

From *Detention* to *Devotion*: Historical Horror and Gaming Politics in Taiwan¹

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Abstract

This article provides a theoretical review of Detention (Fanxiao 返校) and Devotion (Huanyuan 還願) by Red Candle Games.² The international recognition received by these two horror video games is unprecedented in the history of Taiwan. The first part of the article surveys the design and production of the two horror-themed games, both set in the Martial Law period of the island-state. While Detention combines individual and collective memories of the White Terror and the dreadful atrocities committed by the Kuomintang (KMT) government during the 1960s, Devotion is centred on the parent-child relationship and religious frenzy on the island in the early 1980s, with a focus on a small Taiwanese family. Both games insightfully capture the representation of horror in response to socio-political turmoil and cult culture in the specific historical contexts of the local community. In the second part, the article addresses the issue of how the two video games subtly speak to local and cross-Strait politics via the horror genre. Through a Sinophone lens, this article brings into focus the complex representation of gaming politics and examines how Red Candle Games repackages and revitalizes the horror genre in the videoludic world.

Keywords: *Detention*, *Devotion*, horror video game, gaming politics, Taiwan, White Terror, Martial Law

Introduction

Independently developed by Red Candle Games, *Detention* and *Devotion* have earned critical acclaim and accolades through the rendition of historical horror since they were released in 2017 and 2019 respectively. While *Detention* offers a powerful political critique of the Kuomintang (KMT) in the past and present by urging the youth of Taiwan to revisit and remember historical traumas of the White Terror in the 1960s, *Devotion* focuses on how a small Taiwanese family is devastated by the father's blind belief in a cult religion in 1980s Taiwan. Red Candle Games' recent success is reminiscent of the bygone glory of Taiwan's video game industry. In the late 1980s and the 1990s, a great number of locally developed games hit the Taiwanese market. Many of these games were based on Chinese history and fantasy. Notable examples include *Shenzhou ba jian* 神州八劍 (*Eight Swords of China*; 1990), *Chu Han zhi zheng* 楚漢之爭 (*The Chu-Han Contention*; 1990), *Xuan Yuan jian* 軒轅劍 (*Xuan-Yuan Sword*; 1990), *San guo yanyi* 三國演義 (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*; 1991),³ *Xiake yingxiong zhuan* 俠客英雄傳 (*The Legend of Chinese Chivalrous Knights and Heroes*; 1991), *Sui Tang qun*

¹ I am deeply indebted to the two anonymous reviewers and the editors of *BJoCS* for their insightful comments and suggestions.

² While *Detention* runs on PC, macOS, iOS, and Linux, *Devotion* is only playable on PC and macOS.

³ This refers to the video game developed by Taiwanese company Soft-World, not the world-famous video game series with the same title developed by Japan's Koei.

xiong zhuan 隋唐群雄傳 (*Heroes in Sui and Tang Dynasties*; 1992), *Chunqiu zheng ba zhuan* 春秋爭霸傳 (*The Spring and Autumn period and the Supremacy*; 1992), *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策 (*Strategies of the Warring States*; 1993), *Xiaobao jianghu* 笑傲江湖 (*The Smiling, Proud Wanderer*; 1993), *Feng shen bang* 封神榜 (*The Creation of the Gods*; 1994), and *Xiyou ji* 西遊記 (*Journey to the West*; 1994). Taiwan's video game industry made even bigger waves with the 1995 release of *Xianjian qixia zhuan* 仙劍奇俠傳 (*The Legend of Sword and Fairy/Chinese Paladin*), which initiated the long-standing game series alongside its associated adaptations into TV series, comic books, novels, and other forms in China. The abovementioned games were accompanied by hundreds of video games developed and distributed by local companies in the golden era. As Ken Cheng observes, the production of local games happened alongside the localisation of foreign games in Taiwan in reaction to the widespread popularity of PC games before 2000, thus helping Taiwan earn “third place in the world” (*shijie disan* 世界第三) in terms of the annual output value of its games market from 1996 to 1998 (Cheng, 2013). Unfortunately, in recent years Taiwan has been falling behind when it comes to video game development and output value in the global market.

Thanks to the phenomenal success of *Detention* and *Devotion*, Red Candle Games has been standing tall as an independent video game developer in the videoludic arena of Taiwan. It is worthy of note that the previous production of Chinese-bound video games in Taiwan points to a collective emotional link with Chinese cultural heritage in the 1990s. Unlike their forerunners from previous decades, *Detention* and *Devotion* are known to players and critics for their close engagement with Taiwan's unique history and culture. Red Candle Games' vision and ambition have successfully added diversity and depth to Taiwan's local video game industry.

