

'You've met with a terrible fate, haven't you?': A Hauntological Analysis of Carceral Violence in Majora's Mask

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Abstract

More than mere entertainment, video games can be studied as cultural texts, relevant for the interpretation and understanding of the public imaginary relating to crime. Drawing on ideas of Gothic and popular criminology and using a critical lens of hauntology, this study aims to explore themes of carcerality in the video game *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*. By constructing the text of *Majora's Mask* as a horror game, and a cultural text 'in distress', encompassing a crypt incorporating a phantom of past trauma, this paper identifies themes of carceral violence within the text as symptomatic of a deep, haunting disillusionment of carceral justice. Relating back to the culture and context in which the game was created, we argue that this cultural text is 'haunted' by the trauma of lost ideals in relation to punishment; a deep disillusionment towards a carceral machinery producing the socially dead instead of rehabilitating them.

Keywords

carceral violence, hauntology, uncanny, video games, horror, ghost criminology

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Introduction

The 2000 action-adventure video game *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* is a significant departure from the traditional formula found in *The Legend of Zelda* franchise. As [Juster \(2011\)](#) argues, 'the most pressing concern is not finding the Triforce, looking for a princess or vanquishing a great evil, but rather trying desperately not to be *trapped* in a monster's body' (p. 158, emphasis added). From the very first frame, this game, released as a remake by Nintendo in 2015, explores themes of entrapment and confinement, placing our protagonist in a 'twisted' world ([Nintendo, 2018](#)) he cannot escape. While not traditionally labelled as such, we will argue that *Majora's Mask* may in fact be conceived as a horror game, and that the fear and dread the game instils can be read as symptomatic of deeper, cultural insecurities relating to punishment and criminal justice.

As argued by cultural and Gothic criminologists (see, for instance, [Ferrell Hayward, & Young, 2015](#); [Picart & Greek, 2007](#); [Rafter, 2007](#); [Steinmetz, 2018](#)), mediums such as video games are more than just mere entertainment; they are cultural texts, which 'transmit, reflect, distort, and even disturb social conditions and public consciousness' ([Steinmetz, 2018](#)). Examining the Other and the societal construction of the monstrous in both 'real' and 'reel' worlds, Gothic criminology seeks to prompt a critical response to public imaginaries surrounding crime and justice ([Picart & Greek, 2007](#)). As such, Gothic criminology 'recognises the complementarity of critical academic and aesthetic accounts of deviant behaviour as intersecting with public policy in complex, non-reductive ways' ([Picart & Greek, 2007](#), p. 11–12). This, also relating back to popular criminology ([Rafter, 2007](#)), allows for the critical study of video games as cultural texts relevant for public policy as well as the public imaginary of crime; the set of values, symbols and understandings of crime held by the larger public to understand their social whole. As part of a popular criminology ([Rafter, 2007](#)), affecting the cultural imagination surrounding crime and justice, video games may therefore be studied to get a deeper understanding of criminality and the social and political imaginary of criminality. As 'a discourse parallel to academic criminology and of at least equal social and intellectual significance' ([Rafter, 2007](#), p. 404), the framework of popular criminology invites us to examine the representation of crime and punishment in its own right in order to uncover important public discourses surrounding criminality. More recently, culturally imagined understandings of confinement and punishment have been examined in various mediums, including video games. This involves the examination of autobiographical prison literature, demonstrating how patriarchal anxieties regarding punishment is part of the gothic prison imaginary ([Fredriksson, 2019](#)), the representations of incarceration, crime and madness in the video games *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (2009) and *Batman: Arkham City* (2011) ([Fawcett & Kohm, 2019](#)) and the exploration of carcerality as public imaginary in the horror video game series *Silent Hill* ([Steinmetz, 2018](#)). This body of previous research demonstrates the relevance of examining the representations of carcerality and confinement in cultural texts in their own right in order to gain a deeper, critical understanding of these concepts as they may

be understood by the public. Drawing on these ideas, this paper will analyse *Majora's Mask* as a cultural text, exploring themes and elements of carceral violence as well as how these themes reflect culturally imagined ideas of this concept. By taking the interactive nature of video games into account, the analysis will also consider the participatory elements of the gameplay experience. Unlike other cultural mediums such as films or novels, video games require active participation by the player in order to progress. Although interactivity does not always equate identification (Shaw, 2014), video games as a medium in the least *allows* for the identification and empathy with avatars (proxies designed by the player with some level of self-representation) and characters (entities already created in the game that the player control), meaning that feelings such as confinement and entrapment experienced within the game does not only affect the protagonist, but by extension, the players themselves. While identification, immersion and empathy of the protagonist varies between games, Shaw (2014) interestingly observed that many of the gamers she interviewed playing *Legend of Zelda* games did identify with the protagonist's story and position in these games.

By considering *Majora's Mask* a cultural text 'in distress' (Rashkin, 1992, p. 47–48), and by constructing *Majora's Mask* as a horror game, we will argue that the game conveys a culturally imagined understanding of carcerality as a consuming, violent experience which not only renders individuals invisible, but socially non-living, stripped of identity, disrupted spatially as well as temporally. Relating back to the culture in which the game was created, we furthermore argue that this cultural text is haunted by the trauma of lost ideals in relation to punishment; a deep disillusionment towards a carceral machinery producing the socially dead instead of rehabilitating them. In the context of this vertiginous, haunting cynicism, evident in both Japanese and English-speaking cultures alike, carceral violence is rendered gratuitous as well as unjustified.

Majora's Mask

Majora's Mask was released in 2000 for the Nintendo 64 as the sixth entry of *The Legend of Zelda* franchise, 2 years following the critically acclaimed *Ocarina of Time*. Similarly to its predecessor, *Majora's Mask* would gain a following and popularity of its own, resulting in the game being remade in 2015 for the Nintendo 3DS. Overall, the game has been described as immensely popular (Mejia, 2014) and has also been the subject of previous academic inquiries (see, for instance, Olmedo Morell, 2015; Sherlock, 2008).

