra X1 System-on-chip.
[111] Select PS1, PS2, PS3, and PSP videogames are available as part of the PlayStation Plus "Premium" subscription which is the most expensive option PlayStation players can choose from.

work with these *limitations*[112][113] and 'incorporate period styles into their original games' (Sloan, 2016).

There is understandable nostalgia for the aesthetics of videogames from one's childhood, but those same aesthetics are becoming commonplace again. For younger players today, that "retro look" is just *another* visual style found in contemporary videogames (as well as videogames available today such as re-releases and remasters). Something they have grown up with and perhaps look back upon fondly when they are older, again showing the significance of "relative nostalgia". It is an influencing factor when an individual comes across something, and not when it was *originally* created. The ontological murkiness that surrounds videogame remasters and remakes previously examined previously via the help of *The Ship of Theseus* thought experiment will become more apparent shortly with the distinction between "new/newness" and "novelty". This contributes to what I will be referring to as "hauntological form" which has arisen in parts of the medium. Something which contemporary videogames are unable to escape from elements of past videogames. Satiating the perceived desires amongst some players for a past they *think* is lost but can reclaim via these near-simulacra of the past.

[112] The developers of *Shovel Knight* (Yacht Club Games, 2014) were inspired to make the videogame seem as if it *could have* run on a Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), notably only going slightly beyond the original 54 available colours, but meaningfully 'bent the rules' to benefit modern playability (Angelo, 2014).
[113] All three main videogames whose development was followed in the documentary *Indie Game: The Movie* (Swirsky and Pajot, 2012) – *Super Meat Boy*, *FEZ*, and *Braid* – also exhibit deliberate inspiration from past videogames (typically 1980s and early 90s).



Return of the Obra Dinn by Lucas Pope (2018) employs a 1-bit art style. Visually the game looks from another era, but the play style offers a *modern* experience.

Return of the Obra Dinn (Pope, 2018) [as seen above] upon reflection represents what is considered hauntological form, in this instance that independent videogames can provide.[114][115] A unique (novel) experience, perhaps, but one that is still haunted. Hauntological form, as evidenced by *Obra Dinn*, is not incapable of novelty or newness but elements of past form still linger (and in this instance the setting and the in-game narrative are also emblematic of hauntology). Hauntological form is when contemporary form is intrinsically haunted by the past. This *haunting* takes hold in different ways, whether that be from **past media form, historical/past events, and in-game past events (can include**

[114] Recent Square Enix (and therefore a mainstream publisher) videogames also satisfy these criteria, primarily those that use the "HD-2D" visual style. This is notable with relatively new IP *Octopath Traveler* (Square Enix Business Division 11 and Acquire, 2018) that at its core is reminiscent of classic JRPG titles, the kind that Square and Enix Corporation were known for in the 80s and 90s. Its shell is a highly polished pixel style, a kind that would be impossible at the time, yet does not look *modern* now, which is intentional.

[115] This is also prominent with the announced remake of *Star Ocean: The Second Story* from 1999 (although had previously been remastered in 2008/09) which will be taking the HD-2D style even further with the environment now recreated using 3D assets, but all of the character models are 2D pixel sprites (Hagues, 2023).

narrative). It does not need to satisfy all of these conditions and can be a variable combination. Sticking with the example of *Obra Dinn* this satisfies all three potential conditions. Its visual style, or rather its 1-bit colour palette, is directly inspired by the games available on the Apple Macintosh (Pope, 2019). The setting is 1807 in which the player takes control of an insurance inspector for the East India Company investigating a ship that has reappeared in Falmouth, UK, but not all is as it seems. Its gameplay is deeply hauntological as the player explores the lives of those who once lived on the ship before, often, meeting an untimely demise.

Obra Dinn satisfies all the elements I have identified that contribute to a piece of media to be considered an example of hauntological form, even though just one element is enough to be considered. Yet, it is crucial to note that hauntological form is not about fawning dedication to or direct copying/referencing of the past. This is also where hauntological form distinguishes itself from merely being an example of nostalgia (rather, nostalgia is a symptom of this). In the instance of *Obra Dinn* whilst it might *look* like a videogame from the 1980s due to its 1-bit graphical style, it is a fully realised 3D game using a modern videogame engine (Unity). To achieve the look the 3D assets were textured appropriately along with a filter overlayed on top. Therefore, videogames that exemplify hauntological form are still able to attempt to provide contemporary (or novel) experiences, rather than just being relegated to remastering or remaking past pieces of media, but the key is that elements of the past are still being revived which are directly impacting the resulting form. This also goes beyond identifying the presence of nostalgia which can often be an exercise in pointing out a reference, which can also be fairly shallow.

Hauntological form, meanwhile, might not be intentional, that the medium itself is haunted by past form, whether that be genre conventions, design practices, or expectations of the audience, among other possibilities. Although, when it is intentional, is done so as an intrinsic part of the experience to provide an alternative to a lack of future or revolutionary change. Remixing past form to provide the illusion of newness, or perhaps able to create something novel from this. *Obra Dinn* could be argued to achieve both. The next section will unpack the distinction between "new/newness" and "novelty" in detail to explain how this relates in the context of hauntology and hauntological form.

New Videogames from Long Running Franchises

Towards the end of 2021, after being delayed for a year (Yin-Poole, 2021) – and an extended development period – *Halo Infinite* (343 Industries, 2021) was released. The latest in the 20-year-old franchise of First Person Shooters (FPS), set in the 26th century where players control a super soldier (typically Spartan 117 "Master Chief") in a fight to protect humanity from a religious covenant of aliens. This release was significant, as it was the first mainline *Halo* game to be released in six years and was intended to bring the franchise up to date to compete with other shooters that had gone on to take its place in the medium. In addition, it was also meant to help recement Microsoft's position in the videogames space, after ending up a distant third in the previous eighth console generation with the Xbox One.

How to address the significance of such a release? Does Microsoft (and its *Halo* specific subsidiary 343 Industries) provide a crowd-pleaser focusing on the hits, or do they provide a *new* experience to revive the franchise and ideally bring in a new audience? In short, the answer was a bit of both. This resulted in a *Halo* game that whilst an outlier as a whole to

what came before, was not as unique as marketing would have consumers believe. Usually, with *Halo* games, they are typically broken up into somewhat distinct levels. Part of *Infinite*'s new approach is its take on an open world, and this intentionally alters the player experience in *Halo* unlike any other (with the closest exception being *Halo 3: ODST* (Bungie, 2009)).

The issue with *Infinite* is that ultimately, its open world is a façade. This is especially apparent when considering the beginning and ending of *Infinite* from a gameplay perspective. The beginning is not too dissimilar to that of *Halo 4* (343 Industries, 2012), a linear experience with light overarching tutorials. It is around an hour until the *open world* is revealed to the player. The ending of the game sees a further return to the linear style that initiated *Infinite*, by the end the player would be forgiven for forgetting that this was being marketed as an "open world *Halo*".

In addition, for the main missions it seemed like the developers (led by 343 Industries) also struggled to commit to what kind of game they were making. Some missions took advantage of the wider digital space, but *Halo* games are known for their expansive levels. Others though were a collection of different Forerunner (the alien society responsible for creating the halo rings) constructed corridors and hallways.

343 Industries could have *just* made another typical *Halo* game and a sizable part of the existing audience would likely have accepted if not desired that. However, after the feedback from *Halo 5* (343 Industries, 2015), the developers were under pressure to provide something *different*. Yet, *open world* does not have to be the only way to attempt to do so. Nor is it as *novel* from a level design perspective as some developers would like to think.



One of the many Forerunner hallways present in the main campaign missions (343 Industries, 2021).

Now to compare with another videogame that also revived an, even older, franchise after a similar gap of six years. *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo EPD, 2017) expands upon the action-adventure mechanics found in previous *Zelda* entries in which the hero character controlled by the player (canonically called Link) ventures to save the kingdom of Hyrule from the evil Ganon(dorf). This sees Link traverse Hyrule, defeating enemies, and collecting items to help reach and vanquish the evil Ganon(dorf) and save Hyrule.

BotW is a videogame sequel that received seemingly universal praise (Metacritic, no date b), for its art style, gameplay, and environment. Whilst *BotW* is a very accomplished videogame, as a *Zelda* game, some long-time players found it sacrificed too much, but it can be respected for doing something different and sticking to it; as well as finally breaking from convention for the franchise, which had been increasingly criticised for becoming formulaic.

Zelda games have often been recognisable for their dungeons and bosses, but *BotW* is not as concerned with these as its predecessors.

BotW might have nods and references to its past and could be argued to be a true realisation of ideas teased in the very first *Zelda* game, but it does manage to do something to truly distinguish itself from previous 3D *Zelda* games. *Infinite* on the other hand cannot decide if it wants to break the formula by going "open world" or be another *Halo* game due to its relatively linear missions interrupted by conversations from an AI character. That confusion lingers, especially by the end. Whilst it could have been worse, given that somehow the two sides of the game are not at odds with one another, this is still a game of two halves. Trying to do something different, but without the confidence or ability to let go of its past.

The Crux of "Newness" and "Novelty"

Expanding upon the previous examples, my current research addresses the distinction between "new" and "novelty". This might seem like a semantic difference[116] but given the context of the wider research focus on hauntological form, this is a helpful and meaningful distinction to make. This also expands upon the work present earlier in this chapter on videogame remasters and remakes, as exemplified with *SotC*. Below is a brief description I had written whilst undertaking the research[117] to begin to highlight the difference and its relevance to videogames:

> The distinction between novelty and new helps to explain how videogames continue to be developed and released but at the same time argue that the *form* is not different enough to

[116] Similar in nature to the differences I considered between "accuracy" and "authenticity" in Chapter 3.
[117] This was prompted by a discussion with my thesis supervisors culminating in a follow up email pinning down my understanding of the distinction between the two terms: novelty and new.

> distinguish it as wholly different to what came before. That a lingering presence from the past is impacting the form.
>
> What this means is that the videogames medium can still be stated as providing new pieces of media, but those media pieces lack the novelty that was previously more commonly found. Novelty can apply to both the core (mechanics) and shell (aesthetics) which would previously result in a form that would provide revolutionary change on a more continual basis. Change that would distinguish one era (or console generation) apart from another.

Expanding on those two paragraphs I argue that a videogame can be both novel and new, or a videogame can be new without being novel. It is worth noting that I do not think the medium is incapable of novelty. An example of which (novel and new) would be something like *Death Stranding*; a new IP and the online collaboration within a single player game, along with its setting, are novel. Whereas a couple of examples of new but not novel would be *The Order: 1886* (a new IP but has mechanics that were tired even by 2015) and the previously mentioned, *Halo Infinite* (new for its franchise was ultimately just another FPS), among many others. Calling back to the beginning of the chapter it is also helpful to repeat that I have defined that 'a remaster is not new because it does little to distinguish itself from the original' and a remake 'is new, as many elements have been replaced, it looks nicer than before and functions better', but it 'does not qualify as novel for it retains too many features of the original'.

Why though is such a distinction needed? As previously highlighted with the identification of hauntological form, there is a shortage of innovation and revolutionary change. Instead, the medium is looking towards the past for inspiration as well as a source for alternative elements to make up for the lack of revolutionary change but still enough to either provide evolutionary change (or the illusion of) or mask the absence of meaningful change via something *different* to other contemporary releases. As will now be discussed through the two case studies of this chapter (*Halo Infinite* and *BotW*) there are different overarching

approaches to overcoming the inability of providing revolutionary change to videogame form yet still sustaining itself as a medium.

BotW satisfies both categories as it is new (the latest entry in the series and helped to launch a new system) and is also novel in how it emphasises and enables exploration and freedom in a way that not only distinguishes it from other *Zelda* games but also other open world games as well. Yet it too cannot escape its hauntological form – as has been introduced earlier in this chapter – but can exploit the strong ties with previous entries further demonstrating (via a different approach to that seen with *Obra Dinn*) that hauntological form need not automatically be a hindrance in providing something *different*.

Infinite is not as *unique* as 343 Industries would have players believe. It might be for a game developed by 343 – as nearest comparison *ODST* was developed by Bungie – but again, for a *Halo* game, there are still elements present from before. *Infinite* does take the open world concept further, expanding upon the intentionally claustrophobic city of *ODST* and instead provides open spaces from the surface of the Zeta Halo ringworld. It is the execution of the open world though where *Infinite*'s *novelty* is questioned. *Infinite*'s open world is underutilised, with special targets and bases to capture used to mask the emptiness of the digital space. Zeta Halo as a play space is similar to many other open world FPS' with areas of interest dotted around the map giving players something to do. This approach is certainly new for the franchise, as well as for 343 Industries, but that does not distinguish it as something novel within the videogames medium.

Does every videogame need to be novel? No, and it is unlikely that would be achievable. If *Infinite* can be considered new, then what does not count as new? This is surprisingly difficult, which is ironic considering the surrounding research – to put it (perhaps too) simply

– argues that videogames are not creating anything new anymore. Is a port [re-release on a different platform] of a videogame (whether that be a current videogame or an older videogame) new? Technically yes as it is *new* to whatever platform it is being released on, but the game itself is not, so it would be argued that this would not count as new.

Now that it has been defined whether these two examples can be considered "new" and/or "novel" we can determine how to address them in the context of hauntological form. Both videogames by their very nature of being the latest entry[118] in a long-running franchise are ontologically predisposed to presenting hauntological form. Past videogame form will certainly haunt these videogames, with past elements lingering during development. These two examples help show how hauntological form presents itself differently and does not preclude such pieces of media from providing new or novel experiences.

Halo Infinite narratively is a direct sequel to both *Halo 5* and Real-Time-Strategy (RTS) game *Halo Wars 2*, but it also acknowledges events that precede those from across not only other past *Halo* games but also novels as well. *Infinite* is unable to escape its narrative past, despite inelegant attempts to dismiss it to simplify the overarching narrative, yet this ultimately still results in a messy and at times confusing plot. There are elements that players will *expect* from a *Halo* game and that developers presume need to be included. Despite not naming it *Halo* "6", *Infinite* does not present a clean start for the series, nor does it act as a "requel"[119] (Lizardi, 2015). Rather, despite the significant push to do something new with the franchise by breaking up the flow of the gameplay and providing players with (the illusion of) freedom, it is still held back by the very elements that make it a franchise. To

[118] At the time of editing (June 2023) *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom* has been released. But that does not significantly impact this specific argument.
[119] A portmanteau of reboot and sequel. Can be used to describe films such as *Jurassic World* and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*.

abandon those though is not just a matter of difficulty, but incompatibility. The absence would be felt throughout the whole experience creating a sense of loss that would envelop the videogame. Yet regardless a sense of loss is inevitable in this instance. Returning players could experience a *perceived* sense of loss for what they *expected* from a new entry which is not present. Whilst new players must untangle the references to past entries (and expanded media) which linger throughout the experience.

