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The stroller in the virtual city:

Spatial practice of Hong Kong players in *Sleeping Dogs*

ABSTRACT

Sleeping Dogs is an open-world role-playing game developed by United Front Games, a Canadian Studio based in Vancouver, in conjunction with Square Enix London Studios and released by Square Enix in 2012. The game features the city of Hong Kong and the society of Chinese Triads. While the game itself is mainly a representation of post-colonial Hong Kong targeting a transnational audience entrenched in similar gameplay mechanics of the genre, the native Hong Kong players react to these reconstructions of Hong Kong through their own gameplay and unique interpretations. The virtual city is not a static representation but a congruence of vigorous interactions between the originally designed space and gamic actions of the players. This paper seeks to explore the spatial and bodily practices of *Sleeping Dogs* players in the virtual terrain of Hong Kong through the lens of Lefebvre's spatial theory.

KEYWORDS: *Spatial Practice, Hong Kong, Lefebvre, Virtual City, Realism*

INTRODUCTION

Space in videogames is not a “passive absorption of images, but rather through an active and largely self-directed process of exploration” (Fraser, 2011, p.94). Following this line, I argue that the virtual Hong Kong in *Sleeping Dogs* is a reinterpretation of Hong Kong—“a socially and visually prism of the real thing” (Murray 2013)—not only through the algorithmic dispositions on the developers’ end but also gamic actions on the side of players. Even though there is the homogenising tendency of the global game industry, local variances still play a determining role in the polyrhythmic “glocal” digital game ecology (Apperley, 2010). Local gamers’ individual in-game performative practices and interpretations of the reconstructions of virtual Hong Kong should be

understood in association with their everyday lives. This paper will discuss *Sleeping Dogs* as a living space produced by the introduction of urban folk culture into the virtual terrain by players. These folkloristic cultures include Cantonese vernacular oral traditions, street scenes such as vendors and back alleys, public transports and so forth. The aim of this research is not to assess the accuracy of representation per se but the reception as well as subversion of the “representations of space” by the Hong Kong interpretative community and their cultural expression in the actions of gameplay. Videogames in this sense are treated not as ruptures of the mundane existence for the gamers but expressions of everyday life: the lived experiences of players and their aesthetic and spatial intervention in gameplay.

NOTES ON METHODOLOGY

This research is based on analysis of contents from several online Cantonese discussion boards¹ as well as five online interviews of players. This research is deeply entrenched in my own experiences in the game and my conversations with other Hong Kong gamers. After finishing the main story line of *Sleeping Dogs* once, I spent many hours wandering in the virtual city taking screenshots and field-notes, then posting my observations in the discussion boards.

Questions and issues emerging from my interpretations of forum posts were then asked to and further extrapolated by my interviewees. Throughout the online interactions and data collection process, I mostly positioned myself as a participant of discussion rather than a distinguished researcher. This paper is the result of a synthesis of my phenomenological reflection of strolling in the virtual city, dialogues with other players I met online anonymously, and interpretation of the documenting and sharing of these tales of non-diegetic actions and alternative narratives as well as various strategies and screenshots in the online forums.

GAMING SUBCULTURES

The most influential strand of subculture studies comes from the tradition of Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), which defines subculture as a “way of life” against hegemony of mainstream society’s invisible but ubiquitous power (Hebdige 1979). Subcultural style exposes the implicit dominance of ideology and therefore prepares individuals to overcome hegemonic normality and un-reflexivity. However, in recent developments, this class-based “semiotic guerrilla warfare” through “stylistic rituals” had shifted toward a “fluidity of a variety of nebulous ‘tribal formations’ (Wienzierl & Muggelton, 2003, p.5)- “ad hoc communities with fluid boundaries” (p.8). The spectacular subcultures of resistance according to the Cultural Studies tradition of CCCS may be no longer satisfactory model for studies of contemporary videogame (sub)cultures. The primary feature of contemporary subculture is likely no longer “a rigid, reified and realist entity, rooted in

1. <http://www.discuss.com.hk/viewthread.php?tid=20489083&page=1> (Cantonese); <http://www.uwants.com/forumdisplay.php?fid=1672&page=7> (Cantonese).

