'I Was Sure You'd Notice This Game and Play It': *P. T.* as Haunted Text[1]

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The television screen turns to black. Then, text appears:

> Watch out. The gap in the door …
> it's a separate reality.
>
> The only me is me.
> Are you sure the only you is you?[2]

Is it a fact, a description, or a warning? When the words disappear, you are inside a bare room; judging from the perspective, you are on the floor, laying on your left side. You watch impassively as a cockroach scuttles away from your prone body. The door in front of you clicks open. You push yourself up and look around the room, a grey concrete box. In a dark corner, you can just make out a table, and the next thing you notice are the marks carved into the wall. How long have you been here? You have no idea. With no other option left, you go through the door.

[1] This paper constitutes a reworking and expansion of ideas presented at the *Temporal Discombobulations* conference (University of Surrey, 2016) and in the publication associated with the conference. See Madelon Hoedt, 'The Only Me is Me. Are You Sure the Only You is You?', in *Temporal Discombobulations: Time and the Experience of the Gothic*, ed. by Rachel Marsh (University of Surrey, 2016), pp. 71-77.

[2] All primary quotations included throughout this article are taken from *P. T.* (7780s Studios, 2014).

0: Introduction

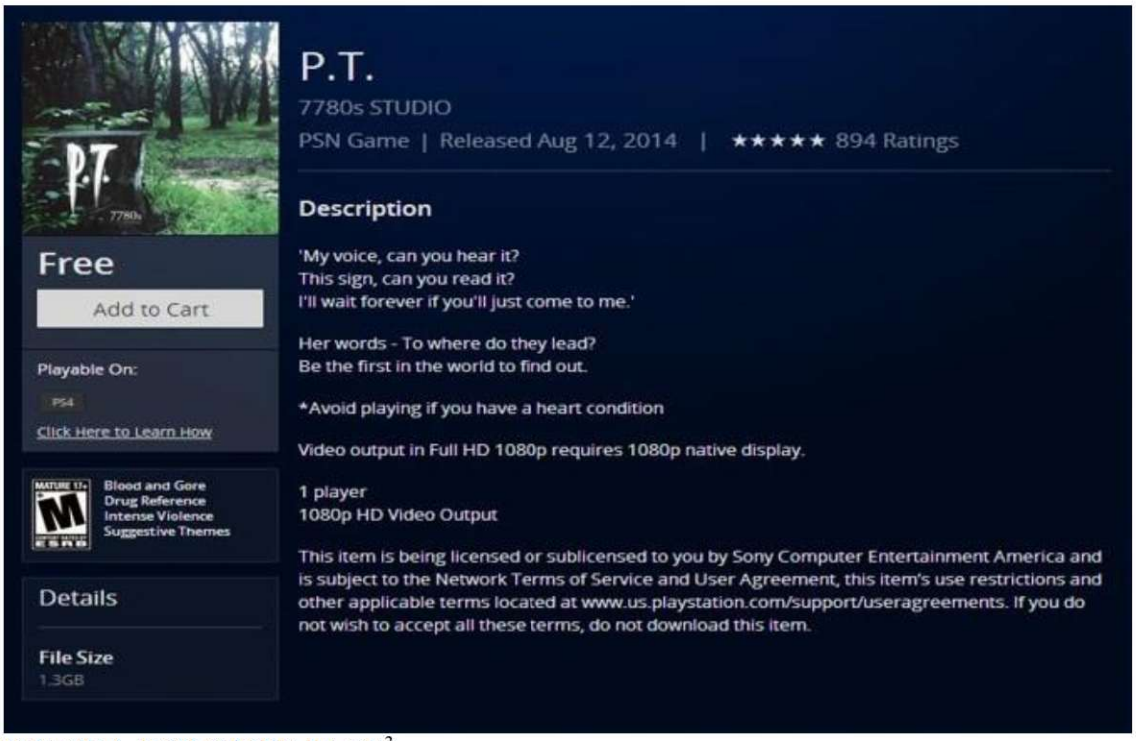


IMAGE 1: PSN STORE PAGE[3]

Created for the PlayStation 4, the file known only as *P. T.* (*Playable Teaser*) appeared on the PlayStation Network in August 2014. It was designed by the unknown 7780s Studio, a demo file that could be downloaded for free and runs to about half an hour in length. No other information was available, but those capable enough to solve *P. T.*'s puzzles were treated to the trailer for *Silent Hills*, intended to be the next entry in the critically acclaimed *Silent Hill* horror-game franchise (1999 to present). Some eight months after its initial release, disputes between the creative team behind *P. T.* and studio Konami resulted in the cancellation of *Silent Hills* and the subsequent removal of *P. T.* from all distribution channels. Unless installed on a PlayStation 4 console, there is no way to access the experience except for second-hand accounts through YouTube videos, still images, and fan discussions. Yet despite, or perhaps because of, its brevity and short life, *P. T.* has remained a talking point, offering a particular interpretation of the (survival) horror genre of videogames. Moreover, its multifaceted nature allows for an approach that breaks down its perspectives on horror (gaming) into separate arguments, which I explore here. In the first section, a narrative summary of the experience of playing *P. T.* is

[3] All images included are screenshots taken by the author between 2014 and 2021 of *P. T.* (7780s Studio; Konami, 2014) and the PlayStation Network.

provided so as to familiarise readers with the content of the game. This is followed by four theoretical sections, each of which explores the various relationships between *P. T.* and the concept of haunting. Two of these relate more directly to the content of the game, discussing *P. T.*'s use of narrative and space, whereas the other two focus more on the context of the *Playable Teaser*, looking at aspects of metagaming, and the troubled history of its release and subsequent removal from digital store fronts. Each of these instances marks a distinct interpretation of the concept of haunting, while linking back to a single gameplay experience, which in turn cannot be read, I argue, without considering its relationship to the ghostly.

