Virtual Ruins:
Longing for Other Worlds

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Somewhere on the internet, there exists a photograph I can no longer access but whose details I desperately cling to. The photograph resides on a Photobucket account whose name and password I have long forgotten. It was taken more than a decade ago. My friends and I are arranged in two neat rows at a mountain campsite. As I recall, we were celebrating and were drunk on pleasure and camaraderie. Yet, the bodies in question were not real. We were playing *Fly for Fun* (Galasoft, 2004), a massively multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG). The mountain was data, the campsite was data, and of course, so were our bodies. I have long since lost touch with everyone in the photograph, but it is my affective response to these memories that tell me they are real, and more importantly that, despite their virtual foregrounding, they matter. These memories lead me to question the manner in which nostalgia is mediated by digital worlds.

In this article, I explore the intersection between nostalgia and the digital worlds of online video-games and reveal the ways in which nostalgia blends the virtual and real worlds. Key to my argument will be an examination of how video-game developer Blizzard Entertainment used nostalgia to sell players the re-release of *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) as *World of Warcraft Classic* (*WoW Classic*) (Blizzard Entertainment, 2019). Similar to T.L. Taylor, part of my methodology stems from my own personal experience in playing MMORPGs and participating within these

wider communities.[1] Yet, I agree with Laurent Di Fillipo who points out that Taylor grounds her methodology in demarcating a boundary between the real and virtual worlds.[2] Di Fillipo instead argues that immersion within gaming worlds is predicated on being absorbed within the game's world while maintaining a distance, on being both an actor and spectator.[3] Consequently, for Di Fillipo, there is no boundary between the virtual and the real worlds. Finally, to ground my discussions in a more concrete example, I will examine Mamoru Oshii's film *Avalon* (Poland/Japan, 2001) through Mark Fisher's deployment of hauntology to show how by functioning as nostalgic objects, the haunted spaces of MMORPGs disrupt conventional divides between the virtual and the real.

On 10 April 2016, the *WoW* private server Nostalrius was forced to shut down after Blizzard sent its lead developers a cease and desist order.[4] While many private servers still exist, Nostalrius stood out because it resembled the initial version of *WoW*. The developers behind Nostalrius crafted the server to cater to fans of "vanilla" *WoW*, an experience stripped of the game's twelve years of updates. In a letter posted to the server's website after it shut down, the development team concludes: "Nostalrius was all about the nostalgia and memories of the glorious vanilla days. We don't know if you truly felt like it was the glory days while playing here, but we hope that you will keep good memories of the time spent here."[5] Several months later, at Blizzcon 2017, Blizzard announced the development of a vanilla *WoW* server. Two years later, it released *World of Warcraft Classic* to critical praise. Prior to the release and later shutdown of Nostalrius, Blizzard continuously refused to create a classic server. Consequently, the release of *WoW Classic* highlights a significant moment when community members seemingly held sway over a corporation.[6]

Yet, *WoW* private servers are still abundant and the events surrounding Nostalrius have led users to ask, why was Nostalrius specifically targeted? There is no definitive answer to this question, but two dominant themes emerge: first, private servers that continue to exist can do so because they are hosted in countries that fall outside Blizzard's legal jurisdiction. Secondly, with an active user base of 150,000 players, it's probable that Nostalrius' popularity became too threatening.[7] This lines up with Blizzard's statement regarding the shutdown of Nostalrius as the need to defend their intellectual property.[8] In retrospect, Nostalrius's popularity as a vanilla *WoW* server highlighted a market of nostalgia that Blizzard had yet to exploit.

What makes this nostalgia for MMORPGs unique, and ultimately explains the ephemerality of such classic servers, is the way their systems and worlds allow for spontaneity.[9] This results from their nature as community-based games built in virtual worlds that mirror the social mechanics of our reality.[10] MMORPGs have thriving cities, fluctuating markets, and even culture, all created by a live player base. However, without a steady influx of new players and content updates, these worlds slowly begin to decay. Nonplayable characters (NPC)—which resemble players but are controlled by artificial intelligence—may remain in town, monsters may forever roam outside city gates, but players age, quit, and disappear. MMORPGs depict worlds haunted by ghosts with the additional aspect of being made eerier due to their world's autonomy. The automated ghosts of MMORPGs can then be understood as spectral reminders of what the live communities once were.[11] As Baudrillard points out, once one realizes that the simulation is no longer real, "it will no longer be a dream."[12] In the case of MMORPGs then, all that remains is a hollow simulacrum birthed and constructed by nostalgia.

What does it then mean to inhabit a virtual realm, a second life populated with ghosts? Here, I wish to turn to Mamoru Oshii's *Avalon*, a film that explores loss and nostalgia specifically within the virtual world of an MMORPG. *Avalon* takes place in a dystopian cyberpunk future and centers on Ash (Malgorzata Foremniak), a top player in a fictional online video game known as Avalon. Central to the film is Ash's trauma caused by the disbandment of her former guild, "Team Wizard." Alone, but haunted by her memories of Team Wizard, Ash sets out to reach the game's highest level, "Class Real," by capturing the CGI figure of a young girl known as "Ghost."