underlying class relationship” (Wienzierl & Muggelton, 2003, p.23) but “manifestations of self-expression, individual autonomy and cultural diversity” (Muggleton 2000, p.167 cited Hall & Jefferson, p.xiii). In contrast to disengagement with consumerism, I argue that contemporary subculture’s chief traits are active engagement and appropriation of consumer products. Explicit violent tactics in previous subcultures had converted into an implicit “resistance” via appropriation. Borrowing from Azuma (2009)’s concept of “database culture” in his theorisation of otakus, we can understand this “oblique resistance” as forms of information elitism, critical consumption, and “an aesthetic preference for cultural products outside social norms” (Stevens, 2010, p.212).

Similar to the approach of the fandom studies exemplified by Henry Jenkins (1992), I aim to document a collective of users (or “prod-users”)'s alternative interpretation or engagement with commercial works- reading (in the case of videogames, performing) practices in novel ways as well as reconfiguration of the existing materials into a derivative oeuvre that subverts the “appropriate” and “intended” use or interpretation of the original. My approach is to focus on “cultures of uses”. Through this perspective, we can avoid homogenising or generalising gameplay experiences and inspect the often-overlooked “emergent and dynamic practices of gamers, rather than ‘intended use’ of the software” (Apperley 2010, p.87). In the case of *Sleeping dogs*, these practices are further exacerbated by the genre of open-world or sandbox games. Secondly, “cultures of use” are situated into “heterogenous, myriad and plural” local variances (p.21). King and Krzywinksa (2006, p.75) argue that “contextual background material...can have considerable impact on overall experience offered to the player”. Although *Sleeping dogs* involves global production and distribution, its consumption in Hong Kong is deeply rooted in local factors. For a local player, the familiar everyday of urban life in Hong Kong spontaneously blends into the virtual gameplay experiences.

SPATIAL TRIAD IN GAMESPACE

Space has always been a pressing issue since the inception of game studies. Moreover, the past decade’s academic attention on Lefebvre has brought his theories into active applications in many disciplines including the prospering field of game studies. As Nitsche (2008) states, “experience, comprehension, and spatial practice are phenomenological key elements that reappear throughout this discussion of virtual space” (p.3). Later, an edited book *Space Time Play: Computer Games* (2007) explores the relationships between computer games and urban space from a variety of perspectives including both academics and designers. Both of the texts recurrently allude to Lefebvre’s original book *Production of Space* (1991). Furthermore, in his frequently quoted essay “Allegories of Space”, Aarseth (2000, p.163) identifies the comparability of game space to spatial practice: “as spatial practice, computer games are both representations

of space (a formal system of relations) and representational spaces (symbolic imagery with a primarily aesthetic purpose)". Inspired by this adaptation, I intend to build on this approach and explicate the application into a particular direction focusing on the role of "inhabitants" in lived virtual space and their potentialities to reverse "alienated spatiality" in "representational spaces". The key idea of Lefebvre is that "space is socially produced" (Lefebvre, 1991, p.26) —it is a complex process instead of a static representation. Lefebvre thereby breaks down social space into a tripartite system:

1. "The spatial practice of a society secretes that society's space" (Lefebvre 1991, p38); It secures a certain degree of cohesion for a "guaranteed level of competence and a specific level of performance" of every society member's social relationship in space (p.33). Spatial practice is also linked to "perceived spaces" – it is revealed through the deciphering and decoding of its space (Merrifield 2006).
2. Representations of space, which is "conceptualized space", the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers" (Lefebvre, 1991, p38); this is the dominant space in the society.
3. Representational space, "space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of "inhabitants" and "users"... This is the dominated—and hence passively experienced—space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate" (p.39). This realm stays dominated thus characterised by non-reflexive everydayness.

Firstly, videogames are representations of space because developers primarily implement the symbolic imagery or narratives and players interact with environments in forms predicted and programmed by the game designers. This predetermined design and prominence of algorithmic control are similar to static conceptualisation of space practiced by the urban planners. Apperley (2010, p.27) suggests, "all options, actions and possibilities are contained "in quantifiable, dynamic relationships" in the digital code of the game's algorithm". In these "conceived spaces", game developers inscribe the intended usages of different spaces just as city planners conceived the organisation and segregation of public and private spaces.

