

The "Chinese" Non-city: Thematic (in)coherence and level design in *Sifu*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The fragmentary nature of *Sifu*'s (Slocap 2022) game world, underlying its thematic design, leads us to an overwhelming question: **Can a video game with discrete levels/stages construct a coherent and cohesive (all-encompassing) spatial environment, such as a city?** And, more importantly, is this urban environment actually congruent with the cultural foundation serving as the main theme for the game? Or simply put, in the case of *Sifu*, **how does this space articulate its purported "Chinese-ness"?**

Games focusing on one-versus-many combat with side-scrolling navigation (commonly known as "beat 'em ups") usually have the player travelling through their settings without concerns of contiguity (that is not to say they do not try to present a coherent setting across their stages, think of Capcom's Metro City in *Final Fight* and *Captain Commando*, or Wood Oak City from the Sega's *Street of Rage* series). *Sifu* tries to present a cohesive urban entity, held together not only by the locations, gangs, and "Chinese" elements, but the "*wuguan*" itself (武馆 "martial hall", a mixture of *dojo* 道場, living quarters and community center) acts as an axis that ties everything in the fashion of a "stage selection" node; moreover, the "*wuguan* board" (a detective-like "evidence board" that fills up as the player gathers items in each stage) stands as a fragmented crystallization of both the narrative and spatial structures.

This paper examines how level design (Totten, 2017, 2019) contributes to creating a sense of congruence between the representations of space and urban structures implied by *Sifu*'s narrative (Wolf, 2013) and the cultural identity that underpins its overall gameplay experience (Attademo 2021). Our analysis focuses on the design process and aesthetic choices behind the overall game structure (Boucher 2023), as they not only explain many of the level design elements but also raise questions about cultural and ethnic representation in video games.

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As Singaporean game writer and journalist Khee Hoon Chan points out (2022B): “Chineseness in *Sifu* is reduced to a mere palette swap,” with little real involvement or presence of the Chinese in the development process (a claim we will examine in-depth); furthermore, aside from its fighting mechanics –“familiar scenes inspired by the fight sequences of Chinese action cinema” (Chan 2022A)– the world-building and environmental design seem less innovative in comparison, submitting willingly to a “sinological orientalism” that imposes Western ideals (aesthetic and otherwise) to lead the Chinese to (global) “normalcy” (Vukovich 2013: 18); this issue is parallel to that of self-representations by Chinese developers trying to appeal to international audiences by “unintended submission to Orientalism” (Tan & Austin 2024).

The issue of ethnic identity has been widely discussed in relation to video games (for some important work related to representation, we could look at Behm-Morawitz & Ta n.d.; specifically in the fighting game genre, we may turn to Şengün et al. 2022, and Molares Cardoso et al. 2022). The Chinese themselves have shown interest in how media, in general (Zhu 2024), and video games, in particular (Tan & Austin 2024), have engaged with their identity. However, little has been done to clearly define what we talk about when we talk about “Chineseness”, or what is understood as being “Chinese”, even less when it comes to space-bound representations. In his 2024 PhD dissertation, scholar Sam Li Mengqi directly tackles the issue of Chinese presence in the medium of video games by questioning both what is represented and who is doing the representation. In this vein, we examine the racial and cultural identity construct in *Sifu*, particularly as reflected in the game’s space and urban design.

Sloclap’s action game *Sifu* has gained a reputation for its simple yet challenging gameplay, allowing players to grasp the fighting system quickly but demanding a certain degree of skill as they progress: “One against all, you have no allies, countless enemies, and a mysterious amulet to bring you back to life every time you die” (Steam 2023). This fighting system combines punches, kicks, and special “focus” attacks, enough resources to help players deal with relentless waves of enemies whose skills often mirror their own. As compelling as the combat might be, it doesn’t seem enough to capture the player’s attention on its own.

One thing that blurbs and sales platforms fail to discuss in any detail is the spatial context of the game, its situatedness. For instance, if we look further into the Steam description quoted above, we only get a vague idea of the overall setting of the game: “Learn how to master your art, whether by fighting through the underbelly of a nightclub, scrambling through a refined gallery to avoid getting surrounded, or vertically navigating a towering office building.” A nightclub, a gallery, and an office building; the player is left to reconstruct the overarching setting from these disparate locations, if one exists at all. The actual space that serves as the stage for all this combat has also received considerable attention; for instance, Brooks (2023) provides a detailed examination of “The Museum” level.

However, beyond its aesthetic appeal, what kind of space is it actually, and how does it relate to the implied “Chineseness” of that world? If a theme can be a unifying force that helps create a coherent world out of disparate –and distant– levels, what happens if this theme is appropriated without discretion? If it betrays that which it pretends to refer to? While Chan’s concerns are certainly present, the actual design decisions for *Sifu* reveal a complex story and a compelling outcome.

We take accounts of the design team (Altermatt 2021, Boucher 2021, Coleville 2021, Chen-Yang 2021, Clevinger 2021, Gandhri 2021, Masset 2021, Michelin 2021), vis-a-vis annotated gameplay (focusing on environment analysis) and direct analysis of selected models of the game's environment extracted with specialized software and rearranged in Blender (mainly of the "Wuguan" and "The Sanctuary" levels:), in order to analyze the challenges games manifest in terms of the **coherence of the environmental design and cultural representation ("Chineseness")**.

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