Detention, Red Candle Games' debut release, has become the most successful intellectual property (IP) in the history of video games in Taiwan. Released in 2017, *Detention* was adapted into a feature film in 2019 and a TV series in 2020. The film version of *Detention* was nominated at the Golden Horse Awards in twelve categories and received five awards in the end. Outside of Taiwan, the worldwide attention received by these two games is also unprecedented. In addition to the enthusiastic support from gamers around the world, *Detention* and *Devotion* are the first two video games to be added to the Chinese collection of the prestigious Harvard-Yenching Library. In response to the exciting news, the Red Candle Games team expressed their appreciation on Facebook: “While we truly appreciate the recognition, we have also taken this opportunity to rethink the possibilities that our games could achieve” (Red Candle Games, cited in Carpenter, 2020b). Following this self-reflection, this article aims to emphasise the digital representation of the paranormal in *Detention* and *Devotion* and their connection with ideologically constructed realities. Specifically, these two video games can be further examined in light of historical horror and gaming politics. Both games lead players to rethink the potential dangers drawn from a blind dedication to alleged authorities, be it the KMT regime or any Taiwanese cult religion. In this sense, these two games not only reflect a specific context of historical trauma, but also reproduce Taiwanese history via interactive narratives and first-person subjective involvement in the game world through the avatars of the main characters. Red Candle Games' ground-breaking production has greatly impacted the Taiwanese video game industry as a whole with respect to the changing political environment of the island-state in recent years.

Historical Horror in *Detention* and *Devotion*: A Theoretical Review

It is important to emphasise that *Detention* and *Devotion* straddle the two genres of historical narrative and horror in the video gaming world. Currently popular historical game series include *Civilization*, *Assassin's Creed*, and *Dynasty Warriors*. These historical games cater to different interests and genres, such as turn-based strategy, action-adventure, and fighting. While players of *Civilization* are tasked with developing a civilisation of their choice to compete against others from prehistory to the future, players of *Assassin's Creed* can freely explore an open world across various historical timelines. In *Dynasty Warriors*, gamers are able to choose from dozens of playable fighters/characters and battlefields around the Three Kingdoms period of premodern China. One can easily tell that *Civilization*, *Assassin's Creed*, and *Dynasty Warriors* are centred on wild fantasies set within historical settings. When it comes to horror games, representative titles include the *Resident Evil* series, *The Evil Within*, and *Outlast*. These games share the same theme of survival in brutal and gruesome conditions.

Compared with the historical and horror games listed above, *Detention* and *Devotion* showcase an innovative design in leading gamers to review the socio-political turmoil of Taiwan in the second half of the twentieth century, thus parting ways with previously dominant China-centric fantasies. The basic mechanism of both *Detention* and *Devotion* is centred around puzzles and adventures located in and around a series of gruesome scenarios. These two games contain no physical combat, but focus instead on how to escape from demonic creatures and/or spectral memories. The compelling storyline of each game is the focal point that pushes players forward. Driven by the narrative, players are guided to piece together all the clues, including flashbacks scattered in various cut-scenes to unravel mysteries and confront the final dreadful truth. In terms of gameplay, players are guided to develop an emotional connection with and experience the feelings of the major characters in both games. This game mechanism helps players remain engaged and enthralled, while exploring the uncharted depths of ghostly encounters and human sentiments. More importantly, these two video games aptly engage with such issues as the personal and collective trauma of Taiwanese subjects via the form of horror. Thanks to Red Candle Games, the mix of history and horror has created a potent hybrid, now proven to be successful in the Taiwanese video game market and beyond. Being both local and boundary-crossing simultaneously, *Detention* and *Devotion* bring together gamers across generations and nations to experience the historical horror of Taiwan during its period of Martial Law (1949-1987).

The topic of historical horror can be widely observed in world literature and film in relation to the wounded landscape and ethnoscape of a nation or community. As Linnie Blake brilliantly argues while commenting on the intersection of Trauma Studies and horror film criticism: "[T]he generic and sub-generic conventions of horror allow for a decoding of traumatic memories already encoded within the cultural, social, psychic and political life of the nation's inhabitants by shocking historical events" (Blake, 2008: 5). Blake's statement further points to how dissenting subjects, though constantly stifled and subdued, can oppose and contest the political hegemony of a fractured and traumatised nation through the cinematic representation of horror. In the arena of Taiwan literature and cinema, historical horror also plays a pivotal role in representing and restoring the historical trauma drawn from the White Terror. Notable White Terror-themed films include *Beiqing chengshi* 悲情城市 (*A City of Sadness*; 1989), *Guling jie shaonian sharen shijian* 牯嶺街少年殺人事件 (*A Brighter Summer*

Day; 1991), *Chaoji daguomin* 超級大國民 (*Super Citizen Ko*; 1994), and *Haonan haonü* 好男好女 (*Good Men, Good Women*; 1995). There are even more literary works on the topic, such as “Lai Suo” 賴索 (Lai Suo; 1979) by Huang Fan 黃凡, “Yueyin” 月印 (Moon Seal; 1984) by Guo Songfen 郭松棻, “Shan lu” 山路 (The Mountain Road; 1984) by Chen Yingzhen 陳映真, and “Taobing erge” 逃兵二哥 (My Second Elder Brother as a Deserter; 1991) by Wu He 舞鶴. As observed, historical horror has long been a predominant shared theme in the above titles and more. What makes *Detention* and *Devotion* outstanding is Red Candle Games’ scrupulous attention to design in recreating the virtual space of historical horror in a spectral light. Through both video games, horror and terror are turned into a perfect duo in the Taiwanese context.