This is supported by Ford (2021) who argues 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 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'. Therefore, in the instance of *Infinite*, the simultaneity of the presence and loss leads to the establishment of hauntological form. This is a deliberate development but with unintended consequences.

BotW is not afflicted with the same existential setbacks as *Halo Infinite*. Whilst it is (as previously mentioned) the latest[120] in a long-running franchise, the majority of entries are stand-alone. What connects each entry are the characters, locations, items, and themes. What they do not share is a strict singular grand narrative that is interwoven between all

[120] At the time of writing, but not at the time of editing.

entries[121]. This gives each new entry a degree of freedom, as it is not beholden to whether a character present in a previous entry lived or died, or even if an entire Kingdom was lost to the bottom of the ocean. Other elements though have impacted the form of new entries, notably the gameplay loop present. Conventions were prevalent across multiple entries (referred to by some players and critics as the "Zelda formula" (Rosenberg, 2021)) providing a familiar gameplay loop that could be found in most *Zelda* games, such as the way dungeons were designed, how items facilitated advancement, and the methods used to defeat bosses. This was particularly evident with *Twilight Princess* (Nintendo EAD, 2006) which shared many similarities with *Ocarina of Time*. These became long-term tropes of the franchise and eventually were considered by reviewers and players as crutches holding the franchise back. The problem the developers faced was how to move beyond this without losing the feeling of a *Zelda* game.

BotW was able to largely achieve this by abandoning much of the gameplay loop that previously defined *Zelda* games. No longer was there a set order in which the player advances through dungeons. Nor are there key items the player is given throughout their journey to navigate specific dungeons and defeat certain bosses. Instead, the player is given the core items they need in the first area and then set free to explore as they see fit.[122] The resulting new gameplay loop (for the franchise) separates it from its predecessors, but what distinguishes it from other third-person action-adventure videogames are the other elements that are iconic to the *Zelda* franchise. The iconography permeates the entire game

[121] There is no expanded *Zelda* "universe". Only a very loose "timeline" that Nintendo half-heartedly endorsed. This became just as vague in the years following *BotW*'s release (Craddock, 2018).
[122] In the direct sequel (which is rare, but not unusual) *Tears of the Kingdom*, many elements, such as the overworld, characters, and mechanics are carried over. There are new locations, characters, and mechanics though. The game received multiple delays and released whilst I was editing, therefore I am not able to explore it in detail for this thesis.

as a necessity. The icons range from across the entirety of the franchise, including promotional material supporting the game's "nostalgic shell"[123]. The execution of this serves different purposes; to enrich the game world, to help affirm its contextualisation within the franchise, knowing nods to long-time players, and recognition of the franchise's history amongst its developers.

Does this mean that the past is something inescapable or a requirement when creating entries within an existing franchise? There is a Proppian structure across the *Zelda* franchise which can be tracked alongside the narratives found in the different games (Propp, 1968; Sweeting, 2017). Whilst *BotW* does require past *Zelda* iconography in its role of continuing the franchise, the Proppian elements also remain, and the combination contributes to the hauntological form present underneath the veneer of newness and novelty that *BotW* provides. This is not a hindrance, rather it is an identification that hauntological form does not necessitate positive or negative impact but is the presence of the past lingering upon contemporary form. In this instance it does not hold *BotW* back, rather, it helps to facilitate its advancement. Making it more than *another open world game* and strengthening it with elements from across the franchise. Providing a wide array of references from past entries that appeal to long-time players but also strengthens the digital world that new and returning players explore. Without the lingering of past elements, this *new* videogame would lack cultural cache and recognition making it more difficult to market. It could also

[123] "Nostalgic shell" builds upon Frans Mäyrä's (2008, p. 17) "core and shell" model. With core referring to gameplay and shell to representation (aesthetics) of a videogame. I have created the term nostalgic shell to refer to aesthetic elements in a videogame that deliberately remediate past videogame (or media) visual or sound attributes as part of its contemporary aesthetic. "Nostalgic core" would refer to mechanics in a contemporary videogame that deliberately those found in past videogames.

impact internal funding available, as the medium is averse to financing large new projects linked to unknown IP as it is a very risky exercise.

The chapter over the past two sections has focused on two initially similar but ultimately different examples that present hauntological form. Both are new videogames which make the identification of hauntological form particularly illuminating. They are also beneficial in this instance as neither is overtly nostalgic.

Conclusion

This chapter introduced the concept of Hauntological Form as a means of applying the concept of hauntology to identify and understand what is happening to the contemporary form of videogames. Aided by different methods of exploration it can be seen that hauntology provides an insight into how the videogames past is increasingly acting upon the mediums present. No longer remaining as the past, but instead actively *haunting* the present. However, hauntological form is not to be 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 the medium to sustain some evolutionary change.

Hauntological form is not a universal form as it can be present differently. This can be seen between the two case studies of *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* and *Halo Infinite*. The former using the franchises past as a means of strengthening the digital world and providing returning players with familiar iconography (and shell elements) meanwhile the core experience is novel not only for the franchise but also open world adventure games. The latter, despite being a new entry that also attempted to provide a new entry point for players

(hence why it was not called *Halo 6*) ultimately was unable to deliver a novel experience. Instead, it remained held back by its own past, unable to navigate the line between recognising its past whilst also moving forward.

Remasters and remakes have also been examined in this chapter. These two types of videogames are inherently haunted as they bring back videogames that had been left to the past – often *trapped* due to limited backwards compatibility across the medium – into the present. Yet, the form in which these videogames are presented not only differs between these two types, but in the case of the remake can differ based on the views of the developer/publisher working on it.

The thought experiment of the Ship of Theseus is particularly helpful in this regard, especially via the expansion of it via the example of the Ise Jingu Naiku shrine. This shrine that is rebuilt every twenty years cannot be considered a novel building, but the building itself is "new" as it is literally constructed out of new materials each time. Does that make it better than what came before? The techniques remain the same, but perhaps it has become more efficient over the centuries? Tools will have likely changed and perhaps some components are no longer available. Some techniques might have been lost to time. Therefore, this provides possible symbolism. The process (and the developers) working on remakes will likely change and developers will actively attempt to improve elements they consider requiring improvement, but there is a fine line that must be adhered to otherwise the result becomes a recreation/copy or homage. Whereas a remaster has smaller aims and instead attempts to polish up the original, otherwise leaving it mostly intact. This is still one step above a rerelease though. Remasters are products for either a new audience (possibly engaging in cultural memory) or an existing audience wanting to reclaim something from

their past. A rerelease would be the most straightforward option (although not without its challenges) for publishers to provide this dose of nostalgia to consumers, but a remaster makes enough adjustments to align the videogame with a player's memory of it rather than how it would be today in its original state.

This is not unlike the Ise Jingu Naiku shrine. To renovate it would be one option, but this is limited in what can be accomplished and the deterioration of the structure would become apparent. Whereas rebuilding the structure every twenty years keeps it relevant, not some relic that has to be preserved. Instead, the structure itself becomes part of a wider tradition contributing to contemporary culture. Can the same apply to videogames? Not for every videogame, but the idea of not letting the culture that exists around videogames be lost to time due to technological obsolescence is important. Remasters and remakes are the more overt means of doing so, but considering this in combination with hauntological form enables past form to permeate into contemporary form. Thus, serving two purposes, retaining elements of past form (and associated culture), and providing content to sustain contemporary form as innovation slows down. This also identifies a possible difference in approach regarding remakes between the West and Japan. Unlike with the Shinto shrine, in the West typically the past is preserved as is (such as maintaining a crumbling castle in that state). This approach extends to remakes being "truthful" or accurate to the original. The next chapter will take this further and examine an example of Japanese studios taking a different approach that instead of preserving the past, rebuilds it taking into account modern sensibilities.

Considering the arguments mentioned around newness and novelty, just because new media is being created, does not mean that novel forms are also created. This is potentially

the crux to understanding the role of hauntology upon media form, or rather, hauntological form. It is a means to help enable the longevity of a medium that otherwise would run out of momentum, alongside the struggles faced as a result of the difficulties that late-stage capitalism brings. Hauntological form provides the illusion of new, which is necessary for the capitalist system to continue and sustain itself, but this is not enough to offer revolutionary change. It is supported by the desire, not only of the system but also of society (consumers) of clinging to the past. Not just because it can be presented as an idealised vision, but because an idealised (perhaps utopic) future is no longer believable. Leaving an unknowable future, and that notion scares people (Curtis, 2021). Therefore, it is not surprising that the familiar, and therefore safe, is what is clung to. It is not simply returning to the past for the sake of nostalgia. Instead, nostalgia is just the by-product of hauntological form.

Chapter 6: A Haunted Medium and a Lost Generation

Introduction

This chapter will address some of the ways in which the mainstream videogames medium is haunted, expanding upon what has been alluded to over the past two chapters. Identifying elements that contribute to this, whether that is as part of hauntological forms inevitability as well as an exacerbating factor based on global events during the past few years. By the end of the chapter, it will be argued that the current console generation can be referred to as a "lost generation" as it will be one that will lack an identifiably unique style of its own, rather it will be emblematic of hauntological form due to its increased reliance on the past. It will be argued in this chapter that this reliance on the past has become multifaceted.

The mediums inefficiencies (due to the scale of many AAA studios) will be examined via the concept of the MAYA Principle and how this can help to understand one of the ways in which the past provides a design strategy. Also, expanding upon the previously outlined inability of wider culture's (from the Global North) ability to imagine a different future, which is now exacerbated by the permacrisis that has emerged as a result of the events of the past few years (pandemic/lockdowns, war, and cost of living crisis). Not only does the future not look promising but the present is failing to inspire hope. Hauntological form provides a solution for the medium, a means of aiding development as well as a window to perceived better times. The latter resulting in a fantasy nostalgia, an inaccurate version of the past that exploits its style.

Remediation will also be looked at for it helps to examine the mediums relationship with itself. Remediation is not unique to videogames but given the particulars of console hardware and the evolution of manufacturer-based ecosystems this has resulted in a specific

use case for media from its own past. Yet as will be outlined at the start of this chapter, the medium is afflicted with "Past Shock", a consequence of looking to the past to sustain itself. However, this might be the cost to maintain the momentum needed provided by MAYA.

Past Shock

This thesis has previously mentioned the concept of "future shock" (in chapter 4), the idea that rapid advancement (technological or social) can cause distress or disorientation (Toffler, 2022). Yet as claimed via Mark Fisher (2014, pp. 175–180) this is something that has disappeared, because there is nothing new to generate such a response. This in-of-itself is an interesting observation, but Fisher (via Reynolds (2020)) expands upon this observation by beginning to identify an alternative symptom that has arisen in its place. This being "Past Shock".

Whilst this can be seen as an alternative it could also be considered an appropriate replacement for understanding the current situation amongst consumer society in the Global North; and specifically in the situation of mainstream videogames – a medium which has now matured. Past Shock 'play[s] on the idea of "future shock"…imagin[ing] somehow teleporting back through time a contemporary group like Arctic Monkeys and playing them to people in 1980' (Reynolds, 2020). Fisher intimating that an audience in 1980 would be stunned by how *little* had changed in the decades that followed. Going against the assumption that the future (the unknown 21st century) should be unrecognisable. Reynolds (2020) goes further arguing that it should be 'derangingly strange, incomprehensibly advanced, and barely recognizable as music'. This position is bold, but I agree with the underlying sentiment that music should have changed enough in over three decades to

provide a previously expected *future* shock rather than *past* shock. The (understandably) assumed view by Fisher and Reynolds that a 1980s audience would be so underwhelmed by the *lack* of change resulting in past shock is a good a thought experiment. Yet, it need not be just that. Past shock can be applied to how we can consider contemporary media, including videogames.

This thesis is a recognition of past shock, a realisation of the underwhelmed sensation at not only the slowdown of change but also the emergence of hauntological form present within the medium. Past shock therefore can be experienced by those alive today and without the need for a time machine. Despite the presence of past shock – and I argue the rise of hauntological form – what is preventing a mass sense of concern, by both consumers and producers, is that on a surface level industrial factors have done a competent job of masking the extremes of hauntological form and the repurposing of the past that leads to it. As a result, lessening the impact, or perhaps wider realisation, of past shock on videogame consumers.

What potentially could be a shock for current younger consumers is if they discover that what they thought was "new" is in fact a revival (and/or remix) of what has come before. With elements of nostalgia emerging cyclically after around 20-30 years (Brown, 2018), before this would be related to fashion and other styles (within film and TV), but this is also becoming present in technology. In the case of videogames, genres, mechanics, aesthetics, or even forms of hardware (and the physical interaction they offer) can reappear. A caveat to this is an awareness that re-engaging with physical media such as vinyl and cassettes is not new. But the different technologies/products from the past do cycle through. For example,

compact digital cameras (specifically “point and shoot”) are just the latest technology to re-emerge 20 years after its initial success (Farrell, 2023); and it is unlikely to be the last.

This revival of older technology will be akin to archaeology for Generation Z who (for the most part) will be too young to have personally used it (except for those who engaged with it via relative nostalgia). Yet, interestingly, there are accounts from Generation Z claiming that ‘For younger people, who will have virtually no recollection of these cameras in their 2000s heyday, this opens up a kind of “nostalgic world”’ (Farrell, 2023). This exemplifies what Andy Bennet describes as ‘Received Nostalgia’ in which an understanding is constructed ‘of a decade of which they have no living memory’ (Van Der Hoeven, 2014). Which is more apt in this instance than the Relative Nostalgia more frequently referred to in this thesis. This is further evident by a quote from Paul Greenwood stating that ‘It’s seen as more real and authentic…the grainy kind of content you see is basically shorthand for authenticity and realness. That’s what Gen Z are looking for’ (Farrell, 2023).

