



The time is out of joint: Atmosphere and hauntology at Bodiam Castle



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ABSTRACT

Drawing on recent work in emotional and cultural geography, the author brings Derrida's concept of hauntology into communication with thinking about atmospheres. The research deployed a mixed-method approach including audio documentation, observation, focus groups and interviews to look at the use of spectrality in the making of atmospheres associated with *A Knight's Peril*, an interactive game played at Bodiam Castle in the South East of England. The paper argues that the figure of the ghost is a useful heuristic towards understanding how designers conjure and exploit the emotional and affective power of atmospheres. At Bodiam, these techniques are deployed in an attempt to facilitate new understandings of the past.

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1. Introduction

Uncover the Castle's Deadly Secrets. It's 1387 and someone wants Sir Edward Dallingridge dead. Help his daughter Kate discover who before it's too late. Experience the sounds of medieval life around the castle in an interactive audio investigation. THIS IS NOT AN AUDIO GUIDE.' (*A Knight's Peril* Adventure Map)

Visitors to Bodiam Castle who play *A Knight's Peril* are driven by this urgent plea to foil the plot against Sir Dallingridge. Guided by an adventure map, echo horn, and the ghostly voice of twelve-year-old Kate (a fictional 14th century character who drives the narrative and assists in the players' investigation), participants interact with a few of the historic and imagined personalities associated with the castle as they solve the mystery and intervene in the past.

In this paper I build on recent work on atmospheres in *Emotion, Space and Society* (Anderson, 2009; special issue edited by Bille et al., 2015; Urry et al., 2016) and elsewhere to examine the production and staging of *A Knight's Peril*. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's hauntology (1994) and considerations of spectrality in social phenomena (Gordon, 1997; Edensor, 2005; Wylie, 2007; Cameron,

2008; Maddern and Adey, 2008; Matless, 2008), I focus on how the game's design conjures ghosts through narrative and sound in support of particular atmospheres and experiences at Bodiam Castle. Coined by Derrida in *Specters of Marx*, hauntology concerns the deconstructive critique of the priority given to concepts such as being and presence (over non-being and absence for example). It is also a philosophical and ethical destabilisation of all manner of dualisms and universalising totalities (Critchley, 2014). In hauntology, the ghost plays a crucial role in this destabilisation via its characteristic uncertainty. As Liz Roberts explains, a hauntological position 'is one of deliberate indeterminacy, enforced hesitancy or uncertainty over presupposed givens and operations involving visibility and invisibility that constitute our reality' (2012, 393).

Geographical and urban scholarship on spectrality often draws on Derrida's work and has brought attention to the ways in which spaces are always haunted (see Till, 2005, 2012; Wylie, 2007; Edensor, 2005; Cameron, 2008; Maddern and Adey, 2008). Here, ghosts are a pervasive, yet often unnoticed or unaccounted for part of social life. As Jameson writes, spectrality 'is what makes the present waver', it is the notion that 'the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity ...' (1999, 38–39). For urban and social research, taking a hauntological position and being mindful of ghosts can serve as a heuristic device towards unsettling commonly-accepted ontological categories and assumptions. The

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logic of the ghost', according to Derrida, is that it 'points toward a thinking of the event that necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic' (1994, 78), such as its tendency to blur the boundaries between supposedly stable ontological categories (e.g. living/dead, being/non-being, and presence/absence).

Atmospheres are arguably the prototypical spatial form of hauntology. Vague, irrational and indeterminate, they haunt the middle ground between subject and object (Böhme, 1993, 2013). 'We are unsure where they are' (Bille et al., 2015, 32) yet we feel them all around us. Like ghosts, their ontological status is always insecure. From the perspective of atmospheres, concepts such as 'presence and absence, materiality and ideality, definite and indefinite, singularity and generality' are always expressed as 'relations in tension' (Anderson, 2009, 80). For hauntology, these relations are not only tense, but are inseparable as each term can be found to contain traces of its opposite (Buse and Stott, 1999). Despite this overlap, theoretical and empirical connections between spectrality, hauntology and atmospheres are relatively underexplored (but see Edensor, 2012).

In this paper, I take scholarship forward by bringing these areas into communication and taking a hauntological position in the investigation of the atmospheres associated with Bodiam Castle's *A Knight's Peril*. I argue that the framework of hauntology brings a fresh perspective to scholarship on atmospheres. The paper demonstrates how the purposeful making and installing of atmospheres (Böhme, 2013) can be a process through which to redress historical absences – in this case, the absence of women and children in medieval record.

