

Ghosts of Present Past.

The video game as an anthropomorphized communication act

Since the invention of Morse Code, each new invention leads to a fresh way of capturing all kinds of the unexplained phenomena. With the development of the media technology, the whole new world of the ephemeral signs of the spirits' existence follow, which widen our perception of the reality as a whole. By definition the media indicate that there is something beyond where we can betake ourselves of. As Friedrich A. Kittler (1999) wrote in the introduction to *Gramophone, film, typewriter*: "The realm of the dead is as extensive as the storage and transmission capabilities of a given culture" (p.13). Therefore, taking into consideration the level of development of contemporary communicative technologies, there is no wonder that the human desire to record signs of the existence of the world of spirits evolves into the need to tell ghosts stories. In that respect video games appear to be another medium, which conveys that kind of tales. However, it seems to be the case that the presence of ghosts in the medium of a video game is decidedly something more than a simple narrative trope. Thus, the main aim of this article would not focus on the simple analysis of the ghosts stories, but quite the opposite, the true meaning behind ghosts appearances in the video games environment.

When we think about ghosts, we actually think about the past. Thanks to their ghostly form, they appear to us as imprints of the memory or traces of the long-gone beings. However, much as their connection to the history is quite obvious, ghost, as a kind of the spectres, cannot be dated (Derrida, 1994, p.3). There is no connection with facts, but more with very private emotions. As Ryūnosuke Akutagawa showed in a story *In a Grove* (better known from film adaptation by Akira Kurosawa *Rashōmon*) ghosts, as a mixture of the unknown and unpredictability, can lie. This shows that even if ghosts are the entities connected to the netherworld, they still behave like flawed human beings. Regardless of the similarities, they, first and foremost, bring with themselves a feeling of anxiety to those who meet them. Haunting is a rather unpleasant event, especially when it concerns a visit from an unquiet spirit. Most of the ghost stories teach us to be if not afraid of ghosts, then at least feel uneasy around them. However, this uneasiness during the contact with the souls of the departed is rather linked with an eeriness instead of fear. The presence of the ghosts always generates the

enthraling feeling of the uncanny. This ghostly concept of the uncanny, first popularized by Sigmund Freud (1919/2003), seems to be a perfect tool to analyze this kind of encounters. As the important philosophical term it is often used by scholars to describe the phenomena that bring with themselves a sense of a secret that is hidden inside familiar objects and events. That something well-known, even close to us, is suddenly out of proper and brings us a feeling of uncertainty of the experienced reality. Sometimes even a sparkle or a sudden change is enough to convert the familiar environment into something strange and weird which requires to be re-read afresh (Royle, 2003, pp.1-10). The uncanny hides something of a mystery, as Royle (2003) notices: “it is perhaps inseparable from an apprehension, however fleeting, of something that should have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (p.2). When a ghost manifests itself to someone the thin veil between this world and the spirit world weakens and all the secrets of the past and the future are in danger of exposure. Reality seems to be in state of constant flux.

Such perceived the notion of the uncanny is very clearly conveyed in the works of Jacques Derrida, particularly those introducing to hauntology. For Derrida (1994) the uncanny of the spectres is connected to their uncertain ontological status: they are neither beings nor non-beings, not alive but also not exactly dead (Derrida, 1994, p.4-6). This paradoxical state distinguishes spectres from simple spirits and in the same time avoids the precise description (or even definition). “Neither soul nor body, and both one and the other” he wrote in *Spectres of Marx* (1994, p.5). Moreover, thanks to this unstable state of a being/non-being, the spectres' identity is something that can freely be changed. The spectres have an ability to impersonate anything they want to. This kind of transformation has a deep impact on the very core of the subject's existence. In fact it is hard to trust the past experience. The stability of the well-known ideas, subjects and objects has been disturbed and their old meaning has been constantly changing (Marzec, 2015, pp.126-127).

In this context it is easy to make the assumption that all ghosts that player meets in the video game environment are just like Derrida's spectres. On the software level they have the similar property as the other objects that one can find in the space of a video game. It might be said that they are or even they exist. However, on the semantic level of the storyworld they are non-existence spirits, haunted souls or just protagonist's hallucinations. One might be even tempted to claim that their state of being is even more complex than ghosts from a ghost stories or paranormal activity research. As a video game objects ghosts have differently programmed behaviours in comparison to others, especially human-like figures. Sometimes

their actions might be more erratic: they can walk through walls, vanish in the thin air or just be remain insensitive to the player's blows. That is not perceived as a glitch of a game but as their feature. However, as a part of the video game world we can analyse them as any other ghostly characters that was introduced to us by any other text of culture. These double structure make video game ghosts even more uncanny (if it is possible). Because in fact, all of these spectres' traits, especially their meaning and state of being, are constantly being negotiated.