Majora's Mask begins with the playable character Link being ambushed by a masked character referred to as the Skull Kid, stealing Link's ocarina and horse. In taking pursuit, Link finds himself falling down a deep chasm, surrounded by strange, vertiginous images. Link emerges seemingly unscathed, but is then cursed by the Skull Kid, trapped in the form of a wooden creature known as a Deku Scrub. Unable to change back on his own, Link must attempt to find a way to reverse the curse. Travelling through a twisted corridor, referred to as the 'catacombs' by the Zelda fanbase

(Fandom, 2021), causing a sense of displacement, Link subsequently encounters the Happy Mask Salesman.

Opening with the ominous statement of ‘You’ve met with a terrible fate, haven’t you?’,¹ he agrees to help Link regain his original form, if Link retrieves the titular Majora’s Mask. With no other option, Link agrees and emerges in Termina, the world in which *Majora’s Mask* takes place. This parallel world to Hyrule is however in peril. Cursed by Majora’s Mask and the Skull Kid, the moon is set to crash into Termina within 3 days, destroying the land and everyone inhabiting it. With the moon hanging above Link, hauntingly observing his every move, there is no escape from this calamity. Link’s only option is to go back in time to the dawn of the first day, using his ocarina. Now trapped in a three-day cycle, Link is forced to travel through Termina, taking the forms of other lost souls in order to acquire the help needed to stop the sinister Moon from destroying the world.

As a clear sequel to *Ocarina of Time*, the opening scene of young Link, identical to his character in the previous game, riding his horse Epona, suggests a direct continuation of the events in the previous game (Juster, 2011). There are even direct references back to *Ocarina of Time* within the game. For instance, the game’s prologue references Hyrule, the world in which *Ocarina of Time* and most other Zelda games take place, identifying the Link in *Majora’s Mask* as the very same Link who saved Hyrule in the previous game. Yet, despite using the same assets from its predecessor, such as the same game engine and similar gameplay, *Majora’s Mask* is a very different game. From the very beginning, the game does not adhere to the normal expectations of saving Zelda and Hyrule like in the other adventure game instalments, but rather finding the means of escaping the entrapment of a cursed form. As such, we argue that the game has more in common with another genre not commonly associated with *The Legend of Zelda* franchise, namely, horror.

As a genre, horror games are meant to invoke fear in the player through disturbing content, twisted subject matter and violent immersion (Rouse, 2009). Horror games tend to use tropes similar to horror films; using darkness or mist to obscure the player’s visual field, creating an isolating and alienating atmosphere, and involving the use of a corrupted world, overtaken by strange people or horrific monsters (Perron, 2018; Rouse, 2009). Horror games furthermore utilises the uncanny and the abject to illicit fear, anxiety and dread in the player (Spittle, 2011; Steinmetz, 2018). Originally explored by Freud in 1919 (2001), the uncanny was defined through the translation as the familiar becoming unfamiliar. The original definition of uncanny was ‘*unheimlich*’ (meaning ‘unhomely’), which was used in order to strongly refer to the home and the epitome of the familiar and our subjectivity (Spittle, 2011). Ultimately, the uncanny can be found within the interplay of the familiar and the unfamiliar, as it blurs the boundaries and paradoxically becomes both the homely and unhomely (Spittle, 2011). Related to the concept of the uncanny is that of abjection, the *abject*, at its core, is that which threatens borders, the in-between, which threatens our subjectivity (Kristeva, 1982; Spittle, 2011). Intrinsically linked to horror, Creed argues that horror is really a ‘work of abjection or abjection at work’ (Creed, 1993, p. 10). Only the act of ejecting

the abject can maintain the threatened borders and protect identity (Kristeva, 1982). The abject is thus something that must be cast out in order to protect our identities from harm (Fredrikson, 2019). Related to this notion is the figure of the monster. As a personification of the uncanny, of 'otherness within sameness' (Beal, 2002, p. 6), the monster must be annihilated, destroyed and cast out in order for society to purge itself of whatever social ill it represents (Ingebrechtsen, 2001). Being both abject and uncanny, the motif of the monstrous does not only invoke horror in of itself, but the transgressive aspect of the monster, the ambiguity in which it revels, frightens because it both repels and attracts (Creed, 1993). While the very presence of the monster threatens borders, the annihilation of the monstrous is legitimised, condoned and even desirable, underlining the terror/desire ambiguity of the abject (Creed, 1993).

As such, while horror emanates from the uncanny and the abject, horror also frightens because it disrupts, inverts and dissolves social categories. Just as the monstrous is repelling because it 'embod[ies] uncomfortable truth[s] about ourselves and society' (Steinmetz, 2018, p. 268), horror frightens because it speaks of deep-held cultural fears and anxieties. As Steinmetz (2018, p. 269) argues, 'By upsetting our sense of order and security, horror provides a reflection of ourselves and our ontologies. It frightens because it interrogates and disturbs psychological, social, and cultural formations. There thus is a *political* dimension to horror (emphasis in original)'.

As a game, *Majora's Mask* is not only teeming with motifs normally associated with horror, such as ghosts, haunting, death and decay, but the game also invokes the uncanny as well as themes of the abject. As will be explored, this is evidenced through the alienation of Link, our main protagonist, from the in-game world as well as the narrative, rendering him not only uncanny and abject, but in fact monstrous; as someone who will be cast out. As such, the narratives and gameplay of *Majora's Mask* serves to encapsulate the player in an unsettling and unnerving atmosphere, not unlike how the uncanny and abject rhetoric in *F.E.A.R* works to create an uncertain and uneasy ambience (Spittle, 2011). As Spittle (2011) argues, the first-player shooter game *F.E.A.R* does not only offer heavily gendered abject imagery of blood, death and decay, but also plays with the ambiguity of identity, the threat of the Other and the boundary between self and Other in order to unsettle the player.