To further unpack how the mechanism of historical horror operates in *Detention* and *Devotion*, this section explores the players’ gaming experience in response to individual and collective traumas and the effects of horror. To maximise the experience of immersion, most gameplay requires each player’s undivided attention in interacting with in-game characters and/or solving problems within the game. A historical video game further extends its own content in dialogue with the outside world, as seen in the other genres of games. While taking into account the historical components embedded in video games, players may be intrigued by the potential representation, if not reconstruction, of history through gaming. In his analysis of *Civilization* and *Brothers in Arms*, Adam Chapman argues that “the aim of the developers of historical videogames [...] is to create history”, in opposition to “historical narrative constructed and received in book form, which is often problematically understood as the only form capable of producing ‘proper’ history” (Chapman, 2012). This critical argument helps to challenge the privileged status of book form and thus brings into focus the potentiality of video games in regard to historical realities. Chapman’s take is further echoed by Erik Champion’s observation as follows:

[G]aming can touch on and investigate the wider spectrum of issues and research questions in the humanities that are relevant both to scholars and to the general public. That said, I am not convinced that the ideological aspects of computer games have been fully developed, and these issues need further clarification in order for us to grasp the value, promise and problematic natures of game-based learning applied to interactive history and digital heritage. (Champion, 2015: 18)

In this regard, players are given the opportunity of “becoming player-historians, experiencing freedom to engage in historical practices and yet doing so in a structured story space” (Chapman, 2016: 232). Jeremiah McCall puts it like this: “[A]ll historical games present the past in terms of player agents with roles and goals that are contextualized within a virtual gameworld whose features enable and constrain player action” (McCall, 2020). There is indeed a profound connection between players and history within and beyond the game being played, thereby elevating the status of historical video games in response to the development of digital humanities. The interactive functions of video gaming are often highlighted in ongoing discussions in the academic world. According to Trent Hergenrader, it is the “aspect of interactivity that distinguishes games as a unique medium,” and “games can and should be critiqued both at the level of language as well as for their representations of people, places and things,” thus making each game a “multivalent text capable of sustaining many different types of readings” (Tergenrader, 2016: 30-31). The interactivity realised in gameplay is thus twofold, taking place within the game and beyond because the outcome of the virtual historical learning

from the gameplay would be extended when gamers return to the actual world. This special characteristic of video gaming can be applied to games' identity as a historical medium. As Jeremiah McCall points out, "[A]ll historical games present the past in terms of player agents with roles and goals that are contextualized within a virtual gameworld whose features enable and constrain player action" (McCall, 2020). "[H]istorical games," McCall continues, "are increasingly being studied as history, as media communicating selected aspects of the past. To appreciate games in this way requires a deeper understanding of the medium of historical games and how they portray and represent the past" (2020). By playing *Detention* and *Devotion*, gamers are given the opportunity to re-imagine and re-connect with the historical past of Taiwan while contemplating the political realities of the present time.

Horror and Politics in *Detention*

While carrying historical weight, both *Detention* and *Devotion* rely heavily on psychological horror, rather than blood and gore, and create heightened reactions of fear and disgust in their players within a paranormal framework. Under the developers' careful design, these two games win gamers over through an unusual immersive experience with horror, as the contemporary historical narratives of postwar Taiwan are contested and rewritten. *Detention* has attracted a large gamership and received very positive reviews far and wide. Set in the 1960s, the game unfolds from a first-person perspective and step by step reveals the plight of Taiwanese subjects under the rule of the KMT government in the Martial Law period. Inspired by literary works like George Orwell's *1984*, Yao Shun-Ting, the creator of *Detention*, "wanted to create a dystopian game which was particularly Taiwanese" (Yao, 2017b). Yao has explained how "the fear of religious or political persecution during that period was used as a subtext to the gameplay" (Yao, cited in Chin, 2017). The horror game follows the paranormal journey of a schoolgirl named Fang Ray Shin, who roams through gloomy scenes in search of an escape from a nightmarish school. The inclusion of Taiwanese folk beliefs intriguingly speaks to the complex cultural phenomena of the local community. The development team added such religious elements as the Shrine (save point in the game), the Temple of Justice Cheng Huang, poe divination (Yin-Yang Crescent Moon Blocks), and the food offerings for "the lingered," the name for the ghosts that wander around the campus and attack Fang to *Detention* (Yao, 2017a). The graphic scenes of the dead are intensified by the appearance of the long-haired Lantern Spectre which causes the instant death of Fang upon direct contact in the game. The supernatural and historical features of the game are grounded in "magical realism" (*mohuan xieshi* 魔幻寫實) and "thrilling daily routines" (*jingsu richang* 驚悚日常) (Kuo, 2017). The supernatural horror in *Detention* is further complicated by the political atmosphere of authoritarianism, thus enabling the game to channel individual and collective unease in the face of life-threatening conditions.

As the game advances with Fang Ray Shin's discovery of clues and recovery of her lost memories, gamers are granted access to the political atrocities imposed on Taiwanese people in light of the White Terror under Martial Law, a time notorious for the KMT's ruthless persecution of dissidents and political surveillance of all islanders. It turns out that Fang is a loitering ghost trapped in the limbo of guilt and shame. When Fang was alive, she had fallen in love with her teacher, Mr Chang Ming Hui, who had co-founded an underground book club with Ms Yin Tsui Han for daring young minds at school. After mistaking Ms Yin for Mr Chang's new lover, Fang reported the illegal club to the authorities, thus leading to the interrogation and execution of Mr Chang and other club members. The only two survivors are

Ms Yin, who leaves Taiwan and lives in exile for half a century, and Wei Chung Ting, who is sentenced to 15 years in prison after he pleads guilty to affiliation with Communist radicals and reading materials banned by the government. Disillusioned following her lover's death, Fang jumps off the rooftop from a school building to end her life, but her soul lingers in an endless cycle. This then forms the main gameplay of *Detention*.