In *Avalon*, Oshii employs video game aesthetics to create a hybrid cinema, one that combines live actors and sets with CGI.[13] Although shot on location in Poland, the film's images are digitally desaturated in a sepia tone to give reality the appearance of a video game (Figure 1).[14] Consequently, Ash's reality and the virtual realm of the video game Avalon are mixed together, presented as one seamless world. Although Ash loses her guildmates within Avalon, her mourning takes place both within Avalon and in reality.[15] By placing its action in this haunted virtual world filled with signposts of Ash's memory, *Avalon* recalls the melancholy and nostalgia of private servers and games whose populations have declined.

Both the real and virtual worlds in *Avalon* are shown to be wastelands of industrial decay littered by ruined factories and prison-style architecture.

Just as in Oshii's other cityscapes, the streets, alleys, and subway systems that Ash wanders through are areas of solitude, recalling the abandoned worlds of dead MMORPGs. As Dani Cavallaro points out in a critical discussion of *Avalon*, Oshii's use of a somber atmosphere is meant to reflect the inner turmoil of his characters.[16] Here, it is Ash who is caught up in a spiral of melancholy and nostalgia and a wish to return to the halcyon days when her guild was still together. What Ash pines for can be understood as what is promised by private and/or classic servers: the re-creation of the past. Yet, Oshii proves this re-creation to be impossible. What remains are only ghosts, both literally and figuratively.

Part of *Avalon*'s story concerns players who have become catatonic due to the game's mental strain. Ash learns from a former comrade that the former leader of Team Wizard, Murphy, is just one of the game's many victims. When she embarks to visit Murphy at the hospital, what we see there can be understood as remnants of the past. Dozens of patients—ex-players—lie in collective catatonia: mouths open, eyes glazed, and faces fixed towards the sky. Like the NPCs who continue to function in automated but empty virtual worlds, these players are reminders of what were once thriving communities. It is by no coincidence, then, that the girl known as Ghost, the key to Class Real and Ash's past, haunts the hospital hallways, reinforcing Ash's solitude and her quest to break free from her nostalgia.[17]

I would like to draw upon Mark Fisher's conceptualization of hauntology to explore the ways in which online worlds might be considered haunted spaces. Fisher uses the idea of hauntology to theorize a new aesthetic which preoccupies itself with the concept of a nostalgia for a future that never was.[18] Fisher's hauntology can therefore be initially understood as a framework for how the past persists into the present through the blurring of time. Fisher later expands the definition of hauntology to include not only time but also space. Drawing upon Baudrillard and Derrida, Fisher points out that teletechnologies, such as telephones and televisions, also work to collapse space. Fisher highlights that no teletechnology is a better representation of hauntology than cyberspace due to its ability to contract space and time.[19] Fisher's hauntology relates to MMORPGs because online video games can be understood to collapse space and time through the player's affective responses and interactions. This idea dovetails with Di Fillipo's concept that players are both spectators and actors, and that, therefore, the real and virtual worlds are one.

In *Avalon*, Ash is nostalgic for a future where Team Wizard still exists, and it is her yearning for the past to have been different which causes her to be melancholic for a future that never was.[20] Just as important, however, is how Oshii presents this nostalgia through the film's cinematography, layering different worlds as one.[21] Returning to the example of the hospital scene, Oshii presents the virtual within the real and the past inside the present: the catatonic players, the CGI figure of Ghost, and, of course, Ash herself. *Avalon*'s narrative of an MMORPG player's nostalgia combined with Oshii's hauntological aesthetic reflects a real player's affective experience on a private or classic server. But what does *Avalon* tell us about the future of nostalgia and whether or not these nostalgic desires can be fulfilled?

Figure 1. Ash prepares to enter the virtual world of Avalon, in *Avalon* (Mamuro Oshii, Poland/Japan, 2001). In mixing CGI with practical sets, Oshii blurs the boundaries between the real and virtual worlds.

At the film's conclusion, Ash reaches Class Real and wakes up in her apartment wearing civilian clothing. When she exits the space, the film changes from sepia tone to lush and vibrant colors. Through this shift in clothes and setting, Oshii deliberately blurs the virtual and real. Ash is meant to be playing a game, yet the final level mimics an alien reality where the world is neither sepia-toned nor does it appear war-torn. It is hyperreal.[22] In this new world, Ash encounters a noncatatonic Murphy, who tells her that he prefers this world's "reality." After a short battle between the two, in which Murphy is seemingly killed and disappears, Ash enters an empty concert hall and finds the Ghost standing upon the stage. The film then ends with the text "Welcome to Avalon" appearing over the screen.