Secondly, video games are also representational spaces because these are the directly "lived" environments where players perform through the proxy of avatars. Players are required to obey and learn algorithm in order to progress in the game. Hence, players or, "inhabitants", passively experience space for the most part. However, videogames are not just designed experiences. Players, in other words, the "users" of the space also seek to appropriate and surpass the passivity of the experience through their imagination. The operator of the game is not entirely subject to machinic actions.

There is always a “simulation gap between the rule-based representation of a source system and a user’s subjectivity” (Bogost, 2006). Moreover, experimental practices can gradually reveal the hidden design principles thus develop strategies to evade and even transcend certain limitations of originally designed usages of the virtual space. This conceptualisation also resonates with the action (rather than textual)-oriented game theories’ emphasis on correspondences- material and affective negotiation with the regimes of algorithms (Galloway 2006). As Huizinga (1970, p.15) states, play is “methectic rather than mimetic”. This subversion of “conceived space” through spatial practice of lived spaces is the focal point of my study of spaces in videogames.

In his critique of “functionalism” in modern architecture and urban planning, Lefebvre demonstrates that the representation of this ideology of urban space as it is lived in the material acts of individuals. It symbolises “the imaginary, ‘naturally’ and normatively separated, relations of individuals to their real, interdependent living conditions” (Prigge 2008, p.53). In Lefebvre’s own words, “What is lived and perceived is of secondary importance compared to what is conceived” (1988, cited from Merrifield 2006, p.175). Furthermore, the counteraction against this dominance of “representations of spaces” is the appropriation of the intended use of the space, which will distort the ruling spatial practice and “shatter conceptions of space ... in dreams, in imaginings, in utopias or in science fiction” (Lefebvre, 1991, p.285). This is similar to Debord’s approach “détournement” that reuses “the pre-existing artistic elements in a new ensemble” and “a politicised use of irony and pastiche” (Elias, 2010, p.835). Through parodying a seemingly natural reality, the aesthetics of détournement denaturalise the non-reflexive everydayness and expose the alienation and boredom. In addition, this manoeuvre of spaces through aesthetic spatial practices can potentially shift the boundaries between dominant and dominated spaces- thus it is possible to imagine an alternative utopia. This is a realm “where the collective unconscious of functionalized metropolitan daily life can be made accessible to the inhabitants by means of shock experiences in language, images, and cinema. This is to allow inhabitants to set their own ideas of their real conditions of existence that may contradict the dominant ideological representations of these conditions” (Prigge 2008, p.54).

Continuing the discussion on space in videogames, the virtual city is in itself another algorithmic space and thus manifestation of the spectacle. In other words, the virtual city is born a spectacle, a perfection of urban planning and organisation. However, it also potentially provides another playground for a Situationist aesthetic that simulates “will to playful creation” (Debord 1958 cited in Elias, 2010, p.825).

SPATIAL REPRESENTATION AND REALISM

Spatial practices of Hong Kong *Sleeping Dogs* players is particularly captivating subject because of the bizarre situation where Hong Kong players are natives in the real space of Hong Kong but relegated to the position of visitors in the virtual replication of their hometown. Strolling through the luminous geometry of urban cyberspace, gameworld exploration is, put forward by Miller (2008a), similar to a kind of tourism. Schwartz (2006) studied *Shenmue* and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* players in a similar perspective and found that

“realism and detail allow gamers to accept game spaces as ‘real’ and visit them as tourists. He or she does not only complete the game objectives but also takes in the sights. Clearly, one aspect of engaging with game environments is this virtual tourism...players also spoke of the game environments in terms of visiting exotic locations” (p.315).