This is reminiscent of Legislated Nostalgia first introduced in Chapter 1, coined by Douglas Coupland (1992). The nostalgia cycle of culture repeating every 20-30 years can be considered to act in a similar way to Coupland’s (1992, p. 47) definition of ‘forc[ing] a body of people to have memories they do not actually own’. For Generation Z is a generation that is less likely to have a “culture” truly of their own. Instead, it has been “legislated” to them based on what has come before from which they can remix (as part of remediation which will be explained later in this chapter). This is because with Generation Z their clothing, music, technology, and crucially (for this thesis) their videogames are not *new*. The caveat is

social media, but even this is being used to as a means to strengthen the cultural memory[124] that exists which feeds into remediation.

Therefore, Generation Z are engaging with this technology now with preconceived ideas (perhaps passed down via digital media), rather than forming their own. They are perceiving it as 'authentic' rather than generating their own lived experiences "out of time" as would be the case for relative nostalgia. Instead, past shock in the context of videogames might be better understood via the lens of another theory which highlights to what extent consumers are willing and able to accept change, meanwhile still allowing *some* change (evolution) to take place within a medium.

MAYA (Most *Acceptable* Yet *Advanced*)

Videogames ultimately are a product, one to be produced and sold; a point made previously in this thesis. The artistic merits of the videogame's medium have not been argued, nor is it the focus here. Yet irrespective of how videogames are regarded, within the mainstream the generation of profit is a requirement for its continued success. This is largely due to the sheer expense required to bring these media pieces to market[125]. In addition to developing the videogame itself, marketing is also a significant cost. It is costly for a recognisable IP, but even more significant for a new IP. As can be seen with the example of *Destiny* (Bungie,

[124] Cultural memory and collective memory are two terms that have been used in this thesis. The two are similar and could be argued to overlap. The way I have been distinguishing between the two in this thesis is that collective memory refers more broadly to national and worldwide events and how these are "remembered". Whereas cultural memory refers to cultural output, such as media, and the residue that they leave.

[125] This is also evident with the revelation of the $200 million plus development costs for both *The Last of Us Part 2* and *Horizon Forbidden West*, published and financed by Sony Interactive Entertainment. These figures were inadvertently revealed via court documents that Sony had failed to properly redact during the Microsoft and Activision Blizzard FTC hearing (Carpenter, 2023).

2014) when launched as a new IP (Pearson, 2014)[126]. These are a couple of reasons why the mainstream medium is reluctant to take risks and a contributing factor to the rise of hauntological form.

Helping to further understand this is the marketing concept of "Most Advanced Yet Acceptable" (MAYA). This is not to argue that all videogame producers have deliberately engaged with the concept, but it can provide an insight into how consumers can be considered regarding the extent they can accept something new. As well as how the medium is received when attempts are made within mainstream releases that either take risks or play it safe.

The MAYA Principle is a concept coined by industrial designer Raymond Loewy in 1951 (Hekkert, Snelders and Van Wieringen, 2003). The aim of the approach is to meet 'present needs and skills while pushing the boundaries of design and technology beyond his users' expectations'. Rikke Friis Dam (2021) explains this to mean that in practice is to seek to give 'users the most advanced design, but not more advanced than what they were able to accept and embrace'.

Acceptance in part is due to a preference towards familiarity. Psychologist Robert Zajonc conducted studies during the 1960s in which participants were shown a range of different visual elements such as words, shapes, and language-like symbols and then asked for their preference. The result was a preference for familiarity. However, there are limits to familiarity, as too much and consumers will lose interest (Thompson, 2017). The balancing act that exists is that consumers simultaneously want something new (something they have

[126] *Destiny* was misinterpreted to cost $500 million for development and marketing. This figure was more of an estimate for how much might be needed to sustain investment in the IP for 10 years (Pearson, 2014).

not grown tired of) but also something that is familiar (recognisable so that they know what it is).

Dam (2021) titled her article on MAYA as 'Design[ing] for the Future, but Balance it with Your User's Present', which is in keeping with Loewy's coining, but focusing on the present does not take into proper consideration users – or rather consumers – preferences regarding the past. MAYA can be considered as not only a compromise, but also a consolidation of recognising the past but doing just enough to help provide momentum to keep a product (or in this instance a whole medium) relevant going into the future. To aid its application in the context of hauntological form I propose an alternative order to the wording inside the acronym, swapping "advanced" and "acceptable", resulting in Most *Acceptable* Yet *Advanced*.

Examining videogames through the lens of the MAYA Principle is not something that has been well documented[127]. MAYA is typically associated with physical products rather than software (although computer hardware, notably Apple products has utilised this approach (Friis Dam, 2021)), yet given the interactivity of videogames makes the medium an appropriate extension of this approach[128]. In the previous paragraph the alternative order for MAYA proposed is apt in the context of videogames because of the current direction the medium is seemingly going in. As argued throughout this thesis (predominantly in the previous two chapters) the once forward-facing (mainstream) videogames medium is running out of momentum yet needs to maintain the illusion of progress and provide newness to consumers. However, the response is two-fold. The first is that the mainstream

[127] The main result being (Game Design Thinking, 2021).
[128] Film and other visual could still be examined by this approach as familiarity of form from audiences is still a consideration for film studios.

medium is largely incapable of providing significant revolutionary novelty as it once could. The second is that, despite many consumers claiming to want something *new* they do not necessarily want something *novel*. They want the familiar repackaged in a new casing. This is where MAYA shows its benefits in the instance of videogames, and especially my *amended* version.

The original MAYA's aim was to push a product (or technology, etc.) as far as possible *without* going too far as to alienate, confuse, or put off the consumer/end-user; therefore, keeping it "acceptable". Most mainstream videogame studios do not have the ability to consistently create revolutionary new videogames offering novel experiences. For those that *can* attempt to do so are cautious of the risks involved in doing so, such as if an overly unique videogame is poorly received by consumers. A large commercial failure could be enough to bring down a studio due to the significant investment required (both for development and marketing). This supports the idea that for mainstream videogame studios the aim instead is to develop a videogame that will be acceptable *enough* for the mainstream audience. Secondary to this is that mainstream videogame studios have access to some of the latest videogame related technology and there is a desire to take advantage of this (Zackariasson and Wilson, 2010), but there are the costs, time, and risks involved which limit the extent to which these technologies can be effectively utilised in the videogames themselves[129]. Instead, what can be seen is incremental evolution over an extended period of time. In which upon looking back it becomes more apparent of the

[129] This can be seen with *The Last of Us Part 2* which cost $220 million to create (Carpenter, 2023). Naughty Dog were taking advantage of the latest technology to provide increasingly realistic looking human characters and highly detailed environments. Except, the videogame itself is not a novel experience, rather a continuation of the first game and the style of single player adventures that Naughty Dog are known for.

change that has taken place as opposed to the greater leaps that were observable between/within previous console generations.

MAYA and Access to Videogames Back Catalogue

With the mainstream videogames medium focusing on the "most acceptable" for what to concentrate on for its output, the place for innovation has shifted. With the destination or the future less clear than in previous generations, creating something new might seem like an unproductive (or even unnecessary) exercise. This is compounded by the previously mentioned protracted development times (made worse from the lasting impact from Covid lockdowns).

If the future is unknowable, with studios unable to release a videogame in under three years[130] then looking towards the *stability* of the past for inspiration regarding "core" features makes sense in the context of MAYA. The "shell" can still provide the illusion or even genuine advancement to enable the videogame to exist as a new product. Access to the past is a suitable resource both as a reservoir of ideas for studios but also as a promotional tool that can *educate/inform* consumers by its very existence. Prior to the adoption of digital stores on consoles videogames relied on physical releases, but crucially – aside from the biggest releases (such as a *Mario Kart* game) – many videogame releases were effectively limited print runs. A certain quantity "printed" and if demand was sufficient enough then another run of a selected quantity was ordered. Ultimately though, a publisher will stop

[130] Some franchises are able to avoid this by having multiple studios work on separate videogame to enable annual or bi-annual releases.

putting in orders for new print runs.[131] This is slightly unlike DVDs at its peak which had a longer sale through time for Hollywood films, which also became 'the primary source of profits for Hollywood' (Kompare, 2006).

During the previous generations – notably the Sixth and Seventh (and to a lesser extent Eighth) – "budget" reprints of popular videogames were available across the different platforms, having different names depending on the console as well as the region. These were videogames that had sold a significant number of units to warrant the distinction. This not only kept these videogames in circulation far longer but also singled them out among other releases suggesting a level of quality, furthermore these would also be sold at a lower cost than new releases with the intention that this would further increase sales volume.[132]

With the ninth-generation – although this started to become the norm during the Eighth – videogame releases are always available as a digital "product", no longer being a secondary consideration. Now it is no longer a certainty that a videogame will receive a physical release. What this has also meant is that for the most part, a videogame will not only be available for the duration of a console generation but also in many instances across multiple generations via the digital store fronts.[133] Physical print runs will still vary in quantity and increasingly will be more limited than with previous generations. With the shift in consumption moving towards primarily digital downloads there is the advantage that more

[131] Even though the Xbox 360 launched with a digital store, for the first few years this was exclusively for "Arcade" titles. This later expanded to include "full games" at release but did not subsequently include all videogames available for the Xbox 360.

[132] Digital changed this slightly, Nintendo had "Selects" for Wii U [until they removed them from its eShop - see next footnote] and "PlayStation Hits" for PS4 which did keep the price down online even after the physical print runs had ended.

[133] The caveat to this is that a videogame is not guaranteed to be available for perpetuity. Those that are linked to a licence, such as racing games or to other IP, typically are removed from sale after a few years. Then there is the issue of digital store fronts being shut down. This is the situation with Nintendo's past consoles the Wii U and the 3DS. Nintendo no longer sells these consoles and instead is concentrating on the one it is actively selling - the Switch.

videogames from earlier in a console generation, as well as the previous, are accessible to both new and returning players.[134][135]

The shift towards digital distribution changes the relationship players can have with the medium. Increasingly videogames from the past decade are less likely to be spoken of as if a legend due to difficulty in obtainability. Instead, they contribute to a vast catalogue of videogames to be discovered. Unlike before where videogames had the very real risk of *disappearing*. Not in the sense that it would be gone for ever, but in previous generations those who did not obtain a videogame physically around the launch period would be less likely to obtain a copy afterwards. Especially those who wanted to do so years later at retail, who would then possibly have to a pay a considerable amount more for what could be a "rare product". Whereas online digital distribution not only provides increased access but also changes the price perspective long term. Physical videogames are impacted by the pressures of supply and demand like other physical products. Whilst it was possible to obtain a (often popular) videogame cheaply in the months after launch, rarer physical releases after the main launch window have gone on to increase in value. However, once a digital alternative becomes available this has seen physical prices decrease due to demand being

[134] There are also instances where a publisher no longer wants specific videogames available on digital storefronts anymore. EA announced that it was delisting three *Battlefield* titles from digital storefronts. The main reason given was that it was no longer supporting the online multiplayer modes. Whilst shutting down online modes after a decade is not uncommon, it is not a given that for videogames that also have a substantial single player offline mode (as is the case for *Bad Company* and *Bad Company 2*) to be delisted as a result (Peters, 2023).

[135] This discussion has sidestepped the argument around the benefits of physical games for archival purposes. Whilst the claims around physical games are understandable due to any digital game being at risk of removal, for the general videogame consumer, digital stores can offer greater access because they are not constrained by limited quantity.

satiated by access to the digital version. This has been notable when Nintendo brings rarer videogames to its eShop or "Nintendo Switch Online" service.[136]

One needs to remember though that with supply no longer being an issue the price of digital videogames is not impacted in the same way. Digital videogames will typically maintain their Recommended Retail Price (RRP) rather than gradually decreasing in price or rising due to scarcity. The exception to this though is the frequent sales that occur within the different digital storefronts. An individual videogame might not be discounted every time, but it does help to bring the price down increasing accessibility. Despite the concept of sales also present with physical releases, the combination with videogames being continuously available on these digital storefronts and frequent sales changes the relationship players have with videogames as consumers. An inquisitiveness of past videogames can be satiated by this greater access and affordability. Even if a player is waiting for what is often an inevitability of a discount and taking advantage of "wish lists".

The impact of this is that the mediums (specifically, but not exclusively, recent) past has never left which is potentially resulting in a change of desire from consumers due to the content that they are exposed to. Compounding this is that new videogames are increasingly competing with the past rather than the future. Therefore, having to beat the past at its own game. Providing polished/updated versions of what came before rather than focusing on something novel and *unfamiliar*.

[136] *Metroid Prime Trilogy: Collector's Edition* for the Wii from 2009 did not receive a large print run. In the years that followed it was selling on eBay auctions for around £100 in the UK and almost $300 in the US. After the addition to the Wii U eShop in 2015 the auctions ended on a far lower amount. Under £30 in the UK and $40 in the US (Calvert, 2015).

This further shows that the adoption of MAYA by the videogame's medium is in part a response to the changing availability of content within the videogame market. It also adds to the paradox of the videogames medium in that it is more concerned with chasing its past to sustain itself rather than chasing new developments to provide something novel. Thus, identifying a relationship between MAYA and Hauntological Form, as the "most acceptable" is being provided by the past which is haunting the medium in a way that previously was not present.

The reliance on the past has connections to the medium reaching a state of maturity (as mentioned previously in this thesis), especially the mainstream. The problem with reaching maturity though is that for long established studios and publishers the ramifications of risk will seem even greater as well as not particularly necessary. The big publishers and console manufacturers have been consolidating over the past few years changing the industry composition. The console space has been an oligopoly for the past three decades which has helped maintain competition (as opposed to it being a duopoly or, worse, monopoly). Yet now both Sony and Microsoft have a considerable back catalogue that can be exploited as Nintendo has done so since the 1990s. Microsoft has been strengthening its position by purchasing many studios to make up for its comparatively limited collection of IPs (Gilbert, 2023).

The repercussion of this is in line with MAYA and providing familiarity. By having increased access, the past IP and content provides the mainstream with familiar forms that can be efficiently released to the market that are also more *digestible* for consumers. Not only that, but it also acts as a stop gap and a means of generating hype for *new* content that exists within the same IP and/or similar genres.

