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THE HONG KONG PAST MADE IN THE DIGITAL PRESENT

PLAYING WITH THE (UN)FAMILIAR AND (IN)AUTHENTIC

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As highlighted in Hugh Davies' 2018 article and his 2022 video-installation at the M+ Museum, "From 8 to 64 Bits: Hong Kong in Videogames," the correspondence (or the lack thereof) between algorithmically generated Hong Kong in video games and the city's tangible lived realities continues to inspire critical inquiry.[1] In this vein, this paper aims to examine how Hong Kong in video games is reimagined as something that seems familiar to all but not fully accurate. What constitutes "Hong Kong video

1. Hugh Davies, "Re: presenting Hong Kong in Videogame Spaces" (*Abstract Proceedings of the 2018 Chinese Digital Games and Research Association Conference*), 1.

games" remains a subject of debate that goes beyond questions of where games are produced or the cultural background of developers. Although not a defined game genre per se, many video games market themselves through their Hong Kong-inspired themes and game worlds, and players also refer to these games as such—hence an *epistemic* genre shaped as much by circulation and reception as by production.

In games, authenticity often becomes less a guarantee of accuracy than a design problem: some cultural and historical meanings resist translation into play or are only legible to players with specific linguistic and cultural knowledge. For instance, the 2024 Hong Kong independent game, *Monster Mansion: Locksmith on the First Floor* 猛鬼大廈 by Genuine Studio includes puns such as "李老母" referring to "你老母" (a local slang meaning "your mother"), alongside other playful renaming of everyday items to avoid copyright infringement. These jokes are unlikely to be understood even by many non-Cantonese speakers within the Sinosphere. As I have argued elsewhere, the issue often lies within the limits of translating cultural specificity into playable form, especially for players who do not seek such "didactic" experiences.[2]

This paper, therefore, argues that authenticity is only one part of how Hong Kong is represented in games, because play opens cultural meanings to renegotiation rather than closure. To develop this argument, I analyse *Kowloon's Gate* クーロンズ・ゲート -九龍風水傳- (Zeque 1997) and *Sleeping Dogs* (United Front Games 2012), two foreign-produced games that are widely recognized as "Hong Kong games" and that exemplify different modes of reimagining Hong Kong through play. The following analysis integrates self-reflective gameplay observations with discourse analysis of surrounding materials, including popular user-generated content on online forums and YouTube channels, to consider how these games are circulated,

2. Jamie W.T Tse, "Historical Authenticity and Digital Seriality: Relearning and Unlearning Asian Past and Present through Gaming" (*Epistemic Genre: New Formations of Play*, 2026), 271-272.

discussed, and *played*. The two selected games are chosen for their persistent global visibility and influence, and this paper aims to propose a new perspective on how their meanings are continually (re)created and circulated through play, rather than offering a definitive textual reading of the games themselves.

Despite their notable inauthentic and inaccurate depictions of Hong Kong history and cultures, *Kowloon's Gate* and *Sleeping Dogs* still thrive on their reimagination and serialization of Hong Kong as a symbol of nostalgia to be *played with*, not merely a backdrop for action. I argue that productive analyses of these games should not be confined within the realm of authenticity or visual representation when we examine their cultural reach and playable value. Rather, this paper demonstrates how video games enact a form of openness and instability—of time, space, and meaning—to be continually renegotiated through the act of playing, particularly given the enduring association of "(East) Asianness" within gaming cultures. Stereotypes of the unfamiliar, inauthentic "Asian/Hong Kong Other" can certainly be circulated, but they can also be *playfully* intervened or reappropriated by players around the world. The "Hong Kong" in these games is rendered exotically unfamiliar yet not fully inauthentic for both local and foreign players to explore. No single, absolute authority can define a game as "authentic," nor do reimaginations of Hong Kong depend solely on "authenticity" (if we interpret it as "accuracy").

PLAYING WITH RACE: PLAY AS AN OPENING OF MEANINGS

If questions of authenticity and inauthenticity structure how Hong Kong is imagined in games, they also shape how race itself is rendered playable. Racial representations in video games have long been theorized by game scholars, especially their close association with East Asianness. Christopher Patterson and Tara Fickle (2024) identify a complex form of "racist love" as positive feelings are entangled with anti-Asian racialization—which "builds from and perpetu-

ates a virulent antagonism against peoples from Asia through typing, commodifying, fetishizing, and foreignizing."[3] Numerous works also point out how video games as a history and industry are always conceptualized as white, heteronormative, and male-dominated.[4] It is true that video games are capable of reinforcing stereotypes and (Techno) Orientalist ideals through visuals, narratives, and game mechanics, but not all "inaccurate" reimaginations of cultures in games should automatically be regarded as harmful and problematic. Orientalism in this paper, following Edward Said's definition, refers to the body of knowledge and mode of representation that sustains Western hegemony by portraying non-European cultures as the mysterious, inferior "other, the "Orient."[5] Techno-Orientalism "contradictorily" completes the Orientalist project by creating "collusive, futurized Asia" instead of a premodern one, which also serves to cement the West's centrality.[6] Building on this discussion of racial representation, this paper examines how race is played in Hong Kong games and how inauthenticity can become productive when video games are understood as open-ended systems of meaning rather than closed representations.

Play enacts a unique form of openness and instability for game meanings to be continually re-negotiated by players and audiences across geographical and cultural contexts. Seth Giddings (2005) establishes the cybernetic nature of play as a circuit of computer components, human perception, imagination and motor skills, and software elements from virtual environments. [7] In a similar fashion, Emma Westecott (2008) sees gameplay as a cybernetic loop of play

3. Christopher B. Patterson and Tara Fickle, "Introduction: Asia / Games \ America" (*Made in Asia/America: Why Video Games Were Never (Really) about Us*, 2024), 9.

4. Lisa Nakamura, 2012; Kishonna L. Gray and David J. Leonard, 2018, 7; TreaAndrea Russworm and Samantha Blackmon, 2020, 93.

5. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1978, 9-13.