1: *P. T.* as Experience



IMAGE 2: HALLWAY

You find yourself in the well-lit hallway of what is clearly a domestic space. There are paintings on the walls, some furniture, houseplants, and photographs. Everything looks slightly dirty, abandoned; the floor is littered with empty bottles and cans, and the tops of the dressers are covered in rubbish. You notice an alarm clock, which reads 23:59. A radio is playing, a newsreader reporting on a triple murder in which a man shot his pregnant wife and two young children in their home, killing them instantly, before being arrested. The hallway itself is in an L-shape, making a sharp turn to the right. Along this second part of the corridor are three doors. The one on your right is locked; the one on your left is flanked by a coatrack and seems to lead outside. When you look up, you can see the second floor of the house, but there is no route to

get upstairs. The only way out is through a third door at the end of the hallway. A few steps leading down take you to another door, and as you push through it, you find yourself back at the beginning of the hallway.

You have completed a loop, the first of many, yet with each cycle, subtle changes start to occur. You can hear sounds: laughter, crying, the mewling of an infant. The door to your right opens a crack, only to be slammed shut, but two loops later it swings wide and you are able to access the bathroom. By now, you have already seen the ghostly figure lurking in the hallway, so you know you are not alone, and when she attacks you, you know you should fear her. You wake up back in the concrete room, but this time, you see the table in the corner more clearly. On it, you find a paper bag, and as you approach it, it starts talking to you:

> I walked. I could do nothing but walk. And then, I saw me walking in front of myself. But it wasn't really me. Watch out. The gap in the door ... it's a separate reality. The only me is me. Are you sure the only you is you?

When you once more enter the hallway, whoever is on the other end of the radio broadcasts knows you are there too, as the original report is now interspersed with new messages: a weird sequence of numbers; a disconnected series of statements and commands: 'You can't trust the tap water.' 'Look behind you. I said, look behind you.' 'Don't touch that dial now, we're just getting started.'

With each loop, the hallway transforms into a slowly escalating nightmare. It gets darker and you need a flashlight to see; then the lights turn to red. You discover a fridge suspended from the second floor with ropes, oozing blood onto the floor below. The radio adds its own commentary, informing you that 'after killing his family, the father hung himself with a garden hose they had in the garage'. You find a message scrawled above the final door: 'Forgive me, Lisa. There is a monster inside of me.' The broadcast changes again, an almost demonic voice, speaking distorted words in an unknown language. The framed pictures on the walls become moving, twitching eyeballs, and the space itself stretches around you, turning into a seemingly endless labyrinth. As you run to a door that you cannot see, you realise one of the pictures is now on the floor, revealing a peephole in the wall. You look through it and can just make out the inside of the bathroom. The voice from the radio promptly responds:

> I've got a message for all you folks down there in radio land. Now's the time for action. Our society is rotten to the core. I'm talking to all the fine, upstanding folks got their welfare cut, got their jobs pulled out from under 'em. Yeah, you! You know what to do! Now's the time! Do it!

Yet this is not the only sound: you hear a struggle, a woman crying, gasping for breath, a blade being pulled free, a scream, a rush of blood, a liquid gurgle. When you pull away from the peephole, you find a message scrawled on the wall above it: 'No turning back now.' Back in the hallway, you decide to enter the bathroom, and a foetus in the sink fills you in on the rest of the story. It tells you: 'You got fired, so you drowned your sorrows in booze. She had to get a part-time job working a grocery store cash register. Only reason she could earn a wage at all is the manager liked how she looked in a skirt. You remember, right? Exactly ten months back.'

The red light disappears, and the pictures return to normal. The alarm clock is still there, but now reads 0:00. The television screen warps, and again, as if something is wrong with the game, with your console. You hear the radio repeating a sequence of numbers over and over: '204863'. You hear a faint crying from somewhere. The screen cuts to an error message, causing the game to crash. The game reloads: the opening screen and text appear, and you are once more inside the first room. Back in the hallway, the alarm clock changes from 23:59 to 0:00. A clock strikes midnight. You hear a baby laughing, once, twice, three times. Then, the phone rings and a voice tells you that 'you've been chosen'. As you enter the next loop, the screen once more cuts to black, revealing more text:

> Dad was such a drag. Every day he'd eat the same kind of food, dress the same, sit in front of the same kind of games ... Yeah, he was just that kind of guy. But then one day, he goes and kills us all! He couldn't even be original about the way he did it. I'm not complaining ... I was dying of boredom anyway. But guess what? I will be coming back, and I'm bringing my new toys with me.

You are now outside. The camera pans out, switching from first-person to third-person view, showing a man walking down a street. Three names flash across the screen: Hideo Kojima, Guillermo del Toro, and Norman Reedus. And finally, a title: SILENT HILLS.

2: *P. T.* as Ghost Story



IMAGE 3: LISA

At its most basic level, a ghost story is a narrative in which a supernatural entity makes an appearance; as noted by Julia Briggs, '[t]he narrowest definition of the ghost story would describe it as a story about the spirits of the returning dead'.[4] Such tales rely on a particular sense of imaginative logic; she continues, '[g]host stories commonly provide an alternative structure of cause and effect, in which the supernatural is not explained away but offers its own pseudo-explanation according to some kind of spiritual law of action and reaction'.[5] Although meant to frighten, fictional ghost stories have often been designated as oddly comforting, since these fictional tales can provide a more rational frame for their audience to negotiate the supernatural, as invented ghost stories

> have some point to them, whereas only too often genuine experiences and ghostly apparitions in life have no discoverable meaning or application. […] This consequential patterning of the ghost story normally implies that there must be a reason (if not a strictly logical one) for supernatural events.[6]

It is this basic reasoning that creates the stories many people are familiar with, where 'the behaviour of the traditional ghost resembles that of a restless sleeper whose bed is

[4] Julia Briggs, 'The Ghost Story', in *A New Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by David Punter (Blackwell, 2012), pp. 176-85 (p. 177).
[5] Briggs, 'The Ghost Story', p. 177.
[6] Briggs, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (Faber, 1977), p. 15.

