

Lost Futures: In the Presence of Long-Lost Civilisations in Open World Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The long-lost, ancient civilisation that somehow had technology that far surpasses the current level is a common trope in videogames that feature large, open worlds. The *Mass Effect* trilogy (2007; 2010; 2012) features the Protheans, whose unparalleled feats of technology and engineering such as the mass relays laid the foundations for the galaxy Shepard steps into. *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) explores a primitive world littered with technological marvels left by the Old Ones. *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017) is centred around the Ancient Sheikah society, who 10,000 years prior to the game's setting had developed teleportation between towers and shrines, powerful runes, and even a motorbike. Their technology was later used to build the giant mechanical Divine Beasts and Guardians. All this while the warriors of the day are still using steel swords.

In this paper, I will explore why this trope seems so prevalent in open-world games, how it changes the configuration of the gameworld, and how the player's experience is shaped by it. My examination is framed around five intertwined terms and their theoretical context. Hauntology, presence, absence, lost futures, and nostalgia.

Gabriella Giannachi et al. describe 'presence' in the context of theatre as "the relationship between the live and mediated, on notions and effects of immediacy, authenticity and originality ... the character of self-awareness, the performance and presentation of self and role ... witnessing and interaction" (2012, 2). The authors also observe a relationship between presence and archaeology, that "concepts of 'presence', 'aura' and the 'uncanny' return of the past accompany an emphasis upon encounters with the cues or prompts of 'site' – with the sign or trace" (2012, 2-3). Presence is about the insertion of the self into an environment, linking yourself to the object or objects in question and linking them to you. As Josette Féral puts it, "the intellect seeks the object or being within themselves, in memory, recognizes it, and associates it with other qualities, other 'mental images'," (2012, 34).

The other side to presence is absence. Death, Rebecca Schneider notes, "appears to result in the paradoxical production of both disappearance and remains" (2012, 72). And, drawing from Jacques Derrida, she also states that "the archivable object also becomes itself through disappearance – as it becomes the trace of that which remains when performance (the artist's action) disappears" (2012, 72).

What remains of long-lost civilisations harbours both a presence and an absence in the gameworld. The objects are present – they are there, the player interacts with them. But they also denote an absence: creation without creator. That absence is not a nothingness, rather a hole that reminds the player that there is an absence. In that

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sense, it is simultaneously there and not there. This is what Derrida calls 'hauntology'. "Repetition *and* first time: this is perhaps the question of the event as question of the ghost" (Derrida 1994, 10). An object's history is simultaneously its present. The ghost belongs to the past in the sense that it is the manifestation of the absence of that which it is the ghost of, and yet precisely because it is a 'manifestation' – it has presence – it cannot be said to belong to the past.

When discussing 'lost futures' and nostalgia, I borrow the former term from Mark Fisher. Building on Fredric Jameson's writings, Fisher discusses the anachronism in contemporary pop culture. Today's films and music evoke a nostalgia for a real or imagined past that has the effect of stalling innovation to a *new* future. Instead, we pine for the lost futures of the past, the what could have been rather than the what could be.

Viewing the remnants of long-lost civilisations through this lens provides an insight into how players experience the ruins, architecture, tools and weaponry left behind. Through my case studies, I will examine how the player interacting with these 'ghosts' affects the experience of play both ludically and through the narrative and gameworld. This analysis will culminate in four separate perspectives on ancient, long-lost civilisations and what they mean to the gameworld:

1. Long-lost civilisations as a ludically liberating force

Many of the core gameplay mechanics in *Breath of the Wild* come through Sheikah runes and the Sheikah Slate, a tablet-like device containing the game's map, a camera, a bestiary and so on. By expanding the player's possibility space via this ancient civilisation, the gameworld ties the exploration of the past to the expansion of their own abilities.

2. Long-lost civilisations as the weight of expectation and destiny

As a result, the player is haunted by the desires and motivations of the creators of the technology they use. Their history and ideology become inscribed on the technology used by the player and lingers even after their disappearance. This is heightened in *Breath of the Wild* by the expectations of the existing descendants of the Ancient Sheikah.

3. Long-lost civilisations as the source of dread

At the same time, however, the power of the technology is haunted by the absence of its creators. That is, the player is constantly reminded that, despite this powerful technology, that ancient people lost their battle or went extinct. How did they disappear? Will the same happen to me? How can we face that which defeated the long-lost civilisation when we have far less advanced technology? Uniquely by using such ancient technology, the player is made aware of the spectre of evil, the cause of their absence.

4. Long-lost civilisations as nostalgia and lost futures

But these ancient civilisations are also idolised and looked back at with nostalgia, despite them being far out of living memory. This act of remembrance is actually a forward-facing nostalgia. The nostalgia for a past that only exists in the imagination is actually more to do with what that imagination desires the future to look like. This nostalgia feeds into a resentment for that which destroyed the ancient civilisation, a longing for what could have been: the potential futures of that civilisation that are now lost.

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