6. David Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta Niu, "Technologizing Orientalism: An Introduction" (*Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*, 2015), 7-8.

7. Seth Giddings, "Playing With Non-Humans: Digital Games as Techno-Cultural Form" (*Proceedings of DiGRA 2005 Conference: Changning Views: Worlds in Play*, 2005), 1.

between the player and the game, which should be understood as a multisensory and embodied experience.[8] Brendan Keogh (2018) restates such a reflexive feedback cycle as players and videogames *continually* incorporating each other, where human players are integrated with, embodied through, and constituted by the videogame.[9] Therefore, meaningful gameplay lies within the embodied engagement between the playing body and the videogame.[10] This negates the idea of video games being a "closed circuit" produced as complete and sealed off from further intervention. Furthermore, according to Giddings and Keogh, this reflexive circuit of videogame and player (and of technologies and audiovisual signifiers) privileges neither the player nor the video game, as they contend that inputs and outputs are made by both, while action is initiated by neither.[11] In fact, a video game's player is not "in charge" of the game's systems but assimilated into them, turning game systems into the player-and-videogame across bodies and worlds.[12]

The transgressiveness of play, particularly upheld by Westecott and Giddings, breaches the boundaries of physical and game bodies,[13] of object and subject.[14] The intersectional understanding of bodies, boundaries, and technologies is rooted in feminist thinking—most notably with Donna Haraway's figurative cyborg as a being between human and organic, technological and inorganic.[15] This challenge to the privileging of the human as the primary site of embodiment, and therefore the very understanding of human being, stems from feminist scholars Rosi Braidotti and Haraway's hybrid

8. Emma Westecott, "Bringing the body back into play" (Proceedings of The [Player] Conference, 2008), 5-6.
9. Brendan Keogh, *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Video Games*, 2018, 4, 41, 191.
10. Ibid, 6.
11. Giddings, 4; Keogh, 41.
12. Keogh, 173.
13. Westecott, 6.
14. Giddings, 4.
15. Margrit Shildrick, "'Why Should Our Bodies End at the Skin?': Embodiment, Boundaries, and Somatechnics" (*Hypatia*, 30 (1), 2015), 13; Giddings, 4.

assemblage of matters, things, and objects.[16] Play, as a result, marks a double instability of bodies and worlds.[17] But then, how does this instability—the different bodies and worlds—conjure (different) meanings to constitute gameplay? To be more precise, how do "Hong Kong" video games allow non-Hong Kong bodies to inhabit Hong Kong-coded bodies and worlds? How does play invite reinterpretations of the notion of "Hong Kong" video games?

When play manifests instability, it also nurtures openness and plurality in meanings of video games, including "fixed" identity markers such as races. Kishonna Gray et al. continue to warn that the creation of virtual spaces does not necessarily erase existing cultural patterns of racism, indicating that racial experiences within game spaces still warrant critical study.[18] Anna Everett and Craig Watkins (2008) incisively identify the unique capacity of video games to combine "telling and doing," a dynamic they translate into "learning and performing races."[19] They draw our attention to the recreation of "culturally specific and racialized environments that are packaged and marketed as authentic expressions of the social world."[20] Authenticity hinges on such racially-coded story-worlds, where the avatars perform and reproduce socially prescribed and technologically mediated notions of race—which are dynamic, contingent, and variable.[21] Dean Chan spotlights the making of a marketable "Asianness" as he stresses how games stage a performative articulation of culturally-specific products that can be

16. Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, 2017, 4, 10.
17. Keogh, 7.
18. Kishonna Gray, Tara McPherson, Gillian Russell, and Rachel Anderson, "Video Game and Race" (*Handbook of Children and Screens: Digital Media, Development, and Well-Being from Birth Through Adolescence*, 2025), 292-293.
19. Anna Everett and Craig Watkin, "The Power of Play: The Portrayal and Performance of Race in Video Games" (*The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning*, 2008,) 142-143.
20. Everett and Watkin, 144
21. Ibid, 145, 149-150.

distinguished from other global cultural products—usually with

Asian antiquity, imagined or otherwise, acting as a trope of authentication and difference.[22]

With the idea of "(racial/cultural) authenticity" in question, Christopher Patterson (2020) further asserts that gamers do not rely on any institutional authority to determine a game's meaning for them, thus nurturing a plurality of meanings in video games.[23] He proposes the notion of the "Asiatic" to better understand the transpacific nature of game productions. The "Asiatic," according to Patterson, is a style or form recognised as *Asianish* but remains adaptable, fluid, and situated outside of the binary of authenticity and inauthenticity—a virtual that does not strive for realness but instead *plays upon the real*.[24] Similar to Everett and Watkins' idea of "learning and performing race," Patterson contends that race becomes something *done* rather than something known, as video games invite players of diverse backgrounds (different bodies and different worlds) to participate in and adapt these games to their own lived experiences, making race a matter of interactions and the experience of control rather than representation alone.[25] Developed from Espen Aarseth, Ian Bogost, Alexander Galloway, and Jonathan Blow's accounts of how a video game's "dynamic meaning" emerges from its rules and acts of play, Patterson's emphasis on "play" (and hence "playing with") seeks to uphold the frivolity of gameplay, thereby reinforcing the *instability* of game meanings.[26] Accordingly, this paper focuses on how these "Hong Kong video games," even as meditated representations and simulations, allow "Hong Kongness" to be continually remade through the very act of playing.

