

Virtual Heterotopias and the Contested Histories of Kowloon Walled City

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Abstract

Hong Kong's Kowloon Walled City has found new life in videogames during the three decades since its demolition, taking on unstable and sometimes contradictory forms when reimagined through virtual architecture. At stake in these acts of memory are the historical discourses surrounding everyday life in Kowloon Walled City, its uncertain political and cultural status, and ongoing postcolonial debates concerning Hong Kong identity. I analyze *Kowloon's Gate*, *Shenmue II*, and *Mr Pumpkin 2: Walls of Kowloon* to uncover the contestation of the city's histories through the types of spaces Michel Foucault described as heterotopic: at once real and unreal, and existent and non-existent. This analysis reveals the fluid nature of cultural memory and historical discourse in videogame spaces, as well as how virtual spatiality and the past can be used together to understand and define the present.

Keywords

Kowloon Walled City, cultural memory, heterotopia, *Shenmue II*, Kowloon's Gate, *Mr Pumpkin 2*, space

Spatializing Histories, Heritage, and Memory

A growing community of scholars in historical game studies have established the value of videogames as vehicles for experiences of history and of heritage. Adam

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Chapman, for one, has foregrounded videogames as a viable and valid alternative to the “official, educational, institutionalised and professional knowledge, forms and practices” that the concept of history has so often been synonymous with (2016, p. 5). Not only are such interactive texts plausible venues for histories, but videogames have in fact become a “primary means by which a wide range of audiences develop interest in and knowledge about the past” (Stirling & Wood, 2021) and are immersed in heritage settings and experiences (Champion, 2015, p. 95; Chapman, 2016, p. 177). With the capacity to make experiences of the past exciting, immediate, and relatable (Holmes, 2020, p. 105), ludic accounts of history are embedded within a contemporary “experience economy,” a condition of late-modern culture and capital where “authentic” experiential encounters—including with the past—are keenly sought out by consumers (Zimmerman, 2021, pp. 20–21). This centrality of the experiential is what makes videogames particularly distinct in their engagements with the past. Videogames oversee a confluence of two modes of knowledge: the interactive, systemic, and multiple characteristics of the ludic on the one hand, and the stable, artefactual, and narratively linear characteristics of settled histories, archaeologies, and heritage environments (Copplesstone, 2017, p. 85). Hence, videogames and their entanglements with the past are better understood as simulations rather than representations (Uricchio, 2005), offering “(hi) story-play-spaces” (Chapman, 2016, p. 34), within which the past can be re-lived through the relative freedom afforded by procedural rule systems and game mechanics (Nolden, 2020, p. 75; Pfister, 2020, p. 48).

By using ludic systems to simulate rather than merely represent histories, videogames also grant their players opportunities to re-negotiate the meanings associated with histories, because games encourage a historiographical exploration of “discourse about the past through play” (Chapman, 2012). By foregrounding players and their capacity for interaction and agency within recreations of the past, videogames stage user-driven encounters with historical or heritage environments, narratives, and artefacts that lead to the construction of new individual and collective knowledge (Stirling & Wood, 2021). Because of this generative potential, Eugene Pfister, following the lead of Florian Kerschbaumer and Tobias Winnerling, deliberately terms this genre of videogames “historicizing games,” in order to acknowledge that “these games take part in processes of making history and are not just history in and of themselves” (2020, p. 48). Videogames therefore offer themselves as tools for creative acts for producing new and modified accounts of the past (Mochocki, 2021, p. 967). Nico Nolden sees this productive function as a key discursive contribution of videogames in the contemporary, digitally networked era, arguing for understanding of these media as a “technical form of collective historical memory” that are framed by, and reshape, historical and political conceptions (Nolden, 2020, pp. 75–76). It is this key characteristic of historical (or historicizing) games—a creative agency toward historical discourse and collective memory-making—that leads me to address the settlement of Kowloon Walled City, and how play encounters with representations of this city destabilize and redefine cultural memories of its past.

