

(Re)play the beginning of the end: 1988 as prequel to Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong

Yang Jing

Transcultural Studies Center

Heidelberg University

+49 01744558532

jing.yang@asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de

Keywords

Alternative History, Digital Activism, Social Play

INTRODUCTION

This study takes the alternative history video game 1988 as the locus, probes into how video game works as an crucial yet overlooked agent in digital activism in the context of post-Umbrella-Movement Hong Kong.

Once an international media spectacle, Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement in late 2014 is now crystalized as a crucial moment in the city's turbulent pursuit to democracy and political liberty. The movement, while witnessing a new generation of disobedient citizens pouring to street occupation, also instilled an overwhelming sense of failure among its participants without so much as an official statement from the

Chinese government. Worse yet, Hong Kong's political situation keeps exacerbating in multiple frontiers ever since, which contradicted the initial faith in the movement to bring about tangible change.

Avid participants made efforts to learn from the failure and become able to project onto a future where political actions could make (or preserve) a Hong Kong that they want. Among them, Cheng Lap (鄭立), an independent game designer slash a vocal political activist, developed a couple of "alternative history" games, and distributed them on Internet as a political action. These games boldly envisage a Hong Kong independent from China's regime through overt struggle with hegemonic power. Considering the current political climate in Hong Kong, where anything relevant to autonomy, liberty, and independence would be interpreted as separatist violence, producing such a game is inherently an dissident act.

This study selects his 2015 production 1988 (光輝歲月) as the research subject. Marketed as "the most local video game" and based on "our collective memory", 1988 generated an alternative history starting from 10 years prior to Hong Kong's handover to China. With hindsight of current political dilemma, Cheng believes the cause of the problem lies in Hong Kong's golden age, and 1988 is the last opportunity to rewrite history. In this mixture of AVG and visual novel, player assumes the role a female teenage immigrant from Mainland China, who would meet various Hong Kong cultural,

Extended Abstract Presented at DiGRA 2018

© 2018 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

social and political figures (real and fictional) as her friends, teachers and enemies. All together these characters could change Hong Kong's future (present in reality) through countless street fights and life choices, beating the hegemonic power that is the collaboration of Chinese Communist Party and Hong Kong real estate tycoons.

Since its inception, 1988 was made to be “more than a game”, but also a constructive cultural agent enabling players to understand the forgotten history of contemporary Hong Kong and contemplate on how to change current situation. Not only the story, the character and the promos in the game is infused with political symbols, the production and reception of 1988 is also imbued with collective political rapport, which is most apparent to see in the online interaction among the producers and players of 1988 on social media.

Following game scholar DeKoven's (1978) starting point, I regard 1988 as both an cultural artifact and social community of engaged players. Therefore, this study explores two layers of “Hong Kongness” brought by 1988. The first one is the good old yet fictional Hong Kong constructed in the game with abundant visual and linguistic elements; the second is the online community built around 1988, where players and designers enthusiastically construct a should-be Hong Kong, and where playing 1988 itself is recognized as a progressive political act of being real Hong Kongers.

Methodologically, this study first takes a close reading of the game world in 1988, including the textual and visual contents of the game and their references, the texture and the style and the level design, etc. Then, I'd like to combine my own gameplay experience as Hong Kong resident with a mainland China background together with Hong Kong youtuber's broadcasted gameplays, to explore the strategies, motives and actions 1988 enables its players to take. And a discourse analysis of social discourses generated around 1988, sources including 1988 Facebook page and the discussion session of the official 1988 website, both are constantly updated by users with heated discussion of political affairs. Last but not least, the linkage between the game world and the social community is analyzed, for instance, I look into how the Cheng Lap and his team update the game with suggestion and even resources contributed by players.

Through the above analysis the text and context in and beyond 1988, this study examines how, by simulating and reconstructing history, 1988 actively builds and disseminates an identity myth, Hong Kong local, as a emerging nationality in a highly politicized society.

In a young-generation-led social movement such as Umbrella and its successors, digital activism becomes a common mean to break into established discourse, generates previously overlooked power. Playfulness, creativity and avid political action are brewed together, hence competent to deliver the message in the private sphere. In the case of 1988, video game, and alternative history genre in particular, creatively captured a complex emotion and anxiety of Hong Kongers' projection onto the past, the present and the future. The game both commentates on the social turbulence players experience in everyday life and becomes a part of that turbulence.

OPTIONAL BIO

Yang Jing is a Phd candidate from the transcultural studies center of Heidelberg University. Her dissertation examines how different visual approaches are employed in social activism among young generation in Hong Kong. Prior to her study in Heidelberg, Yang writes extensively on game culture and international politics for various media in Hong Kong. She is also invited to curate a game art exhibition in Shenzhen, China in 2018 December.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aarseth, E. 2003. *Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis*, paper presented at the Fifth International Digital Arts and Culture Conference, Melbourne, Australia.
- DeKoven, B. *The Well-Played Game. A Playful Path to Wholeness*. 3rd Edition. Writers Club Press; San Jose, CA, 2002.
- Elliott, Andrew & Kapell, Mathew Wilhelm. 2013. "Introduction", pp. 1-29. In *Play with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*. New York, USA: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Evans Richard. 2014. *Altered Pasts: Counterfactuals in History*. London, UK: Little, Brown and Company.
- Groys, Boris. 2010. *Going Public*. Berlin, Germany: Sternberg Press.
- Koselck, Reinhart. 2005. *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. New York, USA: Columbia University Press.
- Lam, Wai-man. 2017. "Hong Kong's Fragmented Soul: Exploring Brands of Localism", In *Citizenship, Identity and Social Movements in the New Hong Kong: Localism after the Umbrella Movement*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge
- Michel Foucault. *Of Other Space*. *Diacritics*. 16 (1): 22–27
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1990. *Time and Narrative*. Chicago, USA: University of Chicago Press.
- Stenros, Jaakko 2015. *Playfulness, Play, and Games: A Constructionist Ludology Approach*. Dissertation, <http://tampub.uta.fi/handle/10024/96986>
- Uricchio, William. 2005. "Simulation, History, and Computer Games", pp. 327-338. In *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*. Cambridge MA, USA: MIT Press
- Wilson, D. and Sicart, M. (2010) 'Now it's personal: on abusive game design', *Proceedings of FuturePlay 2010*, Vancouver, Canada: ACM.