

Bad Vibrations: The Auditory Experience of Digital Dark Tourism

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Dark tourism can be generally defined as the deliberate visitation of sites associated with death and disaster. The term was first coined by Lennon and Foley (1996), applying it to places associated with the life and death of American president John F. Kennedy. They define dark tourism as a post-modern phenomenon facilitated by mass media (2000,6). Whilst dark tourism has traditionally been applied to analogue locations, it also has relevance to digital spaces in video games. One such example is the virtual reconstruction of an historic asylum in *The Town of Light* (LKA 2016), a video game which specifically focuses on the suffering of a former patient. Whilst previous research (Smith Nicholls 2018) has examined the player experience of the asylum as a form of digital dark tourism, there has yet to be an exploration into how the use of audio in the game potentially contributes to or limits its interpretation as a dark tourist experience.

Commercial video games not experienced within an explicitly heritage context have only attracted limited dark tourism scholarship. The main exception to this has been a recent volume on digital dark tourism (McDaniel 2018) which considers video games as viable subjects for discussion. The contribution of music and other auditory ephemera to dark tourist sites has arguably not received as much attention as their physical manifestation. Video games, as audio-visual experiences and potential dark tourist sites, require a holistic analysis of how particular historic settings are presented to the player.

The Town of Light is exclusively set in the buildings and grounds of the *Ospedale Psichiatrico di Volterra*, a non-fictional asylum in Volterra, Italy. Gameplay involves exploring the derelict institution and interacting with objects to trigger flashbacks of former patient Renée's experiences there in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Conditions in the asylum were particularly bad during this period under the fascistic regime (Casetti et al. 2016, 108). Thus, the game developers deliberately focused on the dark heritage of the asylum. This is captured not just through visual reconstruction but also through voice artistry and sound effects.

Though *The Town of Light* is not a conventional horror game in that it attempts to sensitively handle mental illness and the asylum context (Cross 2017), it still uses audio tropes such as creaking doors and indistinct sounds to create an unsettling atmosphere. The contextual importance of music in horror games has been

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productively discussed (Cheng 2014; Van Elferen 2015). With reference to other psychological horror video games, the question of how *The Town of Light* simultaneously rejects and reuses horror game conventions will be explored.

The context of auditory experience will be examined through the lens of archaeoacoustics. This is a sub-discipline of archaeology, specifically focusing on sound in different archaeological contexts; a common subject of study is location-based sound effects often in relation to historic architecture (Kolar 2018; Scullin 2019). If video games themselves can be considered as archaeological sites (Reinhard 2018), then the audio experience of *The Town of Light* can be examined archaeologically.

This paper will present the preliminary results of attempting to map sounds according to location in *The Town of Light*, how this compares to games with similar themes, and how this data might be used to better understand the varied nature of the dark tourist experience that the game can offer. One key observation from the investigation is that audio glitches can create unintentional yet affective audio contexts.

This contextual approach is especially useful in challenging the typological approach to dark tourist sites (Sharpley 2005; Stone 2010) which has been critiqued as contrived and stemming from the fact that much dark tourism scholarship privileges a Western perspective (Bowman et al. 2010; Korstanje 2017). Rather than treating dark tourist sites as homogenous, their potential for varying intensities of ‘darkness’ will be pursued. Furthermore, this examination of the auditory experience of digital dark tourism will take into account the intersectional factors which may inform player experience, including hardware and the physicality of play (Keogh 2018; Taylor 2009).

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