Of particular interest in my investigation of representations of Kowloon Walled City is the role of videogame space, and the changed relationship with history and cultural memory that space takes on when it is destabilized. Virtual space has been a central concern for historical game studies. Foundational arguments outline that history and ludic space are inevitably entangled because the past cannot be addressed without sustained evocation of space and place (Chapman, 2016, p. 100), and because virtual space controls and shapes the very dimensions of historical narrative encountered in a game (Chapman, 2016, p. 112). Spatiality is critical to the player experience in these games as users extend their own “bodily space” into remediated reconstructions of environments of the past (Zimmerman, 2021, p. 25), developing an atmospheric sense of presence environment that heightens users’ relationships with historical objects and stories (Champion, 2015, pp. 99–101; Nolden, 2020, p. 86). What such spaces provide for players is the “sensual and physical experience [...] of ‘Doing History’” (Nolden, 2020, p. 86)—in other words, an interactive stage set for historicizing and memory-making by players. Marc Bonner further highlights that space and architecture in videogame spaces act as a “medial hinge,” folding media and art (and their associated political, social, cultural, and critical meanings) together with the everyday worlds of audiences (2021, p. 2). To date, studies of the media-specific specialization of histories and heritage in videogames have focused on virtual spaces imbued with stable meanings, framed primarily as virtual archaeological sites (Reinhard, 2017, p. 99), as environments striving for verisimilitude or authenticity (Stirling & Wood, 2021), figurative “time travel machines” (Zimmerman, 2021, p. 25), or immersive venues for heritage tourism (Mochocki, 2021, p. 972). These treatments of virtual space account for developers and users striving to either construct or “read” fixed historical and heritage meanings through space, driven by the distinct ludic experiences of immersion, interaction, and agency. What is, as yet, underexplored in historical game studies is the significance of volatility in the meaning of spatialized accounts of the past, and the ways that cultural memory can be entwined and contested across multiple videogame texts.

Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia, which I describe in further detail further shortly, is well-established as a theoretical lens through which to address space as unstable, multiple in meaning, and as engaged in contestations of meaning with other spaces. I argue in this article that heterotopia also offers an approach for reconceptualizing the spatialization of histories in videogames. While addressing space, and the historical discourse it hosts, as unstable in this way is a departure from existing approaches in historical game studies, this approach nonetheless relies upon historical game studies’ existing concepts of spatiality, and particularly that of ludic space as a “medial hinge” that draws the past and its meanings into the everyday for players. Before considering heterotopia and the cultural memorial function of heterotopic spaces, however, I will first outline the histories and forms associated with the one space in particular that centrally concerns this article: that of Kowloon Walled City.

A Makeshift Enclave

Kowloon Walled City is most commonly associated with iconic images of the form it took from the mid-twentieth century: an inexplicable, densely packed, and seemingly anarchic urban settlement nestled within British colonial Hong Kong. The city's early history is important to understanding the evocative aesthetic and cultural characteristics of its makeshift verticality. Kowloon Walled City grew on the site of a Chinese military fort first established along the coastline of Hong Kong's natural harbor in 1682 (Lai & Chua, 2018, p. 100), which was absorbed by British Hong Kong in 1898 after the signing of The Convention of Peking, as part of a 99-year lease for the "New Territories" (Lai, 2016, p. 95). The fort at Kowloon, and its growing civilian population, sat within the New Territories but was excluded from the agreement, heralding the beginning of a long-running uncertain diplomatic status for the outpost (Harter, 2000, p. 92). Hong Kong's colonial government stopped short of annexing the city and their Chinese counterparts also held their hand, rendering the fort a "place over which two governments claimed jurisdiction but with neither actively administering it" (Sinn, 1987, p. 30). An uneasy state of willful ignorance developed between the two powers, with colonial authorities prevented by diplomatic interventions from clearing and razing the city on several occasions and China unwilling to lay claim to its former enclave by force (Lai, 2016, p. 96).

During the twentieth century, Mainland Chinese refugees and Hong Kong residents flowed into Kowloon Walled City's "near vacuum of administrative function and authority" (Sinn, 1987, p. 38), fueling dramatic and enduring population growth (Lai & Chua, 2018, p. 104). Accounts suggest the population of the city ballooned from 2,000, immediately after the Second World War (Sinn, 1987, p. 40), to 60,000 as refugees fled the Cultural Revolution in 1970s (Fraser & Li, 2017, p. 219). To accommodate its staggering population density of roughly 1,255,000 inhabitants per square kilometer, the six-acre city eventually saw "buildings stacked up on top of one another, up to 14 stories [*sic*] high and blocking the daylight from the interiors" (Lee, 2016). Unencumbered by Hong Kong's building regulations, construction within the settlement did not hesitate to maximize use of precious urban space in an era of skyrocketing housing costs in Hong Kong (Harter, 2000, p. 100). The city's aggregate exterior form—a solid cube of tenement housing with rooftops covered in a tangle of television antennae, cables, and pipes, pigeon coops, and accumulated detritus—was a symbol of a kind of "anarchic urbanism" for many (Fraser & Li, 2017, p. 217), and the settlement became "mystified as a horrifying, disorderly built, and unplanned territory" (Lau et al., 2018, p. 157).