The historical horror represented in *Detention* has inspired heated discussions on gaming politics in Taiwan. The political message of the game is doubly confirmed when Fang receives a mysterious phone call: "Miss Fang, your country appreciates your assistance" (*Detention*, 2017). It is a thought-provoking line that reckons with the suffocating social environment of the time wherein home and school are made into an extension of the authoritarian regime. Under these circumstances, Fang can also be identified as a victim of historical tragedy at a higher level, as she has become an accomplice of a political monster that denies everyone of their basic human rights, such as freedom of speech. This is why Fang is troubled by the following questions in the game: "Have you forgotten...? Or do you not want to remember?" and "Forgotten? Or just too afraid to remember???" (*Detention*, 2017). Fang's agonising pain is appropriately demonstrated in her own words:

Again I'm left in abject solitude.
 In a house that I call home.
 In a space that I call school.
 A walking corpse
 whose mind's without,
 A sense of loss
 that's drowned with doubt. (*Detention*, 2017)

On a larger scale, Fang's individual trauma is intimately connected to a striking picture of the taboos around historical trauma experienced by older generations of Taiwanese people. As Ashley Oh argues, "The historical context is what makes *Detention* so haunting — these are stories and memories that could've come from anyone in the White Terror era" (Oh, 2018). Viewed from a modern angle, Fang is a lost soul who has been denied access to the rising awareness of localism and the changing political culture of the island-state in the post-Martial Law era. Only through gamers' active play can Fang be liberated from the limbo of suffering. To trigger the so-called 'good ending' of the game, players have to make sensible choices on behalf of Fang when prompted by Fang's shadow or alter-ego. "Losing myself" is the right answer to the multiple choice question, "What do you fear the most?" Then Fang needs to choose "to escape" and "to take hold of your destiny" respectively in order to escape from her never-ending misery (*Detention*, 2017). In doing so, the ghost of Fang will be able to set herself free and go on to meet the middle-aged Wei Chung Ting at school, an encounter that happens in the post-Martial Law present.

Although Wei and Fang respectively occupy the two opposite ends of the male/female and alive/dead spectrums, both finally embrace their long-awaited freedom in post-Martial Law Taiwan. The majority of gamers who play *Detention* are from the younger generations of the local Taiwanese community, and their engagement with the game creates a profound mix of the historical past, the virtual gameworld, and present-day reality. Importantly, each individual

player forms an overlap with the I-subject in the game. Daniel Vella has provided an illuminating account of this topic: “the subjective ‘I-in-the-gameworld’” represents “the ‘I’ to whom the player ascribes experiences of the gameworld and actions within the gameworld” (2016: 3). It would be problematic to assume the player’s spontaneous identification with the ludic subject in the game because the I-as-the-player and the I-in-the-gameworld are not equivalent and belong to two diverse realities. Nevertheless, the player and the I-subject in the game do not negate but rather complement each other in completing their ultimate mission, as observed in the gameplay of *Detention*. Adapting oneself to the I-subject in the game is the only way to escape the nightmarish loop and come to terms with the past, moving towards a strong sense of closure. It is a well-designed cognitive journey for players of *Detention*. While walking Fang Ray Shin through mysteries, gamers of *Detention* are simultaneously tasked with recovering the haunting past and participating in the process of historical learning connected to the White Terror. As indicated in Stefano Gualeni and Daniel Vella’s statement on subjectivities in digital gameworlds, “users must be situated as subjects” so as to “experience a digital environment,” through which “the emergence of a virtual world into one’s consciousness” is made possible (Gualeni & Vella, 2020: 4). Gualeni and Vella illustrate how players can be “situated” in the digital environment and co-ordinate a two-way traffic between the actual and virtual worlds. In this sense, the in-game effects and historically striking messages from *Detention* are also brought back to the actual world by players. As *Detention* virtually projects “the intense interpersonal relationship and social atmosphere” (緊迫的人際關係與社會氛圍) of Taiwan under Martial Law, players across ages are thus given the agency to actively participate in troubling historical events and even change the fate of the leading character in the game (Hsiao, 2020: 22). Therefore, *Detention* as a historical horror game undoubtedly helps bring to the surface the forgotten trauma of the White Terror and shape the public perception of the taboo past in a profound way.

