

## Games as Historical Representations: The Present/Presence in the Past

Jamie Wing Tung Tse

The University of Hong Kong

### Abstract

*This essay examines the nature and socio-cultural value of games as historical representations that bridge the temporal gap between the past and the present. Through a close examination of *Detention* (Fan xiao 返校, 2017) and *Devotion* (Huan yuan 還願, 2019), the two Taiwanese horror games produced by Red Candle Games. I argue that games as historical representations not only introduce players to the traumatic past but also engage them in the turbulence of the present to envision a better future.*

**Keywords:** game narratives, historical representations, Taiwanese horror games, *Detention*, *Devotion*, Red Candle Games

This essay examines the nature and socio-cultural value of games as historical representations that bridge the temporal gap between the past and the present. Through a close examination of *Detention* (Fan xiao 返校, 2017) and *Devotion* (Huan yuan 還願, 2019), the two Taiwanese horror games produced by Red Candle Games which have gained global popularity in recent years, I argue that games as historical representations not only introduce players to the traumatic past but also engage them in the turbulence of the present to envision a better future. It is not my intention to flatten games into literature nor undermine the importance of gameplay in these games, or indeed in any game at all. Instead, by proposing a new method by which to approach game narratives, I suggest that games can be one of the many forms of historical representations. As historian Hayden White proposes, history must first be written to be digested as such, and we must access history by way of language and through narratives (White, 1999: 1).

To begin with, games as historical representations must establish an ‘authentic’ relation to the player’s living present, instead of merely serving as vehicles of facts. This essay draws from Michel-Ralph Trouillot’s idea of ‘authenticity’, as illustrated in his chapter “The Presence in the Past”. Trouillot criticizes attempts to represent traumatic historical events which fail to consider the fact that ‘The Past’ is *not* a fixed reality and that true historical authenticity resides in an honesty vis-à-vis the present (Trouillot, 1995: 148). Nonetheless, games as historical representations do not only serve to create a factually accurate virtual reality nor as simulacrum of a certain past. Bridging the temporal gap between the past and the present, these games often reveal to us the turbulent present as much as they reveal the traumatic past, perhaps even more so. This is because such historical authenticity with regard to the past resides in the struggles of our present (Trouillot, 1995: 151). As *Detention* and *Devotion* respectively address the traumatic past of Taiwan’s White Terror period and the rise of religious cults, these horror games offer their players immersive and “authentic” experiences by reintroducing them to the past in hopes of reshaping their relationships to the living present - given the fact that such terrors still loom over Taiwan in alternative forms today.

Moreover, the conjunction of past and present - and thus historical authenticity - is usually achieved through expressions of nostalgia. *Detention* and *Devotion* carry nostalgic

elements drawn from Taiwan in the 1960s and 1980s, respectively. Cinematic representations of nostalgia are a double exposure of past and present, dream and everyday life (Boym, 2001: xiii-xiv). Nostalgia is not an objective recovery of historical specificities, as the details portrayed do not aim to invoke a sense of sameness with the past. Instead, nostalgia relies on a deliberate display of temporal displacement in which a modernized gaze towards the past is established (Chu, 2004: 334, 336). Such a modernized gaze towards the past is not only retrospective but also speculative, wherein one can strive toward historical authenticity with the past in the present. Natalia Chan also identifies that on one hand the essence of nostalgic experience cultivates an appreciative stance toward former selves, and on the other hand helps to manage the unpleasant present by celebrating the past and transcending the future (Chan, 2000: 264). Nostalgia can be a social remedy for the turbulent present as the past in cinematic form can reconstruct collective identities and memories (Chan, 2000: 265). And just such a modernized, restorative gaze can be found in *Detention* and *Devotion*.

Whilst recent public attention for *Detention* has focused on the film adaptation that was released in 2019, conversations around *Devotion* have also been diverted towards a controversy which led to the removal of the game on Steam, probably the most popular online distribution platform for PC gaming. This was due to the inclusion of a now-removed small talisman in the game, which Chinese netizens saw as an unlawful criticism of Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China (Muncy, 2019). Nevertheless, the two critically acclaimed games from Red Candle Games have recently been added to the collections of Harvard-Yenching Library in Harvard University for preservation and educational purpose (Carpenter, 2020).

