Cute, Interesting, Zany Ghosts:

Examining Aesthetic Experience of Ghosts

in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, *Genshin Impact* and *Hades*

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Introduction

Regardless of era, genre, platform or style—the 'ghost' has to be one of the most enduring aesthetic and affective occult figures in video games. Ghosts appear where they should: as the ever-reincarnating gothic spectres of *Elden Ring* and FromSoftware Inc's wider collection of games; featuring somewhat appropriately as relatives passed in The Sims franchise (focused such as it is on life and legacy); the gossiping shades that toil and meander the halls of the underworld in Supergiant Games' *Hades*. Yet ghosts also appear where they are unexpected visitors: a Wisp that haunts the seemingly deathless land of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*; the eerie puzzle-givers in the sprawling landscapes of Hoyoverse's *Genshin Impact*. The presence of ghosts across video games of different genres, styles, and mediums is varied and diverse, making video games a compelling site of reflection on the presence of this occult figure in contemporary art and storytelling.

Various game studies scholars, including Janik and Jones, have drawn a link between the presence of ghosts in certain video games and thematic interests between the living and dead, past and present, and the aesthetics of Derrida's hauntology. Hauntology "seeks to

examine that which is no longer a reality in this moment of time but instead leaves traces to complicate that very reality" (Jones 2021: 408) and investigates "the things and thoughts which are out of their proper time and place" (Janik 2019: 4)—the specter as an ambivalence and in-betweenness. One of the repeated phrases in Derrida's *Specters of Marx* is from Hamlet: "the time is out of joint" (Derrida 1993: 1; Fisher 2012: 18). The specter marks something "out of joint", a relation to "what is no longer or not yet" (Fisher 2012: 18-19) but which exerts influence over the present. Jones considers a study of haunting in Fullbright's *Tacoma* through a hauntological lens, and Janik's paper examines the "spectral relationships between different layers of the video game object" (2019: 2). Janik and Jones' work offer valuable insights and foundations for future discussion of ghosts in video games. In this paper I wish to contribute to this reflective discussion by turning my attention to instances when the encounter with ghosts in video games can be interpreted, through close playing of the respective games they appear in, as signifiers for the complex experiences of a contemporary world influenced by the vast economic systems of the Capitalocene. Of particular interest to me are the phantasmal relations to commodities, information, and work that are the focus of Ngai's monograph *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012), and how Ngai's work can be introduced as a frame for discussing the aesthetics and affects of ghosts in video games.

Drawing from Ngai's terminology in *Our Aesthetic Categories* (2012), I identify and discuss three different aesthetic categories of ghosts: cute ghosts, interesting ghosts, and zany ghosts. While Ngai's work does not speak to video games directly, it does explore categories of aesthetic experience about production, circulation, and consumption. Ngai argues that, for all their marginality to aesthetic theory, the categories of cute, interesting, and zany examine some of the most important social dynamics underlying life in the Capitalocene. The cute, zany, and interesting express conflicting feelings that connect to the ways in which

postmodern subjects actively work, exchange, and consume. I suggest that, while ghosts often signify a tension, in some instances this tension is not only between life and death, present and past, but in the game's reflection on commodities (the cute), information (the interesting), and performance and work (the zany).

I examine the appearance of ghosts in three games and consider them through the aesthetic category I find most appropriate and valuable to understanding their role and context in their respective video game: the cute Wisp in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and its relation to acquiring rare and unusual items; the interesting puzzle givers of Dusky Ming and Little Nine in *Genshin Impact*; and the hardworking zany shades of *Hades* who, reflecting the game's own thematic interest in continued effort, exist as eternal water-cooler gossips and workers in the Administrative Chamber in the House of Hades. In doing so, I present an examination of the affective quality ghosts might have in video games, and how the form and function of this occult being has evolved in the context of the Capitalocene. All three examples represent games of different genres and are made in different countries: Japan, China, and the USA respectively. What *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, *Genshin Impact*, and *Hades* have in common is significant international success and audiences. There is of course, capacity and cause for lengthier, more in-depth studies of each ghost and their respective developer; I firmly believe every ghost I discuss is worthy of its own bountiful and extensive literature. My intention in this essay is not to arrive at an exhaustive conclusion, but to reflect on the capacity for Ngai's aesthetic categories to help articulate what ghosts *do* in these video games and what kinds of phantasmal relation they might represent. I will discuss and consider how Ngai's aesthetic categories of the cute, interesting, and zany might illuminate the unique representations of ghosts in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, *Genshin Impact*, and *Hades* respectively.

