Hauntings: Uncanny Doubling in *Alan Wake* and *Supernatural*

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Abstract
Doubles are everywhere in Gothic narratives. The transmedia universes surrounding the television series *Supernatural* and the videogame *Alan Wake* are no different. However, rather than focusing on how, for example, characters are haunted by their pasts, the present essay zeroes in on doubles created by the transgression of medial boundaries. Special attention is given to how the television show and the video game are burdened by the history of the genre and how doubles emerge from the transmedia narratives surrounding these contemporary Gothic texts. In the process, it becomes evident that *Supernatural* and *Alan Wake* do not merely draw attention to the present absence inherent in any representation, but, moreover, highlight the constant attempts by the media to not merely replicate, but replace reality.

Keywords: *intertextuality, metatextuality, hyperreality, genericity*

In his seminal study of the uncanny, Sigmund Freud claims that "in reality", the uncanny is "nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (Freud [1919] 1955: 241). He continues that the uncanny is "something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light" (Freud [1919] 1955: 241). Freud's discussion draws on E.T.A. Hoffman's short story *The Sandman*, in which, Freud argues, Hoffman "creates a kind of uncertainty in us in the beginning by not letting us know […] whether he is taking us into the real world or into a purely fantastic one of his own creation" (Freud [1919] 1955: 230).

These shifting contingencies of reality have become one of the defining characteristics of (post-)postmodern life that is defined by human existence in a (mass-)mediatised world. As Isabella van Elferen observes, in such a world "every act of mediation […] can

evoke a Gothic conflation of overlapping temporalities and realities"
(Elferen 2009: 124). Indeed, media attempts to replicate (a) reality
create uncanny representational doubles of reality with the goal of
possibly repeating these signs *ad infinitum* (if not construct reality
altogether through the creation of simulated doubles that replicate
something not even existing before their repetition). Tellingly, it is
these processes of repetition and doubling that emerge as central
concepts not only in Freud's construction of the uncanny, but
also in postmodern theory, and which assume a key role in many
contemporary Gothic texts, among them the transmedia narratives
of *Supernatural* and *Alan Wake*.

1. Generic hauntings: intertextual Gothic doubles and repetition with a difference

In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida introduces his concept of
'hauntology'. According to Derrida, the spectre, defined as a "non-
present present, [a] being-there of an absent or departed one"
(Derrida 1994: 6), haunts the present: a spirit seeking to return,
transgressing spatiotemporal boundaries in the process. The
spectre thus proposes a new ontology, for it counters any clear-cut
differentiation between absence and presence and is associated with
a temporality in which repetition plays an important role.

From a different perspective, Derrida's concept of hauntology
arguably provides a further development of his language philosophy
according to which no signification can be traced to its origin, for
any sign is haunted by a chain of (mis-)interpretations and cannot
be connected to one clear, stable, and fixed referent. Meaning is
thus never punctually present in any sign. As Marko Juvan notes,
this "centripetal point of reference is Derrida's main gateway
to intertextuality" (Juvan 2008: 81). Following Julia Kristeva,
intertextuality can be conceived as a "passage from one signifying
system to another" (Kristeva 1984: 60). Through this passage, an
intertextual double of the source text is created, as it is repeated in
another signifying system. When considering a genre work such as
a Gothic narrative, it becomes evident that any given Gothic text
explicitly and/or implicitly references other genre texts in order
to define its position in genre history. In the process, not only do
Gothic texts repeat certain formulas, creating doubles of previous

Gothic texts, they repeat them with – however small – differences. As a result, the generic past constructed by contemporary texts (both in theory and practice) haunts the generic present[1].

Most obviously, past Gothic texts influence present ones through generic conventions, which have evolved over decades or even centuries. Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, this 'Gothic spectre' not only concerns the architext of the Gothic, but, indeed, can be considered a key feature of the Gothic: the (un)dead return as Othered doubles of normality, for example, and ancestral curses turn into agents of the return of the repressed.