While the same characters are present in both Termina and Hyrule, the world of *Majora's Mask* feels twisted and different (Nintendo, 2018). The inhabitants of the world look like those of the world that Link once left behind in *Ocarina of Time*, but they are not the same. Creating a 'mirror universe' (Juster, 2011), where all the people appear the same, but act in different ways, without memory of their former selves, *Majora's Mask* uses the player's familiarity with the characters of *Ocarina of Time* as both a ludic and narrative tool to invoke the uncanny. The once familiar game of *Ocarina of Time* is now distorted as the uncanny characters haunt *Majora's Mask* with their familiar yet unfamiliar presences. An echo of Link's previous world, filled with memories of the lost, Termina has even been described as a creation by the Skull Kid, constructed from his memories, past traumas and delusions and the dark magic of *Majora's Mask* (Nintendo, 2018). As such, there is a close intertextual relationship

between these two games, constantly juxtaposed, which serves to underline the uncanniness and horror haunting *Majora's Mask*. While this paper will focus mainly on *Majora's Mask*, the unique Doppelgänger-like relationship between *Ocarina of Time* and *Majora's Mask* will also be explored.

The two central mechanics defining the game, the temporal mechanic and the mask mechanic, work to instil a sense of dread and powerlessness in the player that lingers throughout the entire interactive experience. As ludological tools distinguishing *Majora's Mask* from other games, not just within the *Legend of Zelda* series, these two mechanics will be explored further in the context of analysis. As such, while not traditionally classified as a horror game, we argue that *Majora's Mask* may be conceived as horror, as it not only invokes feelings of both the uncanny and the abject, but revels in ambiguities symptomatic of deep, cultural anxieties. In the current paper, we are going to unpack the nature and meaning of these cultural anxieties, using hauntology as a critical lens.

Tracing the Spectres of Confinement: Hauntology as Critical Lens

As a concept first outlined by Derrida (1994), hauntology has been used in critical, psychoanalytical and literary studies as a means to explore the ephemerality or impermanence of our present, as it relates to our past (Davis, 2005). Hauntology has also been used as a tool to deconstruct the binaries of life/death, absence/presence and being/nonbeing in the video game *Tacoma* (Jones, 2019). It is not about proving the metaphysical existence of 'ghosts' but rather, in a Derridean sense, the exploration of the collapse of the past and present, the demands the past makes upon the living and what possibilities this may bring for the future. Similarly, Abraham and Torok (1972) developed a psychoanalytic, trauma-driven definition of hauntology, building on the act of *incorporation*, as well as the concepts of the *phantom*, and the *crypt*, each of which will be explained.

Incorporation is a psychoanalytical term referring to the internalisation of a lost object, occurring within the subject as a support system in the process of mourning that object (Abraham & Torok, 1972; Clewell, 2004; Fiddler, 2019). The object could be anything from a place, an individual, a community or even an ideal (Fiddler, 2019). In the process of this internalisation, the subject takes the lost object 'into the structure of one's own identity' (Clewell, 2004, p. 50). As opposed to introjection, a more adaptive form of internalisation, the process of incorporation denies the loss of the object, resulting in the encryption of the other into the subject's body. As Fiddler (2019, p. 466) describes, incorporation still involves the internalisation of the object, but '*as though it was alive*' (emphasis in original). This incorporated dead object, the *phantom*, lingers subconsciously within the subject; a full-fledged 'stranger within the subject's own mental topography' (Abraham, 1975, p. 27, quoted in Rashkin, 1992, p. 40), haunting the person's behaviour and speech. The phantom ventriloquises the subject, appearing through the subject's own words and acts, but also 'speaks' through 'the silence, gaps or

secret in the speech of someone else' (Rashkin, 1992, p. 40). The haunting of the phantom does consequently not only occur in the altered behaviour and speech of the subject, but also in the lacuna, or *absence*, existing in the gaps, the in-between and the unsaid.

The process of incorporation is done unconsciously, in secret, and the phantom is hidden deep within an isolating structure, a *crypt*. The phantom is buried within this crypt, entombed, 'doomed to endlessly repeat the trauma, the loss, for which it was originally incorporated' (Fiddler, 2019, p. 467). The crypt is, as Derrida (1994, p. xv) puts it, 'built by violence', where the walls, pillars and beams are constructed by the trauma or social violence itself, encrypting it. This vault, which secures both its contents and those outside of its confinement, needs to be unlocked in order to reveal the phantom lingering within. It is by cracking the crypt that the phantom may be unburied, and the trauma and loss unearthed.

Drawing on the idea of haunting as transferable, Rashkin, (1992, p. 47–48) explored the hidden crypts of 'text(s) in distress', containing secrets of past traumas of which they are unaware, often hailing from previous generations. Rashkin studied various thematic and behavioural elements of the texts, such as uncanniness, obsessive repetition, ghosts and poems or texts *within* the texts to uncover the phantom, secret or trauma haunting the main text. As such, aspects of the uncanny as well as the abject become important features in the readings of 'haunted' texts. While the characters and the text itself remain unaware of their hidden secrets, the process of unearthing the traumatic mysteries within the text illuminates the discourses and social practices that encrypted the trauma in the first place, giving it new, contextualised meaning. This use of hauntology enables a critical, deconstructive way to explore texts-as-crypts in order to trace experiences of incorporated trauma within, as well as what demands this past trauma may place on our future.

In the current paper, using hauntology as a critical lens, we construct *Majora's Mask* as a cultural text 'in distress' (Rashkin, 1992, p. 47–48); a text including a crypt incorporating a phantom of past trauma, haunting the main text. By studying the themes and narratives, as well as gameplay and game mechanics of *Majora's Mask*, we seek to unearth what embedded, culturally imagined traumas that reside entombed within the crypt, haunting our present with its past in order to inform our future. While not canonically recognised as a horror game, we will argue that the trauma of carceral violence 'haunting' the text of *Majora's Mask* in fact places the game into the realm of horror, instilling fear and dread in the player.