MAYA and Videogames Going Forwards

The past is now more accessible than ever before, not just in accessing knowledge about the past but crucially for mediums like videogames is access to *content* from the past. Whilst console generations have previously contributed to the difficulty of accessing past content – and supporting a strategy of selling new software alongside new hardware – current consoles are changing the boundaries. Whether that is by directly accessing past videogames from previous console generations, via backwards compatibility, remakes/remasters/re-releases, or content in contemporary videogames, the mediums past are acting as the greatest resource repository for "new" content in its history.

This section has explored the changing use of the past through the lens of MAYA. Amending it to identify how the medium has adopted a "Most *Acceptable*, Yet *Advanced*" approach. With the mainstream medium that has not only become risk adverse but also widely incapable of even attempting to take a risk and produce something novel. Instead, the medium utilises the latest technology it has access to and push the medium forward *just enough* to help it to evolve over an extended period of time, as opposed to the revolutions that would be seen between (or even within) previous console generations. Helping to bring this about is how the mediums past is used. With new titles taking longer than before to develop the mediums past provides an efficient means of maintaining and generating hype, as well as helping to bring in revenue. Digital storefronts on consoles have resulted in a long tail (Anderson, 2007) for videogames beyond what digital distribution of physical videogames could ever provide due to not being limited in supply. With an overabundance

of supply, it is not just other recent releases that new titles face competition from, but increasingly titles from across an entire decade, if not more.

The following section will be looking further at "Permacrisis" (which has been briefly mentioned a couple of times in previous chapters) and this will be argued to both incorporate MAYA further as a strategy in response but also contribute to the *strength* of hauntological form and its relevance in the 2020s.

Permacrisis

When asked in 2016 what 'moment of history to [choose to] be born', without knowing or pre-selecting living conditions, Barack Obama responded that he would choose now (Higgs, 2019, p. 18). Increasingly there exists a fallacy that the past is better than today, a nostalgia for the better times. When looking back upon human history the past is strewn with horrific periods of time in which even the most well off could be struck down by something survivable today. However, despite the advances in living conditions and international relations, does not mean that the 2020s resemble a utopian existence.

As a concept "Permacrisis" (Collins English Dictionary, no date; Bushby, 2022) could apply to vast swathes of human history, but it has been since the global outbreak of Covid-19 and the lockdowns that accompanied it, as well as the cost-of-living crisis that emerged following the war in Ukraine, which have contributed to the coining of this term. This is not to state that the videogames medium is also in a state of permacrisis – although it has its problems as identified in this thesis – rather the wider state of permacrisis is strengthening the presence of hauntological form and perhaps fuelling an unintentional desire for it.

This thesis has purposefully not focused on the players themselves[137], as the focus is on videogames and its form, but at this point players cannot be overlooked. Players/consumers still want something that appears novel, but they also want something that is familiar. This is supported by the relevancy of MAYA and by extension hauntological form, along with greater access to past videogames. The end result is often something that on some level can count as a *new* product. These help to satisfy demand for such products, but we still need to account for *why* such demand exists. There is not a singular answer that applies across (human) generations, as there are different desires for older generations in which hauntological form might more directly embrace nostalgia. Whereas for younger generations with less past to call their own, the time before their existence will be able to provide an amount of novelty to them. Even if the videogame, mechanics, and/or aesthetics itself is not new or novel in a contemporary setting. Yet, for younger consumers there is a likelihood that these elements will also be familiar because progression within the medium has evolved from these points and therefore the legacy continues to some extent.

Permacrisis applies across generations, albeit differently. In response to not only the contemporary setting as well as pessimistic views about the future, Millennials and Gen X (specifically, but to a different extent older generations as well) will look back to the media from their childhood as containing memories and experiences of "better times". This can also extend further to media that is before their time but encountered during their childhood via relative nostalgia as well as received nostalgia[138]. Of note though is that these

[137] Only specifically referencing them where necessary.
[138] Relative nostalgia would refer to personal experience of something in a different time to its original release. Received nostalgia is an awareness of something that has been passed to someone without having personally experienced it.

generations are not immune to what is being identified as “Fantasy Nostalgia” which will be unpacked shortly.

The younger Generation Z who are comparatively closer to their childhood, given the impact of the pandemic and the associated lockdowns as well as sharing the pessimistic view of the future, are likely drawn to a time *before* their childhood. Although they might still be drawn to media they engaged with during that time, as it could have offered them relief from the world around them and therefore looked back upon fondly. Videogames provide an escape from permacrisis, they proved this during the pandemic and lockdowns with games such as *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo EPD, 2020a) becoming not only a massive commercial success for Nintendo (Handrahan, 2020) but also turning into a cultural phenomenon during this time (Farokhmanesh, 2020)[139]. Videogames as a whole provided escapism during this time and consoles both modern and retro became either difficult to obtain or more expensive than prior (Smith, 2020). Since the end of lockdowns player numbers have settled more in line with pre-pandemic trends (UKIE, 2023)[140] as consumers return to places of work or education as well as entertaining outside. But there will remain a desire for an alternative to the present and consumers might not want their videogames reminding them of their present time. Even videogames and other media set in post-apocalyptic settings are outside of their current reality and in the case of videogames give the player some agency over the situation, something they might feel missing from their own lives.

[139] *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* became home of a Twitch streamed chat show called *Animal Talking* that ended up with a range of Hollywood celebrities after its start with guests linked to videogames.
[140] As evidenced in the UK videogames market.

A way of helping to better understanding this is to consider this an acceptance of futurity (what is to come in the future, that can also linger over the present (Merriam-Webster, no date; Shelley, 2009)). This term can be understood as a "quality" of the future as well as a recognition of what could be to come. Permacrisis therefore can be understood as the realisation of that *now*. If the future is unlikely to provide a better alternative to the problems of today, then looking towards the past rather than the future becomes an appropriate strategy. This provides a motivation for interest in the past, but it is also an unexpected move for the studios, even if the expansion of hauntological form is argued in this thesis to be inevitable.

With the videogames medium not only reeling from the impacts of lockdown, the wider tech industry – of which it is intermingled with even if distinct – is also engaging in a series of layoffs and cuts (Lopatto, 2023). Already some of the big videogame publishers have started laying off staff in 2023 (Sinclair, 2023). Permacrisis was apparent to general consumers as the tech and videogames industries amassed record breaking profits from consumers stuck at home. Now a rebalancing is underway, but an industry shock is bringing this about in a quick deliberate way. Resulting in talent loss and stress induced upon those who remain.

Following this will not be the time for the mainstream medium to experiment as it will effectively be in crisis management until the situation settles. Except, by then hauntological form could be the norm for many studios. This thesis has been gradually arguing that hauntological form is an inevitability for the videogames medium, the rise of permacrisis is a contributing factor to this. What will be explored shortly is "fantasy nostalgia" which can be considered both a response to permacrisis and a means of strengthening the implementation of hauntological form.

Fantasy Nostalgia

Earlier in this chapter, the example of compact digital cameras was noted, this can be considered just one instance of the clockwork nature of nostalgia in action. Although, nostalgia representing cyclical cycles of around 20-30 years is not a new observation (Reynolds, 2012; Brown, 2018)[141] nor is the connection to the categorisation of vintage. For the past two decades the shadow of the 1980s has loomed over contemporary culture, especially videogames. In the context of videogames though this is not surprising given the significance of the decade for the medium, especially considering the phoenix-like revival in North America [which this thesis is using as its starting epoch]. The significance also supports the longevity of the decade and its continued relevancy within the medium compared to others. However, as the 1980s now reach beyond 40 years – longer than the 1970s revival had – the 1990s are starting to take its place. Though, it is worth considering what was it about the 1980s that has endured for so long. Is it something inherent with the decade, perhaps the technological advancements that occurred during this time and the subsequent media it helped to spawn? Or does this suggest something about hauntological form and past culture remaining relevant for longer?

The 1990s as a decade when considering the 2020s and permacrisis poses a potentially stark contrast. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War the decade is looked back upon casually as one of peace and prosperity. Yet, this is not the whole picture for the decade, as genocide and ethnic conflicts still occurred. In addition, multiple instances of

[141] Surprisingly it is not an easy "rule" to find definitive explanations for. Perhaps this "rule" is more of a perceived norm that has not been properly examined. This will be explored further later in this chapter.

financial instability also occurred during this time. Japan's economic bubble (which contributed to the rise of City Pop as mentioned in Chapter 4) burst in 1991 (Samuelson, 1992; McCurry, 2019) and later other Asian economies also faced substantial economic downturns. So too did many Western economies around this time.

The 90s, given the focus of this thesis and its later chapters, is also apt due to being the same time that hauntology was coined by Derrida (1994) in 1993[142]. With the impending arrival of the 21st century the 1990s were seen as being on the cusp of momentous change with the 20th century firmly shifting to the past. As Derrida brings attention to with hauntology, the past can still haunt the present and nor has the world reached the "end of history" as previously argued by Fukuyama (1992). However, the relationship with the past has changed, as identified by Fisher with the 'slow cancellation of the future' (Reynolds, 2020). If the future is slowing down, then as a result so too is the generation of new additions to the past. Which could help to explain why the continued resurgence of the 1980s lasted so long. If the 1990s are to become the new cultural touchstone of the past to influence the present, what separates it from previous decades as not being as "wholesome" as is portrayed? The examples mentioned previously are a large part, but it can be argued that most decades are looked back upon more fondly than the reality of the time[143]. This is where the dangers of nostalgia come in.

In Chapter 3 via the example of *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (Sapieha, 2015; Williams, 2015) it was highlighted how the game does not provide an idealised version of the past by including

[142] A reminder that *Specters of Marx* released in French a year before the English version.
[143] Somehow even World War 2 is looked back upon *fondly* with "Blitz spirit" being used as a means of encouragement in the UK during various different national problems. Mark Connelly (2004) examines the power that the Blitz has over the 'public memory of the war' in the UK as a 'central event' that is also 'vital to British national identity'.

depictions of children working in factories and addressing subjugation of other countries as part of the British empire. This appeared to be an intentional inclusion from the developers, but perhaps could have gone further, as within the UK the Victorian era is looked back upon fondly by some. Possibly due to lasting collective memory, but also perpetuated by elements of the press and media. The misremembering of this period from the past recalls the quote earlier in this chapter from Obama stating that 'now' is the best time to be alive, and that is certainly the case if anyone were to desire to go back and live in the Victorian era, as more likely than not they would be an "average person" which would be highly likely to be worse than their current situation.

With this more dramatic line of thinking, a less striking understanding can apply to that of the 1990s. The creation of a 'fantasy past' not only makes light of what took place but also as noted by Neil Ewen, 'a coping mechanism to deal with the problems of the present' (Hendy, 2023) which is in keeping with the identification of permacrisis made in this thesis. This idea of a fantasy past can be understood as creating a "fantasy nostalgia" in the present. Ewen has identified and Agnes Arnold-Forster expanded upon that the present has 'unsettled people' due to 'political polarisation and the pandemic' (Hendy, 2023) and as part of the coping mechanism response, a *version* of the past is created for consumption.

Fantasy nostalgia is not about providing a completely fictional depiction of the past, but rather a polished or sanitised version. This is common with other applications of nostalgia, but it is just as explicit here. Nor is it about transporting consumers to that time, rather it is about reappropriating media and aesthetics from that time and transplanting them into a contemporary setting. With the present time period perceived by younger consumers from Generation Z as unable to create its own "authentic" experiences or products, the recent

past is instead mined to provide these instead. Authenticity is therefore borrowed from the 90s to make up the absence that consumers are looking for.

What this missing authenticity is though is often another way of describing a sense of 'realness' (Farrell, 2023). This seems contradictory if contemporary reality is deemed *too much.* The issue is that it is a reality they do not like or perceive to have control over. Which brings up a key criterion of authenticity that was the crux of Chapter 3, that authenticity is different from accuracy. Authenticity provides elements of the past (of reality/fact) but not in totality. It can give the illusion of the past to provide a *version* of it, but it is not strictly the same. An authentic version does not need to claim to be the real thing but will adopt enough facts and/or elements to elevate itself with adopted credibility.

How though does this apply specifically to videogames? Like in the context of hauntology, the 90s were also an important decade for videogames. During this decade videogames, specifically console based, made the transition from 2D to 3D graphics [PC games had already started to make the transition]. Changing not only its aesthetics (shell) but also its mechanics (core). Therefore, videogame form as whole went through a significant revolution, on a scale that has not been seen since. Videogames have evolved afterwards, but there was a distinct identity to videogames of the 90s, whether 2D or 3D. A certain quality that is being looked to as resources for fantasy nostalgia. To provide a sense of authenticity to assuage contemporary consumers, whether due to a considered desire or to negate a lack of novelty in new titles.

By the 2010s with the lack of an overall distinct (unique) style specific to that decade (Fisher, 2014, l. 184) the 90s, despite being relatively close in time, allowed for the illusion of a permacrisis free time that provides a base for the fantasy that is being revelled in. In

addition, cultural memory contributes to the perception that Generation Z have of this decade as well as Millennials who will also mis-remember this time as well. Both generations' understanding of this *history* is informed on a subconscious level or cursory awareness by the knowledge that lingers upon and permeates not only their contemporary culture but also their perception of the past. This is what informs and drives a familiarity of something even if someone has never interacted with it personally before (similar to received nostalgia). The result is that enough "puzzle pieces" of the past are generated to help put together an *idea* of the past, but not a complete picture, and certainly not an accurate one. Yet, one that is close enough to give the right impression (without looking too closely). This is where fantasy nostalgia comes into its element. It can be thought of as the culmination of the other forms of nostalgia identified in this thesis. This is not to diminish or replace those, rather, it allows them clearer focus and application whilst fantasy nostalgia can consider the overall whole.

The Millennium and the End of the Revolution – A New Fantastical Era

The millennium, whilst not the end of creative novelty itself, saw the slowdown of novelty in creative media begin, notably impacting popular music with 70% of the US music market comprised of 'old songs' exemplified by the fact that the '200 most popular tracks….account for less than 5% of total [music] streams' (Gioia, 2022). The situation is additionally pervasive when it comes to music downloads which is dominated by 20th century artists (Gioia, 2022). Videogames have not reached this point yet, as *new* videogames are still being purchased/consumed, but as mentioned in the previous chapter, *novel* videogames are in

shorter supply; furthermore, there is an influx of remasters and remakes, with 2023 being a high point a quarter of the year in (Webster, 2023).