The uncanny phenomena strongly resonates in imbued with spectres in Derrida's hauntology. The philosopher takes advantage of political transformations in Europe as a subject of his analysis in *Spectres of Marx* (1994). In this work he attempts to show a mechanism thanks to which Karl Marx's philosophy is still present in today's political reality. He created the idea of hauntology to describe the things and thoughts which are out of their proper time and place. In order to explain it, Derrida chooses to study closely *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. It appears to be particularly meaningful for the author of the *Spectres of Marx*, especially a fragment in which Prince of Denmark devastated by his fate declaim: "The time is out of joint - O cursèd spite/ That ever I was born to set it right!" (p.20-27). By analyzing these words Derrida tried to describe the very nature of the haunted time. For him some of the long-gone ideas, which he named spectres, invoke the concept of the past, but paradoxically, in the same time influence the present. Even if they seem to be nothing more than a simple memory, they have an ability to actively modify present days and thereby change the future. However, the real danger is hiding in the fact that these past ideas and objects are being embraced as present (Marzec, 2015, pp.208-217). The one can say that the present is haunted by bygone phenomena and by that make the reality unstable: "the past does not want to pass away and the future – arrive" (p.193).

Hauntology, despite its fluctuating borders, is a universal idea which might be easily used in the research of various phenomena within contemporary culture. The analysis should not be limited to the studies over the incorporeal ideas as it was the case of Marxist spectres floating over Europe. Nowadays a Derrida's suggestion seems to be particularly interesting not only for popular culture researchers and critics but also creators. While adjusting this concept to their needs, the artists and scholars have found the perfect tool to reflect the spirit of the contemporary reality. Hauntology has been also applied to video game analysis. Christian McCrea (2009) and his text *Gaming's Hauntology: Dead Media in "Dead Rising", "Siren" and "Michigan Report from Hell"* is worth mentioning. There he uses Derrida's

concept to analyze how horror games environment and gameplay are haunted by the other media. It is very interesting proposition which presents hauntology from new perspective. Although the interpretation possibilities of the hauntology were not fully exploited. When we focus more on reconnecting this idea to the notion of the past hauntology would emerge as a phenomenon that indicates, in fact, the absence of the past in the video game world. To have a closer insight into the phenomenon it is necessary to return to its roots and ask questions about how the appearance of the spectres impact the gameplay.

At least two kinds of the past can be distinguished in the video game environment. The first one is connected to the storyworld of the game. It encompasses all the facts, artefacts and stories about the virtual world that have created its history. A player can learn it from many sources, especially when the game is a complex one: he can read in a library-like data base, find out through the exploration of the game environment or just by meeting other characters, etc. However, it is only the substitute of the real notion of the past in a video game medium, because in fact it has never happened before player's first appearance in a game. The history of the game world, the past, the present and the future, have been produced in almost the same time. The scenario is very simple: a player enters the video game environment, gathers some information and then makes a decision that ends the game. However, sometimes the spectres of a game are more vicious and take away the illusion of the choice from the player. This is the case in the linear type of game narration and design, when all of the paths lead to one programmed conclusion. In a way, the past is not only unfold in the same time as the present, but also defines the future end from beforehand. This is the moment when the first type of the past intersects with the second which is directly connected to the past of a game and understood as a virtual environment.

The second type is associated mostly with human presence in the game environment. Especially with all traces that a player leaves behind him during the space exploration. Carrie Heeter (1992) defines this kind of presence as environmental. The game reality gives signal that is aware of a players actions. It can be manifested in a different ways, for example: the player's avatar casts shadow, leaves footprints or bloodstains after battles, etc. Another interesting example of this second type of the past, which is also somehow connected with environmental presence, is when game records the players' gameplay and displays it later. It is the case in *Dark Souls 2*: player can touch the bloodstain and witness the ghostly display of the death of others that followed this path before him. This particular type of the past, which appears to be closer to traditional notion of the past than the first one, is always invariably

associated with the gameplay itself. Nonetheless, it is not only restricted to player's actions, but also applies to traces that designers left for players to be found, for example 'easter eggs'.

Even if these two types of the past seem to vary considerably from each other, both very often interfuse outside the player's realization. One of the fine examples of this kind of fusion are ghosts characters that haunt the video game worlds. They seem to hide beneath the aesthetics of the horror story, but in fact in most of the cases they are strictly connected to gameplay mechanisms. As it was said in the beginning of the article, this text will not focus on the simple matter of describing the property of the game world setting or plot but rather expose the other purposes of spectral appearances in the game environment.

