Code, Culture, and Counternarrative: A Diaspora-Driven Virtual Heritage Deconstruction of Orientalist Portrayals of the Kowloon Walled City

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Keywords

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the development of "The Walled City (Re)forge," my Virtual Heritage Game (VHG) prototype that reconstructs Hong Kong's Kowloon Walled City (KWC). The project aims to challenge prevalent Orientalist narratives and stereotypes about the Walled City by leveraging oral histories, archival research, and innovative game design techniques. Set against the backdrop of Hong Kong's rapid modernization and the global fascination with the Walled City's unique urban form, this research investigates how VHGs can serve as tools for cultural articulation, historical reinterpretation, and community engagement.

The project builds upon theories of presence (Slater 2009; 1999; Skarbez et al. 2017; Gander 1999) to investigate the creation of immersive historical experiences in spaces that no longer physically exist. This concept holds particular significance for diaspora communities, where recreating lost environments carries profound emotional and cultural weight. The research engages with Baudrillard's (1994) notions of simulation and simulacra, examining the relationship between virtual reconstructions of historical sites and concepts of "reality" and memory, especially for places that have been physically erased. Additionally, the project incorporates Champion's (2015) concept of cultural presence, which extends beyond spatial immersion to evoke the sensation of encountering a different cultural perspective within the virtual environment. By synthesizing these theoretical frameworks - theories of presence, Baudrillard's notions of simulation, and Champion's cultural presence - the project develops a novel approach to virtual heritage. Through this multifaceted theoretical lens, the project seeks to capture and convey the cultural norms, worldviews, and daily experiences of the Walled City's inhabitants, fostering a deeper understanding of its unique cultural landscape and challenging visitors to engage with unfamiliar cultural paradigms.

Central to the project is a critical examination of Orientalism (Said 1985) and self-Orientalism as they apply to representations of Hong Kong and the Walled City. The research investigates how these concepts have shaped both Western and local perceptions of the space, and how a VHG can work to deconstruct these narratives. By adopting a diaspora perspective, the project explores how distance and cultural hybridity influence the recreation and understanding of heritage sites, offering new insights into the transnational nature of cultural memory.

Methodologically, the study employs a research-through-design approach, combining oral history collection, archival research, and iterative game development. This process reveals the tensions between official narratives and personal memories, highlighting the complexities of representing contested spaces in digital environments. The project's focus on oral histories not only provides rich, personal accounts of life in the Walled City but also serves as a form of community engagement, sharing authority (Frisch 1990) with former residents to interpret their past and reconstruct their lost home.

The game design process itself becomes a site of cultural negotiation, balancing historical authenticity with player engagement (Sweeting 2019). "The Walled City (Re)forge" explores how game mechanics and interfaces can be designed to reflect the cultural knowledge and thought processes specific to Walled City residents. This approach aims to address a key challenge in virtual heritage projects identified by Champion (2016): creating interactions that are meaningfully tied to the cultural context being represented, rather than relying on modern conventions disconnected from the historical setting.

Key findings of the research include:

1. The potential of VHGs to challenge and deconstruct Orientalist stereotypes by presenting nuanced, historically grounded narratives. By allowing players to experience the Walled City through the eyes of its residents, the game counters sensationalized media portrayals and offers a more complex understanding of the space.

2. The role of diaspora perspectives in bridging cultural gaps and offering fresh interpretations of heritage sites. The researcher's position as a Hong Kong native studying abroad provides a unique vantage point, allowing for a critical examination of both local and international perceptions of the Walled City.

3. The strategies for reconciling historical authenticity with player engagement in VHG design. The project demonstrates incorporating game mechanics to communicate historical information and cultural practices without sacrificing playability.

4. The effectiveness of oral histories in creating a sense of presence and authenticity in virtual environments. By incorporating the memories and interpretations of former residents, the game achieves a level of emotional resonance that goes beyond visual recreation.

The paper argues that VHGs, when developed with critical awareness of cultural representation issues, can serve as powerful tools for de-Orientalization and cultural documentation. It contributes to ongoing discussions about the transnational impact of digital heritage projects and the role of games in shaping cultural memory. Moreover, it demonstrates how VHGs can function as spaces for cultural negotiation

and reinterpretation, offering new pathways for understanding and engaging with complex historical narratives in an increasingly globalized world.

This research has significant implications for game studies, cultural heritage preservation, and diaspora studies. It showcases how interactive media can be used to record and transmit cultural knowledge, particularly for sites and communities that have been physically dispersed or erased. By focusing on KWC, a space that has captured global imagination but is often misunderstood, the project highlights the potential of VHGs to challenge dominant narratives and foster more nuanced cultural understanding.

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BIO

Poki Chan is a PhD student in Design and Computation Arts at Concordia University, Montréal. With a background in interaction design and entertainment technology from Hong Kong Polytechnic University, her research focuses on innovative methods of preserving historical and cultural heritage through game design and interactive technologies. As a Hong Kong native and a diaspora researcher, she brings a unique perspective to the intersection of game studies, cultural preservation, and Hong Kong studies. Her work challenges traditional notions of historical representation and emphasises the power of personal accounts in shaping our understanding of the past.