In *Detention*, a side-scrolling survival horror game, players control the protagonist Fang Ray Shin (Ray) who wanders around an abandoned high school to gather fragments of her memories and overcome her inner demons. Set during 1960s Taiwan, the White Terror era-inspired game conveys the fear of political and religious persecution as a subtext by incorporating aspects of Taiwanese and East Asian culture, as well as religious themes from Taoism and Buddhism (Chin, 2017). For instance, in Figure 1, Chinese deities such as the City God (*Chenghuang* 城隍) and Taoist talismans are depicted as hints and puzzles of the game.

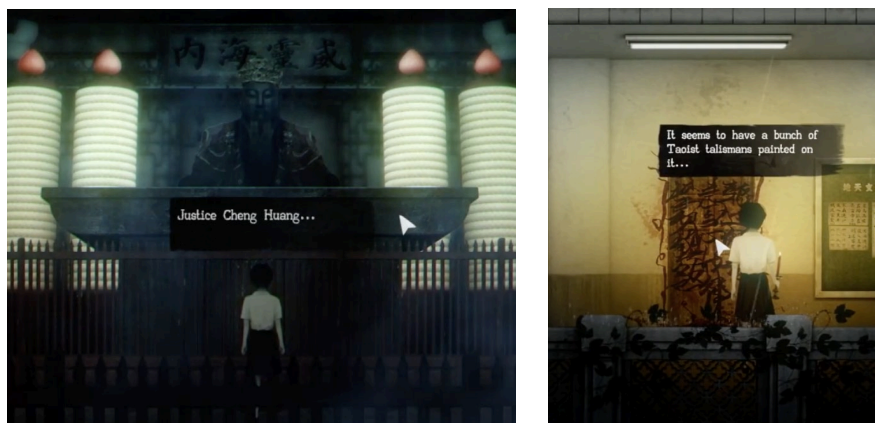


Figure 1. Screenshots taken from the game *Detention*. (Left) Ray faces City God; (Right) Ray struggles to enter a door with Taoist talismans.

Martial law in Taiwan (1949-1987) restricted both civilians' physical and intellectual freedom as they could be labelled and prosecuted as 'Communist spies' for speaking the 'wrong' dialect, singing the 'wrong' songs, reading the 'wrong' books and more (Wang, 2019). Similarly, the secret book club which plays an important role in *Detention* eventually causes

the demise of two teachers and countless students when Instructor Bai, a military officer stationed in the high school, is later informed of its existence. In Figure 2, Ray finds a court verdict which imposes a death sentence and a sentence of imprisonment on two members of the book club, namely a teacher and a student.

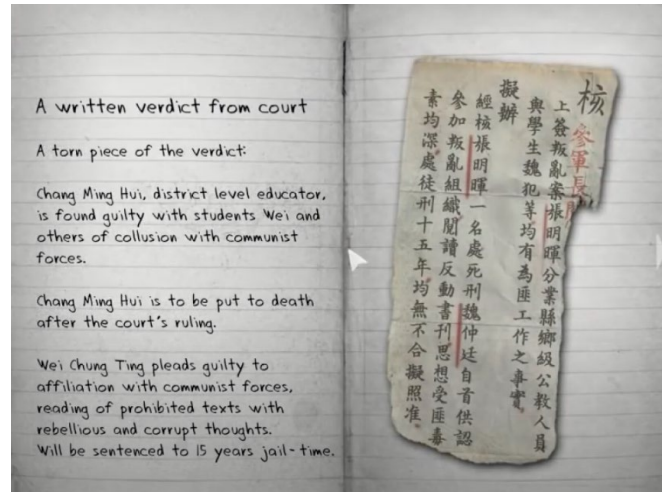


Figure 2. Screenshot taken from the game *Detention*. This written court verdict records the death sentence and the sentence of 15-year imprisonment on two members of the book club.

Further, as shown in Figure 3, one of the puzzles involves a melody from the song “A Flower on a Rainy Night” (*Yu ye hua* 雨夜花), along with three other songs composed by renowned Taiwanese Hakka musician Teng Yu-hsien 鄧雨賢. Once banned by the government during the White Terror era, these songs from Teng are one of the many nostalgic Taiwanese elements local players can easily identify, alongside the visual representation of the school setting in *Detention*.