One crucial argument one can derive from the study of tourism is that people often do bring perceptions and beliefs to these exotic and recreational spaces. In Craik (1997 cited in Miller 2008b)’s words, “cultural experiences offered by tourism are consumed in terms of prior knowledge, expectations, fantasies, and mythologies generated in the tourist’ origin culture rather than by the cultural offerings of the destination”. The case of Hong Kong players may appear different since they are in fact native to Hong Kong and quite familiar with the urban geography and culture. In other words, “at home she feels like a tourist” (Wark, 2007, p.162). The juxtaposition of the tourist and the native provides a very peculiar entry point into the virtual world for Hong Kong players. “Like tourism, games are rituals which both differ from and reinforce certain aspects of the structure and the values of everyday life” (Graburn, 1983, p.95 cited Miller 2008b).

Initial intention of the development team was to capture the cityscape as accurate as possible. In the words of the lead producer Dan Sochan (Houlihan, 2012), “we have a few members of the team from Hong Kong and we also did several research...we tried to capture the essence and culture of Hong Kong”. In fact, United Front Games hired writers and voice actors who were born and raised in Hong Kong to review all of Cantonese dialogues and details such as billboard in order to make sure the representation of city is “authentic”- a word appeared repeatedly in the interview. However, the forum discussions suggest that Hong Kong players are well aware of the origin of the production of this virtual terrain and many emphasise the representation was from the perspective of foreign expatriates rather than locals. Several of my interviewees remarked that the disposition of different spaces and particular choices of locations and landmarks all reflected the stereotypical images of Hong Kong. It is a challenge, as admitted by developers themselves, to “capture all that (authenticity) as a western developer without trying to play on stereotypes” (Houlihan, 2012).

Since the inception of the development, the inspirations the development team drew on were largely popular and cinematic portrayals of Hong Kong rather than ethnographic data gathered through lived experiences. In my interpretation, the game is not able to avoid the Orientalist lens that strives for “authenticity” in development but apparently romanticises the “Eurocentric prejudices” (Said 1979). Instead of feeling intimate to the landscape, a dozen of participants in the discussion board were frustrated by a number of aspects of the map, particularly, the “incorrect” representation of Hong Kong in their opinions². To begin with, the city map of *Sleeping Dogs* only includes Hong Kong Island excluding Kowloon and New Territory; however, it also attempts to incorporate locations in Kowloon (for example, Kowloon Market) within the map of Hong Kong Island, which makes the entire cityscape a hybrid territory rather than a realistic re-construction. One interviewee lamented the frequent reappearances of Tin Hau Temple in the main storyline, as it had become a famous tourist spot and considered as clichés by many young locals despite its continuing popularity in festive rituals. He commented, “I think gweilo’s perception of Hong Kong still lingers in Bruce Lee’s movies. It seems these impressions are never updated ever since”.

As demonstrated by the above examples, the pre-existing conceptions of Hong Kong players are brought into direct conflict and negotiation with designers’ “conceived space”. This discontent also leads to a position of “distant immersion” (Miller, 2008a) — while players are reluctant to fully immerse, they still maintain a viewing position to judge a virtual city as the locals of its original imagery. For this reason, large quantities of forum threads focused on the maps, landscapes, buildings and people (NPCs) to assess the genuinity or quality of the representation. Players’ understandings of Hong Kong— its folkloristic and habitual culture— are immediately brought to the virtual city.

Indeed, players are very much concerned with how well the game space mimics real space. However, two interviewees proposed that most players were clearly missing the point to compare the virtual city to the real one. It is impossible to adopt entire realisticness of the space of Hong Kong in the game. The streets in the virtual space are deliberately made wider and emptier. If the game were to portray the real Hong Kong—the narrow and crowded streets and incessant traffic jams, the gameplay experience would be devastating since one probably spends most of the game time fighting his or her out of the crowds or getting trapped in the car. Furthermore, these discussions brought up the distinction between realistic-ness and realism (these two terms were interchangeably used by many discussants in the forum) by Galloway (2006). Game spaces approximate the real space but they are still “allegories of the real”: games “still rely on the deviation from reality in order to make the illusion playable” (Aarseth, 2000). In fact, the more realistic representation of space, the more the space will be detached from gaming rather it is reduced to simulation.