uncomfortable or who is troubled by guilt or an unfulfilled obligation. There is similarly an illogical logic in those "spirits created for vengeance".'[7] This is embodied within *P. T.* by the figure of Lisa, whose image is one of the most enduring of the experience. Her tall, gangly stature and disfigured face are the primary threat to the player, and her unpredictable behaviour within the house has been the source for much fear and speculation. A later revelation only served to heighten these emotions, as someone's hacking into and deconstruction of *P. T.*'s inner workings has revealed that the player is constantly followed and that, even when she appears invisible, Lisa is always behind them.[8]

When examining the narrative of *P. T.*, it is in the figure of Lisa that a potential focal point is therefore found, as it is her presence that places the experience within a particular frame. The narrative offered by the game is, arguably, both deceptively simple and incredibly complex. On the surface, it is a classic gothic tale of passion and revenge, and in its depiction of Lisa and the clues provided, *P. T.* appears to players as a tragic ghost story: the initial broadcast on the radio, detailing the recent crimes, go some way to set the tone, and the appearance of Lisa only confirms the use here of traditional models of haunting. Based on the information provided, players may be led to conclude that Lisa is the pregnant wife discussed in the news report, and that the house in which the player finds themselves is the residence she shared with her husband and killer. Additional details relating to the motives behind the killing are littered throughout, with hints pointing to alcohol abuse, the loss of the father's job, and a supposed extra-marital affair when Lisa starts work herself. The ghost of the murdered, pregnant woman has, it seems, come back to haunt the place where she lived out her final moments, ready to exact her revenge on anyone who gets too close.

Such an interpretation of the figure of the ghost immediately brings with it a sense of a past: there can only be unfinished business if, indeed, there was business to be finished. The spectre lives on beyond death, apparently stuck in a loop and violently lashing out, until a resolution is found, and they can rest in peace, as per the readings provided by Briggs. This model of haunting seems to appear within *P. T.*: viewing Lisa through the lens of a classic ghost story leads to a particular interpretation of the narrative clues found within the game. Something has happened to this woman before the player became involved, and it is through these events that she is now haunting this space, perhaps waiting for someone to solve the

[7] Briggs, *Night Visitors*, p. 16.
[8] The following article includes in-game footage, as well as a link to the original Twitter thread from hacker Lance MacDonald, who discovered Lisa's behaviour: Alysia Judge, '*P. T.* Camera Hack Reveals Lisa is Always Right Behind You', *IGN*, 9 September 2019 <https://www.ign.com/articles/2019/09/09/pt-camera-hack-reveals-lisa-is-always-right-behind-you> [accessed 15 July 2021].

puzzle and release her from this stasis. Where Briggs alludes to such an understanding of present and past in her discussion of the ghost story, it is Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle who make the importance of these timelines explicit in their definition: 'Ghosts have a history. They are not what they used to be. Ghosts, in a sense, *are* history. They do not, after all, come from nowhere, even if they may appear to do just that. They are always inscribed *in a context*.'[9]

However, although closely linked to understandings of the ghost as brought to the fore during academia's spectral turn following the publication of Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1993), the past/present dichotomy is less easy to maintain within the context of videogames. As Jesper Juul explains,

> Most computer games project a game world, and to play them is therefore to engage in a kind of pretense-play: you are both 'yourself', and you have another role in the game world. This duality is reflected in the *game time*, which can be described as a basic duality of *play time* (the time the player takes to play) and *event time* (the time taken in the game world).[10]

Juul positions the relationship between play time and event time here as one that entails mapping, alluding to the way in which the player's actions are projected into the game world: 'The moment of mapping is one that has a basic sense of happening *now*, when you play. Pressing a key influences the game world, which then logically (and intuitively) has to be happening in the same *now*.'[11] This results in a particular understanding of time within this context, and, according to Juul, leads to a situation in games where there is no way to represent a sense of past and prior moments or events:

> In this way, the game constructs the story time as *synchronous* with narrative time and reading/viewing time: the story time is *now*. Now, not just in the sense that the viewer witnesses events now, but in the sense that the events are *happening* now, and that what comes next is not yet determined.[12]

In this way, Lisa's past and present are called into question by the context in which she appears. This does not necessarily negate her status as what I will call a traditional ghost: the radio broadcasts provide something akin to a backstory, which is coded as having occurred before the current instance of play, and seems to be setting up the possible cause for Lisa's status as

[9] Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (Pearson Longman, 2009), p. 160, emphasis in original.
[10] Jesper Juul, 'Introduction to Game Time', in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (MIT Press, 2004), pp. 131-42 (p. 131), emphasis in original.
[11] Juul, 'Game Time', p. 134.
[12] Juul, 'Games Telling Stories?: A Brief Note on Games and Narrative', *Game Studies* 1.1 (2001), n. p., emphasis in original <https://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/> [accessed 4 July 2024].

restless sleeper/vengeful spirit. At the same time, the *progression* of the haunting and the way in which Lisa's interactions with the player pan out during the time that the game is played locates the experience of *P. T.* away from the traditional ghost-story formula. Instead, it provides a link to Mark Fisher's understanding of hauntology and its dual direction. Fisher defines these directions as follows:

> The first refers to that which is (in actuality is) *no longer*, but which is still effective as a virtuality (the traumatic 'compulsion to repeat', a structure that repeats, a fatal pattern). The second refers to that which (in actuality) has not yet happened, but which is already effective in the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behavior).[13]

In this sense, the haunting in *P. T.* is not simply a replaying of history, of a spectral form locked in perpetual repetition; it also points towards the future of the player, who may find themselves unable to resolve the game, thus joining Lisa within this endless, looping hallway.