Moreover, this "remaking" of race through play in video games can be collective. For instance, T.L Taylor's "networked play" shows

22. Dean Chan, "Negotiating Online Computer Games in East Asia: Manufacturing Asian MMORPGs and Marketing 'Asianness'" (*Computer Games as a Sociocultural Phenomenon: Games Without Frontiers War Without Tears,* 2008), 192-193.
23. Christopher B. Patterson, *Open World Empire: Race, Erotics, and the Global Rise of Video Game*, 2020, 8-9.
24. Patterson, 2020, 27.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid, 16-17.

that with the emergence of live-streaming gameplay, people begin to "transform private play into public entertainment," giving rise to a networked broadcasting medium.[27] As games are now routinely tied to commercialized platforms, complex networks, and media infrastructures, the act of playing should now be seen as a "civic space, political domain, media sphere, and site of critical work, while simultaneously being a place of leisure, even rest and respite."[28] Such duality of gameplay indeed echoes the *playful* nature of video games, or the openness and plurality of meanings as discerned by Patterson. Similarly, Henry Jenkins (2006) highlights the transmedia nature of video games, along with other new media forms, through the phenomenon of "media convergence," where media content circulates across platforms, systems, economies, and national borders.[29] This signals a cultural shift from passive spectatorship towards active participation, giving rise to what Jenkins terms "collective intelligence": a condition in which "producers" and "consumers" are no longer distinct, but collaborators who can pool their resources and combine their skills.[30] Games, therefore, become not only politically charged through collective play but "open" to continual renegotiation as their meanings circulate within networked spaces. In this sense, "Hong Kong" in video games resists fixity and flickers between reconstruction and invention, because its meanings are continually remade through the interactive and collective labour of play.

ENTERING DIGITAL ASIA: HONG KONG AS A PLAYABLE SYMBOL OF "ASIAN NOSTALGIA"

The formation and circulation of a "racially-coded" Digital Hong Kong, in video games, enables an openness for Hong Kong (and even Asia) to be collectively re-imagined. Game developers, content

27. T.L Taylor, *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*, 2018, 23.
28. Ibid, 11-13.
29. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, 2006, 2.
30. Ibid, 3-4; Jenkins borrows the term "collective intelligence" from French cybertheorist Pierre Lévy.

creators, and audiences, both local and foreign, engage in a (re)making of meanings of the game as none of these parties can dictate such a process—a process I shall more precisely coin as "renegotiation." I mainly draw the theorization of Digital Hong Kong as a ludic space from Patterson (2018), who delineates how race can be emancipated as a form of play in video games.[31] Patterson also identifies that such emancipation is not necessarily as "touristic," but rather as a form of reimagination of social space through the game's universe.[32] My analysis here aims to delve deeper into, if not debunk, this "touristic" vs "emancipating" dichotomy hinted at in Patterson's works through a close examination of the gameplay experiences of two selected "Hong Kong" video games.

Many video games frequently reconfigure "Asia" or "Hong Kong" as cultural franchises, thereby both canonizing popular versions of "Asianness/Hong Kongness" and emancipating them for the intervention of play. To understand these global popular franchises on Asian cultures, including video games, Jason Coe proposes the notion of "seriality" to unpack the gamification of Hong Kong action cinema. According to Coe, seriality "reproduces and expands imagined communities by creating perspectives of relationality, not by identifying and canonizing an original and its most faithful descendants."[33] Elsewhere, I have developed Coe's idea into a didactic spectrum of "authenticity vs seriality"—whereas authenticity does not refer to the perfectly accurate replications of Hong Kong in a video game, it reintroduces the Hong Kong past to the players and thus reengages them in the "digital" present[34] (which should be understood as the condition of playing). That is, "Hong Kong" in video games emerges through play itself—not as a definitive image, but as

31. Christopher B. Patterson, "Asian Americans and Digital Games" (O*xford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, July 2018), 6-7.
32. Ibid.
33. Jason Coe, "Serial authentication: Gamifying Hong Kong action cinema in Sleeping Dogs" (*Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, 13 (1), 2019), 36.
34. Tse, 2026, 257, 264.

an evolving symbol co-authored by players through their playful encounters and interpretations.

This paper, therefore, probes further into how such games can be experienced as "Hong Kong" despite their inauthenticity. To better examine this "authentic/inauthentic" dichotomy, we must start by unpacking "Hong Kong games" through its emancipation of Hong Kong and its lived experiences into digital reimaginations for players across the world. The recreation of "Hong Kong" in video games, or "Digital Hong Kong," should not be merely understood as a simulation (a "reality" that does not correspond to any existing thing) nor a representation (an accurate imitation of some real thing that lies outside of the image or picture)[35]—if we are to follow Giddings' line of thought. Upon the formation and circulation of "Digital Hong Kong" in "Hong Kong" games, there is a constant renegotiation of popular, familiar images and elements that are representative. For it is not the "authentic" history but a "playable" symbol of nostalgia, at times romanticized and over-mystified, that the developers and players seek. Through the act of play, players translate the developer's designed elements—code, narrative, and audiovisual materials—into a "Hong Kong" gameplay experience. The openness of play, in return, nurtures new interpretive, immersive possibilities for spatiotemporality and meanings as there is no absolute "right" or "wrong" way to play a game, just as completing a game does not guarantee an authentic lesson on the Asian past and present.

With the two selected games, I wish to demonstrate how the act of play functions as a process of renegotiation, actively (re)producing and circulating a "Digital Hong Kong" that continually reframes the very definitions of "Hong Kong" and "Hong Kongness." The first game to be examined is the 1997 cult hit, *Kowloon's Gate*. This Japan-developed game production portrays a supernatural tale of Kowloon Walled City reemerging from the dead back to the streets of Hong Kong just before its handover to China, playing with the classic,

35. Giddings, 7-8; He later reinterprets "simulation" as "self-moving agent or automata."

exotic *feng shui* theme. The other game is *Sleeping Dogs* (2012), also known as the "Hong Kong *Grand Theft Auto*." Its players explore this version of "Digital Hong Kong" as Wei Shen (a pun on "dangerous" in Mandarin Chinese), an undercover cop in the triad,[36] living out their dream as the "hero" in Hong Kong action cinema. One can get a glimpse of the iconic yet stereotypical elements that have been chosen to be representative of "Asia/Hong Kong" from the cover arts of these games (see Figure 1 below). Both games are, undoubtedly, far from neutral in their portrayals of Hong Kong's culture and history. Rather, they function as serialized media constructs of "Hong Kong" as mediated through on-screen representations. Yet, unlike their cinematic and televisual predecessors, the "Hong Kong" depicted in these games is "open" to intervention through play.