Unlike *The Matrix* (dir. Lana and Lilly Wachowski, US, 1999), in *Avalon*, there is no anxiety as to whether Ash is plugged into the game or if she is in the real world. Just as in my initial example of the photograph, what ultimately

matters here is the affective experience, the consequence that events in the virtual world have on reality and on Ash. In reaching Class Real, Ash confronts her nostalgia by fighting Murphy; the conflict ending in her guild leader's death suggests that she can never truly go back. She must leave her nostalgia behind. From then on, Ash's future remains unknown. The film seems to offer a reprieve from Fisher's haunted spaces and crippling nostalgia, positing this combination of the virtual and the real as the culmination of the "lost futures" so crucial to Fisher's work.

How do private servers fit within this framework? The argument here may seem that by being noncommercial, private servers can indeed provide players with the exact re-creation of their memories that they're looking for. This line of thinking remains precarious, however. Even the developers of Nostalrius seem aware that they were romanticizing the past when they questioned whether users "truly felt like it was the glory days." While private servers create a niche for like-minded players who seek these experiences, like Blizzard, the developers of private servers, ultimately, are also unable to turn back the clock just as Ash, in finding Murphy, remains unable to bring back Team Wizard. Although virtual worlds comprise data that can perfectly recreate our memories of spaces, just as in reality, nostalgia can never be sated. It will forever remain a simulacrum.

Notes

1   T.L. Taylor, *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 17.
2   Laurent Di Fillipo, "MMORPG as Locally Realized Worlds of Action," in *World Building: Transmedia, Fans, Industries*, ed. Marta Boni (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 233.
3   Ibid., 245.
4   Frank Allegra, "World of Warcraft Fans Bid Farewell to Largest Legacy Server Before Shutdown," *Polygon,* 11 April 2016, www.polygon.com/2016/4/11/11409436/world-of-warcraft-nostalrius-shutdown-legacy-servers-final-hours; Here, the word *server* doesn't refer to the hard drive in which data is stored, but is rather a general descriptor for the digital worlds which players inhabit.
5   "Announcement," *Nostalrius: Progressive Vanilla*, en.nostalrius.org/#announcement (accessed 3 April 2020).
6   Rene Glas highlights that players only rent out a license to access *World of Warcraft* rather than owning the software themselves, reinforcing and securing Blizzard's legal jurisdiction and commercial interests. René Glas, *Battlefields of Negotiation: Control, Agency, and Ownership in World of Warcraft* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 33.

7   Matthew Wilson*,* "Blizzard Shuts Down Vanilla *WoW* Private Server with 150k Active Players," *Kitguru,* 8 April 2016, www.kitguru.net/gaming/matthew-wilson/blizzard-shuts-down-vanilla-wow-private-server-with-150k-active-players/.

8   Jason Schreier, "Blizzard Says They Had To Shut Down *World of Warcraft* Fan Server Nostalrius," *Kotaku*, 26 April 2016, kotaku.com/blizzard-says-they-had-to-shut-down-world-of-warcraft-f-1773089312*.*

9   As Laurent Di Fillipo points out, "players take part in diversified situations when playing the same game hundreds, even thousands of hours." Di Fillipo, "MMORPG as Locally Realized Worlds of Action," 244.

10   Glas, *Battlefields of Negotiation*, 32.

11   For one example, see the case of popular Youtuber vincesauce exploring the MMMORPG *Active Worlds* (Activeworlds Inc., 1995) which has long been defunct. Tom Pinchuk, "This Abandoned MMO is a Digital Ghost Town with a Single Survivor," *Geek and Sundry*, 5 April 2016, https://geekandsundry.com/meet-the-sole-survivor-of-an-abandoned-mmo/.

12   Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press), 73–74.

13   Brian Ruh, *Stray Dog of Anime: The Films of Mamoru Oshii*, 2nd ed (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 176.

14   Chung Jean Hye, "Media Heterotopia and Transnational Filmmaking: Mapping Real and Virtual Worlds," *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 4 (2012): 104–105.

15   Oshii has expressed his disinterest in demarcating the boundaries between the real and virtual realms. See Tony Rayns, "Game Master," *Sight & Sound*, November 2002, 30. en.nostalrius.org/#announcement

16   Dani Cavallaro, *The Cinema of Mamoru Oshii: Fantasy, Technology and Politics* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2006) 178.

17   Justyna Janik argues that "specters reflect the state of the haunted present." Justyna Janik, "Ghosts of the Present Past: Spectrality in the Video Game Object," *Journal of Philosophy of Games 2*, no. 1 (2019): 5.

18   Mark Fisher, "What is Hauntology?" in *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2012): 16.

19   Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of my Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures* (Alresford, UK: Zero Books), 20.

20   "Long Live K-Punk: Mark Fisher in Conversation with *NERO*, Summer 2014 " *NERO*, 22 November 2018, www.neroeditions.com/long-live-k-punk/.

21   Miho Nakagawa, "Mamoru Oshii's Production of Multi-layered Space in 2D anime," *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 8, no. 1 (March 2013): 67.

22   Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 73–74.

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