Of course, both *Supernatural* and *Alan Wake* employ elements generally associated with the Gothic: the narratives are, for example, set within family structures and there are confrontations with supernatural forces. In addition to these generic features, however, both the television show and the videogame, in the spirit of postmodernism, repeatedly and (more or less) explicitly reference their generic forerunners, assuring their return in the genre's present.

Whether it is the constant references to past television shows such as *The X-Files* (1993-2002), allusions to past horror movies, or even the defining nostalgic soundtrack of the series, *Supernatural* appears to 'live' as much in the past as its central characters Sam and Dean Winchester, who are haunted by, among other things, the traumatic experience of their mother's death and by a bloodline that seems to go back to Cain and Abel. Indeed, in certain episodes, *Supernatural* is nearly submerged by its intertexts. The episode "Monster Movie" (Singer and Edlund 2008), for instance, replicates horror movies of the 1930s and 1940s. The episode begins with credits that feature an anachronistic 1930-ish Warner Bros. logo and concludes with an overly clichéd ending that is entirely out of sync with the typical conclusion of a *Supernatural* episode. In-between, "Monster Movie" tells the story of a shape-shifter who re-stages the narratives of Universal's horror classics *Dracula* (1931), *The Wolf Man* (1941), *The Mummy* (1932), and *Frankenstein* (1931) in the 'real'

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[1] It may be added that several scholars have opposed the notion of the inherent intertextual character of genre works. Tommi Nieminen, for example, argues that genre is "the diagonal opposite of […] intertextual connections" (Nieminen 2004: 106).

world and prefers the realities of movieland to those of the real
world for their simplicity and clarity. Obviously, "Monster Movie"
touches upon the aforementioned displacement of the real by
signs so defining of the (post-)postmodern condition. In fact, the
shape-shifter seems to have taken a cue from Jean Baudrillard and
has constructed his reality based on the simulacra provided by the
film industry. In the process, the shifter has not only transposed
himself into another space, but effectively been transformed into
someone else, as his self-estrangement becomes literalised through
the disintegration of his 'real' self into the characters he plays, his
palimpsestic subjectivity emerging through the inscriptions that
bring him into being. Yet on another level, an intertextual double
of the Universal horror movies emerges from the episode. This
double is as much defined by its similarity to said movies as by its
difference from them. *Supernatural*'s adaptation of these horror
classics thus proves to be strangely familiar – in other words,
uncanny.

A similar issue is foregrounded in *Supernatural*'s season one
episode "Asylum" (Bee and Hatem 2005), which depicts the ghosts
of former patients roaming a sanatorium in which the head doctor
carried out cruel experimental treatments. This quick plot outline
is already reminiscent of numerous movies that use roughly the
same narrative setup (e.g. *The House on Haunted Hill* [1999])
and provide the blueprint for certain stylistic elements employed
throughout the episode. When Sam and Dean first investigate the
asylum, Dean wonders, "What do you think, ghosts possessing
people?" Sam replies, "Maybe it's […] like *Amityville*". "Yes,
ghosts driving them insane. Kinda like my man Jack in *The
Shining*", responds Dean, as the dialogue effortlessly moves from
present to past and from reality to artifice. When the brothers
return to the asylum later the same day and find a frightened
teenage girl, Dean tops off the wallowing in self-reflexivity by
saying, "You've seen a lot of horror movies, yeah? […] Do me a
favor, next time you see one, pay attention! When someone says a
place is haunted, don't go in!".

Alan Wake (Kasurinen, Lake, Rautalahti 2010), a videogame
featuring a complex metatextual plot revolving around a best-
selling crime and horror writer who discovers that he is only a
character in a novel, takes this reflection on generic rules even a

step further[2]. The game's prologue opens with a voiceover narration by its protagonist:

Stephen King once wrote that nightmares exist outside of logic and there is little fun to be had in explanations. They're antithetical to the poetry of fear. In a horror story, the victim keeps asking "why", but there can be no explanation, and there shouldn't be one. The unanswered mystery is what stays with us the longest and is what we'll remember in the end.