The interior of this densely packed settlement developed a similarly notorious – and largely exaggerated – reputation as a den of iniquity and lawlessness (Fraser & Li, 2017, p. 218). The squalor arising from the combination of the city's leaking sewers and water pipes, scattered refuse, oppressive humidity, free-running rodents, and more, was considered by many as analogous to the morality of its denizens. Journalists depicted the enclave as a haven for "drug pedlars, addicts, pimps, and

prostitutes” where “few dared venture” (Sinn, 1987, p. 30). Seth Harter observes in contemporaneous public discourse a “moral polarization, suggesting that while the city was defined by ‘crime,’ the rest of Hong Kong was characterized by law and order” despite wider Hong Kong providing much of clientele for Kowloon Walled City’s drug dealers, sex workers, and gambling houses (2000, pp. 98–99). Despite a popular reputation as a slum, more measured accounts identify a city populated, in the words of photographer Greg Girard, by a “rather traditional community that had developed startlingly resourceful and original ways” to cope with living in such a crowded and unregulated environment (Nufrio, 2015). While an array of merchants and professional services operated in the settlement without regulatory oversight, raising concerns about safety and hygiene. Helen Grace argues for a reappraisal of these enterprises as a kind of “guerrilla capitalism, establishing [a] form of flexible manufacturing” (2007, p. 471) that made an escape from Hong Kong’s economic norms viable for thousands of residents. A form of civic leadership existed in the city’s neighborhood welfare association (*Kaifong*) and, in this supposedly lawless enclave, Hong Kong’s police in fact had an ongoing patrolling presence (Harter, 2000, pp. 99–100).

Memories and Mirrors

Following an agreement quietly struck in 1987 between Chinese and British officials, in 1994 the enclave was demolished to spare the blushes of both powers prior to the 1997 return of Hong Kong to the People’s Republic of China. However, Kowloon Walled City has, since its demolition, found ongoing representation in popular culture, with its memory providing the aesthetic and affective grammar for Hollywood productions, local East Asian cinema, documentary films, manga comics, and even the physical environment of a games arcade in Tokyo, Japan. The city has also appeared in numerous videogames, to such an extent that its virtual recreation appears “an enduring obsession” for game designers across a range of genres (Davies, 2018, p. 1), granting players access to experience Kowloon Walled City in the form of a “zombie architecture” (Davies, 2019). An imagined space has formed in which Kowloon Walled City is “recast as a hyper-mediated space onto which a range of competing narratives are projected” (Fraser & Li, 2017, p. 225), drawing on the contested meanings associated with the enclave’s political status, physical form, and community. Familiar motifs of claustrophobically arranged, neon-soaked, grimy alleyways operate as a “shorthand for a city caught between divergent cultures, colonial powers, and economies” (Davies, 2019), and the mediation of Kowloon Walled City opens up its meanings and memories to unpredictable and “alternative cultural flows” (Fraser & Li, 2017, p. 225).

In order to trace the alternative cultural and historical meanings that emerge from virtual remediations of the space of Kowloon Walled City, I carry out textual analysis of three videogames: the adventure game *Kowloon’s Gate* (Zeque, 1997), the open-world fighting game *Shenmue II* (SEGA-AM2, 2001), and the puzzle game

Mr Pumpkin 2: Walls of Kowloon (Cotton Game, 2019). Luke Holmes observes that research in historical game studies has tended to address popular commercial games, and argues that it is of increasing importance to understand the contributions of smaller and less popular videogames to users' relationships with histories and heritage (2020, p. 105). As such, these three games represent a diversity of contexts of production and reception, and certainly have not been promoted as particularly historical or historicizing in their marketing. These games, most importantly, offer varied visions of Kowloon Walled City and its place in memory and history, drawing on both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourse. In doing so, the games create the type of spaces Michel Foucault described as a "heterotopia" (1986). Heterotopic spaces are linked to and shaped by "real" spaces, yet at the same time function in contradiction to their referent sites, offering a "simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live" (Foucault, 1986, p. 24). The concept of the mirror demonstrates heterotopia in simple terms: while looking into a mirror provides an undoubtedly real rendering of the space and objects it reflects, this rendition is also simultaneously completely unreal, mediated, and represented because it is through glass (Foucault, 1986, p. 24). The mirror also offers the important reminder that heterotopias are not discrete, static spaces that exist as the neatly opposed *other* in relation to a real space—rather, they represent an intermingling between reality and illusion. It is in this entanglement that the important understanding of heterotopia as a *function* emerges (Wesselman et al., 2020, p. 9), wherein its warped spatial reflections of reality and unreality generate discursive power, as in the heterotopic logic "all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault, 1986, p. 24). Heterotopia empowers unreal spaces to generate alternative rules, symbols, orders and, ultimately, relations of power (Hetherington, 1997, p. 24). As such, a heterotopia works to "project a possibility, a glimpse, of another ideal order," or "emergent otherness," which is equally capable of operating in both a complementary or an oppositional logic to the reality that surrounds and informs it (Wesselman et al., 2020, p. 9).