There are many types of ghosts that a player may encounter during his exploration. Some of them are directly connected to the plot, some just appear to have no relationship with it. Just like the ghost of a murdered man that emerge in the mirror in *Hitman: Contracts* (IO Interactive, 2004). He is the only spirit that haunts the main character and yet was not even his victim: when we arrive to the location we can find the crime scene where the body was found. This event may not be the part of the main story but still influence the player's interpretation by adding element of the uncanny to it. The uncanny of the video game spectres not always is related to its wraithlike aesthetics but also with the sense that we, as players, do not have control over them. This is the case in *The Sims 2* (Maxis, 2004) in which some deceased Sims decided to return from afterlife to haunt the still alive ones. The following examples are somewhere in-between: some are hiding behind the setting and putting some new light on the interpretation; others are the significant part of the gameplay mechanisms. Although, they both have a common theme – the anthropomorphic nature of their manifestation. Thus, all of the different properties of the ghosts are boiled down to this one. In this context the anthropomorphism seems to be also the most significant phenomena for a video game medium perception.

The first thing that occupies our mind in the moment when we encounter a ghost is its ethereal corporeality. We might know that the ghosts in video games are in fact like any other object that exist in virtual environment but we still seem to be bewildered by them. The primary reason of this amazement is probably their wraithlike appearance. Most of the ghosts take form of a shadow-like figure. They seem human, but their features remain unidentified. This is a case in *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012), where the player during his/her exploration can see the strange shadows out of the corner of an eye. These transparent figures cannot be approached. They vanish immediately the very moment the player loses sight of

them. It is not certain who or what they are. However, most of the interpretations recognized them as the departed souls of the long-gone islanders or recordings of past journeys that took place before player's arrival. For some players the island represents netherworld and all the shadows are just its inhabitants. Nevertheless, all of those readings are based on a trope in which shadows are nothing less than prints of a dead body or a memory that someone once lived/existed in this world (Belting, 2012, pp. 218-221). The interesting thing is that when we reach into the game software and write the specific command, we would see that the shadows are in fact some of the unnamed characters from the *Half-Life 2* (Valve Corporation, 2004). It should not be surprising since the *Dear Esther* started as a free-to-play modification for the Source game engine. This form of game recycling does not diminish the character of the uncanny but even deepens the spectral nature of these ghosts. The "walking simulator" has been transformed into an emotional landscape and the complexity of the game world has increased.

Sometimes the transparent figures indicate more active character of the player's presence in a video game. The perfect example of this case is *Braid* (Number None, Inc., 2008): in the level "Time and Decision" the shadow of a player appears when the player rewinds time and for a short moment both avatars (past and present) are working together to solve the puzzles. Thanks to this multiplied self-presences, the player can finish that level. One can see that despite the similar appearance, a primary difference between shadows from *Dear Esther* and *Braid* is in the active role of the second ones. The transparent figure of the protagonist from *Braid* is not only the memento of something that passed away. He is a real, visible evidence of the player's past action. Because of the connection of the past and the activity he is more like a trace in Ricoeur's sense (1988). Moreover, the protagonist's shadow is not only the remainder of avatar's body but also inherits some abilities from the player. The power that was first assigned to the player was transferred to its shadowy image. This procedure of transferring power from the real-time avatar to its mirror reflection reassembles all the techniques in which the imprint of the body should have reserved some of its might (Belting, 2012, p. 55).

This case is an example that the game is something more than just the space in which a player can fulfil his desires by liberally shaping it by his will. In moment of the encounter, the game and the player change their status. They become the symbiotic unity or, in other words, the bio-object: qualitatively new, unbreakable unity. The idea of the bio-object was created by Polish theatre director Tadeusz Kantor (2004, p.397). In this way Kantor tried to describe the extraordinary relation between an actor and a stage object. In this relation the stage objects are

not just a simple prop or a decoration. By using these objects and giving them life actors become a part of them: "The actors became its living organs, linked to it as if genetically. They constituted an active BIO-OBJECT, producing the tissue of action of a special kind: amorphous (I called it "informelle") or mechanical. Without the actors, the object was a devastated wreck unable to act. On the other hand, the actors were conditioned by it; their roles and actions originated from it"(p.397). Moreover, this unbreakable oneness are not a part of the fiction of the play, but rather as Kantor put it, something more like a "of the performance". This structure exists independently from the play and has an autonomous character. The similarities to the relation between the player and the video game software is legible. In the moment of a gameplay the bio-object emerges: the symbolic bond between the player and the video game medium is created above the narration and, simultaneously, the space of multitude possibilities has been produced. The video game, especially the single player type, without the player's presence is, in the most cases, just the virtual reality frozen in time and space. Also the identity of the player without the video game medium would be disturbed.