In addition to the backwards-looking historical setting of *Detention*, it can also be argued that its success in the local community lies partly in its link to the current politics of the island-state. While spectralising the haunting past of the White Terror period, *Detention* presents an extended critique of the KMT of our time. According to Ketty Chen, “the KMT was successful in dominating and assimilating the civil society of Taiwan to the Party’s Chinese origin by methods of (1) coercion, (2) education, (3) restructuring the social status and (4) creating of a new ‘pro-Chinese’ identity for the indigenous population” (Chen, Ketty, 2008: 188). Politically savvy, *Detention* transforms the KMT’s methods into unsettling spectralities as players embark on a supernatural journey to promote an anti-authoritarian rhetoric via vigorous gameplay. For instance, Instructor Bai’s identity as someone serving the KMT regime in *Detention* is provocatively suggested by his physical appearance as a doppelgänger of Ma Ying-jeou, former President of the Republic of China (2008–2016) and iconic leader of the KMT. This deliberate design encourages local gamers to rethink the heavy political baggage carried by the KMT in the twenty-first century. As Alison Brysk astutely observes,

The history of authoritarian abuses was incorporated in Taiwan’s public education and an official annual state commemoration established on February 28th—the date of the massacre that marked the opening salvo of decades of dictatorship. In tandem, civic organizations have established their own memorial and cultural projects, with continuing traction among Taiwan’s youth a full generation past the transition. (Brysk, 2020: 11)

Brysk continues with a recognition of the popularity of *Detention*, which functions as “graphic novel-like simulation” (2020: 11). Although Brysk does not elaborate on the historical and political fabric of the video game, the hidden messages about the ghastly realities of life and death within and beyond *Detention* can be recovered in the contemporary era. Since 2016, President Tsai Ing-wen has led the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), winning two consecutive presidential elections in Taiwan. With the rise of local consciousness, the DPP’s campaign has had a massive impact on the political environment of Taiwan, while the KMT’s share of media coverage has decreased courtesy of its continued partnership with Mainland China in recent years. Under President Tsai’s leadership, many people believe that Taiwan has officially entered a critical stage of the transitional justice process, that goes “beyond the politics of blame and toward reconciliation” and thus leads to “the end of fear” (Hartnett, Dodge & Keränen, 2020: 252). It is crucial to consider that *Detention* echoes the rampant political movement celebrated by the ruling party, thereby making authoritarianism “the real monster” and corresponding with “stages of transitional justice” (Kao, 2019). From this perspective, *Detention* can be regarded as “a far-reaching political allegory of contemporary Taiwan” that helps re-engage with both individual and historical traumas about the White Terror (Wu Chia-rong, 2021: 83). Through an attentive walkthrough of *Detention*, gamers can investigate the discomfiting aspect of the White Terror as a once-taboo subject and the lingering pain it has created in the subsequent decades. It offers a new way for gamers to detox from a traumatising past through active and interactive role-play in video gaming.

From *Detention* to *Devotion*

Two years after the release of *Detention*, Red Candle Games’ second product, *Devotion*, was also made available on Steam, which is a global platform for digital video game distribution created by Valve. Following the success of *Detention*, the development team instilled in *Devotion* local elements with a focus on cult-like belief systems in Taiwan. In the Taiwanese context, “devotion” (*huanyuan* 還願) generally refers to a religious practice in which devotees express deep gratitude to Taoist and Buddhist divinities that have provided guidance and/or granted wishes. Like *Detention*, *Devotion* is set during the Martial Law period, but its gameplay is centred around a series of tragic incidents in the lives of a small Taiwanese family, including the father Du Feng Yu, the mother Gong Li Fang, and their young daughter Du Mei Shin. Ditching the 2D design and the White Terror narrative observed in *Detention*, *Devotion* provides the simulated first-person perspective of Mr Du, who takes its players on a disheartening journey that navigates through an outdated, dark apartment building in Taipei. By controlling Mr Du, gamers can shuffle between different haunting scenes to collect information to solve problems in order to reach the game’s final revelation. Little by little, players piece together the perplexing puzzle about the tragedy of the Du family. Mr Du and Mrs Du got married at the peak of their careers. While Mr Du was an award-winning screenwriter, Mrs Du was a superstar pop singer and actress. In response to the socio-cultural expectations of Taiwan, Mrs Du left show business behind to be a full-time housewife and mother of a young girl. Unfortunately, Mr Du’s career went downhill over time. Despite his family’s financial crisis, Mr Du squanders money on social gatherings and fancy products. Worse still, Mr Du becomes devoted to a cult religion that leads to the downfall of the entire family. To support the family, Mrs Du decides to resume her career in entertainment, which causes even more heated bickering with her husband.

As the gap between Mr Du and Mrs Du widens, they still share the same vision in training and developing their beloved daughter into a young star, just like her mother had been. In the game, the television of the Du residence plays video clips showing Mei Shin's participation in a singing competition entitled "The Rainbow Star Stage" (*Qicai xing wutai* 七彩星舞台). The competition resembles Five Lights Award, which was an extremely popular show which aired in Taiwan for thirty-three years from 1965 to 1998. Additionally, the song performed by Mei Shin is called "Lady of the Pier". This is actually an original song produced for the game but it sounds like Taiwan pop music of the 1970s and 1980s. Unfortunately, Mei Shin repeatedly loses her singing competitions and is simultaneously distressed by her parents' imploding marriage. Gradually, Mei Shin develops breathing difficulties, but the medical report issued by the doctor recommends that Mei Shin be referred to the psychiatric department. Mr Du refuses to accept the diagnosis of Mei Shin's mental problems and thus resorts to praying to Cigu Guanyin (慈孤觀音), a fictional bodhisattva from the cult religion in the game. In order to save his daughter from being possessed by evil spirits and trapped in the cycle of karma, Mr Du follows Mentor Heuh's advice to perform the rite of *guanluoyin* (觀落陰), translated in the game as "Guan Ling Rite and Spiritual Linking" (*Detention*, 2017).⁴ The rite enables Mr Du to enter the underworld and make a deal with the divinity (Chiang, 2019). The psychological horror in the game is intensified at this point in the game, as players control the I-subject Mr Du in gouging out his eyes, pulling out his tongue, and cutting open his hand for blood sacrifice. Mr Du's blind devotion to Cigu Guanyin does not bring peace and love back to the family; instead, it results in the couple's separation and finally takes the life of the poor little girl. *Devotion* provides a first-person angle and manual control mechanism for its players, not only to witness but also to virtually experience an extreme horror that arouses disgust and exploits fear. In terms of the ludic experience, *Devotion* reaches high levels of "engrossment" and "empathy" that are made possible through players' "emotional investment" and "attachment to the game" (Hook, 2015: 317). It is unsettling for most players, if not all, to walk a path of gradual downfall as Mr Du and directly cause the very unfortunate death of his daughter.