36. Hong Kong triads (黑社會) are organized crime groups originated from secret societies in China with historical roots dating back to the Qing Dynasty. Characterized by their secret rituals, hierarchical structures, and involvement in illicit activities, the triads' mysterious and powerful image has grown to be a common trope in global media and popular culture. Notable examples include the comic-turned-film *Young and Dangerous* series 古惑仔 (1996-2000), *Infernal Affairs* 無間道 (2002), and *Election* 黑社會 (2005).

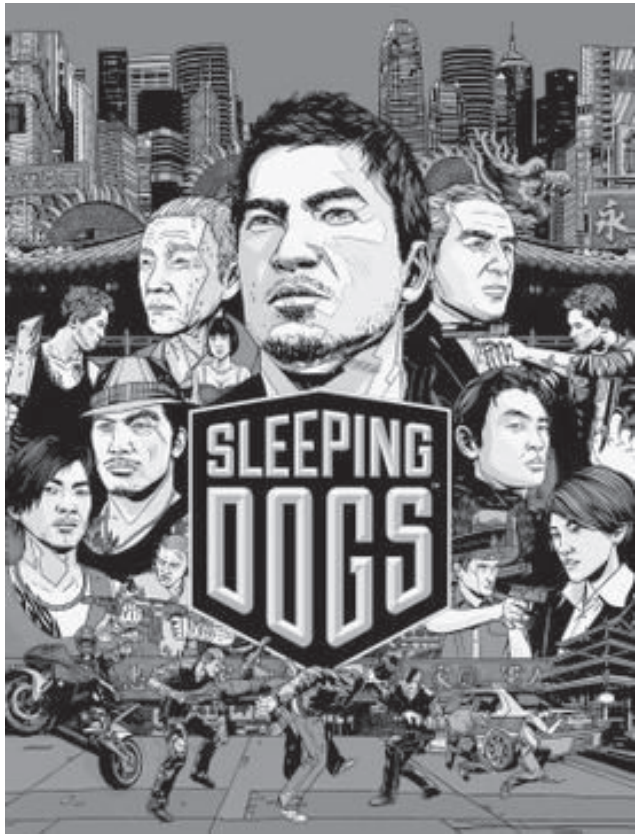


Figure 1: *Cover arts of* Kowloon's Gate *(top) and* Sleeping Dogs *(bottom).*

With a unique form of openness in the (re)making of Digital Hong Kong, I argue that despite the "inauthenticity" and circulation of stereotypes, these video games should not be simply reduced to the production of Orientalist representations or cultural misconceptions of Hong Kong culture. The openness of play also allows players to reinterpret and reappropriate these depictions in the going (re)narking of Digital Hong Kong. Apart from how gaming culture is dominated by "white heteronormativity" as discussed, scholars concerned with game globalization also observe that Orientalism, or Western hegemony, is still looming over the industry when the global north/global south (especially Southeast Asia) division remains

evident in both the production and consumption aspects of video games.[37] Though game globalization fosters cultural hybridity and exchange within regions such as East Asia and Southeast Asia, mystified and stereotypical images of "the Other" are inevitably canonized by media re-presentations. *Kowloon's Gate* and *Sleeping Dogs* are indisputably foreign productions that serialize rather stereotypical elements of Hong Kong such as the chaotic urbanism of the Kowloon Walled City, *feng shui*, and gangster-infested streets—familiar elements circulated from and by media series including TV dramas and films. One recent example would be the critically acclaimed, Kowloon Walled City-inspired action film *Twilight of the Warriors: Walled In* 九龍城寨之圍城 (2023), which is not only the third-highest-grossing domestic film of all time in Hong Kong but has also been included in the Official Selection of the 2024 Cannes Film Festival.

The renegotiation of meanings in the formation/circulation of Digital Hong Kong, as exemplified by these two games, can be understood as two-fold. First, they re-negotiate idealized images of Hong Kong that draw *a certain degree of perceived authenticity* from both the material world and prior media presentations, making them "familiar" to a broad audience. Second, and more importantly, the gaming communities surrounding these games actively transform the developer's intended worlds—game mechanics, space, narratives, audiovisual elements—into "Digital Hong Kong" epistemically, through acts of play, online discussions, and live-chats. To illustrate this process of circulation and renegotiation, the following section examines the two selected game examples which, while not developed by Hong Kong developers, are widely recognized as "Hong Kong games," or "games about Hong Kong." Despite their often-imprecise reimaginations of Hong Kong, the games nevertheless serialize a "nostalgic Hong Kong" experience—one that players (and their spectators) continue to enjoy, reinterpret, and build conversations upon.

Kowloon's Gate and *Sleeping Dogs* serve as accessible entry points

37. Peichi Chung, "The globalization of game art in Southeast Asia" (*Routledge Handbook of New Media in Asia*, 2016), 402-403.

for players to encounter Hong Kong's history and culture, yet their reimagined "Digital Hong Kong" remains an odd blend of the authentic and the inauthentic, offering only a partial, superficial even, understanding of the city. Nonetheless, as addressed earlier, if Digital Hong Kong articulates openness to interpretation and reconfiguration, then "Hong Kong" video games possess the capacity to sustain a plurality of meanings. Their inauthentic reimaginations do not necessarily reproduce Western hegemony; rather, they create spaces for playful renegotiations. Through gameplay, players—different bodies from different worlds—continually reshape what constitutes "Hong Kong" across time, space, and meaning. In this sense, "Hong Kong" in video games should be understood as a mutable construct, ceaselessly reinterpreted through the meanings players generate in play.