In order to tease out the spectral within the cultural text of *Majora's Mask*, the text was explored using ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1987, p. 68; Steinmetz, 2018), which, using a highly interactive and reflexive approach, 'documents and understands the communication of meaning, as well as verify theoretical relationships'. Using ethnographic content analysis, the game-as-text was subjected to many close readings and playthroughs, which included the study of narratives, images, characters, plot devices, monsters, scenery and other elements of the game. Due to the close intertextual interplay between the games, we also explored the game's relationship to

Ocarina of Time. We analysed these elements, exploring traces of lingual or narrative symptoms or ‘tics’ (Fiddler, 2019) of the entombed phantom, ventriloquising the main text of the game. By analysing these results using a hauntological lens, we were able to unpack themes of carceral violence permeating the text and explore them in terms of social trauma and violence, relating back to the context in which they were created. Being a Japanese product, created by Nintendo for both Japanese and English-speaking audiences, the culture in which this trauma may be located is, similarly to what Steinmetz (2018) argued in relation to *Silent Hill*, arguably both Japanese and Western.

During the late 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s when *Majora’s Mask* was developed, Japanese and English-speaking Western countries such as the US and the UK were experiencing similar shifts in ideas of criminal justice. This involved increases of securitisation, fear of crime, punitiveness and crime control, leading to feelings of precariousness and ontological insecurity (Giddens, 1991; Garland, 2001; Hamai & Ellis, 2006; Young, 2007). In Japan, this ‘vertigo’ (Young, 2007) was also expressed through a number of moral panics and an increased fear of the ineffectiveness of the criminal justice system, fuelling more severe penal policies with the increased use of electronic surveillance and rising incarceration numbers, without the corresponding increase in crime (Hamai & Ellis, 2006; Johnson, 2007). These ‘tough-on-crime’ policies such as increased use of capital punishment and an ‘expanding web of surveillance’ (Johnson, 2007, p. 413) were often directed at the more vulnerable people of society, including foreign residents. This pervasive sense of public insecurity has also been mirrored and reflected in popular culture such as novels (Johnson, 2007). It is within this context, relevant to both Japanese and English-speaking cultures, that *Majora’s Mask* is set and analysed.

Unearthing the Crypt: A Hauntological Analysis of *Majora’s Mask*

When tracing the spectral in order to identify the crypt and its entombed phantom, symptomatic of underlying cultural trauma, ‘distressing’ the text of *Majora’s Mask*, three main themes relating to carceral violence were identified: corporeal entrapment, surveillance and control, and temporal confinement. The following section will deal with each of these themes, haunting the main text and invoking a sense of horror, in turn. We will then explore what underlying trauma, of which these themes may be symptomatic, that can be unburied, contextualised within the Japanese and English-speaking cultures for which the game was created. We will argue that Link is himself the phantom, entombed within his crypt of Termina, doomed to endlessly repeat the carceral trauma, the loss of his home and the impossibility of redemption, for which he was originally incorporated. As such, we argue that the text is haunted by the trauma of lost faith in the criminal justice system, leading to a vertiginous disillusionment of carceral justice, rendering carceral violence gratuitous as well as unjustified.

Corporeal Entrapment

Throughout the game, there are numerous examples of corporeal entrapment as re-occurring narratives relating to carceral violence. Perhaps the most obvious example is Link himself, being trapped inside his own body at the start of the game. Cursed by the Skull Kid and forced into the form of a Deku Scrub, Link is literally confined into a twisted, monstrous shape that becomes his new body. This, similar to descriptions of prison inmates ([Fredriksson, 2019](#)), not only strips Link of his selfhood and autonomy, but of his identity and subjectivity as well. He is no longer the Hero of Time ([Nintendo, 2018](#)), but a monster, trapped in a body that is not his own. And, as all monsters must, Link will eventually be forced to be cast out ([Creed, 1993](#); [Ingebretsen, 2001](#)). While Link eventually finds a way to be free from this curse, he, and the player by extension, is still forced to adopt this form along with others in order to progress. As the player is repeatedly forced to entrap Link in this alien form, the visible pain of this corporeal entrapment inflicted on Link acts like a visual ‘tic’ or somatic symptom of a hidden trauma within the text; a visceral image which haunts the player.

The loss of identity experienced by Link’s corporeal entrapment is emphasised by his changeable characterisation throughout the game. Rather than maintaining his characteristic self as the Hero of Time, Link has to use the identities of other characters in order to move forward. Throughout *Majora’s Mask*, there are several examples of this, ranging from the Garo Mask to gain Link access to Ikana Valley or the Captain’s Hat to assume command over undead soldiers, but the three most prominent examples are the Deku, Goron and Zora Masks, which physically transforms Link into one of three forms.

Upon wearing either of these three transformation masks, Link assumes the identity of one of three, recently deceased individuals, using their abilities and identities to immerse himself into the world. The masks allow Link to take the form of these deceased characters, essentially turning himself into uncanny doubles of the dead. This creates an association not only to loss of identity but essentially to loss of life; Link’s corporeal entrapment expressed by the masks turns him into something beyond a non-person, the non-living, a ghost. This may again be linked back to notions of imprisonment as civil death, where confinement and incorporation of the prison is akin to the effacing of life ([Fredriksson, 2019](#)).

While Link’s corporeal entrapment is perhaps the most obvious example, this theme of carceral violence can however be found in the eponymous *Majora’s Mask* itself. As eluded in the game and the Nintendo encyclopaedia, the Mask contains the imprisoned spirit of Majora, ‘sealed [...] in shadow forever’ ([Majora’s Mask, 2000](#)). This entrapment also becomes obvious in the final boss fight with *Majora’s Mask*, where this spirit physically attempts to break out of the mask in various forms. In this final fight, Majora does not only attempt to free itself from the curse of the mask but assimilates and incorporates itself with it, as the mask-qua-prison literally becomes part of Majora’s body.

