

Ghosts of False Pasts, Ghosts of Lost Futures: A Hauntological Analysis of *Genshin Impact's* Sumeru Storyarc

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INTRODUCTION

This work synthesizes Jacques Derrida's notion of "hauntology" (1994) with Mark Fisher's account of "lost futures" (2012, 2014), and Nicolas Abraham & Maria Torok's psychoanalytic theory of the "phantom" (1994) to consider how *Genshin Impact's* Sumeru storyline dramatizes the persistence of absence and the afterlives of trauma. The work argues that the Sumeru storyline is fundamentally structured around "absent referents," which continue to shape the lived realities, ideologies, and emotional realities of the game's characters. Through close readings of two key figures, King Deshret of the desert and Greater Lord Rukkhadevata of the rainforest, the analysis explores how loss and misremembered history can co-generate hauntings that sustain social conflict and psychic repetition. These false "ghosts," though ontologically void, exert real influence within the game world, revealing how "that which does not exist" can still affect identity, myth, and mourning.

The first part of this work analyzes the "Specter of Al-Ahmar," exploring how the historical figure of King Deshret has become a "ghost from a past that never was." This false ghost is the result of competing mythologies that view Deshret as either a supreme God-King or a horrid tyrant—both of which represent opposing but equally fictive constructions of memory that perpetuate present-day conflict. Drawing on Svetlana Boym's (2001) distinction between "restorative nostalgia" and "reflective nostalgia," the essay shows how the desert-dwelling Eremites' desire to restore King Deshret's greatness exemplifies a restorative nostalgia that converts historical loss into mythic certainty, while the Akademiya's disdain for the desert peoples rests on a phantom fear of barbarism. Both factions are thus "haunted" by their own ideological projections, be they ghosts born of denial or distortion. These hauntings demonstrate how trauma, repression, and political desire conspire to create "pasts-that-never-were" which, though ontologically unreal, nevertheless structure present realities.

The second part of the work considers "Rukkhadevata's Impossible Legacy," examining the hauntological dynamics of "futures-that-were-never-meant-to-be." Here the absence of Greater Lord Rukkhadevata is seen as a void that gives rise to a compulsive repetition of loss itself. This can be seen in both the attempt by Sumeru's sages to resurrect their goddess through technological means and in the way Sumeru's new archon, Nahida, struggles with self-doubt. Both the sages and Nahida are mired

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in melancholy, and their fixation on recreating or living up to an idealized deity is explored in light of Fisher's description of hauntology as an inability to imagine genuine futurity unshadowed by past nostalgia. Drawing on the thought of Freud (1961), the work further interprets this circulative fixation as a compulsive "death-drive loop" in which trauma is endlessly rehearsed rather than symbolically resolved. For this reason, the work argues that the sages' descent into techno-fanaticism and Nahida's paralyzing insecurity both exemplify how the specter of lost potential can imprison subjects in cycles of psychic and historical recurrence.

By exploring the hauntological role of these "specters," the paper considers how ghosts are "concealed rhetorically and linguistically within" the game and "how their concealed presence can be detected and exposed as the driving force behind the actions and discourse of certain fictive characters" (Rashkin 1992, 5). The work then argues that only through a confrontation with truth—framed as a "healthy exorcism" of ghosts—can the trauma of the past be overcome. This is easier said than done, as it requires parties to dispense with myth-making and denialism, but it is the only way humans can seek out a reality that is yet-to-be-written. The paper closes by examining the ways that powerful apparatuses (e.g., the Akademiya, the Eremite belief system) often use mythologized readings of the past to uphold a certain world order. By exposing these political manipulations, Sumeru's narrative places the player into a position of hauntological deconstruction, requiring them to take an active part in the dismantling of "pasts-that-never-were" through game play. This is ultimately framed as a pedagogical move that provides players with the skills necessary to identify and interrogate the traumatic specters that linger within our own life-world.

BIO

Paul A. Thomas is a library specialist at the University of Kansas. He holds a PhD in library and information management from Emporia State University. He is fascinated by the intersection of information science and online culture, and his research has explored fan encyclopedism, the information behaviors of media fans, and the meaning of popular media in general. His most recent journal article, "The Analytical Behaviors of *Genshin Impact* Lore Enthusiasts: An (Auto)ethnographic Look at r/Genshin_Lore," was just published in the latest issue of *Game Studies*.

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