Ngai's aesthetic categories: cute, interesting and zany

To articulate my use of Ngai's aesthetic categories in analysing my ghostly subject matter, it is first necessary to describe what Ngai means when she defines an aesthetic category. Ngai argues for the importance of cute, interesting, and zany as aesthetic categories as they specifically speak to the "ways in which late capitalist subjects work, exchange and consume" (Ngai 2020). Ngai writes that "the zany is 'about' deindustrialised production"; the interesting is "tied to the circulation of information" and involves the recognition of difference prior to it being assigned a meaning; and the cute is "about our phantasmatic relation to commodities as consumers" (Ngai 2020). The cute, interesting, and zany are relatively ambivalent and encompass both positive and negative aesthetic experience—the cute is malleable *and* possessive, the interesting is wondrous *and* frustratingly endless and indeterminate, the zany is fun but *also* stressful. This "co-presence of clashing feelings" (Ngai 2020) is an important quality of Ngai's thesis and what differentiates the cute, zany and interesting from more definitive aesthetic categories and judgements, such as the beautiful and the sublime. These "clashing feelings" are what make the cute, interesting and the zany well-suited to grasping aesthetic experience under the conditions of our contemporary era, and it is these contrasting emotions that I will focus on in my analysis of the ghosts in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, *Genshin Impact* and *Hades*.

As well as the ability of the cute, interesting and zany to convey significantly contrasting emotional relations, Ngai also uses the term aesthetic category to refer to a specific kind of 'double-sided' aesthetic experience. The first side involves style—"a conventionalised or pre-shaped way of seeing form" (Ngai 2020). The other side of an aesthetic category is an "evaluative speech act … what we learn to say in response to objects we perceive" (Ngai 2020). So, for example, cute is not only related to a collection of stylistic

conventions but also signified by the presence of a particular behaviour or judgement towards it. An aesthetic category thus "designates the very relation between a stylised form and a verbal judgement; a collective, structured way of seeing, and an equally structured way of speaking" (Ngai 2020). This makes the cute, interesting, and zany almost surprisingly robust in an analysis of video games, a medium that, perhaps more than any other before it, are defined by an experience of style—a game's visual, artful, narrative, and genre qualities—and a player's structured behaviour towards the video game through play and the way the game mediates interactivity and inscribes agency.

Due to this close relationship between the cute, interesting, and zany and the context of the Capitalocene and its economic systems, Ngai argues that understanding the double-sided function of these categories is "critical for grasping our historical moment," as the cute, interesting and zany are "concepts we use to process the hypercommodified, data-mined, performance-driven world of late capitalism" (Ngai 2020). Ngai writes that the complex experience of the cute, interesting, and zany as aesthetic categories "points to the ambivalence most of us feel about capitalism itself, as a system generating enormous misery as well as wealth" (Ngai 2020). I believe another way of phrasing this is that the cute, zany, and interesting are dialectical categories that are able to specifically illuminate (or "process", as Ngai writes) our experience as subjects under global capitalism.

In my following analyses, I will reflect on how the dialectical qualities of the cute, interesting and zany are present in the representations of ghosts in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, *Genshin Impact* and *Hades*, respectively. In doing so I will attend to gameplay qualities alongside narrative and style, observing how the dominant aesthetic category presented by the ghost appears to reflect some of the broader thematic interests of the game itself. In the case of the cute Wisp in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, I will discuss its weak,

malleable expression and 'blob'-like form, and how it inverts the power dynamic between the player and Wisp by having the player adopt its "surprisingly powerful demands" (Ngai 2012: 64). I will reflect on how the presence of ghosts in Hoyoverse's *Genshin Impact* is intrinsically linked to its serial form and its story's contrasting emotional beats of curiosity and "ongoingness". Both the form of *Genshin Impact* and the style of its ghostly encounters express the "tension between wonder and understanding" (Epstein 79, cited in Ngai 2012: 116) that is essential to the aesthetic category of the interesting. Third, I will discuss the zany shades of the Greek Underworld in *Hades*, and how their playful *and* precarious work in the House of Hades relates to its thematic interest in effort; playfully subverting the occult figure of the ghost to reflect on contrasting feelings about work. Across these three analyses I hope to demonstrate how the cute, interesting, and zany can illuminate the way *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, *Genshin Impact* and *Hades* use the occult figure of the ghost to express some of the important aesthetic experiences and relations in our historical moment.

Cute ghosts

Animal Crossing: New Horizons is a peaceful life simulator where the player moves to a deserted, "utopian" island rendered in a sweet *chibi* art style. Over time other villagers will move to the island and become companions for the player. The core game mechanics involve acquiring resources and recipes for items used to design and customise the player's island, as well as to complete collections for the island's museum. Time is marked by the changing of seasons, each arriving with its own celebrations and unique items. Each seasonal festival, such as Halloween (in October) and Toy Day (a somewhat agnostic equivalent to Christmas that occurs in December) come with their own unique collections of goods, recipes, and décor. The player-character is a customisable humanoid reminiscent of Japanese artist Yoshitomo Nara's childlike figures, with the rest of the villagers taking the form of

different anthropomorphic animals. Unlike life simulators such as The Sims series, there is no death on the islands of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. Characters do not age, and time continues endlessly along the four-season cycle.