Upon the creation of their Digital versions of Hong Kong, *Kowloon's Gate* and *Sleeping Dogs* first reimagine time by establishing a "nostalgic gaze" at Hong Kong history, when gameplay (and narrative) need not follow a linearity of time. It is not uncommon for more "historical" Asian video games such as *Detention* (Red Candle Games, 2017) and *Devotion* (Red Candle Games, 2019) to establish such a modernized, and even restorative gaze at the Asian past—where players can strive towards "historical authenticity," or in simpler terms, a genuine reconnection with the past in the present.[38] My previous analysis of these two Taiwanese video games, *Detention* and *Devotion,* as historical representations was my first attempt to manoeuvre around the authentic/inauthentic (or, touristic/emancipating) binary as well as to establish this notion of "modernized gaze," but I did not get to elaborate fully on that in relation to the openness of play (and the plurality of meanings). Such a modernized, restorative gaze is not only retrospective but also speculative, wherein one can strive toward historical authenticity with the past in the

38. Jamie Wing Tung Tse, "Games as Historical Representations: The Present/Presence in the Past" (*British Journal of Chinese Studies*, 12 (2), 2022), 64.

present.[39] The convergence of past and present might be unattainable in real life but is rendered possible through the design and narrative structures of video games, actively inviting players to navigate time.

This notion of a playful, modernized gaze is, in fact, closely entwined with "nostalgia." Nostalgic expression is central to the formation of "Digital Hong Kong," which *plays with* the co-existence of the familiar and the unfamiliar. As a trope, nostalgia is conceptualized as a longing for a romanticised past or a rewriting of the past to re-vision the present.[40] Yet, nostalgia should not be mistaken for an objective recovery of historical specificities, nor does it seek sameness with the past.[41] Rather, it stages a deliberate display of temporal displacement. Video games, moreover, operate through a distinctively mediated relationship to the past, which is constructed by a sense of nostalgia to bridge the real present and the virtual past[42] (an idea that inspires the title of this paper). Therefore, nostalgic expression in video games constitutes a complex renegotiation of temporality, as the players are situated within the time and space of specific events and experience them from particular vantage points.[43] However, that is not to say that nostalgia is a personalized emotion; it often reflects collective memories of a certain generation or subculture through the recycling of popular cultural motifs from a bygone era.[44] In the context of "Hong Kong video games," such nostalgia produces a layered sense of temporal displacement and a conflicting mix of familiarity and exoticness—an experience that is not confined to those with firsthand memories or local knowledge of Hong Kong,

39. Ibid.

40. Natalia Chan, "Rewriting History: Hong Kong Nostalgia Cinema and Its Social Practice" (*The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*, 2000), 264.

41. Blanche Chu, "The Ambivalence of History: Nostalgia Films as Meta-narratives in the Post-colonial Context" (*Between Home and World: A Reader in Hong Kong Cinema*, 2004), 334, 336.

42. Laurie N. Taylor and Zach Whalen, "Playing the Past: An Introduction" (*Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games*, 2008), 2.

43. Taylor and Whalen, 12.

44. Maria B. Garda, "Nostalgia in Retro Game Design" (*Proceedings of DiGRA 2013 Conference: DeFragging Game Studies*, 2013,) 2, 4.

and ineluctably challenges our conventional understanding of the "authenticity" of "Hong Kong video games."

In *Kowloon's Gate*, Hong Kong is reimagined as a liminal space between reality and illusion, reflecting the city's postcolonial anxieties surrounding the 1997 handover.[45] This temporal displacement constructs a modernized, nostalgic gaze towards a lost "Hong Kong past," seen through the protagonist's perspective—a sensibility that remains resonant today. The game's nostalgic legacy continues in its spiritual sequel *Kowloon's Rhizome: A Day of the Fire* クーロンズリゾーム (Kimura Nakaji Office 2023) and in the game-inspired manga-anime-film series *Kowloon Generic Romance* 九龍大眾浪漫 (2019-), both of which have attracted international attention and support. The 2012 game *Sleeping Dogs*, too, transforms admiration for, and fantasy of, the golden age of Hong Kong action cinema into its mission-driven gameplay. Though the game represents a relatively "modern" image of the city, *Sleeping Dogs'* (re)making of "Digital Hong Kong" is equally imbued with nostalgic elements, which I will explore in my subsequent discussion of space.

The formation and circulation of Digital Hong Kong itself in *Kowloon's Gate* and *Sleeping Dogs*, likewise, constitute a renegotiation of space. Both games enable a form of virtual (identity) tourism while simultaneously acting as creative forms of preservation—retaining "Hong Kong" elements that are not only familiar to all, but also "lost" in time for playful intervention. Unlike museums or filmic representations, Digital Hong Kong in these games demands an active participant who explores, transforms, and conjures it into existence through the perspective of the designated Asian protagonists, namely a Hong Kong *feng shui* practitioner in *Kowloon's Gate* and the Chinese American undercover police officer Wei Shen in *Sleeping Dogs*. *Kowloon's Gate*, released in the same year as Hong Kong's handover to China, solidifies the legacy of Kowloon Walled City (KWC) as representative of Hong Kong's colonial history. Despite the physical site being demolished in 1994 and its notorious image as a crime-infested

45. Tse, 2026, 268-269.

enclave,[46] KWC remains a popular choice of depictions in local and foreign media productions from long before 1994 to today. Other than *Kowloon's Gate*, game productions such as *Shenmue II* (Sega AM2 2001), *Kowloon's Magic* (Bun Fun Factory 2003), *Cage* 籠 (Scaffold Studio 2018), and *Stray* (BlueTwelve 2022) have drawn great inspiration from KWC's cluttered anarchic urbanism. *CAGE*, in particular, can be seen as a product of nostalgia from Hong Kong developers themselves. This newer KWC-inspired game is said to "restore the blank in its history" and redress the grievances of the district stigmatized by misleading information,[47] but remains under the radar both locally and internationally. In short, these re-imaginations have eventually given the walled city "a second life," emancipating and serializing KWC as a playable symbol instead of merely a physical historical site.