Alan thus makes the poetics of the narrative that is about to follow explicit and begins to narrate his story, as visuals display his car on a lonely Pacific Northwest coastal road passing an "Entering Nightmare" sign:

Following a typical nightmare pattern, I was late, desperately trying to reach my destination, a lighthouse, for some urgent reason I couldn't remember. I've been driving too fast down a coastal road to get there. [Alan runs over a hitchhiker] I'd seen the hitchhiker too late. He was dead.

Yet, when the headlights of Alan's car go out, the 'dead' hitchhiker simply disappears, only to come after Wake some minutes later and makes Alan "realize that the hitchhiker was a character from a story [he]'d been working on". The premise of the metatextual narrative that pits its protagonist against fictional constructs is eerily reminiscent, an uncanny double, of the movie *Secret Window* (2004), based on the Stephen King novella *Secret Window, Secret Garden* (1990), and, even more so, *In the Mouth of Madness* (1994), which was heavily influenced by the writings of Howard Phillips Lovecraft. Unsurprisingly, both King and Lovecraft are repeatedly referred to by name throughout the game, as their works haunt both the writing of Alan Wake's latest novel and the game's narrative of which he is the protagonist[3].

In this way, both *Supernatural* and *Alan Wake* do not merely repeatedly underline their similarities to other Gothic texts, but also highlight their derivativeness and, as a result, their constructed

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[2] See Fuchs (forthcoming) for a discussion of *Alan Wake*'s textual complexities.
[3] Both S. King and H. P. Lovecraft are also repeatedly referenced in *Supernatural*. In "Let It Bleed" (Showalter and Gamble 2011), Lovecraft's fictionalised double even appears on the show.

nature. However, as much as the texts stress their proximity to their hypotexts, they, somewhat paradoxically, just as much underscore their differences, which go beyond the ways in which generic conventions are employed. While the pre-postmodern "Gothic dwells in the historical past, or identifies 'pastness' in the present, to reinforce a *distance* between the enlightened now and the repressive or misguided then" (Mighall 2003: xviii; emphasis added), a "perpetual present" (Jameson 1983: 119) in which the genre's past, present, and even future simultaneously co-exist emerges from these contemporary Gothic texts. This conflation of the formerly separate (spatio)temporal compartments of past, present, and future provides testament to the Gothic's ability to constantly adapt to changing socio-historic environments and to represent the uncanny at any specific time and/or place. After all, the disappearance of (not only) these borderlines proves central to any consideration of the contemporary Gothic. It is thus hardly surprising that Antonio Negri has diagnosed a "new spectrality" in contemporary digiculture, which has practically enveloped everything. Echoing poststructuralist conceptions of hyperreality in which the real has been displaced, he writes that "[t]here's no longer an outside" of spectrality and there is no "reason to disengage us from the spectrality of the real. There's neither place nor time – and this is the real" (Negri 1999: 9). As a result, Negri argues, only an "'Unheimlich' remains in which we're immersed" (Negri 1999: 9).

2. Doubles across media: *Alan Wake* and *Supernatural* as Gothic. Transmedia narratives

We are, indeed, immersed in a digiculture in which media constantly surround us and provide the means to interact with other people. This contemporary mediascape is defined by convergence and the blurring, if not disappearance, of media borders, and allows fans of the Gothic to immerse themselves in the genre across media. While in the past, immersing in Gothic texts across media generally meant immersing in different storyworlds, today's media environment is saturated by what Henry Jenkins (2006: 95) has referred to as "transmedia stor[ies]". Jenkins explains that such a transmedia narrative "unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole"

(Jenkins 2006: 97-8). Much in the same way that intertextuality is located between individual works, so transmedia narratives are located in the spaces between their individual parts (even if the primacy of the core narrative around which a transmedia story develops cannot be denied).