In the deathless land of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, the player can encounter a singular ghost, a blob-like being with a toothy smile named, in the English translation of the game, 'Wisp', who appears hauntingly on the horizon of moonlit nights. While the concept of death is present in the material items the player can acquire to decorate their island, including Japanese and European style graves and a coffin, the characters that inhabit the world themselves cannot die and do not talk about death. The presence of death as a purely aesthetic quality in gameplay makes the appearance of Wisp somewhat jarring and spooky. Wisp's Japanese name, Yuutarou (ゆうたろう), is also indicative of this ambivalence, roughly translating to "a ghost … right?" (Ahlström, Ahlström and Plummer). The player can interact with Wisp conversationally in the same way they do with other characters on the island, however doing so, ironically, gives Wisp a fright. Wisp is afraid of ghosts and will confuse the player for one when approached. Wisp will shout in fear and his body divides into five spirit pieces which fly off into random locations across the island, leaving an even smaller, even more blob-like, Wisp. Chastising you for frightening him, Wisp requests that the player collects his missing pieces and return them. The player then traverses the island and scoops up each spirit piece (small glowing blobs) with their bug-catching net. Upon returning to Wisp, he thanks the player and offers a reward. The player can choose to be rewarded with an item, either "something you don't have yet" or "something expensive". The appearance of Wisp on the island, under the parameters described above, can occur an unlimited number of times throughout the course of play, with the completion of each visit resulting in the offer of an item from Wisp.

In Wisp's visual presentation and behaviour, and his function as a kind of commodity provider, I suggest Wisp captures the double-sided experience of Ngai's cute aesthetic category. Wisp seems to submit to us, the player, while simultaneously exerting power over us. On the one hand, the cute object incites in the subject a desire to possess, on the other, the cute object possesses the subject. For Ngai, the cute object is "unusually responsive and thus easily shaped or deformed by the subject's feeling or attitude towards it" (2012: 65). Ngai takes one such example of this as a soft frog-shaped baby's bath toy or plushie (2012: 65) able to be compressed and moulded at our behest. Like Wisp, the bath toy example has an "enormous face (it is in fact nothing but face) and exaggerated gaze" (2012: 64). Ngai suggests that "the epitome of the cute would be an undifferentiated blob" (2012: 64) and that "cuteness is an aestheticization of powerlessness" (2012 64), in other words, "what we love because it submits to us" (Ferguson 48, cited in Ngai 2012: 64). Both in its visuals and behaviour, Wisp appears submissive and relatively weak as an agent, deformed by the player's engagement with it into to smaller contoured parts. The use of the English word Wisp as the name of this being itself suggests something small, fragile, and childlike. Ngai writes that "since soft contours suggest pliancy or responsiveness to the will of others, the less formally articulated the commodity, the cuter" (2012: 64). Wisp is an almost perfect presentation of Ngai's definition of cute—blob-like, it does nothing but float aimlessly until it is acted on by the player on the material level, and when it is acted on it is relatively helpless and malleable.

One quality of Ngai's definition of the cute is that while it is "unusually responsive" and "easily deformed"; the contrasting affect of the cute is as an aesthetic category about power—specifically—the subversive power relation that exists between a subject and commodity. While Wisp does submit to the player, both in its "helplessness" (Ngai 2012: 65) and its ability to be collected and handled by the player, it also demands a certain kind of

behaviour from the player. Ngai writes that cuteness is "the name of an encounter with difference—a perceived difference in the power of the subject and object" (2012: 87). Ngai writes that "cuteness cutifies the language of the aesthetic response it compels" (2012: 87) exerting a mimetic power (Ngai 2012). Ngai continues that "the cute commodity, for all its pathos of powerlessness, is thus capable of making surprisingly powerful demands" (2012: 64). To further elaborate on Wisp's "powerful demands" (Ngai 2012: 64), I will here reflect on an important quality video games have as works that communicate meaning and experience: the ability to inscribe and structure the agency of the player experiencing them. In his work *Games: Agency as Art*, Nguyen (2020) argues that the unique capacity games have as artworks is that of agential inscription. Games, through play, inscribe "temporary agencies—temporary sets of abilities and constraints, along with temporary ends" (Nguyen 2020: 5) and take advantage of our "significant capacity for agential fluidity" (Nguyen 2020: 5) as their unique artistic mode to communicate human experience. Considering the player's encounter with Wisp as a moment when the game inscribes a particular agency upon the player, it is one that inverts the dynamic of power between subject (player) and cute object (Wisp). While Wisp is a weak agent, it also commands the player attend to its "surprisingly powerful demands", constraining and changing the agency of the interaction from the player acting upon the helpless Wisp to Wisp inscribing an agency onto the player. One of the key signifiers of an encounter with the cute in Ngai's study is its ability to appear powerless yet able to make a subject behave in a certain way. In their interaction with Wisp, the effect of these surprisingly powerful demands occurs in the form of the request to collect the portions of Wisp's spirit. The player is seduced to carry out Wisp's wishes by the prospect of a new or special commodity.