By conjuring up uncanny spaces, encounters with heterotopias can defamiliarize us from our familiar mental and cognitive relations with places, spaces, and people (Esser, 2021, p. 1) and create alternative views of reality that are intended "to detonate, to deconstruct, not to be comfortably poured back into old containers" (Soja, 2000, p. 163). This reconfigurative potential connects heterotopia to a fundament of historical game studies: the argument, which I have already noted in this article's introduction, that games engaged with the past perform a *historicizing* function, making and re-making histories through interaction. Such play encounters are understood as bound up in layers of negotiation by players that challenge any presumed stability of, or authorial control over, the discursive meanings of historical game texts (Chapman, 2012; Stirling & Wood, 2021). Nolden argues that "historical and game studies need a better understanding of those phenomena" of creative recomposition, which are underexplored in the literature despite videogames routinely encouraging players to exercise historical practices through "open spheres" comprised of user

agency, procedural rules, and game mechanics (2020, p. 75). Alexander von Lünen et al., similarly call for scholarship which addresses and embraces the spirit of “hacking” and reconstruction of meaning that they see as underpinning ludic experiences of the past (2020, p. 5). In turning to Foucauldian analysis, I aim to extend the engagement of historical game studies with the destabilization and redefinition of the past made possible in ludic spaces.

When drawing upon a referent site such as Kowloon Walled City, notable as “not only a space entity, but also a cultural symbol” (Zheng, 2019, p. 140), heterotopia works to redefine not only historical meanings, but also broader, collective *cultural memories*. The contemporary concept of cultural memory is broad, drawing together a variety of processes that guide the sociocultural interplay of past and present (Erll, 2011, p. 101), and a form of remembering which societies have increasingly turned to in order to account for “real,” lived experiences of the past (Erll, 2011, p. 4). Acting not as an *other* to formalized historical discourse, but rather as “the totality of the context within which such varied cultural phenomena” as historical discourse, individual remembering and collective memorialization emerge (Erll, 2011, p. 7). In this way, cultural memory accounts for the negotiable ways in which the past is remembered. In place of stable and reified histories, the mediated heterotopias of videogames help to render the cultural memory associated with Kowloon Walled City as multiple and unstable. Erin Huang notes that because historical events recede into open-ended indefiniteness, cultural memories are constituted, framed by powerful “lenses of legibility” (2020, p. 156). The lens of heterotopia addresses spatiality and discourse as entangled (Wesselman et al., 2020, p. 9) and makes legible the multiplicity of meanings associated with cultural memories. The case study games contribute to an ongoing reinterpretation of the “reality” of Kowloon Walled City pursued by artists and game developers since its demolition (Davies, 2019), using mediated memories of the settlement as “site[s] of remembrance in which Hong Kong’s postcolonial identity is re-imagined and re-constructed” (Lee, 2016). For a settlement whose own citizens were denied, by the legal and discursive apparatus of two international powers, the opportunity to reliably build their own histories and stories, the capacity for videogames to enable the generative possibilities of heterotopia and cultural memory takes on renewed significance.

Fear and Loathing in Kowloon’s Gate

Navigating dark, twisting alleyways, crowded with buzzing neon signs, stained by a pervasive patina of grime and rust, and marked aurally by the continual sounds of dripping liquid and squelching footsteps, the player of *Kowloon’s Gate* is immediately immersed in a vivid recreation of the city’s most notorious tropes. These claustrophobic and, at times, repulsive conditions prevail as the player journeys deeper into the virtual enclave. Residents of the city appear with an array of disturbing, carnivalesque features, whether hybrid human bodies incorporating robotic limbs, monstrous physical deformities or the demonstration of supernatural powers. Foucault described

"heterotopias of deviation," which are a type of space reserved for the separation from wider society of those representing deviation from required means or norms (1986, p. 25), and it quickly becomes evident to players that this virtual city's abjected residents are consciously contained and separated from the mainstream. The player's avatar is dispatched to the settlement by a committee of the clandestine *Supreme Feng Shui Conference*, and this is also significant. In cut-scenes it is established that in 1997 the demolished city has erupted out the world of *yin* (the dark, passive, and negative half of the balanced worlds and concepts of *yin* and *yang*) and returned to physical existence. The deviance that defines this virtual city's heterotopia extends beyond just its denizens (as in Foucault's account) and into a pervasive logic: the entire spatial entity is deviant.