Given its rather sordid image, KWC had not gained much official recognition in real life until the recent popularity of related media productions. Frozen and stagnated in the past after its demolition, KWC was "erased" from the city when the site was revitalised as the Kowloon Walled City Park 九龍寨城公園 in 1995. Alistair Fraser and Eva Cheuk-yin Li (2017) suggest that such "revitalisation" was an erasure from the official records, from the physical space, as well as from collective memories since the lived experiences were replaced with ornate gardens in the style of the early Qing dynasty.[48] Nonetheless, these lived experiences have been re-imagined in the digital worlds, successfully "reviving" KWC in a creative manner. While the main stage of *Kowloon's Gate* is clearly the spirit-infested KWC, the game requires its players to explore four other reimagined places in Hong Kong, namely 重慶花園 ("Chungking Garden" as Chungking Mansion 重慶大厦 in Tsim Sha Tsui), 富善苑 (as 富善邨 Fu Shin

46. Lawrence May, "Virtual Heterotopias and the Contested Histories of Kowloon Walled City" (*Games and Culture*, 17(6), 2022), 888.
47. "Kowloon Walled City Reforge Project," *Poki Chan Website*, https://www.pokichan.com/project/klwc-reforge-project.
48. Alistair Fraser and Eva Cheuk-yin Li, "The second life of Kowloon Walled City: Crime, media and cultural memory" (*Crime Media Culture*, 13(2), 2017), 223.

Estate in Tai Po), 庇利街 (Bailey Street in Hung Hom), and 沙角 (as Sha Kok Estate 沙角邨 in Sha Tin), to collect key items. It is worth noting that although the landscapes of these in-game areas appear almost identical to one another, their real-life counterparts in Hong Kong are densely populated yet rarely represented in mainstream media. As players memorize and navigate through these spaces, many further pinpoint that the game's blend of unfamiliarity and "non-place" echoes the real-world erasure of the physical KWC.[49] Even for those who complete the game without acquiring much knowledge about Hong Kong or KWC, *Kowloon's Gate* still compels them to traverse a re-imagined Digital Hong Kong through the role of a Hong Kong *feng shui* practitioner. This aspect is further reflected in its combat system, which will be discussed in greater detail in a later section.

Sleeping Dogs, on the other hand, canonizes iconic skyscrapers and neon-sign-luminated landscapes including Temple Street, Victoria Peak, and Central, whilst traditional street vendors and neon signs have been disappearing from the streets of Hong Kong in real life. Although "authenticity" was the developers' stated goal—hiring writers and voice actors born and raised in Hong Kong to review the Cantonese dialogues and local details such as billboards[50]—*Sleeping Dogs* unmistakably targets a transnational audience, with its protagonist depicted as a returnee from the United States, a mobile subject between Hong Kong and the US.[51] This "transnational" reimagination is evident from the game map as well, as it only features a small yet iconic fraction of Hong Kong Island, which includes Central, Kennedy Town, Aberdeen, and North Point. However, I propose an alternative understanding of *Sleeping Dogs* as a *playful preservation*, as its digital streets allow players to explore and interact with reimagined neon-lit streetscapes and street markets that are increasingly disappearing from contemporary Hong Kong. Once emblematic of

49. Brian Crimmins, "Kowloon's Gate," *Hardcore Gaming 101*, July 11, 2017.
50. Ge Zhang, "The stroller in the virtual city: Spatial practice of Hong Kong players in Sleeping Dogs" (*GAME*, 3, 2014), 28.
51. Coe, 26.

Hong Kong's economic prosperity, neon signs have long promoted everything from department stores to family-owned businesses, but many now either end up in landfills or find shelter with local NGOs and museums.[52] Furthermore, Temple Street's market, on which the night market in the game is modelled, has also greatly shrunken despite the Hong Kong government's latest "Night Vibes" campaign.[53] Regardless, *Sleeping Dogs* allows its players to tour around and interact with its version of Digital Hong Kong that is still filled with bright neon signs and street vendors of food and various items. The game's player community also thrives on creating and circulating tour guides for both Digital Hong Kong in the game and Hong Kong in real life. For instance, Figure 2 is a screenshot of the game made by a Singaporean blogger, Scribbling Geek, and is used in his 3-part "virtual tour guide" which includes references to these places in real life Hong Kong.[54]

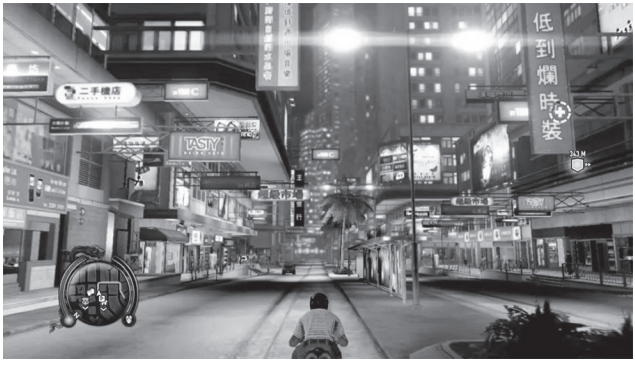


Figure 2: *Streets filled with colourful neon signs in* Sleeping Dogs.

52. Hillary Leung, "'It's disappearing very fast': Hong Kong's fading neon heritage shines a spotlight on the craft," *Hong Kong Free Press*, April 16, 2023.
53. Wynna Wong and Alice Kong, "Where's the buzz? Fewer visitors to Hong Kong's Temple Street market as 'Night Vibes' campaign fizzles out," *South China Morning Post*, July 11, 2024.
54. Scribbling Geek, "Let's Enjoy A Hong Kong Trip with Sleeping Dogs 3 – Central & Victoria Peak," *The Scribbling Geek*, June 14, 2017.

Upon the renegotiation of spatiotemporality in *Kowloon's Gate* and *Sleeping Dogs*[55], the two games eventually renegotiate the very being of "Hong Kong" for players to inhabit through their gameplay, which at times even extends beyond the virtual realm. *Kowloon's Gate* demonstrates how an exoticized "Hong Kong" is reimagined and canonized, as *the* image shows, not only its narrative and setting but also its combat system—where players must familiarize themselves with the game's imaginary mix of Japanese and Chinese religious and folklore elements. The name of the common enemy *guirii* (グイリー; 鬼律) originates from the Chinese Taoist text *The Demon Statutes of Nüqing* 女青鬼律, whereas in essence these spirits resemble *tsukumogami* 付喪神 from Japanese folklore.[56] In return, players must learn the workings of *wuxing* 五行, or "the Five Phrases," that originates from traditional Chinese philosophy.[57] In doing so, Kowloon's Gate mobilizes familiar (Techno) Orientalist images—a haunted, superstitious, technologically saturated Hong Kong—but reroutes them through an Asianist aesthetic that players inhabit and manipulate rather than simply consume. These design choices stage what Patterson calls an "Asiatic" mode of racialization: an Asianish style in which hybrid Hong Kong-Japanese motifs make race a matter of ludic performance rather than fixed identity.