Research for this paper was conducted over two phases during 2014 and 2015. The first phase centred on general background to Bodiam Castle and interviews with designers and historians (n = 4) who were involved in creating *A Knight's Peril*. The second phase occurred over six days and encompassed the main research activity at the castle. Methods included the use of visual and audio methods (e.g. photography and recording), participant observation, focus group discussions and interviews with players (15 groups consisting of 46 individuals). Data collection was not focused on reproducing a single or neutral representation of the conditions at Bodiam Castle. Rather, the approach sought to animate some of the atmospheres associated with playing *A Knight's Peril* by focusing on the affective, emotional and sensuous elements of the game. The approach was explorative and inspired by recent methods discussions within non-representational theory (Vannini, 2015; Anderson and Ash, 2015; McCormack, 2014) where a diversity of methods are often deployed in order to help 'look at, listen to and feel the space differently' (Adey, 2008, 303).

This information was analysed with particular attention on processes of staging and constructing atmospheres at the castle and the experiences of participants who played *A Knight's Peril*. Nevertheless, while the paper captures and names discrete atmospheres (Anderson and Ash, 2015), these are circumstantial forms of sense-making (McCormack, 2014) where envelopment (naming) simultaneously gives consistency while remaining open to the contingency and dynamism of social experience. Moreover, as Simpson (2017b) notes, individuals do not arrive at research sites with identical past experiences. Indeed, even among young siblings who participated in the project, experiences and histories will have been diverse and a day out at a National Trust property can stimulate divergent affective and emotional responses.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Following this introduction I review *A Knight's Peril* within the context of contemporary trends in heritage interpretation. I then discuss recent writing on atmosphere, focusing on design and staging as well as the role of spectrality in producing paradoxical temporality surrounding these phenomena. The empirical discussion presents the ways in which

narratives and staging techniques such as the introduction of sounds both enable and co-produce atmospheres which inform and mediate heritage experience and understandings of the past. This work is further analysed through a hauntological lens, reflecting on Derrida's non-linear conception of time and the role of spectrality in the production of emotionally resonant social spaces. I conclude with reflections and suggestions for further research.

1.1. *Playing with history in A Knight's Peril*

A Knight's Peril is a pervasive game (Montola et al., 2009) – an interactive, augmented reality experience – played at Bodiam Castle (see Fig. 1) in the South East of England.

Built by Sir Edward Dallingridge in 1383, Bodiam has the look of an archetypal late medieval castle (Saul, 1995). While the structure suffered an extended period of decline, I found that its wide moat, elegant, symmetrical shape, large towers and country setting produced an evocative and picturesque heritage space.¹ Its current condition can be attributed to a series of conservation efforts starting in the early 1800s when the castle was repaired and maintained by individuals and families interested in preserving the structure as a 'romantic ruin' (National Trust, 2001, 9–10). Today, the castle is owned and managed by the National Trust, a charitable organisation that operates a range of historic houses, properties, landscapes and nature reserves in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.² In 2014 an independent design company (Splash & Ripple³) was engaged by the National Trust to create *A Knight's Peril*. The broad objective of the project was to improve the experience of *explorer families* – described as families that actively learn and play together (National Trust, 2014). Interest in this demographic is representative of the charity's desire to diversify its visitor base and reach new audiences.

A Knight's Peril deploys a choose-your-own-adventure game model to enable player interaction with a few of the personalities associated with the castle. It facilitates this primarily through a fanciful *echo horn*, constructed specifically for the project. The device is RFID⁴ enabled to allow digital interaction at the site. However, it has the look of a type of object one might find in the 14th century. According to the game narrative, Kate Dallingridge (Sir Edward's daughter) has left echoes around the castle and where they have seeped into the stonework, a small seal has grown. When placed in contact with a seal, the horn can tap into Kate's echoes. With echo horn in hand, participants interact with her character and work together to foil the plan to assassinate her father (see Fig. 2).

A Knight's Peril is illustrative of heritage learning where non-didactic ways of engaging people with past experience are being explored (e.g. beyond the guidebook and audio guide). Such projects typically involve the introduction of digital media or the creation of virtual environments where visitors can engage in learning activities (Mortara et al., 2014). A range of motivations are evident including: to modify and enhance conventional heritage experiences, to decentre heritage experience away from dominant narratives; to facilitate user agency, and to boost attendance through the incorporation of fun and engaging activities and technology (Hertzman et al., 2008; Coenen et al., 2013; Mortara

¹ Further images of the castle at: <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/bodiam-castle>.

² The National Trust is one of the most highly visible and influential institutions within the UK's cultural industries. In 2015 there were over 21 million visitors to their properties (National Trust, 2015).

³ Production involved designers, historians, creative technologists, writers, actors, producers and the Splash & Ripple director as well as National Trust advisors.

⁴ Radio-frequency identification.

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