This in part has contributed to the prevalence of fantasy nostalgia, especially around the 1990s. Previously this chapter has identified how younger generations, in particular, are not immune to what is identified as permacrisis that is currently afflicting contemporary times. Fantasy nostalgia can help to mask and bypass problems from the past whilst also escaping those of the present. Recreating media from the recent past is a striking act of hauntological form given that the absence or loss from that time and its ability to haunt will be less powerful.

Generation Z have grown up with the pandemic during their formative years and the side effects of it will likely haunt them in some capacity for years to come. Thus their "relationship" with this time will be different to older generations [that does not mean the pandemic did not cause problems for older generations] and will likely be looking to a time that occurred before their childhood for "better times". Nostalgia can often be criticised for pointing towards supposed "better times" that were not better than the current time being looked back from, but in this instance, there is some merit here. Although, it is also worth noting that during the pandemic many players will have found comfort in videogames (such as *Animal Crossing*) as an escape, this could likely be looked back upon fondly in years to come. Generation Z in a desire to experience fantasy and escape from the present (and future) will be primed for the hauntological form that mainstream studios are currently working on due to their situation impacted by permacrisis, thus making for a "perfect storm" of content unintentionally perfect for an audience looking for this very content that calls back to the past whilst avoiding the future.

Consumers as a consequence of permacrisis have accepted their futurity and so too have developers. This recent change complements the existing inevitability of hauntological form rather than determining its existence. As of writing the 2020s and especially the first few months of 2023 have seen a wealth of remakes and remasters from the sixth and seventh console generations (Webster, 2023). It is demonstrative of the lack of novelty in the medium that out of the top 10 *new* releases during the first 3 months of 2023 the top two are updated versions of Nintendo GameCube games (the former a remaster and the latter a remake)(Cooper, 2023)[144]. Others include a remake from the seventh-generation and many of the others are retro-themed games. Only one game in the list can be said to be novel, with *Hi-Fi Rush* providing a blend of beat 'em up and rhythm game mechanics with a cel-shaded art style (Cooper, 2023; Sliva, 2023).

This also acts as a redemption for the GameCube, a console that during its lifespan was considered a commercial failure selling just under 22 million units worldwide (Nintendo, 2023). There will be some players today that grew up with the system and have nostalgia for it, in addition, its critically successful games have been espoused as part of the cultural memory that accompanies the medium. The latter point and a general unfamiliarity from the wider public make it an ideal source to be plundered for a contemporary audience.[145]

[144] Full list of the top 10 from first 3 months of 2023; Metroid Prime Remastered – 94, Resident Evil 4 – 92, 8-Bit Adventures 2 – 90, Path of the Midnight Sun – 89, Hi-Fi Rush – 89, Dead Space – 89, Dead Cells: Return to Castlevania – 88, Theatrhythm Final Bar Line – 86, Octopath Traveler 2 – 85, A Space for the Unbound – 84, The Legend of Heroes: Trails to Azure – 84, Hogwarts Legacy - 84

[145] More videogames that are either remasters or continuations of a series from the GameCube are coming later in 2023.

Nostalgia and the 20 Year Cycle: A New Source for Film

My examination of fantasy nostalgia has so far predominantly focused on the 90s, although the recent example surrounding the GameCube brings it into the new millennium, century, and decade of the 2000s, a decade that by the start of the seventh-generation 'we knew what video games were' as 'the game industry settled on a standard type of video game' a statement by Jesper Juul (2019, p. 10) that that was more prophetic than he would have imagined (nor would be happy about). This is crucial for a few reasons.

The 2000s, specifically the early 2000s, just falls within the window of what can be referred to as vintage (that being 20 years), lining up with the first couple years of the sixth-generation. This helps to explain why this era of videogames are just now starting to come "back into fashion" as nostalgic trends have a tendency of doing consistency around 20 years (Ewens, 2022; Friedman, 2022; Ulaby, 2022)[146]. Additionally, this also supports the inevitability of elements from the past returning, supporting my argument that it is not predominantly a deliberate or conscious effort from studios or overwhelming direct requests from players. Although I do note the caveat that there will still be times where there *are* deliberate efforts by developers to court past elements and from players requesting them. The key point to highlight is that the existence of an unconscious, non-deliberate, approach to the use of past elements is crucial in distinguishing what is happening to the videogames medium. This process was going happen, and it was a matter of when, not if. The why and how are multifaceted, and this thesis is identifying those different reasons.

[146] Outside of academia there is not an abundance of material on the 20-year nostalgia cycle. Interestingly these sources argue that the 20-year cycle is coming to an end, that styles are repeating quicker and perhaps more frequently. I would argue that the rise of relative nostalgia combined with greater access to the past via online means is contributing to this shift.

Currently, this section is focusing on a time period that is relatively near, but with a couple of exceptions the points made here apply to the past console generations. Fantasy nostalgia is not specific to just the 1990s, it can apply to any decade. Although its execution, as with cultural memory, lends itself more effectively to that within living memory. Whilst I have shifted from identifying fantasy nostalgia within the 1990s to the arrival of a resurgent 2000s, this further demonstrates how the contemporary setting of the 2020s (and by extension the 2010s) do not have a distinct or wholly unique form or style. Rather one that is remediated and remixed thus enabling continued *newness* whilst lacking novelty.

A non-videogame example, that also acted as the initial spark of inspiration for this thesis as I began to unpack the presence of nostalgia in the videogame's medium was the arrival of the *Star Wars* "Sequel Trilogy"[147]. Director J. J. Abrams deliberately used older technologies such as puppetry and film stock (Morris, 2015; Burton, 2016) as well as (working with others) to provide a story that lifted heavily from the Original Trilogy for plot points, characters, and iconography (Cotter, 2015; Child, 2023). This was also used to market the "sequels" (especially the first entry *The Force Awakens* (Abrams, 2015)) to an audience that grew up with the Original Trilogy whilst also benefiting from those films' contribution to cultural memory. The resulting style, particularly in *TFA***,** is a remix of what came before with little originality of its own. However, given the intentionality behind this, the *lack* of originality is itself a deliberate style, even if the result is not novel.

This further demonstrates the impact and interaction with futurity as there is a shortage of new ideas combined with a lack of desire compounded by the acceptance of the situation encapsulated by futurity and permacrisis. Though, there is also access to the wealth of past

[147] I also introduced this in Chapter 2.

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 in a contradiction of their own mediums as well as that of capitalism. Instead of providing consumers with "new" (or rather *novel*) products to consume, the past is being mined to extract the last penny (Newman, 2009) to instead provide media products that appear new or different enough to what was previously available. Therefore, working to delay capitalisms end by helping to sustain its existence with the illusion of "new" products to sell to and appease consumers.

The film industry broadly[148] (Shaw, 2022) has been struggling for the past decade due to competition from other mediums, the rise of streaming, and most recently the dire impact of cinema closures during the multiple lockdowns. There might be a sign that the situation is changing, this is not to state a definitive reversal of the situation, but a possible means of bringing some security back to the industry, especially the cinema venues which are considered a significant part of the medium and how it is consumed (enjoyed).

The recent "hit" film *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* – despite being dismissed by critics – has quickly become a commercial success with audience satisfaction scores much higher (Metacritic, no date d)[149]. Despite the disparity in response between critics and audiences', objectively the *Mario Movie* as a piece of cinema is not novel. It is a 90-minute family friendly computer animated film with a familiar plot that sees its characters defeat the source of evil and make their way home; and save a princess. This in-of-itself also demonstrates how narratives are still haunted by the archetypes of the past, unable to

[148] The main exception being Marvel films. Although this is starting to even out (Whitten, 2023).
[149] Metascore of 46 and User score of 8.7 (as of 24/04/23).

escape and explore new and novel narratives (Propp, 1968; Sweeting. James, 2017). The film can also be critiqued for acting as an advert for Nintendo and its *Mario* franchise. A means for Nintendo to generate attention for past releases before it is ready to announce the next title[150]. This provides Nintendo with an additional avenue for taking advantage of its IP (which has seen a number of different *Mario* titles increase their sales (Dring, 2023b)[not including digital sales]), in addition to re-releasing/remastering/remaking past titles, whilst it has a shortage of new releases.

As for the *Mario Movie* itself, it is a competent piece of media – the critical consensus, despite not being overly positive, was not overly negative either – treated its source material with reverence and appealed to a multi-generational audience; from families to videogame players who are fond of the franchise and anywhere in-between. This approach, whilst not risky, could have contributed to its commercial success not only as an animated film but film in general (Malhotra, 2023; Wen, 2023). It could therefore appear to the industry to be an example of a form or approach that could help keep cinemas in business after struggling post-lockdowns. It might also give a message that could be interpreted by Hollywood that to sustain itself, *safe bets* are needed and a source for these could now come from videogames with the medium (and by extension TV) working out how to effectively utilise videogame content within the film medium[151].

The aforementioned middling response from critics could be a wariness of what such films could represent for the medium as a whole. Perhaps also fearing another Marvel-type scenario influencing the form that the films would take. This could also lead to a reversal of

[150] Two months after the film's release a brand new 2D *Mario* game was announced during a Nintendo Direct, titled *Super Mario Bros. Wonder* (Wales, 2023).
[151] There are a multitude of past attempts to bring videogames to the "big screen" that have either failed critically, commercially, or (usually) both (Crucchiola, 2022).

the oedipal relationship that exists between videogames and film. With the transition to film looking towards videogames and not the other way round as have previously been the case, not only in terms of money made (Malhotra, 2023; McClintock, 2023) but also in cultural relevance (Cruz, 2023).

Remediation (and Pastiche)

This thesis throughout has referred to remediation (coined by Richard Grusin (Bolter and Grusin, 2000, p. viii)), but has not gone into detail about the term. Nor for another term that is beneficial in a similar context, that being pastiche. Whilst remediation have been mentioned a dozen times in this thesis, it is helpful to clarify at this stage how they have aided my understanding of contemporary media form and the way it has been informed by its relationship with the past.

Bolter and Grusin (2000, p. 46) provide a detailed exploration of their own term in the eponymous book. One part that stood out to me was the distinction of how the new 'seeks to remain faithful to the older mediums character', giving the example of digital encyclopaedias from the 1990s; such as the *Microsoft Encarta* (Microsoft, 1995) series. These sought to improve upon the original printed versions of text and images by adding sound and video. Whilst there is a noticeable difference (whether this is an *improvement* is subjective) there remains a clear recognisable form across the versions (2000, p. 46).

This could be seen as a revolution for such an object, transcending into a digital form to provide a potentially more immersive experience whilst retaining the informative quality that is its objective. It also 'emphasi[ses] the difference rather than erase it' (Bolter and Grusin, 2000, p. 46) to highlight the *newness* of the product. Yet, in this instance, it was not

to last as it regressed into a simpler digital form. Moving away from the digital environments to be navigated, as well as mostly dropping video and audio, with text and static images once again becoming the focus. This was likely in part a response to the shift of digital encyclopaedias from CD-based to online (which is what happened to the *Encarta* series before it was discontinued) in which size, or rather resulting speed, is a premium which requires forgoing large video, audio, and unnecessary digitally created assets.

What this means for videogames is that *new* or better products can emerge, but likely after a while will settle and a *lesser* form will emerge, one that provides a middle-ground that shares elements of its past form. This shares a similar approach to that found with MAYA mentioned earlier. Whereas MAYA deliberately restrains design so as not to alienate consumers, a potential consequence of remediation is that media form that does attempt something novel (with something from the past), will eventually (inevitably) settle, expelling excess to provide a stable and perhaps more deliberate form. This can be interpreted and expressed in different ways and examples. One such instance comes again from *The Legend of Zelda* which often introduces a new concept (or gimmick) only for it to be removed or lessened in the following entry. For example, *Skyward Sword* (Nintendo EAD, 2011) developed for Nintendo's motion control focused Wii heavily revolved around motion controls for the sword and other items. Whereas *Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo EPD, 2017)(via the help of modifications made to the HD remasters of *The Wind Waker* (Nintendo EAD, 2002) and *Twilight Princess* (Nintendo EAD, 2006) on the Wii U[152]) retains some motion

[152] *Wind Waker HD* released in 2013 and *Twilight Princess HD* in 2016.

controls but are used to complement gameplay rather than be at the core and are entirely optional[153].

Remediation can also be considered an exercise in dealing with absence and loss. A means of addressing the haunting upon a medium. The videogames medium remains attached to dedicated physical hardware[154]. Videogame consoles do not last forever, and despite not being afflicted by planned obsolescence as much as other technologies[155], there remains a desire from the manufactures for consumers to move to the latest systems (Guins, 2014, p. 5). Previously the transition from console generations meant that many videogames for those older systems remained "stuck" due to being incompatible with newer hardware[156]. This situation has thankfully begun to shift in recent years, but there are still generations of videogames that unless ported, remastered, or remade will remain stuck on their respective consoles. This results in inaccessibility for consumers who do not possess these videogames but are aware of their existence via cultural memory. For those who might still have the videogame, there can still be an issue of accessibility, as they might not have direct access to the necessary hardware (or it no longer functions). There are debates about the accuracy of experience playing on the original systems (Guins, 2014, p. 34)[157] but as explored earlier in this thesis an authentic approach can provide a meaningful compromise. In this instance, providing access to past videogames via ports/remasters/remakes can help to *heal* the sense of loss and minimise the absence from the present by providing an authentic experience of

[153] The remaster of *Skyward Sword* for the Nintendo Switch made the once compulsory motion controls optional as well by adding a traditional control input method.
[154] Despite the continued relevance of PC, which this thesis is not focusing on.
[155] Every year there is a new Apple iPhone and Samsung Galaxy phone for example. Even if they do not stop working after one year, the significance is that they have been *replaced*.
[156] Nintendo's handheld systems for the most part has been an exception to this.
[157] Guins quotes Henry Lowood who asks, 'Is it necessary to play *The Legend of Zelda* on the original Nintendo Entertainment System, with the original Nintendo controller and a contemporary television set, in order to gain a historically valid experience of the game?'

those videogames [an accurate experience is near impossible without original hardware (including controllers)].