2. Link to the original post: <http://www.uwants.com/viewthread>.

“Realisticness is yard-stick held up to representation” (Galloway, 2006, p.72) while realism “requires a special congruence between the social reality depicted in the game and social reality known and lived by the player” (p.83). Through experiencing the gamespace, players can then critically reflect upon the trivialities of everyday life.

In my conversations with other players, the topic of minibuses came around several times. Minibuses are 16-seats small vans operating outside the realm of public transport. In contrast to normal buses in Hong Kong, minibuses are less regulated and route-flexible and served as a unique and yet conventional transportation in ordinary lives of locals. *Sleeping Dogs* includes a plot (part of the main story) where the main character Weishen has to drive a minibus loaded with passengers recklessly in order to compete with a hostile minibus controlled by a rival triad. The appearance of minibuses in the game triggered intimate feelings toward minibuses—the small-scale operations of minibuses in mostly older and poorer districts³, communal and personal connections with other fellow commuters, the prevalence of aggressive driving and evasion of normal traffic rules and routes⁴, which are all integral bits and parts of the “red van” culture in Hong Kong. However, in real life, minibus drivers are excessively hasty simply due to the particular business model rather than triad competition. Minibus drivers’ incomes depend on daily earnings of these buses so they have to be hasty in driving and aggressive in getting passengers. This hurriedness of driving is sometimes detrimental to safety of drivers and passengers. Nonetheless, for many locals, this means of transport is incorporated into the hustle and bustle of city life; thus, it represents a unique aspect of Hong Kong urban culture. Indeed, the game’s lack of miniature portrayal and practical usage of these minibuses (apart from the plot I discussed earlier) led to many players’ demands for more opportunities to ride these buses besides the main means of transportation, which are taxi and carjacking. In this instance, players naturally reflect on congruence between their real life experience of mini buses and in-game experience. This is exactly the “realism” that I attempt to theorise. The demand for minibus in gamespace is motivated by the intimacy to minibuses despite its rude services and the anxieties rooted in the fact that the monopoly of large transportation corporations threatens to take over this private sector that serves the local community. The minibus as a means of transportation represents a vanishing community value in the dominance of the gigantic monopolies that governs almost every aspect of city life including public transport. Minibuses’ operation style defies the uniformity of the “conceived space” of public transport monopoly—its faceless service and sole pursuit for profits. This defiance is carried on in the virtual space where players demand to nostalgically re-“live” the chaos of street and triad owned business before the monopoly takeover—when street life was ferocious yet alive. In Fredric Jameson (cited in Galloway 2006, p.74) words, “the artistic devices and technological equipment whereby it captures that truth of the world are explored and stressed and foregrounded, ‘realism’ will stand unmasked as a mere reality- or realism- effect”.

3. Passengers can get off at preferred locations roughly along the route rather than bus stops, which serves as convenient supplementary alternative to fixed routes public buses.

4. Minibus drivers often take flexible routes and shortcuts to customisable locations. There is a mandatory legal speed limit of 100km/h due to the ubiquity of reckless driving and a number of fatal traffic accidents. Most of time, this legal restriction is ignored by both drivers and customers who prefer to spend minimum time on travelling.



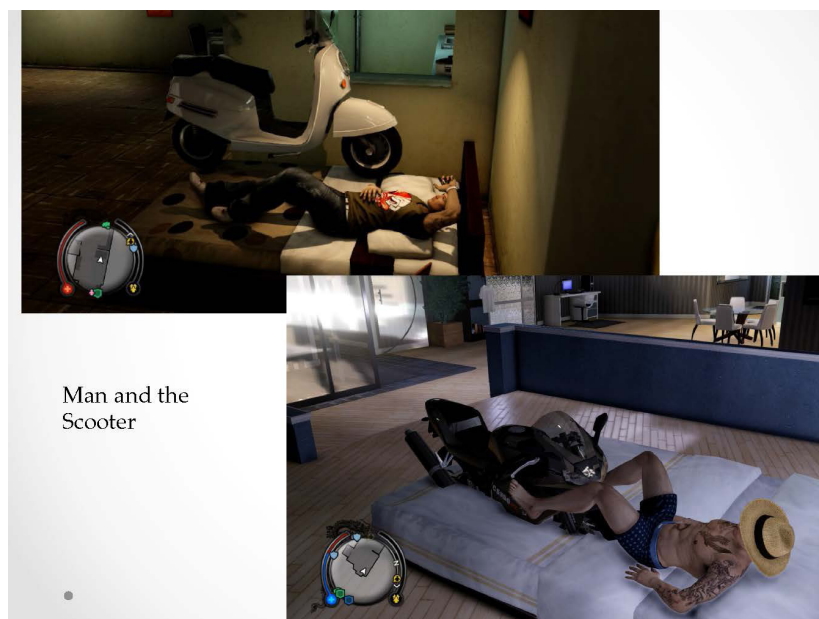
FROM SPATIAL DISCIPLINE TO SUBVERSION OF "CONCEIVED SPACE"