Furthermore, the success of *Kowloon's Gate* inspired the opening of Kawasaki Warehouse[58], a physical amusement facility in Japan, reconstructed with items collected from the real Walled City, which functioned as a significant piece of creative preservation until its closure in 2019. Even as the warehouse inevitably reduced the Walled City to familiar stereotypes and a "mystified" symbol, the recent

55. Image taken from the Reddit thread "What's The Best Real City Interpretation In A Game?" made by user @trippy_e.
56. Tse, 2026, 266.
57. Ibid.
58. From Reddit user *verychichi* who initiated the Reddit thread, "Not your usual Japan pic. Anata no Warehouse, the famous video arcade in Kawasaki is closing down," in 2019 under the topic "japanpics; it was later picked up by another user *knobiknows* who reposted it under the topic "Cyberpunk."

success of the Hong Kong film *Twilight of the Warriors: Walled In*[59] appears to follow a similar trajectory, drawing local and international audiences to the lost Walled City through its nostalgic depiction of the 1980s Hong Kong. As a result, the production team has been invited to exhibit the film's sets at the Hong Kong International Airport, the AIRSIDE Mall in Kowloon City, and eventually on the original site of the KWC itself.[60] Although neither culturally nor historically accurate, these exoticized, hybrid reimaginations invite local and foreign audiences to revisit and reinterpret collective memories of Hong Kong. Their circulation across game worlds, amusement facilities, and film-set exhibitions complicates distinctions between authenticity and inauthenticity, and between material and digital forms of remembrance. Within this circulation, games make nostalgic images of Hong Kong available for exploration and interaction, allowing players to reinterpret them through play.



59. "'Kowloon Walled City: A Cinematic Journey' Movie Set Exhibition, *Hong Kong Tourism Board*, https://www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/what-s-new/events/kowloon-walled-city-cinematic-journey-exhibition.html.

60. Supported by the Hong Kong Tourism Board, the exhibition named "Kowloon Walled City: A Cinematic Journey" at the Walled City is available from 24 May 2025.



Figure 3: *(Top) Photography of the Kawasaki Warehouse; (Bottom) Photography of the latest Twilight of the Warriors: Walled In film set exhibition at the site of KWC.*

By re-imagining and emancipating its version of "Hong Kong" for players to conjure upon play, *Sleeping Dogs* destabilizes the binary of authenticity and inauthenticity through nurturing similar playful interventions within its gaming community. Hong Kong players can readily identify "inauthentic" elements, such as the "mahjong poker" minigame and Taoist health shrines reduced to simple collectibles. Yet, different from *Kowloon's Gate*'s mechanics, *Sleeping Dogs*' players can complete the game without understanding what these elements signify for Hong Kong, Cantonese, or broader Chinese communities. The game's awkward hybrid language further complicates this picture, with characters mainly speaking English punctuated by occasional Cantonese profanities. The fluent English of every street vendor strains plausibility, and the fact that many key characters (especially the triad members) are American-born Chinese reflects the game's orientation towards an international market. Although the 2014 Definitive Version of the game does feature Chinese subtitles, they are often imprecise when compared to the idiomatic written Chinese and spoken Cantonese in Hong Kong. For example, a hostile NPC's line "條友都幾串喎 (What a snarky dude)" is subtitled as "挺

帥的, 這傢伙 (Quite handsome, this dude).[61]" The vulgar tone of the original Cantonese phrase is flattened into a more neutral, almost satirical, written Chinese. Such mistranslation, again, underscores that the game primarily caters to a "foreign" audience, and risks causing misunderstanding for players less fluent in Chinese, a pattern that recurs in the 2014 version. At the beginning of the mission where Wei Shen is tasked to complete his initiation trial with the triad, the English voiceover goes: "Your initiation is Yung Lee On. He was selling (drugs) to schoolgirls and was ordered to stop. He's switched to the 18K instead. Make an example of him." The Chinese subtitles of these lines, however, make little to no sense: "你的啟蒙老師是容李安。他被賣給了女學生, 同時也奉命停止。他換成了18K, 以他為戒 (Your inspirational teacher is Yung Lee On. He was sold to the schoolgirls but was ordered to stop. He has been exchanged into 18k, make an example out of him.)"



Figure 4: *Screenshot of part of the mistranslated Chinese subtitles in* Sleeping Dogs: Definitive Version

Nevertheless, *Sleeping Dogs'* serialization of a "touristic" version of Hong Kong can be conceived as an effective simplification that enables players from diverse cultural backgrounds to enact what Coe identifies as a masculine, metropolitan, Asian experience.[62] The

61. English translations of the 2014 *Sleeping Dogs: Definitive Version*'s Chinese subtitles cited in this paper are my own.
62. Coe, 27, 33.

popularity of YouTube videos such as "Sleeping Dogs搞笑廣東話大整合 (Sleeping Dogs' Funny Cantonese Compilation)"[63] and "Cantonese Profanities in Sleeping Dogs"[64] shows how local Hong Kong players and audiences find the game's "linguistic choice," especially how game characters and NPCs deliberately only swear in Cantonese, hilarious and entertaining. These responses exemplify Patterson's "Asiatic" mode of racialization, where an "Asianish" style is performed, mocked, and reappropriated through play rather than fixed by the game's text alone. On the other hand, many Hong Kong players utilize digital platforms, such as Reddit and YouTube videos, to share related real-life incidents and answer foreign players' inquiries about Hong Kong in real life. Instead of merely reducing Hong Kong's population and culture into the existing stereotypes, this "effective reduction" of Hong Kong as a playable symbol in *Sleeping Dogs* can also serve as an accessible entry point to the culture and the space for more conversations and renegotiations to take place. One might therefore argue that Sleeping Dogs primarily expresses nostalgia for Hong Kong action cinema rather than for everyday life in Hong Kong: the game reproduces and circulates an image of the city already mediated by cinematic conventions.[65] As such, Coe himself is sceptical of the game's seriality and criticizes it for failing to revivify Hong Kong action cinema for a new medium.[66] Rather than treating *Sleeping Dogs*' perceived failure to revitalize Hong Kong action cinema as the limit of its cultural significance as Coe proposes, this paper examines how players and audiences reinterpret its representations of Hong Kong through gameplay, online commentary, and the circulation of player-created content.