Expressing the complex aesthetic relation between the self and the commodity, Benjamin wrote "if the soul of the commodity which Marx occasionally mentions in jest

existed, it would be the most empathetic ever encountered in the realm of souls, for it would have to see in everyone the buyer in whose hand and house it wants to nestle" (1983: 55). It would perhaps not be too far of a leap to suggest Wisp is a quite literal reflection of Benjamin's meaning here, taking on the form of a wandering soul and splitting itself apart in its helplessness into manageable round blobs—a perfect cute shape to nestle in one's palm. At the same time Benjamin expresses something that aligns with Ngai's cute—the commodity "wants". It has a desire which it expresses upon "everyone". After the encounter with Wisp, the player does take something made to 'nestle' in their island home. Observing the encounter with Wisp through Ngai's aesthetic categories illuminates the ways in which this cute ghost expresses contrasting aesthetic experience between desire, control, and subjugation. Wisp provides a moment in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* that perhaps reflects on a more ambivalent relation to consumption that I suggest is less visible in other moments of gameplay.

Interesting ghosts

Genshin Impact is an ongoing game, first published by Chinese developer Hoyoverse in 2020. It is an open world action role-playing game where the player takes on the role of a being nominally referred to as "The Traveler". *Genshin Impact* is free to play and includes a Gacha system, by which players use in-game currency to make "wishes" on rotating character banners that reward them with new characters and weapons they can play as and use in the world. *Genshin Impact*'s landscapes and characters are realised in a hand painted (Haoyu Cai) anime art style. *Genshin Impact* is comprised of numerous chapters that are released sequentially over time, with each instalment revealing more of the story and world as well as introducing new characters, events, and environments. As *Genshin Impact* is released like serialised novel, the game garners a similar kind of recursive investment from its substantial

international player base as might have been the case for readers of Charles Dickens in Victorian era London. To date, Hoyoverse has published six of a speculated eight "regions"—distinct nations in the fantasised world of Teyvat with unique environments, customs, values, theisms and culinary cultures. Hoyoverse estimates that the game's main story will continue to be released sequentially up until at least 2025 and potentially beyond (Haoyu Cai 2021). The ongoing serial form of *Genshin Impact* is intrinsically linked to Ngai's explanation of the interesting as an aesthetic category. Ngai writes that the interesting "is an aesthetic whose difference from others resides in its … seriality … and its future-orientated temporality" (Ngai 2012: 140). The interesting appears in "encyclopaedic works often explicitly about seriality or ongoingness" (Ngai 2012: 140) and "emerges as a measure of tension between wonder and understanding" (Epstein 79, cited in Ngai 2012: 116). Ngai articulates that its appearance often reflects a "response to novelty and change" in an era where change is often "paradoxically constant and novelty paradoxically familiar" (Ngai 2012: 146). This feeling Ngai describes here, between joyful discovery and a constant delayed arrival, always *in medias res* (Ngai 2012: 152), is the quality of the interesting, which I will explore in more detail in relation to the way ghosts are presented in *Genshin Impact*. I will first discuss how *Genshin Impact*'s serial and open world forms create an "interesting" aesthetic and affect across general gameplay, and then examine how ghosts are situated in the world in a way that reinforces the feeling of an "ongoing" and "endless" journey.

Genshin Impact's serial form encourages a long-term investment from its players. The journey of the Traveler throughout the world of Teyvat also reflects on the aesthetic experience of the "interesting" in a narrative form, drawing attention to its dual affects of "wonder" and "indeterminacy" (Ngai 2012: 116) as essential to the game's thematic interests. While there is an overarching purpose or goal which motivates the main character—they are on a journey to find their lost sibling—the game, for the majority of play, functions as an

anecdotal travel novel or memoir. Players collect editions of an in-game magazine called the "Teyvat Travel Guide", literature, and recipes for regional cuisines; attend artistic performances and festivals and take photographs of scenic vistas. Collecting characters through the Gacha system also serves as a way of contributing to this "travel novel" form; each character's individual story form part of what Hoyoverse themselves describe as an "Endless Journey" (Hoyoverse 2022). The game celebrates the joy of discovering new places and getting to know the inhabitants. Ever in transit, in my time playing the game, *Genshin Impact*'s Traveler has always brought to my mind the figure of the *flâneur* that Benjamin observed in the writing of Charles Baudelaire. Shaya articulates Benjamin's *flâneur* as the "figure of the modern artist-poet, a figure keenly aware of the bustle of modern life, an amateur detective and investigator of the city, but also a sign of the alienation of the city and of capitalism" (2004 47). Benjamin describes the *flâneur* as detective-like in his observations; a hero "looking for refuge" (1986: 66), the *flâneur* is in the crowd but "abandoned" (1986: 55) by it (1986: 54). In many ways Benjamin's interpretation of the *flâneur* is dialectical—able to feel everything about the crowd but never being a part of it. The *flâneur*'s relationship to the crowd might be perceived as what Ngai calls interesting; he constantly returns to the crowd yet arrives at no conclusion, he exists within the crowd and the city and is fascinated by them but denies the kind of affirming judgement that might make him truly belong. The Traveler, similarly, continually moves throughout the world of Teyvat, their very name itself referring to a kind of impermanent state. They observe, investigate, fight, play, love and *wonder* in the world, but their search for their sibling produces an almost infinite number of possible quests, experiences, stories, and knowledge in such a way that they are always passing through Teyvat and rarely coming to rest. In the serial form of *Genshin Impact*, there is always another landscape on the horizon.