Overall, the theme of corporeal entrapment found throughout the game does not only signal a loss of identity and life but uncannily links this experience to the experience of imprisonment (Fredrikson, 2019). Both Link and his main antagonist struggle to free themselves of their corporeal, monstrous prisons, hoping to turn their unfamiliar husks back into familiarity before their identities are entirely consumed. While the monster itself is a sign of trauma (Ingebreetsen, 2001), the constant and repetitive shift of identity in the game visibly causes Link severe pain, further highlighting this traumatic experience. This entrapment further works as a ludic tool to instill a sense of enclosure and discomfort in the player, locking them inside various monstrous bodies, and can be considered to disturb our sense of identity and reality (Steinmetz, 2018), as reflected by the pain on Link's face during the grotesque transformations.

As such, the violence of corporeal entrapment and its associated pains, incorporated into Link-as-phantom, emerges in the main text as a symptom of an underlying trauma relating to the understanding of carcerality and carceral justice. Here, a cultural understanding of incarceration as negating of identity is expressed, illustrating the violence of carcerality as it turns Link into something non-living, a ghost. This unforgiving and cynical understanding of carcerality, related to the punitive shifts evident in both Western and Japanese societies during the time when *Majora's Mask* was created (Hamai & Ellis, 2006; Johnson, 2007; Garland, 2001), can thus be read as a popular culture reaction to a pervasive sense of public insecurity, as indeed has been observed previously in other mediums (Johnson, 2007). The dissolution of identity keenly felt throughout the movements of the game, directly linked to the uncanny experiences of corporal entrapment, may therefore be considered to represent culturally innate ideas relating to the pains of carcerality.

Surveillance and Loss of Control

The second theme of carceral violence identified in the game was that of surveillance and loss of control. As Steinmetz (2018, p. 278) argues, 'surveillance is intimately linked to confinement, as such strategies often involve the monitoring of bodies in space for the purposes of control (real or imagined)'. Numerous elements of loss of control are evidenced throughout *Majora's Mask*, instilling feelings of unease in the player. One of the most obvious examples is the narratively loss of control experienced from the very onset of the game. As the game begins, we are told Link is on a journey to find a lost friend (*Majora's Mask*, 2000). However, the events unfolding, locking him inside his monstrous body, quickly strips Link of his agency. While his first objective is to become free of his monstrous form, the main quest of the game is subsequently not dictated by Link at all, but by the Happy Mask Salesman. Saving Link from his corporeal imprisonment, Link is then forced to proceed with the game's main objective in order to pay off this debt to the Happy Mask Salesman, essentially forgoing his own quest to locate his friend, whom he therefore never finds. This loss of control over the narrative and loss of agency is furthermore emphasised by the ludic mechanic of the world of Termina itself. Unlike most other games, the events of *Majora's Mask* will

unfold regardless of Link's (and the player's) involvement. Labelled a 'player-independent game' by [Olmedo Morell \(2015\)](#), the story, characters and narratives progress in *Majora's Mask* independently of the players themselves. For instance, if Link (and the player) decides not to go looking for the witch in the swamp on the first day, her sister will leave her shop on the second day to go looking for her herself, making it impossible to access the shop for the rest of that three-day cycle, as long as the witch is trapped in the woods. These events will unfold whether or not Link (and the player) is there to witness them. This particular game mechanic highlights the loss of agency in Link; he is not the main actor of the game, neither narratively nor ludologically.

Another example illustrating loss of control concerns the main antagonist, the Skull Kid. While it is the Skull Kid who imprisons Link in his monstrous body at the start of the game, as the story unfolds, it becomes apparent that the Skull Kid is himself restrained, being merely a puppet to Majora's Mask. Just before the final boss fight with Majora's Mask, as the Mask discards Skull Kid's lifeless body, it itself states:

'A puppet that can no longer be used is mere garbage. This puppet's role has just ended.'

([Majora's Mask, 2000](#))

Just as Link is bereft of control over his own narrative, so is the Skull Kid. This uncanny doubling of the loss of control and agency further works to instil a sense of helplessness in the player. As a carceral element, loss of control and agency are well documented aspects of imprisonment and incarceration ([De Vigianni, 2007](#); [Douglas, Plugge & Fitzpatrick, 2009](#)). While obviously part of the punishment itself, these experiences may also be linked to the loss of identity, autonomy and individuality. Just as the Skull Kid loses his control and identity when he is incorporated by Majora's Mask, so is the inmate when they become assimilated into the prison. The notion of the prison as consuming ([Fredriksson, 2019](#)) is also mirrored in *Majora's Mask's* dialogue following directly after it has rejected the Skull Kid's body:

'I... I shall consume. Consume... Consume everything.'

([Majora's Mask, 2000](#))

The loss of control experienced in the game's narratives can therefore be read as threatening and uncanny aspects of carcerality, as an effect of monstrous and all-consuming confinement.