Compared with the White Terror-themed *Detention*, *Devotion* deals with the issues of historical horror and gaming politics in a more subtle way. At face value, the main setting of *Devotion* fixates on the religious frenzy that occurred in Taiwan as the island was approaching the lifting of the Martial Law. However, the political message hidden behind the storyline of the video game has fuelled raging controversies over cross-Strait relations. On 19 February 2019, *Devotion* was released to positive reviews. Yet just two days later, the video game was accused of featuring a Taoist charm that intentionally mocks Chinese President Xi Jinping. It was discovered that the charm combined two written parts: "Xi Jinping Winnie the Pooh" (*Xi Jinping xiao xiong Weini* 習近平小熊維尼) in Chinese cursive writing and "Ni ma ba qi" (呢嘛叭唎) in Chinese, which sounds like "Your mom is an idiot" in Taiwanese dialect. Cultural memes featuring Xi and Pooh went viral on Chinese social media back in 2013, but this comical parallel has been censored by the Chinese government for years, probably because Pooh self-describes as a "bear of very little brain" (AFP, 2017). As Nick Aspinwall critically comments, "Xi is notoriously sensitive to memes highlighting his likeness to the cartoon bear" (Aspinwall, 2020). Even though this hidden Easter egg may appear to be a darkly humorous joke in the

⁴ The video game provides the definition of *guanluoyin* as follows: "The guan ling rite is a ritual that has been passed down for centuries. With the guidance of a spirit medium, it is possible to chant an incantation and enter the spirit realm."

eyes of Taiwanese players, from the perspective of the Chinese authorities it crossed the line and *Devotion* was thereby labelled a “Taiwanese independence game” (*Taipei Times*, 2019a). This political contention was further escalated after Red Candle Games’ Chinese sponsor Winking Entertainment decided to terminate their partnership with the developer (Wu, Kuan-hui, 2019). In the official apology on its Facebook page, Red Candle Games claims that the charm was a mistaken artistic design and that the team has removed it from the latest update of the game. However, this response was far from satisfying to Chinese netizens, who observed that *Devotion*’s political agenda is also suggested by its inclusion of thought-provoking news headlines, such as “Baozi sentenced for three years or above in prison or death penalty” (包子被判三年以上最高死刑) and “School child assaulted. Baozi arrested. The suspect self-identified as lolicon” (襲擊小學童 包子被逮捕 犯人自稱蘿莉控) (Chiang, 2019). These fictional news headlines have undoubtedly intensified the political issue encountered by Red Candle Games. On Chinese social media, President Xi is often nicknamed Baozi (包子; steamed buns),⁵ but this nickname has been censored as with the meme of Xi and Winnie the Pooh (Chen Kuan, 2017). In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping was reported as having had to wait in line to buy baozi, or steamed buns, himself. This incident was officially interpreted as a down-to-earth act to shape his image in a positive light. However, the use of Xi Baozi in the Chinese social network has been censored due to some intentional mockery. In 2017, a Chinese netizen named Wang Jiangfeng addressed Xi as Xi Baozi (Steamed Bun Xi) on WeChat and QQ and was subsequently sentenced to two years in prison. Moreover, the photo of ‘Baozi’ in the in-game newspaper strongly resembles a younger version of Xi, which further alludes to the mockery of the highest political leader of China and the Chinese Communist Party he represents.

In response to the harsh criticism of *Devotion* from Chinese players, Red Candle Games made an English-language statement on Facebook: “Due to technical issues that cause unexpected crashes and among other reasons, we are pulling *Devotion* off from Steam store to have another complete QA [quality assurance] check” (Red Candle Games, cited in *Taipei Times*, 2019c). It was a hard decision for the Taiwanese video game developer to take given that Steam is an industry-leading platform for video game digital distribution. The predicament faced by Red Candle Games is the exact projection of the political situation endured by Taiwan for decades. While the PRC disapproves of any attempts to promote Taiwan’s independence, the DPP is keenly supportive of any endeavours to underscore local elements in opposition to the overarching China-centric discourse. A notable example was reported by *Taipei Times* regarding the strong support of “Taiwanese-made video games” and “freedom of creation” by Taiwan’s then-Vice Premier Chen Chi-mai 陳其邁 (*Taipei Times*, 2019a). The tug-of-war between the two political entities was even instantiated in the commentary on Taiwan’s different attitude towards freedom of speech. In a news article published right after the *Devotion* incident erupted, *Taipei Times* distinguished the Taiwanese President from the Chinese President through a comparable case of political mockery in Taiwan:

Earlier, in Taiwan, a controversy erupted over an English-language exam designed by a teacher at National Chiayi Senior High School asking students to answer a question about a “President Tsai-englishit” doing “silly” things. While the incident has stirred up public debate over whether it was appropriate, President Tsai Ing-

⁵ Baozi is also the nickname of Henry Wang, one of the co-founders of Red Candle Games (Wang n.d.).

wen (蔡英文) has said that she does not mind, with Presidential Office spokesman Sidney Lin (林鶴明) adding that the school and the teacher have nothing to worry about.