In the Traveler's endless roaming, the ghosts in *Genshin Impact*, like Wisp in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, have an anomalous appearance in the world. In contrast to other beings in Teyvat, ghosts are uncommon. Not part of the world inherently as they are in *Hades*, their appearance reflects something "out of joint". *Genshin Impact*'s ghosts return from sites of catastrophe, lost civilizations, and tragedies; spectral *flâneur's* wandering on the periphery of the still living world. The few ghosts present in the landscapes of *Genshin Impact* are almost always in some form linked to a form of activity—the puzzle—and the presence of an incomplete or ongoing narrative that has the potential to be understood *more* (but never completely) through continued exploration of the world. The completion of different puzzles is a gameplay activity that encourages numerous aesthetic experiences common to the interesting. The act of solving the puzzle begins with feelings essential to the aesthetic category, such as "inquisitiveness" and "curiosity" (Ngai 2012: 116). A puzzle also offers has the potential for the player to "produce new knowledge" (Ngai 2012: 171) about the game itself, whether that be how to solve future puzzles or the potential for the completion of the puzzle itself revealing more information about the world and history of Teyvat. On the other side, whatever narrative the ghost is a part of is always left incomplete when the encounter with the ghost ends. To elaborate on this incompleteness and "endlessness", I will discuss two examples of ghostly encounters in *Genshin Impact* Liyue region Dusky Ming and Little Nine.

In the region of Liyue, the Traveler encounters the ghost of a child, Dusky Ming, who is spooking the chef at Wangshu Inn (this is the puzzle to be resolved). After finding Dusky Ming, and playing a game of hide and seek with her, The Traveler can eventually ask Dusky Ming to stop scaring the chef. Dusky Ming will agree but will creepily stipulate in a sing-song voice that next time the Traveler needs to play with Dusky Ming, and that "if you don't come and play, Dusky Ming will come find you". To date in *Genshin Impact* Hoyoverse has

never offered the opportunity to return and play with Dusky Ming, but the serial nature of the game's release means that there is always a possibility it *could* happen. On Wuwang Hill, the Traveler encounters a small child called Little Nine. Little Nine is anxious as she lost a book given to her by a dear friend and asks for help. The Traveler can then search north into the woods on Wuwang Hill, which contain eerie desolate buildings from a destroyed village. After searching at various prompted locations and completing a puzzle, the Traveler's companion will remark the book is nowhere to be found and that they should return and let Little Nine know. Upon returning, Little Nine seems to have disappeared. Evidence as to what Little Nine and Dusky Ming's cause of death, and how they came be where (and how) they are, is not found or explained during these encounters. However, in both instances The Traveler may come across information in other parts of their journey, as part of their *flâneur*-like wandering. A storyteller called Uncle Ghast in Qingce Village will occasionally, when prompted, tell a ghost story about Dusky Ming, who he says succumbed to a fatal illness when she was a child. The song Dusky Ming sings is the same tune sung only by Hu Tao, the director of the Wangsheng Funeral Parlor in Liyue Harbor. Little Nine is implied to be the childhood companion of Chang the Ninth, an adult author living in a nearby village. In the quest "For Old Time's Sake", he references a young girl who he assumed had moved away when he was a child, and whom he hopes to one day finish a story he promised to write her, not realising she seems to have died. Dusky Ming and Little Nine, like all the other ghosts in the game, recurse and linger, their temporality is the "temporality of ongoingness" Ngai situates as essential to the interesting (Ngai 2012: 134).

The interesting, more so than the cute and the zany, is a diachronic aesthetic category that expresses a conflicting relationship to time as much as it does information (Ngai 2012: 134; 168). This brings the interesting as an aesthetic category into close orbit with Derrida's hauntology, for what is the specter if not a complication in our apprehension of time. The