In *Kowloon's Gate*, the player is tasked with negating the material presence of this suddenly undead city by redressing the balance of its spiritual energies. The game features weapons that allow players to redistribute particles of the life force energy *qi*, combat with wandering unsettled spirits (*gururin*), and activation of hidden idols associated with the Four Gods of the *yin-yang* philosophy, which leads to spiritual recalibration. The player is positioned in clear moral and spiritual terms as an *other* to the deviant nature of the citizenry and space of Kowloon Walled City, acting as a force for purification and cleansing. The player's own sense of their outsider status in relation to this heterotopic space is redoubled by the game's mechanics of movement. In the tradition of the full-motion video genre, *Kowloon's Gate* centers around a number of pre-rendered interactive sequences selected by the player, who do not freely roam a three-dimensional environment, and players lose control of their avatar during travel. In these periods of movement, the first-person perspective of the game's "camera" swings around unpredictably as the avatar lurches forward, looks up and down, and wobbles from side to side. A disorienting disconnection emerges between the depth of sensorial detail in the city's environment (drenched as it is in hyper-rich visual and aural signifiers of disorder, and featuring an extensive layout of alleyways) and the player's lack of direct agency in relation to navigating and interacting with this space. As the player traverses the walled city, the unsettling pitching and yawing of the ingame camera makes it increasingly difficult to undertake way-finding or to develop familiarity with the city's spatiality. During the infrequent exploration of dungeon spaces inhabited by *gururin*, the game does adopt real-time rendering of three-dimensional environments and allows free player movement. However, the hardware limitations of the game's production era mean that a barely legible space is rendered: uniformly grey walls, floors, and ceilings, tight corridors, nonsensical angles, and impossible layouts. The spatial experience of this virtualized city is one of fundamental unnavigability, serving as a reminder that the player and their avatar are unwelcome outsiders in a space saturated with deviance.

The player's role as an agent of purification and their alien experiences of space revive the dominant sociocultural discourses that surrounded the settlement from its dramatic growth after the 1950s to its demolition in 1994. Contemporaneously, colonial authority and news media worked to translate the city's diplomatic abnormality

into a “moral polarization that pitted clean, dynamic, orderly, colonial Hong Kong against the dirty, stagnant, lawless” enclave (Harter, 2000, p. 101), a demonization that mirrors a wider-scale cultural effort to subordinate Hong Kong citizens (Law, 2009). Entering this heterotopic space as outsiders, and armed with weapons of righteous spirituality, players are invited to recall and repeat these acts of subordination and reaffirm a seemingly timeless, hegemonic account of inescapable *otherness* in the settlement. Hugh Davies observes that videogames featuring Hong Kong often seek to precipitate an idealized account of a pre-handover Hong Kong (2019), and that in assembling signifiers that outweigh Kowloon Walled City’s actual existence, videogames are bound to repeatedly perform something Akbar Abbas defined as *déjà disparu*. The notion of *déjà disparu* suggests that as soon as Hong Kong, its identity, and its meanings are articulated, particularly by outsiders, it disappears (1997, pp. 25–26). Ultimately, in *Kowloon’s Gate*, the player’s complicity in re-articulating the once-popular meanings associated with Kowloon Walled City and their successful spiritual cleansing of its virtual spaces leads them to re-enact its ultimate fate: destruction and disappearance. With *qi* balanced and *yin* and *yang* restored to symmetry, the city is swallowed back into the ground and the cultural memory of a city that was too grimy, anarchic, and monstrous to even exist is re-affirmed.