The reactions from people in Taiwan and China show their distinctive differences. (*Taipei Times*, 2019b)

By highlighting how expressions like “Xi Baozi” and “Tsai-engli-shit” can be handled in strikingly different ways, this news passage is a typical example of media coverage that demonstrates the political and ideological divide between China and Taiwan. With the official support of Taiwan, Red Candle Games has been seeking collaborations with alternative platforms to better distribute *Devotion* to overseas players. In 2020, Red Candle Games made a public announcement that *Devotion* had found a new home on GOG, another well-known digital distribution platform for video games and films. Nevertheless, Red Candle Games’ plan to re-release the game was scrapped by GOG in hours under the unrelenting pressure from China (Carpenter, 2020a). As of today, *Devotion* is only available for download on the official website of Red Candle Games.

Reviewing Gaming Politics in *Detention* and *Devotion*

Reviewing *Detention* and *Devotion*, one may find gaming politics an essential topic in addition to historical horror. As explained by Doy Chiang, one of the co-founders of Red Candle Games:

然而在《返校》與《還願》中最恐怖的，是處於極端精神狀態的人。無論是方芮欣決定要告發讀書會，還是杜豐于把自己奉獻出去的執著，都是發生在我們身邊，有一天你我都可能陷入的處境。

The more terrifying element of *Detention* and *Devotion* is the people in the extreme mental disturbance. While Fang Ray Shin decides to write up the book club, Du Feng Yu is obsessed with religious devotion. These stories happen around us. Both you and I may be in the same situations one day. (Doy, cited in Jen, 2021).

As Red Candle Games’ adoption of the horror genre facilitates the representation of Taiwan’s historical disturbances, the two video games in focus in this article capture penetrating insights into the multi-layered political arena of Taiwan. The ghosts that haunt these games profoundly exude the frustration that plagues the Taiwanese characters in the two major settings of home and school, both of which are under the close surveillance of higher existence—be it a nation-state, a cult religion, or both. In *Detention*, Fang Ray Shin’s betrayal of her lover is mistakenly interpreted as a noble act of patriotism by the KMT regime. However, Fang and her schoolmate Wei, along with other deeply troubled minds of the time, now serve as virtual agents who reveal the sinister aspects of the Martial Law period, a time when any commoner’s normal wish to live a peaceful life could be thwarted by politics. While Fang’s family is falling apart, the school has become a subdivision of the authoritarian government. Under this circumstance, home and school are both dictated by the monstrous political machine and lose their original purpose of protecting and educating youth. The overlap of historical horror and the White Terror is thus reconfirmed in the game. In *Devotion*, the importance of school is greatly reduced, as the game stands out for its haunted home setting which serves as the central stage for the characters. Although *Devotion* revolves around the concept of home for family, it can also be connected with the island-state as ‘home’ for citizens, thus reflecting upon “the epitome of

Taiwan” in the contemporary era (Hsiao, 2020: 25). As a matter of fact, the government seems omnipresent in the game. Its propaganda can even be seen in Mei Shin’s miniature playhouse theatre, which is presented as part of her fragmented memories of home in the game. As the screen of the miniature TV reveals, “Disease prevention is a civil duty. The Department of Health, Caring for the public” (Chiang, 2019). At this point, moments of playful innocence are forcefully interrupted by the constant reminders of the oppressive KMT regime. Such dynamic interpretations of gaming politics are worthy of further exploration within the framework of popular culture.

In his influential work on popular culture and ideological struggle, John Fiske has identified popular culture as “a culture of conflict” that “involves the struggle to make social meanings” accepted by “the subordinate,” rather than “the dominant ideology” (Fiske, 2011: 1–2). As Fiske makes clear, popular culture is created, circulated, and propagated by the subordinate in defiance of the dominant ideology from the socio-political angle. Fiske’s broad concept of popular culture encompasses such cultural commodities as television, music, fashion, video games, and more. As his discussion of video games involves both arcades and the digital rendition of gaming, Fiske offers an illuminating insight about where the act of gaming is taking place. While “home and work (together with school)” have become “the places where social control is exercised most nakedly” for “the young and subordinate,” video game arcades function as a favourable venue to temporarily free oneself from the constraints of real society (Fiske, 2011: 74). It is crucial to highlight the fact that the cultural significance of video game arcades has been greatly reduced due to the rapid development of digital gaming. However, contemporary digital video games like *Detention* and *Devotion* certainly create a boundless virtual space separated from ‘home,’ ‘work,’ and ‘school’ and accordingly can be said to maximise the effects produced by video games in arcades. Under Red Candle Games’ clever design, *Detention* and *Devotion* engage in dialogue with current social and political trends in Taiwanese popular culture. On this matter, we may benefit from Leandro Augusto Borges Lima’s research on gaming politics. In Borges Lima’s view, videogames are “a highly political medium” not only for “the exposition of political content,” but also for “questioning hegemonic thought through its stories and mechanics” and for “being capable of mobilizing publics towards action” (2019:342–43). Borges Lima explicates that both online and offline video gaming occupy a special position as regards their engagement with dominant social ideology. Hence, gaming extends the political domain of popular culture and contributes to the everyday conversation in the actual world.