aesthetic category of the interesting is "forensic" (Ngai 2012: 171) and its presence inscribes value to that "whose exact concept may be missing and the moment of judgement" (Ngai 2012: 112): two phrases that are essential to *Genshin Impact* as a serialised narrative, the *flâneur*-like experiences of The Traveler, and the particular way ghostly figures are represented throughout the game. Dusky Ming may or may not return to haunt Wangshu Inn and the Traveler. Chang the Ninth is writing a novel for a companion that may never return, and no one in the world (including The Traveler) seems to know or be willing to tell him Little Nine's fate, leaving him in a perpetual state of anticipation. Dusky Ming and Little Nine are interesting in the sense that their recursions in other parts of the game's story and world invoke wonder and curiosity, but the serial form of *Genshin Impact* also creates an indeterminate state that is somewhat uneasy in its pending, untethered, and ongoing judgement on the presence of these interesting ghosts. Ngai writes that in "encoding this promise of a second and possible third, fourth, or nth+1 encounter, the interesting narrativizes aesthetic experience, giving it both an anticipatory and a retrospective orientation" (2012: 133), producing an oxymoronic "serial novelty" (2012: 168). As a crude comparison to the ghosts in *Genshin Impact*, an "interesting" phenomena might be articulated as the cyclical return of flared jeans, each time hailed as a thrilling new turn by people who want to sell them. The "anticipatory and retrospective" orientation of the jeans might mean a pair from the last season they were "in" is haunting your closet, a ghostly memento stuck between long being left behind and the potential they might have some future meaning. In the world of *Genshin Impact*, ghosts occupy a similar space in Teyvat's hypothetical wardrobe of narratives—these ghosts have something to offer, their presence continues on through other narrative means even when they themselves are hidden away, and they will always be slightly out of sync with the living open world of Teyvat.

Zany ghosts

Unlike *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and *Genshin Impact*, where the appearance of a ghostly figure is anomalous and creates a feeling of unease, in *Hades* the presence of ghosts is ubiquitous. The "shades", as they are referred to in-game, make up most inhabitants in the world and thus fulfil many practical and canny roles: house contractors, chefs, and desk workers in the administrative chamber of The House of Hades. *Hades* is set in the Greek underworld, and players play as young, strident, and charming Zagreus. Zagreus is the son of Hades, the God of the Dead. After a significant falling out with his father, Zagreus decides to escape from home. To leave home, Zagreus must fight his way out of each level of the Underworld: Tartarus, Asphodel, Elysium, the Temple of Styx and, finally, The Surface. If Zagreus is killed during his attempt to escape, he is transported back to The House of Hades, resetting any boons or abilities he had gained during his venture. From this point Zagreus attempts to escape again, and this cycle informs the foundational structure of *Hades*. This genre of play, characterised by its repeated effort to overcome a challenging series of fights that escalate in difficulty as the player progresses, is known as a rogue-like game. Unlike the complete hard reset of narrative and abilities common to the rogue-like genre, when Zagreus dies during an attempted escape, his return to the House of Hades is when Zagreus interacts with other members of The House, reflects on his experiences, and progresses the narrative of the story through the evolution of his relationships with his family and colleagues. In this sense failing is an integral part of experiencing the game in its entirety. Unlike many other games in this genre, both failure and success are considered valuable from a gameplay and narrative perspective. While the game has several points which offer a sort of resolution to the core narrative arc (Zagreus' contested relationship with his father and his home), even at this point the game can continue to be played as much as the player desires.

Hades, then, is in part a game about continued effort—what we might consider as "work" in an ambivalent sense. It is for this reason I have chosen the zany as an aesthetic

category relevant to *Hades* as it is an aesthetic about work and an "ambiguous erosion of the distinction between playing and working" (Ngai 20120: 188). To do "work" is to be engaged in physical or mental activity to achieve some sort of result. This definition encompasses an enormous scale of possible relation. Work can be playful—it can involve experimentation, invention, perseverance. Work can fail; to achieve its intended result, to occur effectively; work can fail us. Work can succeed, but this measure, and more specifically the experience of it, is just as complicated as failure. All these feelings are entwined with our context, aesthetic experience, our relationship to value. It is complicated, and as Ngai would argue, complicated more so by the ambivalent relation many people have towards modern social and economic order in the Capitalocene. *Hades* and the experience of Zagreus' story reflects on the kinds of work we might experience at the personal level; the more obtuse kind that refers to understanding others, "working through" interpersonal challenges; as well a more practical kind: work required to reach a tangible and perhaps more linear objective, such as successfully escaping the Underworld.

Of Ngai's three aesthetic categories it is the zany that reflects on this complex matrix of relations about work. The zany is categorised by an experience that is quite playful and funny, Ngai writes that the zany insists "strenuously on pleasure … on the pleasure of the activity in strenuous, goalless play" (2012: 188) as well as "clowning and buffoonery" (2012: 187). At the same time, this playful pleasure inherent to the zany is always accompanied by "desperation and precarity" (Ngai 2012: 187). Ngai writes that this expression of precariousness inherent to zany is linked to a modern "precariousness created specifically by the capitalist organisation of work" (2012: 188). This dialectic between play and anxiety also makes the zany the only one of Ngai's aesthetic categories where she makes a direct reference to the video game medium (2012: 182). Much like the ghosts in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and *Genshin Impact* reflect the material and thematic interests and contexts of

the game in which they appear, the ghosts in *Hades* express and reflect some of the gameplay and thematic interests the game has in "work". They are, I suggest, zany ghosts.