Shenmue II and Hybridised Heterotopia

In *Shenmue II*, players take on the role of the Japanese martial artist Ryo Hazuki as he travels to Hong Kong in pursuit of vengeance against his father’s killer. A tip takes Ryo into the famous enclave, which appears as a much cleaner, brighter and more spacious environment than the damp and grimy claustrophobia so often associated with Kowloon Walled City. A number of well-worn visual tropes of the settlement are eschewed by *Shenmue II* as the game hybridizes seemingly oppositional cultural memories in its remediated urban environment. To reach the settlement, players, as Ryo, travel some distance out of downtown Hong Kong by bus, through green marshes, to approach a towering hill topped by a small city. In 1987, the year in which this game is set, the Walled City was surrounded on all sides by the dense urban fabric of Hong Kong’s housing estates and commercial buildings. The iconic image of the compact, cube-like external form of the enclave also gives way in the game to an image of more deliberate, careful city planning. In place of compressed, makeshift verticality, *Shenmue II*’s vision of the Walled City is one of varied building heights, with an ordered logic to the positioning of taller buildings in relation their lesser neighbors and generous provision of view shafts and circulation spaces. Entering the city, Ryo encounters yet more discordant engagements with cultural memory: the player does not encounter the barrage of neon signs and cabling so often associated with the city, but walks along comfortably wide streets flooded with light, and even encounters a restful plaza built around an ornate decorative fountain.

Shenmue II offers up a Kowloon Walled City that, in many respects, does not resemble its historical antecedent. And yet, there are also signifiers that clearly do

make such a connection. In cinematic cut-scenes, the player is granted vertiginous views of passenger jets skimming the rooftops of the city, an acknowledgment of the daily experience of living in immediate proximity to Kai Tak Airport. While the shape and volume of the game's buildings do not match the aggregate form of the Walled City, surface art overlays appear to be derived from photographs of the real-world settlement. The faces of individual buildings resemble strikingly the iconic images of hundreds of units stacked upon one another in the Walled City, forming grids of grimy concrete, metal joinery, precariously balanced air-conditioning units, and drying washing. Ryo enters some of these buildings during play and encounters snaking corridors, dark stairwells, criminal enterprises, and bootleg businesses, recalling a more stereotypical visual account of the city. Two versions of Kowloon Walled City flicker in and out of existence in *Shenmue II*. One bears the now familiar hallmarks of grime, criminality and disorder. The other communicates a far more quotidian and mundane reality: one of criminals and law-abiding citizens, rackets and legitimate business, and moral darkness and lightness co-existing in an unexceptional physical environment that is largely interchangeable with the other areas of Hong Kong the game constructs.

This simultaneous evocation of different modes of memorialization demonstrates a heterotopic logic of the "juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault, 1986, p. 25). *Shenmue II* stages a *heterotopia of illusion* (p. 27), drawing together directly competing meanings surrounding Kowloon Walled City. Players are invited to witness and interact with the contestation between morally polarized accounts of a city either beholden to criminality and anarchy, or a remarkably functional and well-meaning community. The player, through Ryo, can just as easily decide to wander the city's charming civic spaces, buy a bowl of noodles and admire the surrounding landscapes as much as they can decide to engage in illegal gambling, participate in fights or immerse themselves within the activities of the *Yellow Heads of Kowloon* criminal gang. The player is granted agency to explore different cultural memorial formations of their own volition and, in Foucault's estimation, experience "a space of illusion that exposes every real space ... as still more illusory" (p. 27) and that challenges received histories related to this infamous enclave. *Shenmue II* appears to draw attention to the mundane entanglement of everyday life and extraordinary criminal activity, and to Hong Kong and Kowloon Walled City as co-constituted rather than othered entities. Indeed, the intermingling of colonial Hong Kong and its seemingly rogue, ungovernable Walled City is an important historical characteristic. The enclave's usefulness for a kind of "collaborative colonialism" that drew together colonial government, local residents and the Chinese state (Law, 2009) saw Hong Kongers travel into the settlement for access to vice and gambling industries, food and goods manufactured cheaply for consumption across the colony and affordable housing made available (Harter, 2000, pp. 97–101). Similarly, players enter the game's version of the settlement with ease, find it knowable and traversable, and experience an environment and community that is equally as familiar and mundane as it is exceptional and monstrous.