While there are several examples of surveillance throughout the game, for instance, the peephole in Kafei's hideout surveilling the stolen goods coming into the curiosity shop, or the ability to spy and monitor other characters unseen with the aid of the Stone mask, the most palpable example of surveillance is the disturbing moon, looming above. Not only is the face on the moon distressing and unsettling on its own as the familiar celestial body approaches Termina, but it is also a distortion of the familiar tale

of ‘the man in the moon’, thereby turning this familiar simulacrum face into something unfamiliar. This uncanny representation of the moon is therefore another example of the recognisable and safe becoming unhomely and corrupted within the game’s narrative. As the moon’s unfamiliar face trespasses upon the familiar, the moon is also placed in the realm of abject horror, similar to that of the prison (Fredriksson, 2019); as something in-between familiar and unfamiliar, threatening to break the boundaries of subjectivity as well as reality. But as the moon is constantly kept in view, it also relentlessly keeps Link in view, turning the entire world of Termina into a great Panopticon² (Foucault, 1977) in its omniscience. Being cursed by the Skull Kid and the power of Majora’s Mask, the moon also carries intrinsic antagonistic connotations. As such, the moon represents a constant surveillance of an overpowering force that is locking Link in Termina, his crypt, made more potent by the fact that it is constantly getting closer, day by day. Left with the only option of restarting the three-day cycle, Link is able to delay the inevitable but never capable of fully escape the moon’s constant approach. Powerless to stop the impending cataclysm, Link is forced to submit to endless antagonistic surveillance. This feeling of surveillance is made all the more claustrophobic as it is coupled with a vertiginous loss of control and an inherent dissolution of agency, demonstrating that the carceral violence inflicted upon Link is not only visceral, but ontological. This permanent surveillance can also be read as a symbolic expression of the ‘expanding web of surveillance’ (Johnson, 2007, p. 413) evident in Japanese as well as Western cultures during the time of the game’s production. As such, this theme of carceral violence is read as symptomatic of the ontological uncertainty permeating the culturally imagined trauma concerning carcerality. Exactly what this trauma entails will be unearthed with the exploration of the third and final theme of carceral violence, temporal confinement.

Temporal Confinement

The third and perhaps most obvious theme relating to carcerality identified in *Majora’s Mask* is that of temporal confinement. Having escaped the spatial entrapment within the walls of Clock Town, Termina’s capitol, for the first 3 days, Link then becomes permanently confined in a temporal sense within the three-day cycle. While Link has the power to reset the 3 days, reliving the same events and meetings over and over, he may never escape the continuous loop all together. Not until Link (and the player) wins the game may he break this cycle and leave Termina. However, if the player then was to start the game again, the saving mechanics of the game places Link right back within the three-day cycle, keeping him (and the player) trapped.

This temporal confinement is also a reflection of real-life imprisonment (Fredriksson, 2019). Prisons are temporally confining, both in the sense that you ‘serve your time’, but also since the confinement itself takes you out of time, making you temporally disjointed. There are examples of people who, when being released after years of imprisonment, are forced to refamiliarise themselves with a society which seems to have moved on beyond them (Western, Braga, Davis & Sirois, 2015). This

‘dissolution of time’ (Fredriksson, 2019, p. 273) evident in prison is directly mirrored by the disrupted temporality in *Majora’s Mask*, an effect achieved by temporal confinement. This temporal confinement, evident both for Link and the player, serves to isolate Link from his surroundings and effectively put him out of joint with time. All progress Link has made during a cycle will be erased once the three-day cycle is reset. All the people he has encountered and helped will again become strangers. Only Link (and the player) remembers what has happened and what will happen. This serves to instil not only a sense of helplessness and futility in the player, but also a sense of alienation. Link becomes the Other in this world; a spectre haunting the uncanny double of his old world with the knowledge of what once was, breaking the boundaries of space as well as time. Over the course of the game, Link even becomes a spectre to himself, haunting his own present, which is simultaneously the past and the future, with his own pasts. Much like the prison is ‘being haunted by its future’ (Fredriksson, 2019, p. 267), so is also Link. By constantly reliving the same 3 days over and over in order to save himself and those around him, Link paradoxically destroys himself, as well as those around him, making himself unfamiliar. His time is out of joint. It is in the breaking of these boundaries of the (un)home, rendering these boundaries porous, that the myth of the separation between Other and Self is exposed (Fiddler, 2013). Link is simultaneously the familiar and the Other.

By Othering Link, placing him out of place and out of time, the game also negates his subjectivity. As such, the game projects a carceral narrative which not only disjoins Link from time, but which effectively demonstrates a dissolution of life. He has not only lost his identity, becoming unmoored from time, but he has also been made into a spectre, haunting his present with his pasts. Similar to the effects of the corporeal entrapment evident in the game, the temporal confinement thus effectively gives Link the status of non-living, a ghost. This again reflects themes evident in real-life narratives of imprisonment, where prison ‘becomes the space of its dissolution into non-life’ (Fredriksson, 2019, p. 273). As a location of civil death, prison has previously been depicted as a tomb, populated by ghosts and other unliving monsters (Fredriksson, 2019; Smith, 2009).

Discussion

As we have traced the spectral in the cultural text of *Majora’s Mask*, teasing out the hidden traumas ‘haunting’ the game, we have also placed the game in the realm of horror. While horror motifs are prevalent throughout the game, as demonstrated, one of the ludological effects underlining the horrors of this game is the unique relationship between *Majora’s Mask* and *Ocarina of Time*, more akin to doppelgängers than prequel-sequel. Part of why *Majora’s Mask* is so unsettling is because the horror and uncanniness is entirely unexpected. Expecting the safe, familiar ambience of *Ocarina of Time*, the player settles in for a new but habitual adventure, with a green-clothed Link off to save the princess. Instead, they are met with a terrible fate as the uneasy atmosphere closes in around them, trapping them in a sense of dread and anxiety from which, in true Gothic spirit, there is no escape. Unlike in proclaimed horror games,

