When to use a first person shooter as a historical tool? Ludic site preservation in Hong Kong

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INTRODUCTION

This paper offers an experimental contribution to current debates in computer game representation and virtual archeology, where a digital site reconstruction was made as a modification (mod) of Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO). It presents the project Autosave: Redoubt, a site-recreation game mod produced in Hong Kong, as an example of how the playable space of the first- person shooter can be used as a tool of historical representation. The adoption of computer game engines as tools for site recreation has been the subject of substantial debate in the field of virtual archeology, just as the representation of historical violence remains a fraught issue for computer game studies. I argue that the walking simulators commonly used for site recreation imply the ludic behaviour of the first-person shooter, and therefore the playable space of the shooter should be engaged with as a medium of representation, rather than treat the first-person navigable space of the 3D game engine as a neutral representation. As a co-author of Autosave: Redoubt, I will present this project from both a research and a practice-based perspective, and analyse how it might contribute to current debates in computer game representation and virtual archeology.

Autosave: Redoubt is a virtual recreation of a World War II military site in Hong Kong, the Shing Mun Redoubt, built using the Valve Source Engine and uploaded as a playable map of Counter-Strike: Global Offensive. The Shing Mun Redoubt is situated in the mountains of Kowloon, and consists of a labyrinth of underground concrete tunnels, bunkers and pillboxes, presently in various stages of decay. Built by the British in the 1930s, it was the site of the first clash in the Battle of Hong Kong between Japanese and Allied soldiers in 1939.

The use of computer game engines for producing non-game 3D visualisations in virtual archaeology has generated methodological debates with a productive relevance for game studies. Game technologies engines provide virtual archeology with the benefit of detailed rendering and navigable architectural environments, but inevitably the site being

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recreated must be bent towards the computational limits of the engine, such as polygon counts and the number of dynamic elements. (Herwig and Paar 2002) Archaeologist Paul Reilly and visualization specialist Gareth Beale argue that the representational affordances of any technology should be treated with great care, as they have an instrumental effect on the object of study. In their 2017 review of virtual archeological practice, they recommended that the technical affordances of game engines be foregrounded as methodological constraints. Using the archaeological dig as a comparison, Reilly and Beale write that "potential realities become lost in an institutionally induced amnesia", where the decisions made by a number of specialists results in stratification that elevates certain narratives and subdues others. (Beale and Reilly 2017) To answer the concerns of Reilly and Beale, I locate the representational affordances of the 3D first-person game engine according to Rune Kelvjer's description of the player as a "camera-gun" and the tunnel vision that this medium specialises in producing. (Klevjer 2012, p.20). I also characterise the architectural space within the FPS engine using Leino's term "playable space" in order to show that the mode of player engagement produced by the FPS engine is so specific, that to seek a neutral space using this medium is to risk the 'institutional amnesia' described by Reilly and Beale.

The decision to use CS:GO as the medium of representation for Autosave: Redoubt derived from the unique characteristics of the site itself. The enclosed tunnels of the site seemed a natural fit for the 'tunnel vision' of first-person shooter spatiality and as the site is commonly used today (illegally) by airsoft players for war games, its spatial architecture and patterns of contemporary usage suggest a congruence with the playable space that Counter-Strike produces. Furthermore, the longevity and large player numbers that Counter-Strike has maintained for over a decade present an interesting opportunity for considering how site reconstruction functions at the level of reception and dissemination. Does a mod on the servers of one of the most popular and enduring computer games qualify as an act of historical preservation?

In 2011, a team from Hong Kong University conducted an extensive survey of the Shing Mun Redoubt and produced an analysis of the historical events according to line of site data revealed by their architectural information. This study revealed that not only does the site follow many of the design principles outlined in Paul Virilio's Bunker Archaeology (Virilio 1994) but that the rapid defeat of the British at this site and the relatively low casualties inflicted on either side also approaches Virilio's theory, that what appear in the landscape as ruinous historical technologies of death, are in fact monuments to technological redundancy, that as Virilio writes "[bring] to light better than many manifestoes the urban and architectural redundancies of this postwar period". (Virilio 1994, p.12) In this paper, I will show how the ludic design of Autosave: Redoubt reproduced these redundancies by an accurate architectural reproduction of the site in CS:GO, and creating an experience where getting lost confounds and contrasts the 'camera-gun' vision typically valued in CS:GO. I also demonstrate how in the quest for this architectural accuracy, we were able to reveal certain representational limits of the Valve Source Engine, which resonate with the concerns expressed by Reilly and Beale.

In this paper, I outline how the methodological concerns of virtual archeology can be aligned with debates surrounding computer game representation, with specific reference to the first person shooter (FPS). I introduce Autosave: Redoubt as a practice-based examination of how the architectural and the ludic affordances of an FPS engine can be foregrounded to deliver a new understanding to a historical site and to mitigate the 'institutional amnesia' that might result from the uncritical use of 3D computer

visualisations. I will argue that the use of FPS gameplay is a provocative extension of the walking simulator, but that whilst it is unconventional, it can be a valuable addition to how computer game technology can be understood as a representational medium.

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