Mr Pumpkin 2's Distant Memories

Mr Pumpkin 2: Walls of Kowloon offers yet another variation on the remembrance of the walled city using heterotopic space. In a departure from the three-dimensional renditions of the city offered in *Kowloon's Gate* and *Shenmue II*, *Mr Pumpkin 2* adopts a two-dimensional style. Rather than moving through the Walled City using the embodied first- or third-person perspective of an avatar, the gameworld is viewed top-down by players, and their avatar is directed to move by using a cursor to click on and interact with buttons, puzzles, and dialogue prompts. *Mr Pumpkin 2*'s art style also stands apart from both *Kowloon's Gate*'s pulsating, squalid claustrophobia, and *Shenmue II*'s crisp, naturalistic urbanism. A cartoonish and playful aesthetic is instead assumed. Backgrounds and characters are illustrated in a vivid, comic book style, with thick outlines, strong color saturation and shaky, hand-drawn effects on lines combining to recall marker pens and coloring pencils. The result is an unreal and imaginative aesthetic with inconsistent spatial and physical logics. Buildings have bulbous edges, walls run at curving angles and objects sit within space uncomfortably as hand-drawn planes and perspectives conflict. Characters' facial features are exaggerated and bodies appear mis-proportioned. And while the cartoonish style embraces exaggeration, this does not extend to the city's familiar visual tropes of filth and decay, which are absent. The game's digital illustrations instead take on a delicate and clean appearance, suffused with the glow of warm primary colors in place of dankness and disorder.

Mr Pumpkin 2 constructs for players a *heterotopia of compensation*, an unreal spatiality that appears as "other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed and jumbled" (Foucault, 1986, p. 27). These heterotopias sanitize, catalogue, and give the appearance of order to the meanings hosted by spaces. As Helena Esser observes, this heterotopic logic sees spaces carefully reproduce the superficial properties of the real, referent sites, while "advertising their deviation from them as [a] selling factor" (2021, p. 2). The game's aesthetic contributes to a compensatory heterotopic logic, rendering various cultural memorial elements of Kowloon Walled City akin to the polished artefacts of a museum exhibition. Mahjong parlours, black market abattoirs, criminal hideouts, debris-strewn rooftops, and other typical Walled City scenes exist in the game, but are enveloped in the safe and clean sheen of *Mr Pumpkin 2*'s cartoony aesthetic. Even the game's occasional threats—for example, two caricatured figures of gangsters wielding a gun in the game's first chapter—take on a comical air, imbued as they are with the playfulness of hand-drawn illustration. Gameplay is staged across various discrete sections of the city (navigated using the "point-and-click" convention of selecting different compass directions at key junctions), heightening the impression of this Walled City as a catalogued and curated series of cultural memorial echoes, rather than a truly navigable space. The player engages repeatedly with puzzle-solving gameplay mechanics—including arranging codes to open locks, matching puzzle tiles, and recalling and repeating visual patterns. The cleansing function of this heterotopia of compensation thus extends beyond just the city's visual appearance, and smooths out the complexity

and nuance of daily life in the Walled City. The city's obstacles and opportunities seem to be simply puzzles to be resolved, moved aside, and forgotten in Mr Pumpkin's relentless quest to leave the city.

A sense of cleanliness, containment, and safety permeates *Mr Pumpkin 2*'s account of Kowloon Walled City through both its aesthetic style and key gameplay mechanics. Referring to seventeenth-century settler societies, Foucault observed that the purified, precise spatial order of a *heterotopia of compensation* also structures individual and communal behavior (1986, p. 27). In a similar way to the post-demolition reconstruction of Kowloon Walled City's site, *Mr Pumpkin 2*'s heterotopia performs a kind of governmentality. With residents relocated and buildings razed, in 1994 architects were charged with redeveloping the land as a public park. Three cultural ambitions guided the redevelopment: to preserve the city's history, to develop a distinctively Chinese garden, and to provide opportunities for public education (Lai & Chua, 2018, p. 108). This has resulted in a park that entirely elides memories of the post-1898 Kowloon Walled City, landscaped in the culturally and geographically distant style of lower Yangzi River gardens found in the early Qing Dynasty period (Harter, 2000, p. 104). This garden style provided the site's post-1997 administrators—the People's Republic of China—a semiotic grammar with which to establish a form of remembering free of Western influence (Harter, 2000, p. 104). Fraser and Li describe this place-making as the erasure of the memory of the Walled City (2017, p. 223), in line with a broader postcolonial politics of disappearance in Hong Kong designed to abate political controversy (Chu, 2013, p. 14). Where *Kowloon's Gate* implies for players an inescapable intimacy with the enclave's disorienting alleyways, and *Shenmue II* offers self-determination in engaging with a nuanced urban environment, *Mr Pumpkin 2* is characterized instead by affective distance and affirms a revisionist take on cultural memory. The hallmarks of Kowloon Walled City are on display, but polished and arranged as discrete spatial experiences to be resolved through the execution of simple puzzles, and ultimately discarded. The city is recast as innocuous, anodyne, and inconsequential.