Remediation and pastiche with the help of Jameson's (1991, p. 19) 'nostalgia mode' also bring this thesis back to *Star Wars*. Rather than provide a parody, as its references were in the past (or 'extinct' as Jameson describes), *Star Wars* in its Original Trilogy is stated to have satisfied 'a deep longing' for past Saturday afternoon style serials (Ebert, 1999). Ones which younger audiences can enjoy for their own merit whilst 'the adult public is able to gratify a deeper and more properly nostalgic desire to return to that older period and to live its strange old aesthetic artefacts through once again' (Fisher, 2014, p. 13)[158]. The previously mentioned sequels have both remediated past film technology but also provide a pastiche of its own franchise. Serving a similar purpose of entertaining a dual audience except now for the adult audience the referents are self-referential.

The changing circumstances for the film medium also could be seen to present an alternative direction of remediation to what has previously taken place. The previous section noted that film is looking at videogames for inspiration, a reversal of the oedipal relationship. This also suggests a swapping of remediation engagement. Robin Sloan (2015) notes that Bolter and Grusin state that videogames remediate film and TV, providing 'nostalgic references' from 'media of the past'. Instead of film and TV providing those 'nostalgic references' for videogames, it is now moving the other way around. The *John Wick* films have a dynamism reminiscent of a videogame, but it was *Chapter 4* (Stahelski, 2023) that took this further with the director, Chad Stahelski, taking direct inspiration from the videogame *The Hong Kong Massacre* (Vreski, 2019) (not *Hotline Miami* as had been

[158] Quoting Fredric Jameson's 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', p8.

commonly, but wrongly, assumed) (Razak, 2023). During the final third of the film there is an extended sequence which has a top-down view giving the viewer a god-like perspective of the action taking place. With Keanu Reeves' titular John Wick dealing out carnage reminiscent of a player of a videogame fighting off swathes of enemies. In an interview Stahelski went on to express his admiration for what videogames can do, adding that 'We all steal from each other, we're all seeing how crazy the other one's gonna get' (Razak, 2023). *The Hong Kong Massacre* itself has been inspired by films (Nguyen, 2020) (so too was *Hotline Miami*) resulting in remediation coming full circle. The referent becoming the reference.

The examples from film are emblematic of a wider problem afflicting the videogames medium. Because of the mediums difficulty in accessing its own past for much of its existence, remastering or remaking videogames has had extra necessity compared to that of film. Whilst the film medium is not immune to the concept of a remake, these typically are created as a reboot instead of a shot-for-shot recreation. Mark Brown (2023) identifies the peculiar (in the context of film) instance of the 1998 version of *Psycho* (Van Sant, 1998). Despite the contemporary setting and a transition from black & white to colour, it remains – for the most part – a shot-for-shot recreation of Alfred Hitchcock's (1960) version. Upon release the 1998 version directed by Gus Van Sant was widely criticised, the main criticism was the similarity to the previous version. Videogame remakes meanwhile follow this approach more frequently, with some videogames criticised for the opposite reason as the 1998 *Psycho*, for not being *close enough* to the original. Subsequent instances of the same film are more likely to take the form of a reboot, maintaining characters and settings but with a different style (or a requel (Lizardi, 2017) as identified in Chapter 2), whereas with videogames either option is likely.

In recent years however an interesting approach has been taken by Capcom specifically for its *Resident Evil* remakes. I have mentioned repeatedly in this thesis the significance of the medium having greater access to the past and how this has contributed to hauntological form. In this instance, there is a tacit awareness by Capcom of the elements that comprise hauntological form; even though they will be unaware of the term itself. This is because during the eighth-generation, Capcom remastered entries from the sixth and seventh-generations, resulting in a large number of entries subsequently available on current ninth-generation consoles. However, there were notable exceptions for *Resident Evil 2* and *Resident Evil 3* which were eventually remade. What is of note – but is more significant with the *Resident Evil 4* remake (Capcom, 2023) – is that these are not like-for-like remakes. These remakes make a deliberate decision to modernise both the core and shell of these videogames whilst remaining authentic to the scenario of the original. Yet, it is with the remake of *RE4* that the rationale has adjusted due to easy access to the remaster (of *RE4*) and the number of players that have played some version of it[159].

Expanding upon the approach of the two previous remakes of providing a contemporary experience, *RE4* sees various gameplay adjustments including the removal of quick time events (QTEs); which is a mechanic that is rarely used in contemporary releases[160]. Capcom wanted to provide an experience that will still deliver some surprises to the returning players without impacting the overall experience for new players. This approach benefits both sides of the player base, as new players are not encumbered by older (perhaps outdated) mechanics and returning players can enjoy a familiar but different experience. Which is

[159] Whether that be the original GameCube version, PS2 port, Wii port, PC port, or the HD remaster that is available for PC and consoles.
[160] The main exception being some of Sony's published videogames.

reminiscent of the logic behind the MAYA principle, hence its validity in the context of hauntological form for videogames going forwards.

An earlier example can also be found from another Japanese publisher, in this instance Square Enix. When working on the remakes for the first two *Star Ocean* games, the producer Yoshinori Yamagishi said that he 'wants the remakes to feel as though they're completely new games' (Niizumi, 2007). This further suggests that there could be a difference in approach/ideology between how Japanese videogame companies treat remakes compared to those in the West. As introduced in Chapter 5 there is a difference between preservation of decayed relics from the past in the West to recreations of past objects in Japan.

The approach by Capcom (and Square Enix[161][162]) has yet to become the standard with some companies (notably Western) having removed previous versions from digital storefronts upon the release of a new remaster or remake. For example, Rockstar Games upon the release of *Grand Theft Auto: The Trilogy – The Definitive Edition* (Grove Street Games, 2021) the previous versions of the individual videogames (*III*, *Vice City*, and *San Andreas*) were delisted from digital storefront Steam and PlayStation Network (Delisted Games, 2021). This example is of particular note as it straddles the line between remaster and remake due to mechanic changes and rebuilding the videogame in a different engine, but still focuses on providing an experience very similar to the original.

With the continued rise of digital distribution (which is becoming the norm), there needs to be consideration by videogame companies on how they approach access to videogames

[161] Can also be seen with the upcoming remake of *Star Ocean: The Second Story* (mentioned in a previous footnote) and the remakes of *Final Fantasy VII* which provide more of a reimagining of the original game. Remasters of *FF7* are still available on multiple digital storefronts.

[162] Square Enix has also found success with its other HD-2D remasters. With shareholders requesting them as well (Middler, 2023). In part due to the longer gaps between main releases, therefore the remasters can provide stop gaps between these releases whilst also sustaining and generating interest.

from recent console generations that are currently still accessible via digital storefronts on PlayStation and Xbox. Do they view it as a means of preservation and/or a way to help market an existing franchise and future releases? Or is it a transient place in which videogames exist before being replaced by "better" versions? Capcom currently appears to be taking the former approach. Instead of removing past versions, which can create a sense of haunting loss, by continuing to provide access to past versions of its videogames can result in continued influence upon the franchise. This can also extend beyond Capcom's own videogames and impact contemporary videogames upon the wider medium as a source of inspiration/reference. The *Resident Evil* franchise has been experiencing considerable success (as has the company as a whole (Robinson, 2023a)[163]) with both new mainline entries (and DLC) and the previously mentioned remakes releasing at a steady pace over the past decade. Capcom is using hauntological form in a way that I would recommend all mainstream videogames companies should currently consider (where applicable). That being using past elements (resulting in a hauntological form) to help shorten development time on titles that can fill the gaps between development of *new* and possibly *novel* titles, and also use it to generate new interest or strengthen familiarity with existing franchises (whilst also tapping into cultural memory) as seen with Capcom's staple of four to five core franchises[164].

This is primarily just one instance from one Japanese videogame company but shows recognition as well as an acceptance of what the past can bring to contemporary form. Despite being an approach I recommend to videogame companies, that does not mean that

[163] *RE4* in its first week sold 3.75 million units (Robinson, 2023a).
[164] *Resident Evil, Monster Hunter, Street Fighter, Devil May Cry* [itself a spin-off from *Resident Evil*] and *Mega Man*.

it is the direction that must be followed long term, rather instead short-to-medium term. In the next section I will explore this further by unpacking the current situation that facilitates active recognition and use of hauntological form into the near future.

Pandemic and Hauntological Form

I have been arguing that Hauntological Form was an inevitability for the medium. It was a matter of when not if that hauntological form became present. The pandemic has also been briefly discussed but the extent to which it has exacerbated the rise of hauntological form has not yet been looked at properly. The pandemic is one contributing factor of permacrisis, but the other ongoing factors could be argued to have been influenced by it in some way. In the context of the videogames medium the disruption to development caused not only by the direct impacts of the virus itself but also crucially the two to three years of lockdowns that took place around the world[165].

The sudden shift to working from home was not a smooth transition for many mainstream studios. Despite the behemoths of the medium being based in multiple countries around the world, the transition to having staff working outside of the office added to the complexity collaborating between large numbers of individuals. In addition, access to necessary hardware and difficulties with securely accessing latest videogame builds during development, exacerbated by varying speeds found with home internet access, provided further challenges[166]. Japan in particular has been a country that struggled with the shift to working at home due to its more rigid development structure (Waber and Munyikwa, 2021),

[165] This thesis is not addressing the specifics of the lockdowns or national policies associated with them. I am only addressing the impact that these had on mainstream videogame development.
[166] For indie developers this shift was either manageable or had already begun.

partly mirroring the difficulties that the Japanese medium faced during the transition to HD with the seventh-generation (Henderson, 2011; Byford, 2014), as stated in Chapter 2.

The pandemic's continued interference happened at an un-opportune time for the videogames medium as it was preparing for the launch of the ninth-generation consoles (PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series S and X) along with it videogames that were targeting to launch around this time such as *Halo Infinite* (Waber and Munyikwa, 2021; Yin-Poole, 2021); among other titles. The consoles themselves, despite launching in time for the Christmas release window, were constrained by stock availability (Waber and Munyikwa, 2021; Fahey, 2023) due to the global chip shortage and logistical complications that resulted from the lockdowns. Especially in China where at the time these consoles were primarily being manufactured.

The shortage of consoles (as well as graphics cards) had an impact upon the videogames that were released, in terms of *what* was released and aspects of the *content/form* of the videogames. The result is that the first couple of years into the ninth-generation was more of an extension of the eighth than something different (and that is for those fortunate enough to access the improved hardware). I have argued that the medium has shifted to going through evolutionary changes rather than revolutionary changes, but for the ninth-generation the evolutionary changes have not had the opportunity to get underway. Instead, much of the early ninth-generation has concentrated on "polishing" videogames from the eighth-generation (and prior in the case of the Xbox Series S and X[167]) which has further

[167] A range of videogames available on previous Xbox consoles were optimised enabling better framerates and/or resolution.

resulted in the mediums recent past staying on longer and haunting the current generation with better versions of the past.

This also reflects Lisa Blackman's (2019, pp. 53–54) interpretation of Fisher's view on innovation that it cannot be present 'if the potential hauntology is constrained or erased'. Taking this view further, if we consider innovation as having two settings, the first and lesser as evolution and the second and more substantial as revolution. Using the first setting of innovation as evolution, we can consider hauntology to provide intransitive change/development (Rist, 2002, p. 73). In which the medium is impacted by internal forces to facilitate its change; for videogames this would be via its own past. Given the nature of these influences, the impact is largely sustaining with enough overarching evolutional change over time. Whereas transitive change could be argued to have helped contribute to the second setting of innovation as revolutionary changes upon the medium previously experienced prior to the 2010s. Transitive change requires an outside force, I argue – echoing Yves Guillemot's earlier comments from Chapter 4 – that new console generations, and specifically more frequent ones (like the previous 4–5-year average), used to provide that external force. External in that it is the hardware impacting on the software. Guillemot said that new console generations 'helps creativity' (Morris, 2012) because it provides opportunities for risk. I do not disagree with this statement, but I also view new console generations as an opportunity for providing a shock to the medium that previously could force change. Arriving at the time when complacency starts to settle in. However, longer console generations have contributed to complacency as well as exhaustion. Furthermore, the slow introduction of the ninth-generation and the reliance on the previous generation has further minimised the transitive forces that would traditionally be expected from a new console generation.

It is only as of writing – two and a half years in – that the ninth-generation seems to be attempting to provide evolutionary changes, a return to the trajectory seen in the previous generation. However, it is unlikely that the evolution that will take place will be at a rapid pace to compensate for lost time during the pandemic. Instead, it will be an attempt of rebalancing to overcome the backlogs that have already contributed to delays. This leaves the medium in a position that is still subject to vulnerability. The advantage that the videogames medium has over other technological industries is that it did not quickly pivot its strategies and resources assuming there would be a "new norm" of a greater proportion of people working remotely[168]. Ironically, the inability for console hardware to meet demand during the lockdowns has prevented videogame companies from overestimating the scale of the market once consumers physically returned to work/education. Parts of the medium have still seen layoffs (as mentioned earlier in this chapter) and some of those are linked to their parent companies being part of the technology industries struggling most with the post-pandemic transition; Microsoft being one such example with staff from Bethesda and Xbox affected by layoffs (Robinson, 2023b).

As a medium, mainstream videogames inability to be agile has inadvertently prevented it from experiencing the same difficulties now faced by the TV medium. A significant pivot by US studios and networks towards dedicated streaming services that prioritise their own content has resulted in a market that has become saturated and convoluted. With competition between the studios/networks there is an abundance of content (supply), but viewers are unable to watch it all (demand) due to their finite available time (physically returning to work/education) as well as affording to subscribe to the multitude of different

[168] The number of people working remotely since the lockdowns ended is higher than pre-2020 but has not been the great shift that the tech firms (wrongly) anticipated.

services[169]. This is now resulting in platform owners removing their own content from their services. In one instance, the film *Crater* was 'deleted' from Disney+ less than two months after it was released (Edwards, 2023). The impacts of this are multifaceted, at first this can be considered as going in the opposite direction to videogames, which is increasing its access to as much content as possible and a reversing of direction for the TV and film mediums with the rise of streaming. The second is that this reintroduces the sense of loss to TV and film. The creator of *Willow* – a series on Disney+ that has also been removed – has said that they are 'kinda into it', explaining that they 'grew up at a time when movies were periodically re-released and not available to own, and it made them…more special' (Edwards, 2023). This then reenables media content like this to go on and haunt a future audience because of its disappearance. It also sees the mediums experience a reversion in its structure, where nothing lasts forever on streaming platforms and the past can be easily accessed.