3: *P. T.* as haunted house



IMAGE 4: NIGHTMARE HALLWAY

The fracture between past and present is not just realised within the narrative of *P. T.*, but also in its use of space, and in particular, the relationship between its designed spaces and its status as videogame. Arguably, videogames are impossible spaces, entire worlds created through

[13] Mark Fisher, 'What is Hauntology?', *Film Quarterly*, 66.1 (2012), pp. 16-24 (p. 19), emphasis in original.

programmed code and realised as a graphical representation of a (fictional) reality. On the one hand, there is the option for players to view *P. T.*'s hallway as an example of embedded narrative space, defined by Christopher W. Totten as a spaces 'that contain[s] narrative information in the architecture itself'.[14] In this context, the designed spaces of videogames are able to transfer meaning to such an extent that narrative information can be gleaned from their traversal, helping to piece together the more overt clues found in, for example, cutscenes or dialogue. In this use of space as part of the narrative, the haunted house found in *P. T.* becomes, arguably, haunted by itself. As is noted by Daniel Vella, the use of embedded narrative space 'frames the gameworld as a repository of the past, a tissue of its own history', with the game space being transformed into 'a spatial repository of information'.[15] The hallway, then, is not a mere representation of a domestic space; it also carries within itself the events that came before, as well as any instances of gameplay that are experienced by the player with each subsequent loop.

In terms of visual representation, *P. T.*'s hallway presents the haunted house in a way that is hyperreal. I employ this term here as it is used within the visual arts, to indicate high-fidelity realism in representation, which is realised through the game's graphics, and the detail found in the depiction of the hallway and the items found within. The reality of the space is further emphasised by the player's ability to move around and interact with their surroundings. As Mark Wolf explains, environments in videogames are defined by their status as navigable spaces, 'space through which one must find one's way around'.[16] However, this emphasis on navigation does not always translate into cohesiveness, and although many videogames rely on Euclidean geometry, examples of non-Euclidean spaces can also be found. In its presentation of its hallway, *P. T.* transgresses the boundary between these two types of geometry: the hallway itself, its L-shape and contents, have a clear basis in a real-world understanding of dimensions and movement. Even the loop that players complete each time they pass through the doors at the end and start of this traversal is, arguably, a physical possibility, the end of the hallway simply returning the player to the beginning, two L-shapes ultimately creating a square. Where such an understanding falls apart, however, is in *the several steps leading down*

[14] Christopher W. Totten, *An Architectural Approach to Level Design* (CRC Press, 2014), p. 279.
[15] Daniel Vella, 'Spatialised Memory: The Gameworld as Embedded Narrative', in *Proceedings of The Philosophy of Computer Games Conference 2011*, n. p. <https://gameconference2011.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/spatialised-memory-daniel-vella.pdf> [accessed 18 January 2022].
[16] Mark J. P. Wolf, 'Theorizing Navigable Space in Video Games', in *DIGAREC Keynote-Lectures 2009/10*, ed. by Stephan Günzel, Michael Liebe, and Dieter Mersch (Potsdam University Press, 2011), pp. 18-49 (p. 19) <https://publishup.uni-potsdam.de/opus4-ubp/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/5043/file/digarec06_S018_049.pdf> [accessed 4 July 2024].

from the door at the end of the hallway, and to the start door. This results in a situation where players are not simply completing an endless loop of what is supposedly the same space; instead, they find themselves on a constant downward trajectory as they move through the hallway and its various mutations. Indeed, Wolf explains how 'connections in and of themselves are neither Euclidean nor non-Euclidean; it is the way they connect […] that produces one kind of space or the other'.[17] As a result, the addition of the steps highlights *P. T.*'s status as a hyperreal experience in the Baudrillardian sense, in that it responds to 'the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it', emphasising its status as a fantastical, impossible space.[18]

The best way to start understanding this aspect of the spatial experience is through Michel Foucault and the concept of heterotopia. Foucault starts by noting that certain sites 'have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect'.[19] He calls these sites 'heterotopias', which he describes as places that 'are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality'.[20] At the core of the heterotopia, Foucault notes, is a strange duality, an opposition of its place in reality and in one's experience of them:

> Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. […] Everyone can enter into these heterotopic sites, but in fact that is only an illusion: we think we enter where we are, by the very fact that we enter, excluded.[21]

The heterotopia is both accessible and impenetrable; it is both part of reality and exists outside of it. Yet the concept does not only relate to a perception of space: Foucault includes time in his discussion and introduces the concept of the 'heterochrony', as he argues that '[h]eterotopias are most often linked to slices of time'.[22] These heterochronies, Foucault argues, operate on two levels: some accumulate time, whereas others are connected 'to time in its most fleeting, transitory, precarious aspect. […] These heterotopias are not oriented toward the eternal, they are rather absolutely temporal.'[23] Within *P. T.*'s repeating hallway, both types of

[17] Wolf, 'Navigable Space', p. 36.
[18] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Michigan University Press, 1994), p. 1.
[19] Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, 16.1 (1986), pp. 22-27 (p. 24), doi:10.2307/464648.
[20] Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', p. 24.
[21] Foucault, p. 26.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.

heterochrony are represented. The haunting at the core of the narrative is an accumulation of time, of things that have happened *before* but are able to affect the current situation. Simultaneously, events are playing out in real time as players traverse the hallway and interact with the environment. The alarm clock inside the repeating hallway perhaps best exemplifies *P. T.*'s status as heterochrony: perpetually hovering between 23:59 and 0:00, it points to a space stuck forever in a single moment in time. *P. T.*'s possible reading as a ghost story appears to introduce multiple *stories* of haunting into its hallway. In its inclusion of impossible space, these stories become inscribed onto the loop: here, past and present coexist, with ghost and player simultaneously trapped in a never-ending downward spiral.