Alongside the previous examples, ghosts as traces of the bygone can also act as 'memory discs'. They create the illusion of the historicity of the game world and by that they extend the sense of the completeness of the world. Thusly, the virtual places that they haunt gain a memory. This property, anywise associated with the narration, might also be one of the gameplay functions. With all the uncanny accompanying the appearance of ghosts, it is easy to overlook the fact that they appear at a pre-designated locations and guide the player through the space of the game. They are like a lighthouse which ensures the player that he or she is heading the right direction or the place that he or she has found is significant. This mechanism has been applied i.a. in *Bioshock* (Irrational Games, 2007) which also demonstrates how knowledge is mediated through various media. Due to mutated genes the game protagonist has visions of the leftover memories of the late residents of Rapture. In the beginning of the game the ghosts seem to be simple unquiet ghosts from the underwater city. However, as plot thickens, their status desists from being so evident. We eventually learn that they are not ghosts that haunt the certain place, but spectres that haunt the mind of the protagonist. It is not exactly clear to whom those memories belong. They could belong to people that we see in visions. Even if they are shown from third person's perspective, some of the incidents seem to be too secretive to have a witness. Others maybe are the witnesses' memory of those incidents. However, there is also a possibility that some of them could be just returned to the main character after the first ADAM injection. The past is literally being

relived inside his consciousness. This is the way the very subjective version of the Rapture history is created. However, these ghosts are not the only spectres that affect the protagonist. Jack who is genetically programmed, unconsciously, is forced to follow orders whenever he hears the words 'would you kindly...'. Paradoxically, this mechanism has also an effect on the player. It uncovers the fact that most of the player's future actions and important decisions were determined long before he or she has entered the game world. This is a very interesting situation where a subversive plot twist exposes a mechanism governing the video game medium.

The examples above, especially the last one, show particularly well the problem of the past and its true meaning. If it is one last thing left that is worth mentioning in this context, it is a shape that a video games ghosts take. All of them appear as human-like figures or they at least show signs of a human behaviour: they can speak to us, have plans or show the whole spectrum of emotions; others sometimes create something of a community. Their human form is important because throughout the process of anthropomorphization the non-human agent becomes the medium of the human image, by extension, explicitly embodies a man (Muniak, 2010, pp.19-26). Anthropomorphism, as a complex phenomenon consisting of both cognitive and motivational determinants, is also often used by people in various situations, especially when they try to cope with the surrounding reality (Epley, Waytz & Cacioppo, 2007). It is frequently employed also in the gameplay situations when the players want to effectively interact with the virtual environment, because as Epley, Waytz & Cacioppo noticed: "attributing human characteristics and motivations to nonhuman agents increases the ability to make sense of an agent's actions reduces the uncertainty associated with an agent, and increases confidence in predictions of this agent in the future" (p. 866). Thus, the player learns the game mechanisms quicker by anthropomorphizing a game's software. This phenomenon has one more interesting motivation, besides the aforementioned effectance, which is sociality. Sociality describes a need of a human contact (p.866) and it is one of the reasons why the player often develops a bond with the game characters when he or she misses the company of other humans (it seems to be a case especially in a single player game). At every turn, when the player interacts with the game environment, he or she impresses traces of his or her actions and thereby becomes a bio-object. By changing the medium, he or she animates it, just like in a case of a doll, and creates new quality (Muniak, 2010, pp. 45-57).

The interactive game environment, anthropomorphized by the player, is slowly turning it into something familiar and well-know. It is possible because of the multiply self-presence of the player that is achieved not only through the traces he or she leaves behind, but also the

anthropomorphised form of the memory, for example ghosts. This kind of implementation of human features into the virtual environment allows to 'tame' the video game. However, for the sake of a gameplay this mechanism should be hidden. It is possible thanks to deepening of the illusion of completeness of the game's world. By building the complex past (understood as a history of a game world) with the multifaceted nature designers shroud the evidence of the presence of the video game medium and thus preserve a possible immersive experience.

Anthropomorphised traces scattered through the space, spectral imprints of the past, even if they have a different functions or origins, lead to the same conclusions: by the inherence of the humanlike figures, a player multiplies self-presence in virtual environment and thanks to that overcomes the medium of a video game. These strategies help to cover the gameplay mechanisms and make them invisible to a player. In fact, we are dealing with the same process as in the case of experiencing the art, for example paintings (Belting, 2011, pp. 39-46): the presence of the traces of the past animates the world of a game inside the user and for a few moments they are able to forget that this reality is mediated. In other words, a video game by putting on the mask of a ghost creates the past events that camouflage the medium of a game. The presence of ghosts, paradoxically, indicates the absence of the past of the video game world. Even the traces of the player's actions designate that also the past, understood as a previous gameplays, is bygone. However, all the uncanny spectres still haunt the video game medium. Therefore, we should remember when playing *Assassin's Creed: Revelations* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2011) that the moment of the encounter of Ezio and the ghost of Altair is in fact the pure act of communication between the game and the player. Without the encasement of the narration, this is the time when two bio-objects faced each other: the present one, that consists of a player and a game software, is lead to a final destination by the spectre of the designer's intention.

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