there is no ‘canonical knowledge’ (Spittle, 2011) of horror tropes presumed in the player before emerging; no figurative warning shots fired to alert the player of the horrors to come. Instead, this jarring display of horror in a franchise mostly known for traditional action-adventure games emanates from the underlying trauma ‘haunting’ the game-as-text. Here, the horror creeps in, lurking and encompassing, until the safe and familiar has suddenly become unsafe and unfamiliarised, not unlike the criminal justice imaginary in Japan, transforming from ‘the safest country in the world’ to ‘a danger zone’, where ‘public safety has deteriorated’ (Johnson, 2007, p. 374–375). Even though the doppelgänger-games *Ocarina of Time* and *Majora’s Mask* were released only 2 years apart, they express radically different reflections of society as cultural texts, reflecting this shift. While narratives of increasing crime had been prevalent in Japan and other Western countries since the mid-1990s, around the time *Ocarina of Time* was developed, it was not until the end of the 1990s and early 2000s when *Majora’s Mask* was released that the deep sense of insecurity increased, leading to a punitive turn in criminal justice policies (Johnson, 2007; Pratt, 2007). As such, we argue that the corruption of the world in *Ocarina of Time* visible in *Majora’s Mask*, resulting in an uncanny, confining ‘mirror universe’, reflects a real-life shift in cultural anxieties relating to carcerality and criminal justice in Japan and Western countries. The three carceral themes identified in *Majora’s Mask* (*corporeal entrapment*, *surveillance and loss of control*, and *temporal confinement*) are thus considered to be popular cultural expressions of innate cultural anxieties relating to increased penal populism, increased surveillance and increased punitive policies, all of which were evident at the time of the game’s development (Hamai & Ellis, 2006; Johnson, 2007; Pratt, 2007).

While this strengthens the position of *Majora’s Mask* as a culturally relevant text, incorporating imagined social trauma in relation to carcerality, it furthermore aligns the game’s carceral themes with the trauma-informed themes of hauntology. Link is not only a ghost, but a *phantom*, churning within his crypt of Termina, doomed to endless, uncanny repetitions of the carceral trauma for which he was originally incorporated. As Link’s movements within the crypt is traced through the symptomatic tics haunting the text, a deep, traumatic sense of futility is unearthed. Read as a cultural representation of carcerality, this sense of futility in *Majora’s Mask*, permeating the game, speaks of a culturally imagined social trauma relating to the futility and pointlessness of carceral justice. Much like *Silent Hill*’s monstrous retribution may represent as well as problematize our collective lust for vengeful justice (Steinmetz, 2018), the elements of carceral violence demonstrated in *Majora’s Mask* is argued to reflect and problematize our disillusionment with the criminal justice system and cynicism towards a carceral machinery producing the socially dead rather than rehabilitating them. While the carceral themes of *Majora’s Mask* are suggestive of a cultural fear of punishment as, in line with the classical theorists, inherently evil, which corrupts as well as consumes, leaving nothing but ghosts in its wake, the game also expresses a deeper fear of carceral punishment as inherently pointless. This connects back to the vertiginous fear of ineffective criminal justice expressed in the Japanese society during the time when *Majora’s Mask* was created (Hamai & Ellis, 2006; Johnson, 2007). Indeed, the carceral themes of *Majora’s Mask* do not necessarily reflect a fear of crime but

are rather symptomatic of a fear of the *ineffectiveness* of punishment. This is the trauma which the phantom represents, the hidden violence which distresses the text-as-crypt, a vertiginous, haunting disillusionment of carceral justice. Ventriloquising the main game-as-text with the themes of carceral violence outlined above, Link as the phantom endlessly repeats this trauma, this loss of faith in incarceration, twisting and annihilating himself, incorporating the violence of carcerality and evoking a sense of futility. Here, the spectral is felt in the omissions and gaps, in the *absence* of resolution, which is the very thing Link-as-phantom (and the player by extension) fervently and futilely attempts to achieve by reliving and repeating the same events over and over, but to no avail. This absence haunts Link and the player throughout the game, reminding us of the pointlessness and impermanence of both our quest as well as the trauma of lost ideals for which he was initially incorporated. The player-independent nature of the game further highlights this futility. It does not matter what Link or you as the player chooses to do; certain events will occur independently of your choices and others will be erased when you are forced to go back in time. This ludic experience evokes a sense of powerlessness and isolation as well as pointlessness. As the player actively haunts the present with their pasts, forced to endlessly relive the trauma alongside Link, undoing all atonement in the process, they too find themselves imprisoned by the ludological mechanics of the game. The player thus emerges from the gaming experience feeling a keen loss of autonomy and control, rendering player agency almost nonexistent. As such, the social trauma buried in the en-crypt-ed game is also experienced, doubled, by the player through Link's repeated experience of incarceration.

To illustrate, there is neither resolution nor redemption for Link at the end of his confining journey. While the land of Termina is saved and he is supposedly free of both temporal as well as corporal shackles, he is not permitted to join the rest of society. Even though he did fulfil the quest laid upon him by the Happy Mask Salesman, there is no personal victory to be found. Link's accomplishments go largely unnoticed, as he conducts many of them in the guise of other dead characters. Some of his actions are even erased within the scope of the game's 3-day mechanic, meaning that as far as the citizens of Termina are concerned, they never happened. Despite the incessant repetition of having to relive the same 3 days over and over, uncannily doubling and simultaneously annihilating himself, Link (and the player) is still denied resolution. As the game draws to a close, Link is told to leave, without being invited to the carnival to celebrate the towns survival:

'Well... it's almost time for the carnival to begin... So why don't you just leave and go about your business? The rest of us has a carnival to go to'. (*Majora's Mask*, 2000).

Being cast out, Link is made object, without resolution. He did not find what he came looking for, he is not included but banished, a monstrous spectre made invisible. The whole endeavour seems *pointless*; it is post-carnival but no resolution is found. He is banished back to his (un)home, lonelier and less than he was before, his banishment re-establishing the boundaries he transgressed (*Creed*, 1993; *Ingebreetsen*, 2001).