This identification is relevant in the context of comparing to one of the innovations (or certainly attempts at doing something different) in the medium in the past five years and that is Xbox Game Pass (even if it is compared to the earlier efforts of film and TV streaming). Exacerbated by the "efficiency measures" taken by Microsoft, the Xbox division faces even more pressure for its Game Pass initiative to succeed. For the past couple of years this appeared to be paying off but along with the difficulties seen by TV[170] streaming services Game Pass momentum has slowed and Xbox's "all in" approach is coming under increased scrutiny as a viable long-term approach (Warren, 2022). Xbox Game Pass could be argued to

[169] Also subscription services were one of the expenses cut when people are trying to save money due to the cost of living crisis (BBC News, 2022; Sweney, 2023).
[170] These also stream films but often the attraction are new "prestige" shows.

represent a rare example of significant risk, an attempt to do something *different* in how consumers engage with and consume the medium. Yet, if it fails, it could be interpreted as showing that the medium is incapable of breaking the status quo and providing noticeable change; therefore, deterring others who would consequently be unwilling to attempt to change the medium for at least another generation. Meanwhile, Sony – who were criticised for being too cautious – with their competitor of updated additional versions of PlayStation Plus (Extra and Premium)[171] took a more measured approach. Actions such as not adding first-party titles to the service when they release was purposely done as they 'think the knock-on effect on the quality of the games that we make would not be something that gamers want' (Dring, 2022). In addition 'putting games in a bit later in the life cycle has meant that we can reach more customers 12, 18, 24 months after they have released', as stated by Nick Maguire PlayStation vice president and global head of subscriptions (Dring, 2023a). Even though Sony were criticised for not adding enough value to the service (Fahey, 2022). This approach, helps to position PS Plus as complementary to Sony's gaming efforts rather than the core, as is the case with Microsoft.[172][173]

At the moment the videogame medium is trying to understand what direction it is to go in. This is particularly evident surrounding console hardware and the manufacture ecosystems that exist around them. It would be excessive to refer to it as a crisis, but it is contributing to

[171] These offer a game "catalogue" similar to Xbox Game Pass.

[172] The increasing connection between videogames and streaming will change the relationship in how videogames are consumed and "owned". Outside of the console space Nvidia's GeForce Now subscription streams users' "own" games, rather than providing a catalogue to choose from. Currently Sony's refined streaming option is now limited to its "Premium" option (PlayStation, n.d.) which offers a "curated" selection of older titles to play. Although, despite Sony's reluctance to offer its latest titles on its subscription service (which also can't be streamed unlike with Xbox Game Pass) it might be open to the possibility of enabling streaming of videogames its users already "own" digitally but on other devices (such as PC and mobile). This could be part of an existing or new tier of its PlayStation Plus online subscription service, building upon what was originally a means of paying for online multiplayer access and additional features.

[173] As of writing Sony has started to test streaming PS5 games from the cloud for use on a players console (Warren, 2023).

uncertainty as to how the medium will proceed. Will there be mid-generation refreshes as seen in the eighth-generation with the PS4 Pro and Xbox One X? This was a means of extending the console generation in a way that both facilitated some technical evolution in the medium but also provided a stopgap as a new generation was not ready, both from a hardware and software level. With the ninth-generation the videogames being released are only just starting to take advantage of the newer consoles without also needing to be compatible with the older, now less powerful, hardware of the previous generation. Yet, with the confusion from platform holders as to what direction the medium will go in for consumers to consume content, hauntological form will take hold to steady the ship to prevent a potential crash. Consoles will still need to be sold to both new and existing consumers, therefore a return to the revisions seen during the seventh-generation[174] could be a means of energising console sales as well as efficiency savings with manufacturing[175]. Meanwhile the videogames themselves continue to look towards the past for ideas to sustain development of new, albeit non-novel, videogames for the duration of the ninth-generation. The result of this could be a *lost generation*. Commercially still successful *enough* but, as a whole, distinguishable by its *lack* of change and its similarities to what came before it. A generation haunted by the mediums past.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the culmination of the haunted medium of videogames and ultimately what has resulted in a lost generation. As argued throughout the second half of

[174] Both PS3 and Xbox 360 received at least two "slim" revisions.
[175] The smaller revisions are more efficient to produce and if smaller and lighter will be cheaper to transport.

this thesis, hauntological form is a means of identifying what is happening to the mainstream videogames medium. What this chapter has explained is how other concepts contribute to the understanding of hauntological form and its application to the videogames medium. Yet, it is not just concepts that helps us to understand how the form has changed, but also how events over the past few years have further contributed to why and how the past are used the way they are as a means of dealing with the future, or rather the perceived lack of one.

Continued greater access to the past has been a significant shift for the medium. This has changed the context and relationship with nostalgia. Nostalgia via a pastiche or even a copy is less necessary when a *version* of media or original media from the past is quite easily accessible. Rather, remediation is the crux here, because instead something *different* can be done with the past. Possibly something *new*, but the result is in unlikely to be *novel* due to the ties anchoring it to the past. Thus, going beyond nostalgia, which deals in loss, whereas hauntological form is the past getting another life (a 1up if you will). Rather than an absence of the past haunting the present, the past itself is actively haunting the present instead.

This combines with the application of the MAYA Principle, particularly my alternative version of most *acceptable* yet *advanced* (instead of most advanced yet acceptable). With true advancement in the medium increasingly difficult to achieve – and very risky – hauntological form provides acceptable (meaning familiar) elements to sustain continued development of videogame *products*, meanwhile some effort can still be applied towards advancing the medium forward, albeit subtle with the effects becoming noticeable over an extended period of time (such as a console generation).

The pandemic has exacerbated the rise of hauntological form in the videogame medium, as it has disrupted development and led to a slower evolution of the medium. Hauntological form is becoming a default for AAA mainstream development, as studios reappropriate the past to sustain development of new but non-novel games. Capcom's approach of providing both new interpretations of their videogames via remakes as well as access to past versions (remasters) of its games can result in continued influence upon its franchises and impact contemporary videogames across the wider medium. The advantage that the videogame medium has over other technological industries is that it did not quickly pivot its strategies and resources following what was assumed to be the “new norm” with a greater proportion of people remaining at home after the lockdowns.

Also potentially exacerbated by permacrisis is the rise of fantasy nostalgia. The use of elements of the past to provide an *idea* of what came before, but not an accurate one, enough to give an appearance and perhaps improve upon it; or at least bring it more in-line with contemporary standards. The presence of fantasy nostalgia can escape the problems of the present whilst also masking and bypassing less desirable elements (by contemporary standards) of the past. Fantasy nostalgia is also incorporating aspects of the recent past (previous and past decade) into contemporary products. This is a curious act of hauntological form, as it is too recent for a sense of loss associated with nostalgia to be noticeably present, nor would the ability and impact to haunt be as powerful.

The pandemic has had a significant impact on mainstream development, contributing to an already strained and over encumbered development pipeline. With videogame developers already struggling to create new IP, a reliance on established franchises makes sense. This can be seen not just via the increase in remasters and how remakes are being handled, but

also the continued expansion of videogame franchises. Hauntological form will become the default for AAA mainstream development. This part of the medium is largely unable to imagine, and crucially incapable of creating, different futures in which the medium could venture. Reappropriating the past becomes not only a viable strategy but also likely the main one many studios can use. For they do not have the flexibility/agility to attempt something truly different or novel.

To bring this final chapter to a close, before concluding the entire thesis, the mainstream videogames medium is argued to be a haunted one. The thesis has worked towards understanding what the "problem" is with mainstream videogames, having identified the significant presence of nostalgia but wanting to understand why this is the case. As stated at different points in this thesis, I wanted to go beyond identifying the presence of nostalgia, and this is because contemporary videogame form is not just nostalgic. Videogame form has slowed down, due to internal aspects of the medium and also influenced by wider economic and cultural aspects. The later has been seen in other mediums, notably that of music – as explored in previous chapters – and this chapter has sought to highlight the combination of internal and external influences that have contributed to a form that is haunted by the past, rather than just exploiting nostalgia. However, this has also resulted in a medium that is afflicted by past shock, an aftereffect of hauntological form, in which some consumers will be shocked at how little change over a period of time has taken place. Yet this could be the result of MAYA and its approach to help sustain the medium and provide just enough momentum to keep the medium going. It is perhaps in my roles as a researcher, lecturer, and critic that I have been experiencing past shock which in turn has influenced and motivated my exploration in this thesis.

This chapter has expanded on the previous chapter and identified that the inevitable rise of hauntological form has become intrinsic, resulting in a console generation that will not have a unique style of its own, rather an amalgamation of past styles culminating in a hauntological form and a lost generation.

Conclusion

What This Thesis Has Covered

During the years I have spent researching and writing this thesis the central concern for me was understanding what is happening to videogame form and how I can explain it. Videogame form was not advancing at the pace it was previously. I had previously assumed this was a possible side effect of the elongated seventh-generation, but when videogame form continued at a similar slower pace and resembled the form present at the end of the seventh despite being a couple of years into the eighth-generation I realised that there was something more to what was taking place. More exploration was needed, and importantly the problem that I was trying to solve with my thesis was gaining some clarity.

I soon found inspiration from my concerns about the direction that the new *Star Wars* trilogy was going in and nostalgia became the focus for helping me to begin to unpack the problem with contemporary videogames. The increasing presence of nostalgia is not an existential crisis for the videogames medium, even if it is contradictory to its long-standing focus on high technology. Videogames have long looked towards the older medium of film for inspiration via an almost oedipal relationship wanting to one day supersede it.

The identification of nostalgia in videogames by itself is not new and this thesis has not claimed to make such a statement. However, what I was working to achieve with this thesis was understanding to what extent nostalgia was involved in altering the form of videogames and why. This by itself was not enough, as whilst it is clear that nostalgia is increasingly present across the medium (both mainstream and indie), merely identifying it is not enough. I was also struck with an uncertainty with my own perception of the significance of nostalgia and videogames. Yes, nostalgia is present in contemporary videogame form, but *what of it*.

Is this actually a problem? Might it even be a good thing? Regardless of what I might think, there is demand for nostalgic products, and videogames are no different. This uncertainty was compounded by a concern that I might fall into the trap of simply identifying different instances of nostalgia and then trying to argue the significance of this. However, I did not consider this to be enough and nor did it answer my question as to *why* or to a lesser extent *how* nostalgia was impacting contemporary form. Something was still missing.

Whilst trying to determine what was missing, I made a diversion into Historical Game Studies (in Chapter 3) to see whether there was something about the use of the (real) past by videogames that could provide a clue to my problem. Ultimately yes, as human generations are looking to the past for alternatives to the present, therefore, as a cultural product it is not surprising for videogames to similarly follow. The additional benefit of Chapter 3 was that it provided me with an insight into how I distinguish between accuracy and authenticity. Even though the primary benefit was of understanding how history can be used differently in videogames, it was also applicable later in my research for identifying how contemporary videogames can use the mediums past in different ways to support the form.

Following from this I came across hauntology once more by chance, having previously discounted it. This was following the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic (but lockdowns were still occurring). The pandemic did not intentionally or directly influence my shift towards hauntology, but the idea of wanting to look back to the past – the way things used to be – was an understandably appealing notion. The idea of being haunted by a *better* past subconsciously has resonance, which is something upon reflection has become more apparent writing this.

Conclusion

Hauntology as a concept provided the missing clue that my research needed to get me closer to understanding the problem with contemporary videogame form, as it was evident to me that it was not nostalgia on its own. Examining hauntology resulted in recontextualising nostalgia as a "symptom" rather than the problem itself. This also brings nostalgia more in line with its original coining as a "sickness" that represented homesickness, rather than the more wistful longing that it is thought of today. Although, I do not disagree that it can *also* represent this sentimentality, but this does not exist in isolation as it is symptomatic of something deeper. It could be said that hauntology is the problem, but it is actually representative of wider systemic issues within and upon the medium, such as existing in a culture that cannot imagine a better future (exacerbated by permacrisis), a culture where the past is seen as the better alternative to the present. A reversal of how in the past, the future would be looked to. Videogames, as a cultural product, reflects this, but not intentionally.

Identifying hauntology as a source for nostalgia still does not quite answer the problem, which is where the term hauntological form that I created provides the final piece needed to provide *an* answer – or at least a tool to help – to explain what *is* happening as well as what could happen going into the next console generation. Hauntological form provides a means of sustaining the mainstream videogames medium amidst its inability to imagine a different future and the inefficiencies it is dealing with which prevent it from taking risks as it works with extended development times. Therefore, the medium finds safety and support from its past. Using it as a resource to maintain relevance and provide the illusion of momentum.

Reflections – An Update from Simon Reynolds

As I was finishing the thesis, I discovered that second editions of Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* and *Ghosts of my Life* had recently been released. The text itself remained the same, but the meaningful addition was the inclusion of a new introduction and afterword; notably, the afterword of *Ghosts* was written by Simon Reynolds. The latter point is significant given the importance of Reynolds' work upon my research. Also, crucially, are Reynolds' reflections upon Fisher's work in 2022 and the similarity to how I have been interpretating and applying with my research at the same time.

Reynolds continues to view hauntology and Fisher's work in *Ghosts* primarily through the 'music scene' but also acknowledges that 'innovation in popular culture has slowed to a standstill' and that it is 'a culture-wide crisis' resulting 'in entropic cycles of recycling and reenactment, resulting in a kind of frenzied stagnation ("hyper-stasis" [which Reynolds 'nicknamed'])' (Reynolds, 2022, p. 238).

My attention to the use of the past as a resource accompanying the slowdown of the medium mirrors that of Reynolds' (2022, p. 239) claim that not only can the 'retro critique' no longer be dismissed but that 'archive fever and slowdown' had become 'omnipresent'. This is exacerbated by the concerns raised by Fisher, Reynolds, and myself in this thesis that the future is no longer looked to for providing a better alternative, that tomorrow will be different 'in some dramatically improved way, or even in just some dramatically strange way' (Reynolds, 2022, p. 240).

Videogames too have succumbed to the slowdown Fisher wrote of in regards to music in *Ghosts* in the first half of the 2010s, following what Reynolds calls an 'entropic decade which felt nothing like how the first ten years of the 21st century ought to have' (Reynolds, 2022, p.