Conclusion

In the ongoing efforts of Hong Kongers to define past, present, and future, cultural memory is centrally important, making significant the multiple cultural memorial meanings that arise from heterotopic representations of Kowloon Walled City in video-games. Hong Kong's reintegration with Mainland China after the 1997 handover has been driven by a conceptualization of the future that bears "indeterminable relations with a former system that is neither alive nor dead," resulting in a "suspended future with a reimagined past" (Huang, 2020, p. 15). Hong Kong has emerged from colonialism as a politically and culturally contested "zone of exception" (Huang, 2020, p. 150), where postcolonization has meant an unfamiliar confrontation between nationalism and globalized capitalism (Pang, 2007, p. 414). Memories of Kowloon Walled City, itself a liminal entity, are a powerful vehicle of identification

for contemporary Hong Kongers, characterized as they are by a dispossessed transnational sovereignty and identity that simultaneously draws from and rejects both local and global contexts (Lee, 2016; Choy, 2007, p. 54). The famously contested site of Kowloon Walled City (or at least the memory of it) is uniquely positioned to stage debates about, and to reimagine and reconstruct, postcolonial meanings and identities associated with Hong Kong (Davies, 2019).

Each of the three games I have analyzed draws upon different strands of historical discourse and cultural memory related to the “real” Walled City in order to construct notably different and unreal formulations of the space. *Kowloon’s Gate* frames the Walled City as posing an absolute form of horror for outsiders, fueled as it is by rifts and imbalances in other-worldly energies. The player is enlisted in validating, and participating in, the destruction of the Walled City, which is, through its monstrous excess, a reflection of hegemonic discourse promoted by Hong Kong’s colonial rulers. *Shenmue II* illuminates a perspective that appears closer to that of those who lived within the community of the Walled City: one that tells of a porous social, political, and commercial border between the exceptional enclave, the wider colonial territory it existed within and neighboring Mainland China. The figurative logic of the museum that characterizes *Mr Pumpkin 2*, contrastingly, places the player in a contemporary, post-handover and officially mandated memorial formation. This casts the Walled City as distant, curious and, above all, *reconciled* through the destructive return of the city’s site to the bygone mode of cultural sensibility now communicated through the Kowloon Walled City Park.

In her analysis of contemporary Hong Kong cinema, Erin Huang identifies media as offering “strategies of repossession” that might allow the city state’s residents to push back against the politics of dispossession that underly its rootless postcolonial identity (2020, p. 156). The appropriation of multiple cultural memorial meanings by users and audiences is one such strategy (Fraser & Li, 2017, p. 222), and amid a broader contemporary context wherein representations of the past act as key sites of discursive conflict (von Lünen et al., 2020, p. 1) videogame heterotopias provide important access to these memorial formations. A return to the idea of spatialized ludic histories as a “medial hinge” reminds us that cultural memorial configuration and reconfiguration is a two-way street—such media construct both the past, and collective identity, cultural values and social norms (Erll, 2011, p. 114). At the same time that discourses of history are reshaped through play, digital spaces also function as existential tools (Bonner, 2021, p. 6) that can impress upon players “any socio-cultural conception about the life-world that shapes the game” (Nolden, 2020, p. 74). Historical and heritage games, as Michał Mochocki summarizes, shape identities and worldviews in the present by imbricating players in experiences “resonating with their own nostalgia, memory, culture or any collective identity they discover, challenge or reinforce” (2021, p. 966).

I have demonstrated through analysis of these three games that their game environments bear the characteristics of different modes of Foucault’s heterotopia—a type of illusory space that has the capacity to both reinforce and destabilize discursive norms.

By giving virtual spatial form to memory-making, heterotopia arranges players in direct relationships with historical discourse and memory, inviting them to affirm, negotiate, or even reject these formations of meaning. Just as in films staged in Hong Kong, Walled City-centered videogames contain the traces of “*affective residues* and *emergent feelings*” of both the past and the present (Huang, 2020, p. 156), and can be drawn upon to help to produce entirely different, and new, forms of cultural, political, and physical space (Huang, 2020, p. 12). In the repeated resurrection of Kowloon Walled City through videogames, heterotopia and Hong Kong’s past together become tools for understanding and defining the anxieties, opportunities, and meanings in the postcolonial conditions of the present. Heterotopic analysis of *Kowloon’s Gate*, *Shenmue II*, and *Mr Pumpkin 2* also extends existing concepts of spatiality within historical game studies, highlighting the way that articulations of unstable, multiple, and contested spatial meaning might function to commingle the past and present in ways that reconfigure discourse, memory, and identity.

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