The shades in *Hades* represent the countless souls of the dead who have come to inhabit the Underworld for all eternity. The shades in the House of Hades are predominantly green, visually appear like robed and formless ghostly figures, with simple, emoji-like features, and some variation in body type. In their eternal afterlife, the shades in The House of Hades are almost always depicted in some form of work, from those working to prevent Zagreus' escape, to the "Head Chef", a gangly shade who resides in the lounge and is seen perpetually cutting onions. Shades in fact are only really distinguished from each other by the kind of work they are doing. Reflecting on the zany and frenetic style of Lucy in *I Love Lucy*, Ngai writes that the zany is a "style of incessant doing" (2012: 181), and the shades of *Hades*, in contrast to their more ephemeral counterparts in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and *Genshin Impact*, are almost always doing. The only time shades are seen not doing is when they occasionally hang out in the halls of The House of Hades, seemingly floating from one point to another or bemoaning to each other (comedically) the moment they died. While its "stressed-out" quality sets the zany "apart from its more light-hearted comedic cousins, the goofy or silly", Ngai affirms the zany "is playful in all its manifestations across genres, media, and cultural strata" (2012: 185). The shades often contribute to moments of levity throughout the game, and their existence of literal never-ending and deathless work is treated playfully even as they seem "frantic and beset" (Ngai 2012: 186).

One example of the shade's dual presentation of playful and precarious is in the Administrative Chamber in the House of Hades. At a certain point in the narrative Zagreus re-acquires (he is banned from the area at the start of the game) access to the Administrative Chamber of the House. The Administrative Chamber is a room filled with shades working

dutifully on the endless paperwork required to sustain the operation of the Underworld, from filing complaints from other "restless shades" to sorting accounts and expenses. Zagreus can interact with a motivational poster which seems to be in the likeness of the devoted and precise God of Death, Thanatos, to which the game's narrator will comment: "The administrative chamber's ever-working shades remain utterly dedicated to their thankless toil because of an inspiring rendition of how dedicated they ideally should be". The poster references the post-Fordist mandate that workers "become subjects of communication" in work that involves "even the workers' personality and subjectivity in the production of value" (Lazzarato 136, cited in Ngai 2012: 206). In response to the poster, Zagreus can comment "everybody hang in there!" or another half-hearted corporate leadership phrase, which prompts all the shades in the room to emote with an irritated expression, as if someone has told a particularly bad pun. Zagreus reflects sarcastically that "the job's number one perk" is the water cooler, yet Hades himself states that there are numerous "simple shades, hungry to work here". In fact, the crowd of shades lingering in the halls are never presented as not desiring to work. One of Ngai's examples of a "zany" is Jim Carrey's character in *The Cable Guy*, whose work Ngai describes as "temporally as well as spatially unbounded and thus difficult to quantify … not financially compensated and willingly given" (2012: 200). Due to being dead and thus inherently unbounded from time and space as the living perceive it, the hardworking shades in The House of Hades seem to present a similar zany persona and relation to work as Ngai finds in her reading of *The Cable Guy*.

The zany is the only aesthetic category in which Ngai draws specific reference to video games. Ngai describes the zany as being "like a round of *Frogger, Kaboom!* Or *Pressure Cooker*, early Atari 2600 video games in which avatars have to dodge oncoming cars, catch falling bombs, and meet incoming hamburger orders at increasing speeds" (2012: 183). She continues that these examples express something essential about the zany, that

"zaniness is essentially the experience of an agent confronted by—and endangered by—too many things coming at her at once" (Ngai 2012: 183). Despite being dead, which might imply being freed from such mortal concerns as work, the hardworking shades of *Hades*' Underworld always seem to express the potential for precarity. The House Contractor, despite being a ghost (and thus presumably absolved of injury), wears a hardhat. The Chef shade chops his onions with such vigour and mechanical ferocity that it draws attention to the sharp knife in their hand and the sheer volume of onions being chopped in their endless task. The Chef has, perhaps, too many onions "coming at her at once" (Ngai 2012: 183), an experience that is not unlike the frantic waves of enemies Zagreus must defeat to escape the Underworld.

Occasionally, Shades will queue up in front of Hades' imposing desk to present their claims and requests. What the shades are asking is illegible to the player, but Hades will respond with "approved" or "denied" (causing the shade to emote appropriately). The garbled requests from the shades and the severity of the sound of Hades' administrative judgements is funny, but also implies something zany about the Shades' existence in the Underworld; all their "incessant doing" has a kind of relation to their level of employment precarity. What is essential to the zany figure for Ngai is that she works so hard between "virtuosic and domestic labor" (2012: 216) that the potential for catastrophe or injury seems to hover near her constantly (even if it never eventuates). Despite their identity as occult ghostly figures being something that removes the shades from these concerns, *Hades* playfully subverts what the ghost represents, turning them into zany figures that express and reflect on the idea of work in a way that is cohesive with the wider thematic interest in continued effort of *Hades* and the rogue-like genre.