241). The idea that the 2000s were meant to represent a shift and bring significant change was true, albeit only for much of the first decade (2000s), by the start of the 2010s (argued to be exacerbated by the financial crash of 2008 (Colquhoun, 2022, p. xix)) the change had dissipated resulting in a 'post-millennial anticlimax' (Reynolds, 2022, p. 241). This also led to what Alex Niven (2022, p. xxi) in his introduction for the second edition of *Capitalist Realism* referred to as 'the Long 2010s', a term that encapsulates not only the political and cultural situation but also what, I argue, has happened to the form of mainstream videogames.

Reynolds does ask whether as we are now in the 2020s if we have passed the 'psychological post-millennial hangover' which refers to the disappointment that the 2000s did not represent a *different* future, that it was 'the same as it ever was except we had no 2000 to look to anymore' (Reynolds, 2022, p. 241)[176]. We might have the 2100s to look towards, but it is still far away, but also does not seem attainable for reasons that Reynolds goes on to address. Something that I have not mentioned in this thesis is the threat of looming ecological problems facing the planet. This was partly because I initially did not see it as a direct connection to what it happening to videogames, but in hindsight can see this as being an additional contributing factor of permacrisis.

Whilst videogames themselves cannot directly solve this problem, what they (and other cultural media) can do is instil 'a sense that change [is] possible' which Reynolds (2022, p. 246) states is something that Fisher would have argued. For now, the stalling of cultural output, currently evident in videogames, is representative of a 'reversal in society and politics'. This is why we can argue that Reynolds' flippant remark that worrying about a 'crisis

[176] Reynolds is quoting James Kirkby aka The Caretaker, one of Fishers favourite artists who inspired his work on hauntology.

of retro' seeming minor is that actually this trend of focusing on the past and the inertia of popular culture is symbiotic of wider problems in the world. By depending on the past to sustain cultural output 'creates a sense that nothing will ever change in the other areas of life' (Reynolds, 2022, p. 246).

Technology can have a lot to answer for in the changing landscapes, not only how it has contributed to the ecological issues the planet is facing, but also what is happening to the form of videogames. The internet is an ever-increasing archive and access is providing videogame consumers quick and wide-reaching access to the mediums past. It is not as extensive as other mediums, and there are also substantial gaps amongst the back catalogue. The Video Game History Foundation released a study as I write this conclusion that led with the intentionally shocking result that '87 percent of classic games released in the United States are out of print[177]' (Salvador, 2023). In this study the state of classic videogames is compared to that of silent films, of which 14 percent survives, one percent more than videogames pre-2010 (which is the point they no longer deem videogames 'classic'). This is a caveat to my argument (and that of Reynolds') but just because a large amount of past content is not currently accessible, does not mean that the 13 percent that is currently accessible (according to the VGHF's study[178]) cannot impact the medium today. The 'idea of the current' has been 'fatally damaged' (Reynolds, 2022, p. 247). This is evident by the increasing number of remasters and remakes[179] which are becoming more necessary

[177] The term 'reprint', used in the study, is an interesting one to use, as it suggests that the once physical releases are still being manufactured rather than rereleased digitally, which is what they are actually referring to. The term also includes remasters and *some* remakes (dependent on how much has been remade or changed).

[178] The results from this study should be considered with caution, as it only takes into account three 'ecosystems'. Those being the Commodore 64, PlayStation 2, and Game Boy 'family'.

[179] It has been announced that the Super Famicom game *Clock Tower* is getting a remaster for modern consoles. But it is also the first time the game is receiving an official release outside of Japan along with an English translation. This is a collaboration between Capcom (the original creators), WayForward (who are

to fill in the gaps of *new* products due to the elongated development cycles. Head of Xbox Game Studios Matt Booty claims that big budget videogames can no longer be made in 'two or three years' instead more likely 'four and five and six years' (Doolan, 2023). Booty said that the pandemic was not the only contributing factor and that the extra development time is here to stay[180].

This also provides more incentives to publishers to look after and make use of their back catalogues. In Chapter 6 I mentioned about Square Enix's recent efforts of remastering and remaking past JRPG's utilising the HD-2D style to both modernise and pay homage to the past. Such an exercise is emblematic of hauntological form in action. In addition, Square Enix's shareholders are also supportive of this trend, requesting more remasters in the same vein as what the company has been doing for the past few years (Middler, 2023). Yet, this focus does not result in a new videogame or a novel experience, it is polishing up old ones. If this were the Ship of Theseus the ship itself would be the same, except would be powered by an engine and the sails replaced with solar panels. However, these releases by Square Enix have been successful for them and help keep interest in its franchises whilst they work on new titles that take years to make.

Publishers' utilisation of their back catalogue is not a new phenomenon. As mentioned in Chapter 2 Sony purchased a film studio (Columbia Pictures) in part to gain access to its back catalogue, this was then later used to help support its media storage format (another attempt of controlling home media after the Betamax "lost") by having a range of content

doing the "port/remaster") and Limited Run (who are publishing it) (Lyles, 2023). Limited Run's Carbon Engine is also being used to bring the Super Famicom game to modern platforms (Limited Run Games, no date). Demonstrating that just because a videogame is not currently available does not mean that it can never become available. It just requires effort and coordination.

[180] This is in relation to AAA videogames. Smaller indie experiences will not necessarily need this much time.

ready to be provided over the early years of its existence. The videogames medium is in a similar situation, except instead of being reliant on a new physical format, digital storefront (and subscriptions) are the means of distributing old content that has not been available for a number of years.

The significance of the past and its reappearance in the present is not just about bringing these products back, as crucially in the case of hauntological form it is also about incorporating 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]' 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'. This is reminiscent of a statement by Reynolds that I included in Chapter 4 where he said:

> '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)

This helps to support what is happening with the mainstream videogames medium, as technology might be improving with each new console generation providing more powerful systems that can also access more videogames and with extra options/efficiency. I can play Xbox videogames by streaming to my smartphone and then resume the same save file automatically on my Series X when I get home. This is a substantial change, a revolutionary one in what we can play on such small devices and the added flexibility. Yet, what we are playing is not all that different to over ten years ago. Which is the significance of hauntological form and the remediation that is taking place within new videogame products. Remediation is bringing back past videogame elements, as well as from other mediums, and

it is via hauntological form that recontextualises and subsumes these past elements. The two main examples used in this thesis (in Chapter 5), *Halo Infinite* and *LoZ: Breath of the Wild*, demonstrate two ways in which the mediums past can be used to support titles that not only take a long time to develop (both received multiple delays and an extended development process) but also secure their placement in long running franchises. The *success* between these two titles differs. Even though *Infinite* was not a failure, it did not achieve the success Microsoft were expecting it to generate, especially as it was a pillar of its Xbox Series lineup. Whereas *BotW* helped the Switch launch to a better than expected high (after the commercial failure of the Wii U). What can be surmised from both examples is that hauntological form does not result in something being overtly attached to the past, but at the same time have strong ties to the past in some capacity. In these instances, both core and shell call back to the respective franchise's past to additional context and/or gameplay elements. Nonetheless, these are fundamentally new products but rely on the past to support its form which has not been a necessity to this extent in prior (before the eighth) console generations.

This thesis might be arguing that the videogames medium is focusing too much on the past and abandoning the future, but there is more to it than that. Whilst the medium can be accused of struggling to imagine a better future, it has not abandoned it either. The medium is in a difficult position, development times (as mentioned) are getting longer, and costs are increasing. By looking to its past, it is treating it as a resource to sustain itself so that it can continue to work on the videogames that do still help the medium to evolve. The days of revolutionary shifts might be a thing of the past, but that does not mean that the medium will fall into the same creative rut it found itself in during the early 1980s in North America. Approaches such as MAYA (Most *Acceptable* Yet *Advanced*) provide strategies for the

medium to identify where it can push the medium forward just enough, whilst not alienating consumers or completely falling victim of its own past.

Significance of the Research

The significance of this thesis is the identification of the positive uses and treatment of the videogame mediums own past as a strategic means of sustaining its momentum amongst creative slowdown. The inability to imagine a better future is not unique to videogames, as it is a wider cultural problem, in part identified by Fisher and Reynolds; and intensified by the rise of permacrisis. However, the contribution to knowledge that this thesis provides is that I have taken the approach used by Fisher and Reynolds in the context of music and both expanded it to apply to videogames as well as taken it further to better understand what is happening to the medium in its own separate way. There are still similarities between what has happened to other mediums and what is happening with videogames – it is this very point that influenced my research – but in this medium the combination of remasters and remakes (and to a lesser extent ports) with the use of hauntological form to support new videogame products demonstrate a range of strategies to combat cultural slowdown. Videogames relationship with its own past is also paradoxical compared to other mediums, portraying itself as forward-facing and hiding behind phrases such as “next-gen graphics” publicly whilst refusing to acknowledge the underlying approach of doing just enough to sustain the medium as it increasingly relies on its past.

This also provides a rationale for publishers (that have not done so already) to realise the value of their back catalogue. Not only can it help support the bottom line, it can provide stop gaps between bigger releases, whilst also generating interest in new titles from the

same franchise (or similar). Also, crucially for the medium as a whole, it expands access to its past whilst also simultaneously helping to prevent videogames from being lost (or remaining inaccessible), as feared by organisations such as the Video Game History Foundation; but also, videogame players who want to engage with cultural memory of videogames they have read about but unable to play.

The thesis is as much for developers (and students) to consider how they utilise the mediums past effectively as it is for those working in the medium in publishing and management roles to consider how to effectively use the back catalogue they have access to and what this can mean for the sustainability[181] of the medium as it continues. This requires active efforts from publishers (and other rights holders) to achieve, but this will increasingly become an option to them to complement the development of the traditionally larger AAA title.

Finally, this thesis builds upon the existing work of hauntology and its application to cultural theory, as well as providing the original creation of hauntological form. This contribution to knowledge acts as a means of reappropriating hauntology to provide the potential for a positive outlook on the future of the videogames medium, rather than a pessimistic one. Whilst acknowledging Fisher's and Reynolds' previous concerns about the existence of the future, hauntological form situates the mediums past as a means of sustainability. Rather than retreat to the past, which the use of nostalgia can help facilitate, hauntological form provides an alternative means of generating evolutionary change over time. This might not be as noticeable as the revolutionary change previously experienced in past console

[181] Not in an ecological sense.

generations, but it does help to prevent the medium (and especially AAA which is most at risk) from running out of momentum.

Therefore, with hauntological form, I am providing a concept for videogames (but also a transferable tool for other mediums) to efficiently utilise its own past 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.

Thus, hauntological form serves a distinct and crucial purpose for two types of specialists. For scholars it provides a critical tool for examining the form of videogames and understanding what could become of it. For practitioners a means of affordance in aiding and informing continued videogame development.

Hauntological form is an acknowledgement that the future of media is intimately interwoven with the past. Something which the videogames medium in particular has struggled to directly acknowledge. This is evident in the evolution of the videogames medium over the past decade since the midpoint of the seventh console generation. It is this shift from revolutionary change to evolutionary change, one that is increasingly dependent on the mediums past, that hauntological form has been created to bring attention to as well as provide an explanation. The past, and therefore hauntological form, are endemic to the videogames medium, especially in the mainstream.

However, hauntological form is an innovative concept that offers an alternative perception of the past and positions it instead as a means of ensuring that the videogames medium (and others) has a future. The caveat being that it is more familiar than had been previously anticipated for the future form of videogames.

Future Research

One of the parts that has stood out to me is the distinction between how some Japanese videogame companies approach remakes compared to those in the West. The difference regarding how Japan and the West deal with nostalgia in its videogames was something I began to consider around the mid-point of my research, but prior to beginning to apply hauntology and gaining a better understanding of nostalgia I lacked the toolset to explore the possible differences properly. In Chapter 5 I began to explore how cultural differences affect how the past is looked after, which led me to consider how this subsequently could impact how videogame past, such as remakes (and remasters) are dealt with. This is something that I would like to return to by identifying specific case studies and conducting an extensive comparative study.

Another area of interest that was mentioned in one of the footnotes is exploring the extent to which hauntological form might be present in Chinese videogames. This is inspired by three reasons, first is the unique nature of the Chinese videogames medium (dedicated consoles were only officially allowed to be sold from July 2015 (D'Orazio, 2015)), second is the proximity to Japan where similar cultural views to the past exist (even though the two nations are very distinct) and if this informs the form of some videogame releases, and third is due to my working relationship with a transnational partner University in China which sees staff and students travel between countries. The Chinese videogames medium is comparatively new (videogames were still present before 2015 but were predominantly PC based) and is also tightly regulated compared to other nations. The medium is dominated by a duopoly of Tencent and Netease (there are other companies as well, but these are the main two) which will have an impact on how the medium evolves as well as looks back at its

own past. I am aware of research into the presence of nostalgia and the use of videogames to provide cultural insights into China's history (Li, 2022). In addition, I have also seen from my students work (from our partners in China) using their videogames as a means to explore their nations history.

The final possible related area of research that could follow is getting more involved into looking into videogame archival practices. The conclusion chapter in particular has addressed aspects of the medium addressing inaccessibility of past videogames. Although, the mediums treatment of its own past has been a running theme throughout this thesis. There is a lot of work that has taken place in this area, but there is an opportunity to take what has been identified with hauntological form further in this regard.

Final Remarks

To bring this thesis to a close I conclude by quoting Simon Reynolds and Mark Fisher one final time. As noted by Fisher[182]

> 'Characterizing the present negatively in comparison to the past doesn't automatically equate with nostalgia. No one would say of an author of books on subjects like climate change, pollution, species extinction, overpopulation, that they were being backward-looking for preferring a world where [these things were not happening]' (Reynolds, 2022, p. 248).

Reynolds adds that conversations about retro have been long ongoing and with it whether it is a bad thing are likely to continue. I side with these points, looking towards the past does not mean that we are ignoring our future, and nor does it have to mean that we hide in the past to escape the present. The current situation is far from ideal, but looking back throughout history, when is everything ideal. Nostalgia might now equate to looking back to

[182] But in this instance quoted by Reynolds.

what is perceived to be “better times”, in which case, what is it about those times that are looked at which made them seem *better*? Let’s actually learn from the past and do something ‘derangingly strange’ (Reynolds, 2020) that is both familiar and different at the same time. Embrace hauntological form and bring sustainable evolution to the videogames medium.

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