4: *P. T.* as Horror Game

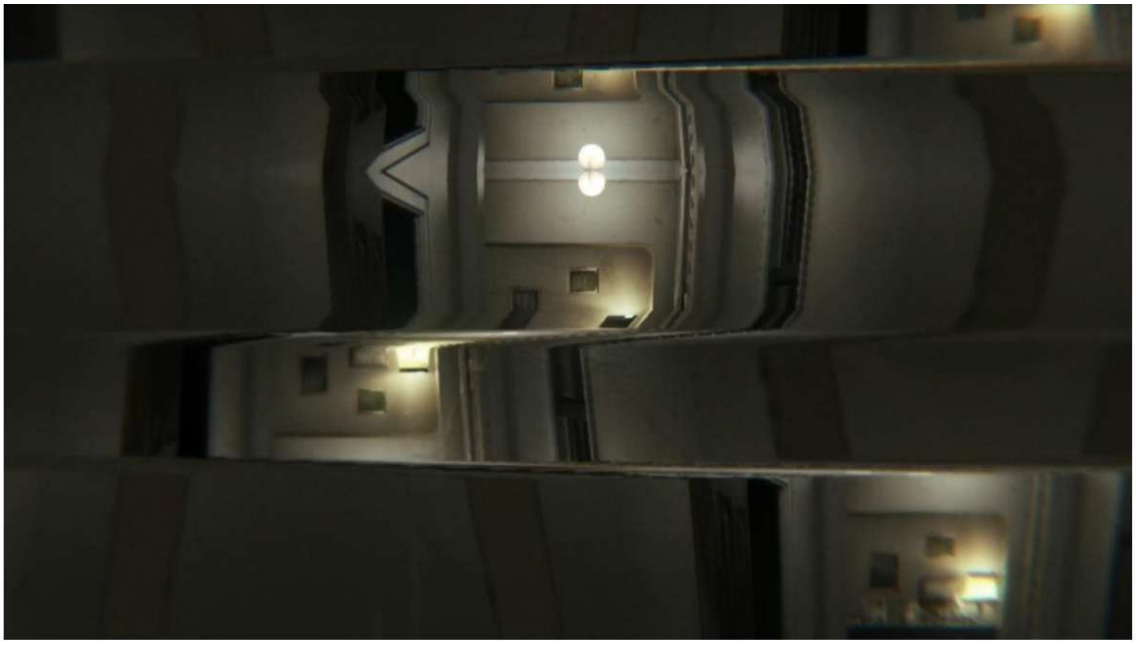


IMAGE 5: GLITCH

Maria Del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren's interpretation of the spectral highlights the potential for the technical ghost: 'Generally, the ghostly can be said to refer to that which is present yet insubstantial (the spirit rather than the body), secondary rather than primary (a faint copy, a trace, a ghost writer), and potentially unreal or deceptive (a spurious radar signal).'[24] The idea of the unreal and deceptive, in particular, is of note here, as through its choices in gameplay, *P. T.* literalises the trope of the ghost in the machine. While the opening loops of

[24] Maria Del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, 'Introduction', in *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture*, ed. by Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren (Continuum, 2010), pp. ix-xxiv (p. x).

the game simply confine the player to the hallway, listening to radio broadcasts and attempting to avoid Lisa, the later stages of the experience break away from this fictional reality and into a more immediate one. Distortion of the demo itself replaces the supernatural apparitions: players are forced to solve in-game puzzles through non-diegetic user interface and menu screens. The radio interrupts its own broadcasts with messages that address players directly. Visual glitches hamper the play experience. One of several different error messages appear, their text referring to supposed bugs in the software, while others display notes that have been left behind in multiple languages: 'I'm heading there now.' 'I'll call later.' A final one seems to be part of a letter: 'Knowing you, I was sure you'd notice this game and play it. I will never – can never – forget that day 20 years ago. I have something to tell you. Contact me. – J.' The appearance of any one of these messages results in a software crash. Each of these instances impacts on the supposed separation between player and game, creating a convergence between game world and real world.

In doing so, *P. T.* invokes the concept of haunted media as coined by Jeffrey Sconce. He describes the idea of digital technology being considered in some way live, or even living, which in turn determines an audience's relationship to that particular medium: 'At times this sense of liveness can imply that electronic media technologies are animate and perhaps even sentient.'[25] The live(d) experience of playing the game, and being played by it in turn, impacts its players by 'bringing this spectral world into a home' in the form of 'either uncanny electronic agents or as gateways to electronic otherworlds'.[26] To achieve this effect, *P. T.* makes use of mechanics that emphasise the distortion of the fourth wall and the possible intrusion of the game world. Steven Conway defines the fourth wall in this context as an instance 'when the videogame medium consciously oversteps the boundaries between diegetic and non-diegetic, either by drawing something into the diegetic world from outside, or expelling something out of the diegetic into the non-diegetic'.[27] He goes on to note the difficulty in using this concept within the context of games: due to the centrality of interactivity, the game-player relationship requires a more direct investment through agency, and does not provide the neat delineations between reality/fiction (and the subsequent breach thereof) that are found in other media. There is an overlap between the fiction of the game and the reality of the player, as direct input is required to make progress and realise the game's narrative (or, at

[25] Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Duke University Press, 2000), p. 2.
[26] Sconce, *Haunted Media*, p. 4.
[27] Steven Conway, 'A Circular Wall? Reformulating the Fourth Wall for Videogames', *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*, 2.2 (2010), pp. 145-55 (pp. 145-46), doi:10.1386/jgvw.2.2.145_1.

least, the version of that narrative as it will be experienced by the player). While some games do break the fourth wall in a way similar to other media, by openly acknowledging their status *as* game, other titles instead manipulate these boundaries rather than transgressing them. The result is 'not the breaking of the fourth wall in the traditional sense'; instead, 'the fourth wall is itself relocated, […] as it is moved from in front of the player to behind him or her'.[28] This has the potential to create an element of uncertainty in the player: rather than being 'in on the joke' with the developers and continuing to assess the game as a game, the movement of the fourth wall in the way described by Conway would include the player in a way that is both more immediate (directly affecting their experience) and less obvious (as they may not be aware such a shift has taken place).