Not only characters and other elements located on the level of *histoire* cross medial boundaries in transmedia narratives, but so do various devices on the level of *discours*, such as symbols and motifs, effectively establishing doubles in different media. The doppelganger, one of the most important Gothic conventions, takes the motif of doubling to the extreme. As generic spectres that haunt the contemporary Gothic, various depictions of the doppelganger can be found in individual contributions to the transmedia narratives of *Alan Wake* and *Supernatural*. Sam and Dean repeatedly face shape-shifters, which, as the name suggests, can take any form. When the Winchesters are after these creatures, the monsters tend to adopt the look of one of the brothers. In *Supernatural: The Animation* episode "Ghost on the Highway" (Miya and Inamoto 2011), even the boys' beloved 1967 Chevy Impala finds its evil twin in a car that seeks revenge on a coastal town. And in the season five finale of the live-action series, "Swan Song" (Boyum, Kripke, Gerwitz 2010), Sam's body gets possessed by Lucifer, culminating in a scene which practically begs for a psychoanalytic reading and visualises the struggle between Sam and Lucifer – both inside Sam's body – for control over Sam's body.

While the spectre of the doppelganger thus haunts contemporary Gothic tales as a genre convention, in both *Alan Wake* and *Supernatural*, the doppelganger furthermore transgresses the medial confines of the core narratives – the video game and the television series, respectively. As already mentioned above, *Alan Wake*'s narrative is extremely complex, so the following plot outline presents a condensed and simplified version of the story, knowledge of which is, however, necessary to comprehend the meaning of the doppelganger in the narrative. Early in the game, Alan's wife, Alice, is abducted by a dark force that haunts the otherwise idyllic town of Bright Falls. Alan discovers that the force can only exist through stories that are written about it, metatextually underscoring that, to use Tzvetan Todorov's words, "[t]he supernatural is born of language" (Todorov 1975: 82). Of course, the force wants Alan to

write it into existence. While Alan first believes that following the Dark Presence's orders would allow him to save Alice, he comes to understand that "the story [he's] writing […] is a horror story [that] no one will survive" and realises that in order to save Alice, he must take her place in an alternate universe in which she is held captive. Towards the end of the game, Alan learns that he will be replaced by his doppelganger, Mr Scratch, in the 'real' world when he moves into the parallel universe[4]. While in the game, it remains unclear as to what happens in the 'real' world while Alan is caught in the alternate universe, an ancillary text developing the transmedia narrative surrounding *Alan Wake* provides additional information regarding this issue. In *The Alan Wake Files* (Steward 2010), a fake report on the events surrounding what seems to be the death or disappearance of celebrity author Alan Wake, Clay Steward, the (fictitious) author of the report, relates:

[O]ne night […] I saw a man that looked like Wake rounding a bend in [a] trail. I called out and started jogging, then running after him, and while he seemed to walk at a steady and even pace, I was never able to catch up. There was even a brief moment in which he looked back and I saw that it was him. He smiled at me as though he were letting me in on a big secret, just before rounding the bend. When I caught up, he had vanished. (2010: 128)

In this context, *The Alan Wake Files* thus performs a twofold function. On the one hand, it authenticates the surreal events that take place in the storyworld established in the game by highlighting that the diegetic events are not merely a dream (a conclusion one could easily draw when solely considering the core game, as the final words spoken are, "Alan, wake up!"), but 'real', since the always-smiling Mr Scratch has replaced Alan Wake in the reality of the storyworld. On the other hand, it transports the confusion of diegetic levels so present in the game into the real world, since *The Alan Wake Files* is a document that exists in physical reality, effectively suggesting that the borders between reality and fiction have disappeared.

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[4] The follow-up to *Alan Wake*, *Alan Wake's American Nightmare* (2012), centers on the struggle between Alan and his double.

A metatextual subtext that similarly conflates reality and fiction has been a staple of *Supernatural* since (at least) season four. However, the season six episode "The French Mistake" is noteworthy for how the show's metatextual character is supported and highlighted by a transmedial dimension. In the episode, Sam and Dean are transported into an alternate universe in which they are actors 'Jared Padalecki' and 'Jensen Ackles', that is, the 'real-life' actors playing Sam and Dean, who are starring in a television series, naturally entitled *Supernatural*[5]. As they try to cope with the situation, they meet 'Misha Collins', the fictionalised version of real-world actor Misha Collins, who plays the angel Castiel on the show. Sam and Dean believe that they are talking to the 'real' Castiel, but then discover that 'Misha' is only reciting his script, which simultaneously serves as 'Misha''s script in the fictional universe and Misha Collins's in the real world. When the two crestfallen brothers turn their backs on 'Misha', he, thinking that 'Jared' and 'Jensen' played a trick on him, tweets: "Ola mishamigos! J2 got me good. Really starting to feel like one of the guys". Numerous elements employed in the episode (such as the presence of crew members' names in the diegetic reality and the fact that the actor's fictionalised doubles roam the paranormal reality of a television show called *Supernatural* in the storyworld of the television series *Supernatural*) already hint at the disintegration of the borderlines between reality and fiction. However, a piece of *Supernatural*'s transmedia narrative took this deconstruction of the reality-fiction binary literally to another dimension. In the very moment when 'Misha' tweeted the abovementioned message during the episode's original broadcast, the exact same tweet appeared on actor Misha Collins's twitter feed. Two more tweets broke the reality-fiction boundary in the same way later in the episode[6].