In his early writings on *Grand Theft Auto*, Frasca (2003) provides a utopian vision of sandbox games, “the environment is a giant laboratory for experimentation, where I could test the system’s boundaries and set my own creative goals”. In contrast, Chess (2005) provides a Foucauldian interpretation of the space in *Grand Theft Auto*: “Space...as a means of both disciplining and controlling a player, as well as a system of rewarding his acumen” (Chess, 2005, p.82). This type of spatial discipline also persists in the design of *Sleeping Dogs* although in different forms. Progression in the game primarily depends on effectively negotiating and memorising the virtual terrain. Player develops a sense of direction through practicing navigation in an ever-broadening territory during questing or simply wandering/cruising. There are locked boxes and health shrines scattered in various locations in the city. Unlocking these boxes will reward the player bonus money and praying at newly found health shrines will increase the avatar’s maximum health. The process of looking for these upgrades compels the players to travel around the city including areas where main quests do not take place. Moreover, players’ desires and pleasures in the *Sleeping Dogs* are predominately manufactured by the developers in an algorithmic manner- the artificial need for physical strength, social reputation (which is measured by a “face meter”), and financial management.

In Chess (2005)’s words, this “spectacle” of gamespace “ultimately helps to reinforce the player’s encapsulation within the game”. In other words, the gamespace internalises disciplinary rules and submissive mindsets. Similarly, in Lefebvre’s terms, these spaces of urban planning and traffic rules are grounded in rationality and institutional knowledge, detached from lived practices. However, this “conceived space” or the intended use of the space does not necessarily coincide with the entirety of users’ experiences. In the case of Hong Kong players, the situation is in fact quite peculiar because the virtual city is

supposed to resemble the traffic rules of Hong Kong in a realistic manner: that is, players drive on the left. However, this seemingly accommodating design in practice turned out to be a disorientating hindrance for many local Hong Kong players. Due to highly developed public traffic as well as fairly limited and expensive parking spaces, few of the interviewed gamers drove in real life but they did so very often in digital games such as in driving simulators or racing games, where they mostly drove on the right. As we can see from this example, the developers are only the initiator. The result of the gameplay on the end of the player is not necessarily what the developer originally intended- but rather a result of the interactions between the dynamic (non-static) algorithms, which is deeply situated in the local condition, and infrastructure provided by the developers.

The primacy of “conceived space” over the “lived space” and the condition of “silence of users” will not necessarily always persist; playful distractions can invert the situation. These are activities or interactions in game spaces where players can establish their own goals that oppose instrumentality or immediate usability of actions in the main game algorithm. Instead of striving for upgrades, levels, or better vehicles, players can pursue self-defined goals and exploit the space outside it intended uses. These experimentations of space and alternative narrative sometimes lead to surprises exposing options that are even beyond the spatial liberties provided. Even given a defined set of parameters, the players can manipulate spatial elements in order to achieve a goal that may be great enjoyment. For example, all the apartments available for the avatar in *Sleeping Dogs* are above the ground floor and there are usually parking spaces near the residence. However, some players are determined to drive their scooters into their rooms, which is no straightforward task since they have to ride up stairs and fit through the tiny front door.