It is this strategy of distortion and manipulation that is used by *P. T.*, placing it within a larger context of metagaming, which is defined by Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux as follows: 'The word *metagame* has become a common label for games about games, games within games, games around games, and games without games.'[29] In other disciplines, the prefix 'meta-' can relate to questions of intertextuality, or to an acknowledgement of the artifice within a work of fiction. Within the context of game studies, however, metagaming places a large amount of power with its players: 'Difficult to design, impossible to predict, deeply collaborative, and always ephemeral, metagaming undermines the authority of videogames as authored objects, packaged products, intellectual property, and copyrighted code by transforming single-use software into materials for making many metagames.'[30]

Indeed, since its release, *P. T.* has received continued engagement from players in efforts to mine its secrets. Whereas scenes removed from movies get left on the proverbial cutting-room floor, never to be seen again (or at least only in particular circumstances), certain elements of videogames remain embedded in the software and, although they have been made inaccessible to most players, the information is still available for those who know where to look. An example of this is the aforementioned camera hack: by changing the static position of the camera, one user has verified that Lisa is continuously positioned behind the player. The hacker responsible for this discovery, Lance McDonald, has shared several other finds via his YouTube channel.[31] Across these videos, McDonald is able to examine Lisa up close (an

[28] Conway, 'A Circular Wall?', p. 149.
[29] Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux, *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), p. 25, emphasis in original.
[30] Boluk and LeMieux, *Metagaming*, p .25.
[31] Lance McDonald, '*P. T. Silent Hills* Cut Content and Unseen Details – *P. T.* Hacking and Hidden Moments', *YouTube*, 26 September 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYSFN6UiVA8> [accessed 4 July 2024];

opportunity not afforded during a normal play experience) and highlights instances when the ghost appears that would otherwise go unnoticed. A similar video focuses on what can be found outside of the hallway, giving viewers a glimpse of what one can assume would have become the game world of *Silent Hills*.[32]

However, the relationship between the gameplay experience and the hacked footage is a complicated one: although the developers did not include these instances into *P. T.* as it is experienced by a player when interacting normally with the hallway, in the '*Silent Hill* Full Map Explored' video, an appearance of Lisa occurs that resets the game, upon accessing the town beyond the hallway (outside of the scripted cutscene). McDonald points to this as a specific event, and a deliberate inclusion on the part of the developers to return the player to the main game space when they have wandered out of bounds. This occurrence calls into question the status of the footage found when hacking *P. T.* and whether these additional events were intended to be seen by players or not. Either way, the material remains buried within the software and, as a result, can be found and mined for information. Examples of this practice can be seen in the context of other games, with fans of certain titles always eager to discover more about their favourite game.[33] The demand for such footage is arguably heightened by the level of secrecy surrounding *P. T.* With little to no explanation given regarding its narrative, players continue to search for additional details, both to help interpret the events of *P. T.* itself, and in a search for clues on what the final product, the game *Silent Hills*, might have been like, a question which will remain unanswered due to the cancellation of that title.

However, although the process of metagaming is in some ways able to empower the player, as argued by Boluk and Lemieux, the reality of this is more complex in the context of *P. T.* In the case of this horror game, it is the powerlessness, rather than the power, that is emphasised by the metagame and fourth-wall distortion. Tanya Krzywinska discusses horror games and their mechanics in relation to the position of their players, noting the emphasis found in videogames on interactivity, on *doing*, and how this process is manipulated in many horror titles:

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and '*P. T.* Unseen Content – Lisa's Hidden Behaviours – Hidden Scenes', *YouTube*, 20 March 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nJHg1gmySTs> [accessed 4 July 2024].

[32] McDonald, '*P. T.* Unseen Content – *Silent Hill* Full Map Explored – Town and Streets Area', *YouTube*, 20 December 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHLPRrPXaPo> [accessed 18 January 2022].

[33] Other examples of this are the games by FromSoftware, in particular the *Dark Souls* franchise and related titles, which have entire communities dedicated to unravelling their lore and secrets. These include the YouTube channel of user @VaatiVidya, which is almost solely dedicated to the narrative analysis of FromSoftware titles (<https://www.youtube.com/@VaatiVidya>); and @ZullieTheWitch, who often posts content related to hidden game content (<https://www.youtube.com/@ZullietheWitch>) [accessed 27 May 2024].

> The element of pre-determination, which lies outside the player's sphere of agency, is therefore linked to the metaphysical dimension in which manicheanism operates. The concept of the moral occult plays a central role in my argument that horror-based videogames are strongly dependent on their capacity to allow players to experience a dynamic between states of *being in control* and *out of control*.[34]

P. T.'s use of metagaming and fourth-wall break constitutes an instance of players being out of control, whilst emphasising the control exerted by the game. In its use of messages and glitches, the demo not only acknowledges the existence of a world beyond the game, but directly addresses the player inhabiting that world. The supernatural malevolence already encountered in *P. T.* is, in effect, showing its awareness of and influence over the play experience, actively manipulating and seemingly thwarting the player's efforts to complete it by forcing errors and crashing the game. The message here is not one of an insubstantial, unknown entity causing strange behaviours of game and console, but rather of an actual *ghost in the machine*, a malevolent spectre invading and undermining the ability to play.