This uncanny interconnection between fiction and reality proves essential to understanding contemporary mass-mediatised reality, which increasingly assumes characteristics that Jean Baudrillard

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[5] The inverted commas are meant to help differentiate between the characters in the show and the actual actors.

[6] For the tweets, see http://twitter.com/#!/mishacollins/status/41319367685832704, http://twitter.com/#!/mishacollins/status/41369246122524672, and http://twitter.com/#!/mishacollins/status/41385506159853569.

ascribed to postmodern reality already about thirty years ago, most importantly in his conceptualisation of the simulacrum. In the words of Anthony Vidler, the uncanny's "propensity for the double, for the elision between reality and fiction […] gives it a central role in the explication of the simulacrum" (Vidler 1992: 9-10). Indeed, what emerges from both transmedia narratives are simulacral spaces, "uncanny […] space[s] capable of collapsing, compromising, and even displacing the real world" (Sconce 2000: 18)[7]. This aspect becomes most explicit when considering the tweets, for here the differences between original and double, between reality and artifice, between the messages written by 'Misha' and those posted by Misha – and, by extension, 'Misha' and Misha – have disappeared, simultaneously injecting reality into the "*Supernatural*verse" – the universe of *Supernatural* – and rejecting the physical reality surrounding it.

The question that looms large is what this omnipresence of questioning the constructedness of reality tells us about contemporary Gothic. In her book *Gothic-Postmodernism*, Maria Beville argues that the postmodern Gothic "problematises the relationship between reality and fiction" (Beville 2009: 7). However, as the partly digital transmedia narratives of *Supernatural* and *Alan Wake* (and other recent Gothic artefacts, such as Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* [2000]) demonstrate, maybe this problematisation of the relationship between reality and fiction is even more characteristic of what Alan Kirby (2009) has called "digimodernism". Jeffrey Sconce has suggested that

[w]here there was once the 'real', there is now only the electronic generation and circulation of almost supernatural simulations. Where there was once stable human consciousness, there are now only the ghosts of fragmented, decentered, and increasingly schizophrenic subjectivities. […] Where there was once 'meaning', 'history', and a solid realm of 'signifieds', there is now only a haunted landscape of vacant and shifting signifiers. (Sconce 2000: 170-171)

In fact, as texts that not only unite the medial past and present of the Gothic, but, moreover, interrelate reality and fabrication, *Alan Wake* and *Supernatural* are testament to a culture in which media are as much part of real life as real life is part of the media, as video

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[7] For a discussion of *Supernatural* and hyperreality, see Fuchs (2011).

diaries and 'reality TV' perfectly demonstrate. In his elaborations on the uncanny, Freud proposed that fiction provided "more means of creating uncanny effects" ([1919] 1955: 249) than physical reality. However, in our contemporary digiculture in which physical reality increasingly assumes hyperreal characteristics, spectrality and the uncanny are, as Gray Kochhar-Lindgren writes, "all around us in our most mundane activities and transactions; it is the medium in which [...] we exist" (Kochhar-Lindgren 2005: 2). In this contemporary digiculture, we constantly construct virtual doubles of ourselves through which we communicate with other people, among many other things that are oftentimes similar yet different to our 'true' selves – an uncanny, if not to say 'Gothic', kind of human existence that is, indeed.

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