Detention and *Devotion* can be examined in a similar vein. Although the modern KMT is no longer the majority party or the ruling party in Taiwan, it still carries burdens from the traumatic past of the island-state. As observed in these two games, loyalty to the KMT and devotion to the cult religion are the major causes of the tragedies in two interconnected historical times, during which two controversial idols are brought to the fore and questioned. In *Detention*, Fang Ray Shin encounters a copper statue of the president that “can be seen from almost anywhere in the school” while loitering on campus looking for clues (Yao, 2017a). Although the statue is not named, it is directly linked with late President Chiang Kai-shek, who is believed to be responsible for the implementation of the notorious Martial Law in Taiwan. Despite his resting in Cihu Mausoleum 慈湖陵寢 or the Mausoleum of Late President Chiang 先總統蔣公陵寢 in Taoyuan City since 1975, Chiang Kai-shek remains to be a political figure of immense historical significance in Taiwan. Under the banner of transitional justice, the DPP

government has been working arduously to push forward the removal of all the bronze statues of Chiang Kai-shek, which are regarded as “authoritarian symbols,” around the island (Chen and Madjar, 2021: 50). Compared with Chiang Kai-shek as a political leader, Cigu Guanyin is falsely believed to be an omnipotent religious saviour by followers like Du Feng Yu in *Devotion*. Players and critics may suspect that Cigu Guanyin, though fabricated by Red Candle Games, is based on the religious belief in Zigu Guanyin—a toilet deity from Tang dynasty. The death of Du Mei Shin in the toilet also contributes to this assumption (Tseng, 2020: 125). By examining the symbolic leader in Cihu and the fictional bodhisattva named Cigu, players are led to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the political and religious fanaticism in Taiwan in the past and present. In *Detention* and *Devotion*, gaming politics straddle the virtual space and the physical environment, thus making historical horror a free-floating form of political asset to be digested and circulated by players outside of the gameworld.

Conclusion

For decades, Taiwanese video game developers have received limited international attention, as China had long been their major targeted market. To many gamers’ excitement, *Detention* and *Devotion* by Red Candle Games have not only earned immediate recognition from the local community, but also brought Taiwan into the limelight in the global gaming scene. As Yao Shun-Ting expresses, “We hope that, by virtue of this same principle, through our game, Taiwanese culture can be noticed by places around the world” (2017b). The unprecedented success achieved by Red Candle Games hinges on their early decision to localise *Detention* and *Devotion* into other languages, especially English, which is a tactical strategy for “communicating with the world” (Chang, 2019) and “marketing Taiwanese culture internationally” (Wu, 2019). Overcoming the language barrier is simply the first step for the products to enter the international market. Red Candle Games exceeds gamers’ expectations by cleverly exploring themes of institutionalised horror, ghost haunting, parent-child relations, and the pursuit of freedom. Evocatively designed with consideration of the continuing socio-political issues in Taiwan, these two games reflect the particular troubling times and spaces experienced by players across diverse age groups.

While revealing the questionable act of blind devotion to symbolic authorities, Red Candle Games’ video games hinge upon gamers’ experience of immersion and point to the reproduction of Taiwanese history and historical awareness, especially in the context of the political tensions between Taiwan and China. As ghost haunting is usually associated with the return of the repressed in literature and film, *Detention* and *Devotion* arouse gamers’ primary affect of fear and disgust in a similar vein by inviting them to directly engage, if not confront, with historical spectres and the repressed memories of Taiwanese people in the past and present. Through their subjective involvement in the two video games, gamers are led to psychologically invest in the storyline and the characters they play in the virtual environment and further develop a vital link with the historical background and political horror drawn from the actual world. Each player’s gameplay and cognitive process contribute to the transmission of the political effects from the gameworld to the actual world. On a deeper level, it is through the blended structure of interactive video gaming that the local history and politics can be accessed and re-thought in a new light, which was unprecedented in the video game history of Taiwan. Importantly, the success of Red Candle Games, despite the controversies the company has also sparked, expands the horizons of the gaming industry in Taiwan and assists in forming a collective Taiwanese consciousness, which corresponds with the DPP’s ongoing political

campaign. As *Detention* and *Devotion* feature the unique character of Taiwan in the face of challenges from within and across the Taiwan Strait, Red Candle Games testifies the trajectory of Taiwan's historical horror with respect to gaming politics in the twenty-first century. It is an indomitable spirit that never wears out in the Sinophone world.

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Ludography

Detention (standard edition) (2017), iOS [Game], Red Candle Games: Taipei.

Devotion (standard edition) (2019), PC [Game], Red Candle Games: Taipei.

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