5: *P. T.* as Ghost

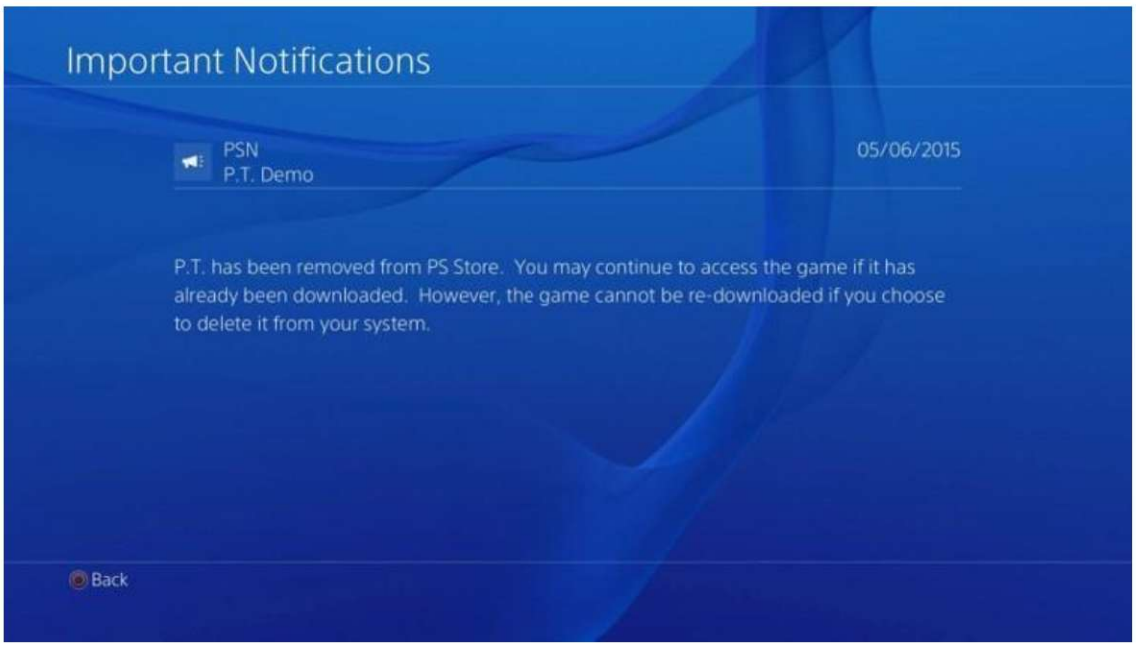


IMAGE 6: PSN REMOVAL NOTICE

While *Silent Hills* as a project has been cancelled, its demo is not dead. At the time of writing, in June 2024, it is just under ten years since the *Playable Teaser* first appeared on the

[34] Tanya Krzywinska, 'Hands-On Horror', in *Screenplay: Cinema / Videogames / Interfaces*, ed. by Geoff King and Krzywinska (Wallflower Press, 2002), pp. 206-24 (p. 208), emphasis in original.

PlayStation Network. No one knew who was behind 7780s Studios until the riddles of *P. T.* were solved and the ending revealed, which, in itself, has proved tricky. Diligent players were able to unlock the final teaser video within hours of *P. T.*'s release, yet the methods for doing so remain shrouded in mystery. Even to this day, the walkthrough of the demo on the IGN website, which includes information on how to complete the game, is still a work in progress. Last updated in January 2019, the guide includes several methods to reach what is listed as the 'possible "official" solution', as well as multiple methods and additional theories supplied by players.[35] Ultimately, however, there is still no definitive, fool-proof solution to the final puzzle, which has only added to *P. T.*'s allure. This is extended to the marketing surrounding the title on its release: first announced at Gamescom 2014, it simply appeared as a free demo, a small horror experience from an unknown developer, only revealing its distinguished lineage of Kojima, Del Toro, and the connection to *Silent Hill* to the player upon completion. In doing so, *P. T.* became perhaps the first interactive teaser trailer and, by extension, an excellent viral marketing tool.

Following these revelations, players discovered a trail of breadcrumbs left by the development team that reveal deeper connections, from small details (such as the name '7780s Studios' being a nod to *Silent Hill*(*s*)[36]) through to larger discussions in the years that followed, including theories that *P. T.* is a metaphor for the very public falling-out between Hideo Kojima and long-time employer Konami, which took place in 2015.[37] The cancellation of the *Silent Hills* title, which resulted from this feud, as well as the removal of *P. T.* from all distribution channels on 29 April 2015, has sparked its own controversy about developer/studio relationships, as well as the preservation of videogames. Ordinarily, games purchased via the PlayStation Network stay accessible to players even if they are removed from the storefront: the title does not appear in new searches, but can still be downloaded by its owner. In the case of *P. T.*, however, this option was removed in May 2015, meaning that the title can only be played if it is installed on a PlayStation 4 console. Similarly, the ability to transfer an installed

[35] Jon Ryan and others, '*P. T.* Demo Walkthrough', *IGN*, 5 January 2019 <https://www.ign.com/wikis/silent-hills-pt/P.T._Demo_Walkthrough> [accessed 15 July 2021].

[36] The number 7780 refers to the area size of the Shizuoka Prefecture in Japan, with the phrase 'Silent Hill' (or 'quiet hill') being a literal translation of the region's name. Shizuoka is often used as a nickname for the *Silent Hill* franchise in Japan. See also Brenna Hillier, 'What Does the "7780s" in *P. T.* Mean? Kojima Explains', *VG247*, 22 August 2014 <https://www.vg247.com/2014/08/22/silent-hills-p-t-7780s-hide-kojima/> [accessed 15 July 2021].

[37] For a summary of the split between Kojima and Konami, see Samit Sarkar, 'Konami's Bitter, Yearlong Breakup with Hideo Kojima, Explained', *Polygon*, 16 December 2015 <https://www.polygon.com/2015/12/16/10220356/hideo-kojima-konami-explainer-metal-gear-solid-silent-hills>; and for an example of the *P. T.* as metaphor theory, see TheGrateDebate '*P. T.*'s Hidden Meaning', *YouTube*, 16 August 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yr4RvdREwl8> [accessed 15 July 2021].

version of the demo between a PS4 and the new PS5 console, released in 2020, was quickly removed.[38] Writing in April 2015, Crossley describes how '[t]oday, Konami will remove [*P. T.*] from the PlayStation Store and it will be neither game nor demo nor teaser nor advert. It will be nothing – a haunted space in a digital library, its memory slowly fading like an awful dream.'[39] *P. T.* invited players into its horrifying depths, and has now become its own ghost.