Man and the
Scooter

The player has a central role to play in the production of gamespace. The main process takes place in the player, which can be directed by “conceived space” through repetitive training of navigation and mastery of algorithm. However, spatial or narrative elements provided by the algorithm not only help deciphering the designed events and space, but also prepares the contexts and tools that can be taken in control by the players to create meaningful space and experiences. Murray remarked (2005), “by learning how to effectively navigate a simulated body within this manifestation, the quality of place comes to life” (p.92). Electronic games are living spaces where condition of non-reflexive alienation can be inverted through active disruption of the functionalist mathematical algorithms and this inversion occurs in the space of representation—the living practice of players.

THE GROTESQUE VIRTUAL BODY

Lefebvre’s spatial analysis is a process of practice, or “lived experiences” that situates the body in the space (Nunes, 2006, p.xxv). At the centre of his theory, human beings are “in their corporeality and sensuousness, with their sensitivity and imagination, their thinking and their ideologies; human beings who enter into relationships with each other through their activity and practice” (p.29). Thus it is possible to situate the avatar body in the gamespace. Chess (2005) describes the effect of the management of the avatar body on players of *Grand Theft Auto*: “this use of discipline where players must memorize and master game controls for each game essentially produces Foucault’s ‘docile bodies’” (p.9). In other words, through repetitive exercises, gamers master the control system with speed and dexterity; at the time, the operator’s subjectivity is completely submitted to machine.

In *Sleeping Dogs*, we can observe similar patterns of disciplinary complex. Initially the player is only an apprentice of the avatar. As the game progresses, the player builds up skills through constant exercises and purchases of upgrades. Furthermore, players are responsible for a simulated body that needs exercise (in the form of Kung Fu), food, clothing and even defecation. The game employs a quantified face point system that can be gained from quests and the level of your “face” determines what outfits and accessories the avatar can wear. High face level unlocks luxurious suits, designer sunglasses and leather shoes; low face level characters are only eligible for T-shirts, jeans and snickers. Expensively clothed avatar can also automatically “captivate” females at nightclubs (otherwise, no one will even notice you are dancing). However, players are not necessarily subsumed to algorithmic discipline of the body. As I have shown, the avatar body satirically imitates the social pressures originated from the obsession over superficial appearances and materialism deeply rooted in Hong Kong city life. In the course of everyday life in the gameworld, the avatar becomes “a caricature through players’ interpretative intervention” (Miller, 2008, p.273). Through this body, players participate in a series of performances of masculinity, racial stereotypes and metropolitan lifestyle.

The body seeks “naked immediacy of experience as it is felt from within the utmost particularities of a specific life” (Bakhtin, 1993, p.10). The shocking performance in language and images mobilises the inhabitants to reflect upon their functionalised metropolitan daily life and non-reflective mundaneness. For instance, one of the most discussed portions of the *Sleeping Dogs* is the incorporation of Cantonese oral traditions in the game⁵.

Many local players were originally excited about the Cantonese speaking aspect, particularly the profanity. The ambience and the soundtracks were at the centre of the discussion: celebrity voice acting, the surrounding environment, the street noise, the engine, random conversations on the street, traffic lights, convenience stores, radios and vociferous citygoers. The game embeds a special feature: when the avatar physically contacts ordinary pedestrians or drivers on the streets either by car or direct body contact, they will respond in Cantonese offensive swearing. In order to document these various profanities and exhaust all the possibilities recorded in the game, some went so far to spend many hours strolling in the city and harassing random (NPC) pedestrians⁶. This episode entails a perfect example of “playful constructive behaviour” (Debord 1958 cited in Elias 2010, p.844) in an urban walking journey.