The one character who gets resolution, it would seem, is the Skull Kid; the very entity who arguably created the world of Termina, if the world is read as a creation from his psyche. As the game draws to a close, Skull Kid is rid of the malignant force of Majora's Mask and is reconciled both with his fairy friends and the giants which Link summoned to save the world. This further highlights the disjointed narrative and lack of agency in the gaming experience. Link, while being the protagonist, is not really the hero of this story. He exists in the margins, attempting to save the world from the shadows. He is not the hero of time, but a hero out of time, disjointed and disrupted temporally. In the end, it is the villain of the story who gets redemption and resolution. Skull Kid gets to go home again, redeemed and forgiven, while Link is cast out and made homeless. He is excluded, forced back into the shadows from where he began, a spectre in the forest once more, uncannily doubling the origins of his nemesis, the Skull Kid, as if he has now taken his place. To make matters even eerier, it is also suggested that Termina, as a figment of Skull Kid's imagination, ceases to exist once the dark magic of Majora is destroyed (Nintento, 2018). As such, Termina becomes a distressing secret, encrypted into Link's mind alone, forgotten by the rest of the world. Its haunting legacy a trauma of its own, there truly is no respite from the carceral violence tormenting Link, confining him once again, collapsing his past, present and future.

This haunting repetition of the carceral trauma in the context of the cultural cynicism and disillusionment related to carcerality identified in the game further emphasises the *violence* of carcerality inflicted upon those incorporated in its institutions. Regarded not only as a consuming but socially murderous enterprise, leaving nothing but ghosts in its wake, carceral justice becomes even more cruel in the light of its imagined futility and ineffectiveness. The violence of carceral justice, then, is not only visceral and pervasive but gratuitous, becoming unjustified acts of state violence.

But the carceral spectre haunting the text does not only collide the past and the present; it also opens up possibilities of meaning and change for the future. While Link truly has met with a terrible fate, the uncanniness surrounding the themes of carceral violence evoked by the game simultaneously invites critique, prompting change. In the current shifting political landscape, with punitive populism on the rise and increasing calls for securitisation, particularly targeting Othered, monstrous groups (Linneman et al., 2014; Sothcott, 2016; Skott, Nyhlén & Giritli Nygren, 2021), highlighting these popular criminology narratives, representative of a cultural imaginary of carcerality, becomes very important. Not only to explore how popular and academic criminological discourses are intertwined, but also to explore how aesthetic accounts of criminal justice may prompt a critical response. This invitation to criticism of carcerality is all the more impactful due to the visceral experiences of video games compared to other mediums, demonstrating, as by Fawcett and Kohm (2019), that video games can be used to promote critical dialogue on criminal justice issues. Highlighting this by the exploration of carceral themes as cultural trauma, this study demonstrates that video games such as *Majora's Mask* can be read as culturally relevant texts, reflecting real-life cultural anxieties, that not only feed into popular criminology discourse but also challenge and critique such discourse.

Conclusions

This study aimed to provide a critical reading of the game *Majora's Mask* as a cultural representation of carcerality and carceral violence, drawing on the concept of hauntology as informed by Abraham and Torok, Derrida and Rashkin, and on Rafter's (2007) framework of popular criminology. We have argued that the game may be viewed as a text 'in distress' (Rashkin, 1992, p. 47–48), incorporating an encrypted phantom of past trauma, haunting the main text. By identifying themes of carceral violence ventriloquising the text, placing the game in the realm of horror, the spectral has been traced and the underlying trauma unearthed. We have argued that the trauma in this en-crypt-ed game is a vertiginous, haunting disillusionment of carceral justice, where carcerality is understood as a consuming, violent experience which not only renders individuals invisible, but socially non-living, stripped of identity, disrupted spatially as well as temporally. As a product of both Japanese and English-speaking cultures, *Majora's Mask* constitutes a culturally relevant text, conveying a sense of vertiginous cynicism and ontological insecurity in relation to carceral justice, where carceral violence is rendered both gratuitous and unjustified.

Used as an analytical lens in the current study, hauntology has proved an effective tool to tease out the spectral, revealing traumas of past social violence that holds relevance, not only to our present lives, but for the future, prompting critical change. As Fiddler (2019, p. 474) argues, 'rather than a static memorialization, engaging with an artwork-as-crypt encourages us to *re-member*' (emphasis in original). As such, a hauntological analysis of *Majora's Mask* has allowed us to engage with this 'distressed' game-as-text to unearth a popular criminology discourse relating to carceral violence which urges us not only to remember, but to improve. This study does therefore not only contribute to the understanding of carcerality as expressed in cultural text, drawing on popular, Gothic and the emerging Ghost criminology (Fiddler, Kindynis & Linneman, 2021), but also suggest new modes of engagement, unpacking sentiments of disrupted temporality and hidden violent traumas in relation to criminality and punishment.

Arguably then, *Majora's Mask* constructs carcerality, and the violence it inflicts, rendering individuals not only invisible but socially non-living, as an old relic; a ghost in its own right, locked into a system which has since long stopped believing in its rehabilitative effects. Spectrally haunting our justice system, this ghost leaves nothing behind but a vertiginous sense of ephemerality; a feeling of impermanence of the deceptively solid foundations of our present. But as with any spectre in the Derridean sense, we also need to explore what demands this haunting makes upon our future. Having unlocked the crypt within *Majora's Mask*, entombing the phantom symptomatic of the disillusionment of carceral justice in both Japanese and Western contexts, this distressed text implores us to let this trauma inform our future; to revisit the violence of carcerality and its purpose. Lest more people meet with a terrible, yet hauntingly avoidable, fate.

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Notes

1. This line of dialogue has also been made famous by the ‘glitch horror’ creepypasta (works of online horror fiction) and subsequent alternate reality game called BEN Drowned, made by the online author, Jadusable (Crawford, 2018).
2. Originally a concept by Jeremy Bentham, Foucault elaborated on the notion of the panopticon; an annular prison building built around a watchtower (Caluya, 2010; Foucault, 1977). While the windows of the cells facing both towards the tower and out of the building allowed for a ‘backlighting effect’, letting anyone in the tower have perfect visual control of all prisoners, it was impossible for the prisoners to determine whether anyone was occupying the watchtower. This particular architectural design led a surveillance ‘permanent in its effects’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 201).

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