Despite this, *P. T.* has lived on in reports, stories, and homages. Often praised for its atmosphere and appearing on various lists of best horror games at the time of its release,[40] *P. T.* has gone on to inspire a number of spiritual successors, with titles like *Allison Road* (cancelled), *Layers of Fear* (Bloober Team, 2016), and *Visage* (SadSquare Studio, 2020) among the most notable. In addition, the puzzles and secrecy surrounding *P. T.*'s initial release, further heightened by the involvement of Kojima, who is known for hoaxes and publicity stunts,[41] has led to extensive speculation in the intervening years, and discussions surrounding *P. T.* and a possible revival of the *Silent Hill* franchise have continued. Projects such as the (now seemingly abandoned) *Abandoned* project from the Dutch developer BlueBox Studios, which was announced on the official PlayStation Blog in April 2021, tapped into this speculation.[42] The tone and realistic graphics of the teaser trailer included in the announcement, as well as several supposed hints provided by the developers, soon sparked an interest from fans hungry for news about *Silent Hill*. Multiple games-journalism sources reported on what is now being referred to as 'conspiracy theories' in June 2021, which has resulted in attempts from the developers to debunk some of these rumours and in the BlueBox Studios website

[38] Michael McWhertor, '*P. T.* is not Playable on Playstation 5', *Polygon*, 6 November 2020 <https://www.polygon.com/2020/11/6/21549228/pt-ps5-backward-compatible-playable-playstation-5> [accessed 15 July 2021].
[39] Rob Crossley, 'In Memory of the Unbearable Enigma, *P. T.*', *Gamespot*, 29 April 2015 <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/in-memory-of-the-unbearable-enigma-p-t/1100-6426967/> [accessed 15 July 2021].
[40] Although *P. T.* has since disappeared from such lists (most likely due to the lack of accessibility), the game has received continued attention since its 2014 release. See, for example, David Theriault, '*P. T.*: The Best Horror Game That Never Was', *NonStop Nerd*, 29 October 2021 <https://nonstopnerd.com/2021/10/29/p-t-the-best-horror-game-that-never-was/>; and Mary Beth McAndrews, '*P. T.* is the Scariest Video Game That Never Was', *Dread Central*, 12 August 2022 <https://www.dreadcentral.com/editorials/435309/p-t-is-the-scariest-video-game-that-never-was/> [accessed 27 May 2024].
[41] Some of these examples are quite benign. See Jamie Payne, '4 Times Kojima Totally Trolled Us With Marketing Stunts', *Twinfinite*, 28 August 2018 <https://twinfinite.net/2018/08/kojima-trolled-us-marketing-stunts/>. Others are more far reaching (in every sense of the word). See Dave Smith, 'The World's First Head Transplant Surgery Might Be Part of One Giant Marketing Stunt', *Business Insider*, 22 April 2015 <https://www.businessinsider.com/head-transplant-hoax-2015-4?r=US&IR=T> [accessed 15 July 2021].
[42] Hasan Kahraman, '*Abandoned*, a Cinematic Survival Sim, Hits PS5 Later This Year', *Playstation.Blog*, 7 April 2021 <https://blog.playstation.com/2021/04/07/abandoned-a-cinematic-survival-sim-hits-ps5-later-this-year/> [accessed 15 July 2021].

being taken down.[43] Meanwhile, Konami itself has returned to the franchise, essentially reviving it from what appeared to be a certain death, with several *Silent Hill* projects greenlit in recent years. Writing in 2026, there are numerous (pending) releases: firstly, the main franchise has seen a critically acclaimed remake of *Silent Hill 2* (Bloober Team, 2024), and a similar reworking of the original was announced in 2025. In addition, three further videogames have been released or are nearing completion: *Silent Hill: The Short Message* (Konami, 2024); *Silent Hill f* (NeoBards Entertainment, 2025); and *Silent Hill: Townfall* (Screen Burn Interactive, 2026). Finally, 2026 saw the release of a new movie (*Return to Silent Hill*, Christophe Gans, and its novelisation by John Passarella). In this way, the liminal space of the town of Silent Hill and its inhabitants have been reawakened to haunt its players, even as *P. T.*'s hallway remains empty.

Its existence as a digital artefact and its subsequent disappearance adds to its ephemerality and, during its brief lifespan, *P. T.* has created what is perhaps the ideal gothic space:

> Disorientation: multiple interlinked networks of signs, images, bits, flows. Disruption: all spatial, temporal, physical and subjective coordinates diffuse, conflate, expand and enmesh. Where does it begin and end? How is it animated? What can it mean? In digital and virtual contexts, what are its frames, anchors, material supports? Who – or what – writes, reads, projects, imagines, perceives? Are the ghosts it generates actual, hallucinatory or medial? Are they effects of unconscious, textual or technical processes?[44]

Ultimately, *P. T.* fails to answer any of these questions, instead simply adding more of its own. What cannot be denied, however, is *P. T.*'s ability to live on, and to continually haunt its hallway and its players, thus becoming a ghost itself. As Bennett and Royle assert, '[t]o be human is to have a spirit, a soul, a *Geist* or ghost. But the more modern sense of "ghost" […] involves the idea of a spectre, an apparition of the dead, a revenant, the dead returned to a kind of spectral existence – *an entity not alive but also not quite, not finally, dead*.'[45]

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[43] Some examples of the reportage can be found in the following: Ethan Gach, 'Kojima Conspiracy Theory Ends With Tears', *Kotaku*, 21 June 2021 <https://kotaku.com/hideo-kojima-conspiracy-theory-ends-with-tears-1847141712>; and Liam Croft, 'Hideo Kojima Fans Investigate PS5 Exclusive *Abandoned*, Reads Like Conspiracy Theories', *PushSquare*, 18 June 2021 <https://www.pushsquare.com/news/2021/06/hideo_kojima_fans_investigate_ps5_exclusive_abandoned_reads_like_conspiracy_theories> [accessed 15 July 2021].

[44] Fred Botting, *Gothic*, 2nd edn (Routledge, 2014), p. 197.

[45] Bennett and Royle, *Literature, Criticism, and Theory*, p. 160, emphasis added.