Conclusion: the ghost in the longue durée *of capitalism*

Ngai's three aesthetic categories arise out of what Ngai describes in 'The Zany Science' as a "*longue durée* of a modernity never entirely reducible to capitalism but driven primarily by its contradictory logic of incessant expansion" (2012: 188). This *longue durée*—a view of recent history that observes its long-term historical structures as opposed to its minute events—does not suggest that living as capitalist subjects defines all aesthetic experiences, expressions, and judgements. What Ngai's *longue durée* aesthetic views do recognise is that life in the Capitalocene, what Robbins describes in 'The Sweatshop Sublime' as an "economic system of notoriously inconceivable magnitude and interdependence" (2002: 85), is conspicuous in artistic styles and our aesthetic expressions and judgements. What Ngai's aesthetic categories of the cute, interesting, and zany offer is a way of comprehending and reflecting on some of the predominant ways the experiences of living under capitalism are expressed in the *longue durée* of our modernity. Ngai acknowledges that the cute, zany, and interesting are not the only meaningful aesthetic categories of our contemporary time, but suggests they are the well suited for grasping the radical transformation of aesthetic experience and discourse under the conditions the Capitalocene.

Throughout my analyses I have explored how *Animal Crossing: New Horizon*'s blob-like wisp, *Genshin Impact*'s curious and recursive ghosts, and the funny yet precarious shades employed in The House of Hades reflect qualities of the cute, interesting, and zany respectively. I consider how these ghosts express a "transformation of aesthetic experience" at both the level of style and judgement, and how reflecting on them through the lens of the cute, interesting, and zany allows me to articulate and pin-point some of the contradictory affects conveyed by these ghosts. It would be possible to expand this discussion and consider how the cute, interesting, and zany are all expressed, and to what degree, in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, *Genshin Impact* and *Hades*. However, what I hope to have demonstrated here

is that each example has a particularly strong expression of the aesthetic category I have aligned it with. It is true, for example, that the shades in *Hades* are also relatively blob-like, and at times express some of the visual qualities of cuteness that Ngai describes. However, Wisp in *Animal Crossing* has a much closer relation to the experiential qualities of the cute and the specific relationship this aesthetic category has to commodities, possession, and consumption. In contrast, *Hades* has a far greater interest in the experiences of work and performance inherent to the zany, and this extends to the way ghosts are represented and the role they play in The House of Hades. As the cute, interesting and zany are able to convey complex and contradictory experiences—softness and power, curiosity and indeterminacy, playfulness and precarity—my hope is that this approach contributes to continued discussion on the occult figure of the ghost in the video game and the *longue durée* of our contemporary experience.

Across the *longue durée* that Ngai takes as her point of study, the ghost exerts significant presence in writing and literature that reflects on the experiences of existing in an era not entirely defined by capitalism and, by extension, settler colonialism, but which inescapably influences human experience and reflection in the everyday. The presence of the ghost and the netherworld is summoned early in Marxist literature, as Roy notes in *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*. 'Manifesto of the Communist Party' begins with a ghost story—a spectre that "is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism" (Marx and Engels 1888, 2017: 47). Marx and Engels write that capitalism too "has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, that it is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the netherworld whom he has called up by his spells" (Marx and Engels 1888, 2017: 17; Roy 2014: 8). Janik suggests that Derrida invokes the spectre in *Specters of Marx* to "show a mechanism thanks to which Karl Marx's philosophy is still present in today's political reality" (2019: 4). In other words, while Marx and Engels see capitalism as a kind of

necromantic force that has pulled occult creatures of production and exchange out of the netherworld, Derrida invokes Marx like someone summoning a ghost to speak to the dead, to speak to the time that "is out of joint" (Fisher 2012: 18). Gordon writes that our task is to "look for lessons about haunting when there are thousands of ghosts" (1997:64); that "the unhallowed dead of the modern project drag in the pathos of their loss and the violence of the force that made them" (Gordon 1997: 22). Tuck and Ree write that "haunting is a constituent element of modern social life" (2013: 642), an affect Roy reflects in her writing on Antilla, an expansive dwelling on Altamount Road in Mumbai owned by India's richest man, Mukesh Ambani (2014: 7). Roy continues that the "word on the street (and in the *New York Times*) is … the Ambanis don't live in Antilla" (2014: 8). Despite this, Antilla is always brightly lit at night, Roy observes that the lights at Antilla "blazed on, to scare away the ghosts" (2014: 47). What I hope these brief but influential examples demonstrate is that there exists a substantive relationship between the occult figure of the ghost and works that reflect on the "*longue durée* of a modernity never entirely reducible to capitalism but driven primarily by its contradictory logic" (Ngai 2012: 188). Because Ngai's aesthetic categories of the cute, interesting, and zany specifically take this "contradictory logic" as their point of reflection, I find the cute, interesting and zany each offer a rich potential for reflecting on the presence and significance of the ghost in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, *Genshin Impact* and *Hades*, and perhaps the ways this occult figure is invoked across contemporary video games more broadly.

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