

# Reimagining Nostalgia in Hong Kong Games: Playing with the (Un)Familiar and (In)Authentic

**Jamie Wing Tung Tse**

Chinese University of Hong Kong

Room 301, Leung Kau Kui Building, The Chinese University of Hong Kong  
Shatin, Hong Kong

[jamietsewt@link.cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:jamietsewt@link.cuhk.edu.hk)

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## INTRODUCTION

Although what constitutes the genre of “Asian games” remains to be subject of debate, most scholars and even players can agree on where the video games are produced or the cultural backgrounds of the developers are not the sole criteria for this seemingly amorphous genre. The notion of “authenticity”, on the other hand, often limits the “playability” of games due to their tendency of having more linear and “closed” narratives and ludic designs. Not to mention that not all cultural or historical elements can be properly translated into gameplays, especially for players who do not seek such didactic experiences. Nonetheless, I wish to unpack the popularity of “Asian games”, namely, how they have successfully transformed Asia and Asian lived experiences into ludic reimaginings for players across the world. In assessing so, I wish to examine *Kowloon’s Gate* (Zeque 1997) and *Sleeping Dogs* (United Front Games 2012), two video games that are set in Hong Kong but not produced by local developers, in this paper. Despite their notable inauthentic and inaccurate depictions of Hong Kong history and cultures, these two games reimagine and serialize Hong Kong as a symbol of nostalgia instead of a physical place.

While nostalgia as a trope is generally understood as “a painful yearning to return home” or a longing for a romanticised past (Chan 2000), it also embodies a sense of temporal displacement and a conflicting mix of familiarity and exoticity where such ludic experience would not be comprehensible to Asian players only. One shall understand nostalgia not as an objective recovery of historical specificities but a deliberate display of temporal displacement in which a modernized gaze towards the past is established (Chu 2004). It is not uncommon for more “historical” Asian video games such as *Detention* (Red Candle Games 2017) and *Devotion* (Red Candle Games

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2019) to establish such modernized, and even restorative gaze towards the Asian past—wherein one could strive towards “historical authenticity,” or in simpler terms, a genuine reconnection with the past in the present (Tse 2022). This paper aims to delve further into how this modernized gaze in Asian video games teases both local and non-local players with the familiar within the unfamiliar—an “Asian past” which is alien yet inviting and captivating to all. Foreign producers of *Kowloon’s Gate* and *Sleeping Dogs* renegotiate popular, familiar images and elements that are representative of Hong Kong’s past. For it is not the “authentic” history that they seek after, but a “playable” symbol of nostalgia, at times romanticised and over-mystified, which also emancipates Asian lived experiences for all through the intervention of play.<sup>1</sup> With a closer look of *Kowloon’s Gate* and *Sleeping Dogs*, I propose an alternative perspective to approach the genre of “Asian games” through their reimaginings of a nostalgic Asia, Hong Kong in particular, where the authentic and inauthentic, as well as the familiar and unfamiliar, co-exists.

#### ENDNOTES

1 This ludic racialization is a reference to Christopher B. Patterson (2018) in his paper on various Asian representations in video games where he suggests that ludic race can emancipate non-Asian players from their fixed identities and locales to inhabit “Asianness” as a form of virtual identity tourism.

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