This virtual body does constitute desires of torturing, beating and cursing and other abusive behaviours. However, we cannot interpret these practices as mindless violence or simply utter profanities but contextualise it. The depictions of urban spaces can function as neutral zones in which to manifest more pervasive urban anxieties around lived situations (Murray 2013). The virtual Hong Kong is the playground to re-experience the “real” differently; evasion of boundaries makes it possible to experiment safely extremely disorienting/ disturbing aspects of modern life. The performative dimensions of these complex worlds provide sites for open-ended explorations the societies they mirror. In the virtual Hong Kong, the disdainful is the everyday; taboos may still be in force whereas transgression is the main motivation of the game. Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter (2009) opposes this kind “satires” that “takes pleasures in the powerlessness and distress of men” (p.182). However, I argue this playful cynicism can be analytical: in the course of discussion on the game, players also express their concerns about the lack of space and the ubiquitous disciplines in hyper-urbanised Hong Kong. After all, this is not same as the open confrontation against alienated spatiality as exemplified by the “Star Pier Saga”⁷ (Ng et al, 2010). At least, we realise that any fight against the dominant space originates from the mundane “representational space”, the living practices, which, in the case of this study, improvisation and experimentation of gameplay in the virtual space.

5. Link to the original post <http://www.uwants.com/viewthread.php?tid=15182197>

6. See the video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVHjCAPf5Ns>

CONCLUSION: UNREALITY OF HONG KONG

Xu Xi states in the *Unwalled City*, “the perceived unreality of Hong Kong... (is) heightened by the stock constituents of drugs, oriental sex, and political intrigues, and triads” (p.293). Cultural productions such as cinema have consistently contributed to construct a specialised spectacle of Hong Kong—its violent, chaotic and mysterious legend. This constructed spectacle has now become common perception of visitors of Hong Kong. There is an interesting juxtaposition of the virtual and the real at work in the production of this spectacle. In 2012, Japanese company Square Enix saved United Front Games from its development hell and revamped the original *True Crime* series into a brand new title *Sleeping Dogs*. In 2001, Sega AM2 was in charge of the production of *Shenmue II*, which featured the Walled Kowloon City. In fact, most of remaining visual images of Walled Kowloon City and a map of the interior were documented by a Japanese survey team before its demise in 1994.

Recently, an arcade game centre “digital Kowloon Walled City” was built in Kawasaki to commemorate the dying images of the city. Throughout these instances, one can get a glimpse of the persistent interests and efforts from the Japanese cultural industry in curating and preserving, at least in a digital form, the city of Hong Kong. However, the bizarre reality is that while triad activity, street violence, drug dealing have been mostly absent after the hand-over in 1997, urban anxieties are further intensified and the future appears obscure and uncertain for many Hong Kongers. The city is no longer run by triads and colonists, as depicted in the classic Hong Kong triad movies and *Sleeping Dogs*, but corporate monopolists who manage virtually every aspect of the operations of the city.

The virtual Hong Kong in *Sleeping Dogs* and the level of urban violence may look unrealistic but economic turbulence and political violence take place in reality on a regular basis (Law, 2002). The virtual does not accurately mirror the real but it is simplified and stylised caricature: everything fits into the algorithmic structure. The argument is no longer that games are simulacra but precisely the opposite: “games are the real, emptied of all reality, existing in a permanent state of anticipation”. (Galloway, 2007, p.388). Perhaps the point is that games are “not failed representations of the world, but the reverse” (Wark, 2007, p.22). Games are not representations of the real world but allegories of the real. Our everyday life is an imperfect vision of the gamespace. “While digital games lack complexity, everyday life lacks the consistency, fairness and coherence of digital games” (Apperley, 2010, p.22). The virtual thus can provoke a critique of the “unreality” of everyday life.

Gaming subculture provides critical insights into the contemporary landscape of subcultures. Videogame as a medium should be no longer situated in the dichotomy of apocalyptic versus redemptive debate. While acknowledging much of philosophical speculation of videogames as mechanism of control or discipline or “representation of space”, we should not be paranoid about a seemingly pessimistic picture; instead, I argue we should look at players’

7. In November 2006, there was a series of massive protests, occupations and violent confrontations against the police in defense of the 48-year-old Star Ferry Pier, which was under imminent threats of being demolished. The pier was considered as an important site of the local folk memories.

lived and mundane practice in the virtual space and their circulated stories about the sense of urban space, spontaneous subjectivities, and grassroots folk culture. If there is to be any real changes, an alternative algorithm of play has to emerge, which requires the central actors, the players, to change. As Miller (2008b, p. 266) indicated, “this gameworld is meaningful place, something with the power to gather lives and things, each with its own space and time, into one arena of common engagement”.

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