We should not overlook the more "authentic" dimensions of

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63. Coe, 27, 33.
WOLFleungHK, *Sleeping Dogs搞笑廣東話大整合* [Video], YouTube, December 13, 2021.
64. This is the Happy House, *Cantonese Profanities in Sleeping Dogs* [Video], YouTube, October 3, 2012.
65. Tse, 2026, 265, 270.
66. Coe, 38.

Sleeping Dogs in its remaking of Digital Hong Kong. Beyond the inclusion of local HipHop band 24Herbs (廿四味) on the in-game radio, the protagonist Wei Shen's identity crisis—his struggle to find his footing in an exoticized yet metropolitan-looking city—has prompted many foreign players to take an interest in Hong Kong's colonial history. One prime example is Game Revo's video essay "How Sleeping Dogs Tackled Hong Kong Identity and Culture,"[67] which has garnered exchanges among viewers in the comment section. Game Revo's conclusion of the game mimicking the complicated lived reality of Hong Kong people instead of just another "action hero's fantasy" also coincides with Ge Zhang's analysis of spatial practices in *Sleeping Dogs*. Zhang argues that *Sleeping Dogs*' gameplay allows its players to reinterpret the spaces of Digital Hong Kong through their lived and mundane practices in the virtual space—where the virtual spectacle can provoke a critique of the "unreality" of Hong Kong's everyday life.[68] Akin to the legacy of *Kowloon's Gate*, the 2025 re-opening of the nightclub "Big Boss Generation 大富豪夜總會" in Tsim Sha Tsui is another serialization of the triad's "old Hong Kong", an action filmic representation that predecessors of *Sleeping Dogs* borrowed from.[69] It is fascinating to observe how Hong Kong businesses are gradually rebranding themselves through these renegotiated images, further folding "Digital Hong Kong" into the material spaces of everyday life. Whilst *Sleeping Dogs* sustains the co-existence of authentic and inauthentic depictions of the city, it remains crucial to develop more productive ways to unpack how "Digital Hong Kong" is continually renegotiated by both local and foreign audiences, across both the digital and material planes.

67. Game Revo, *How Sleeping Dogs Tackled Hong Kong Identity and Culture* [Video], YouTube, August 23, 2020, 11:44.

68. Zhang, 24, 35-36.

69. The nightclub had to close temporarily in August 2025, only two months after opening, due to auditing and licensing issues. Notably, it was not directly affiliated with the old nightclub but branded itself under the same name to generate publicity.

CONCLUSION: PLAY, AUTHENTICITY, AND RENEGOTIATION

To conclude, this paper hopes to draw attention to this reimagination of a digestible yet stereotypical image of Hong Kong as an accessible gateway for video game players regardless of their backgrounds. Most would agree that authentic elements and cultural nuances in video games are not always translatable. Rather than measuring Hong Kong games solely by accuracy, this paper has argued that their significance lies in how they make Hong Kong playable, revisable, and collectively interpretable. *Kowloon's Gate* and *Sleeping Dogs* show that inauthenticity can also produce access, circulation, and reinterpretation for different audiences. Read this way, Hong Kong games operate as a playable symbol of nostalgia at a location where authentic and inauthentic meanings coexist through play.

This explains why game developers, both local and foreign, resort to reproducing canonized yet stereotypical spectacles to create a "Hong Kong" gameplay experience that can be enjoyable and inviting for all. Therefore, I find it necessary to identify what invokes a sense of "nostalgia" as well as "Hong Kong" within both local and foreign players, as well as to ask what role authenticity plays in "Hong Kong games"—if we understand this as an epistemic genre—*how authentic* does a "Hong Kong" game have to be?

If we are to delve further into how Hong Kong video games tease both local and non-local players with *the familiar within the unfamiliar*, it is not difficult to see a "Hong Kong past" which is alien yet inviting and captivating. Foreign producers of *Kowloon's Gate* and *Sleeping Dogs* renegotiate, as well as circulate, popular and familiar elements that are representative of Hong Kong's past. Other than reinforcing the transmedia nature of video games, this paper demonstrates how the openness of play can set cultural-coded game productions apart from their counterparts in other forms of media. And so, despite the numerous similarities between Hong Kong films and Hong Kong video games, "Hong Kong games" must be analysed through a different lens to better unpack their unique mode of

consumption and circulation. The formation of "Digital Hong Kong," instead of an "authentic" historical re-presentation, would be *a playable symbol of nostalgia*, at times romanticised and over-mystified, emancipating lived experiences in Hong Kong for all through the intervention of play and renegotiation. It is not my intention to dismiss the potential harm of racial stereotypes, nor to neglect the importance of upholding accuracy in cultural-coded productions. Rather, by regarding play as an opening of meanings, I turn to the vast possibilities created through gameplay and gaming communities to renegotiate meanings and bridge rifts. With a close examination of the two foreign-produced Hong Kong video games, I propose an alternative perspective, a new critical lens to approach the (epistemic) genre of "Hong Kong games" through their reimaginations of a nostalgic Hong Kong where the authentic and inauthentic, the familiar and unfamiliar, should and can co-exist. Future research might consider how the different bodies—within and responsive to the cybernetic circuit of play, both material and digital—continue to shape the interpretive dimensions of "Hong Kong" in video games.

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