Figure 3. Screenshot from the game *Detention*, showing an old cassette player which plays “A Flower on a Rainy Night” and other three songs from Teng.

Between 1949 to 1992, millions were arrested for criticizing and defying the government under martial law and at least 1,200 were executed. Current President of the Republic of China Tsai Ing-wen’s advocacy has encouraged historians to work on recovering the lost records of these political prisoners (Sui, 2016). Tsai, when first elected in 2016, has advocated for a re-investigation of the February 28 Incident and the White Terror era that followed. As she openly stated: “There would be reconciliation only if there is truth, there would be unity only if there is reconciliation..... And then Taiwan can finally move forward”

(有真相才有和解，有和解才能帶來團結……台灣才可以繼續向前走) (Sui, 2016). On the other hand, Tien Meng-shu 田孟淑, who had provided shelter and aid for many political prisoners during the White Terror era, commented in an interview that *Detention* is an unforgettable nightmare that she had lived through, and what was portrayed on screen is only the tip of the iceberg (Wang, 2019). The brutal torture in the film adaption reminded Tien of that which happened during the Meilidao Incident 美麗島事件 in 1979, where the government suppressed pro-democratic demonstrations and arrested leaders of the opposition camps. In the game, torture of students reported to be ‘Communist spies’ who intend to overthrow the government is also heavily implied, as demonstrated in Figure 4.

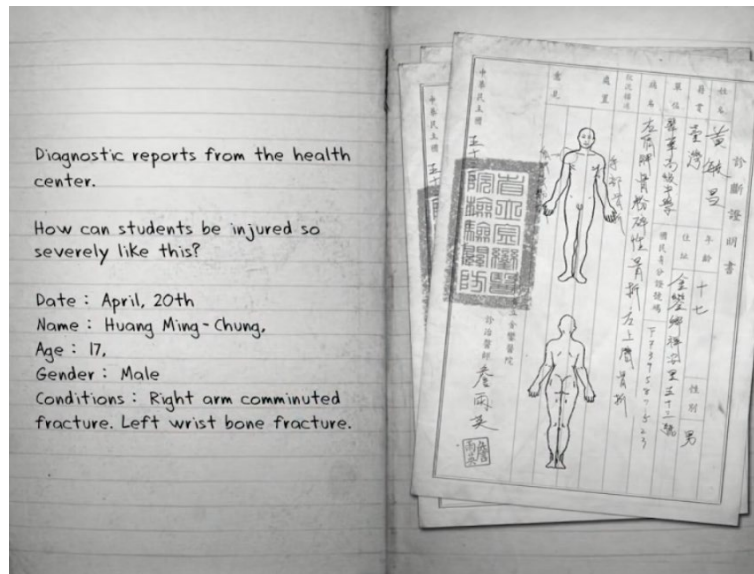


Figure 4. Screenshot from the game *Detention*. This medical report documents suspicious wounds suggests the brutal torture of a male student.

In short, by establishing historical authenticity, *Detention* serves as a restorative gaze for the locals towards their distressing and almost-forgotten past. The protagonist Ray's search for lost memories resembles that of the Taiwanese in the present under their current president's advocacy. Nonetheless, the game also provides foreign players with an 'authentic' outlook on Taiwan's past, providing a better understanding of its current political scene and struggles.

As compared to *Detention*, *Devotion* is undoubtedly more concerned with the personal (Muncy, 2019). Set in the 1980s Taiwan, *Devotion* puts the players in a haunted apartment and narrates a tragic family story. Similar to Ray in *Detention*, the father Du Feng Yu (Feng Yu) is also a ghostly figure who seeks to redeem his sins and who is searching for his daughter, Mei Shin. This second Red Candle Games production has reminded many Taiwanese players and netizens of a cult-related tragedy in 2013, in which a high schooler was introduced to a cult called Ri Yue Ming Gong (日月明功) by his mother, but was later abused and starved to death as the members accused him of being a drug user (Zhu, 2019). Red Candle Games does not shy away from religious references in *Devotion*. For example, in Figure 5, the game depicts a household guardian ceremony commonly practiced in Asian cultures and a Taoist ritual called the Guan Ling Rite (*Guanluoyin* 觀落陰), when Feng Yu is convinced that it is the only way to save his daughter Mei Shin from the evil spirits which have caused her distress.



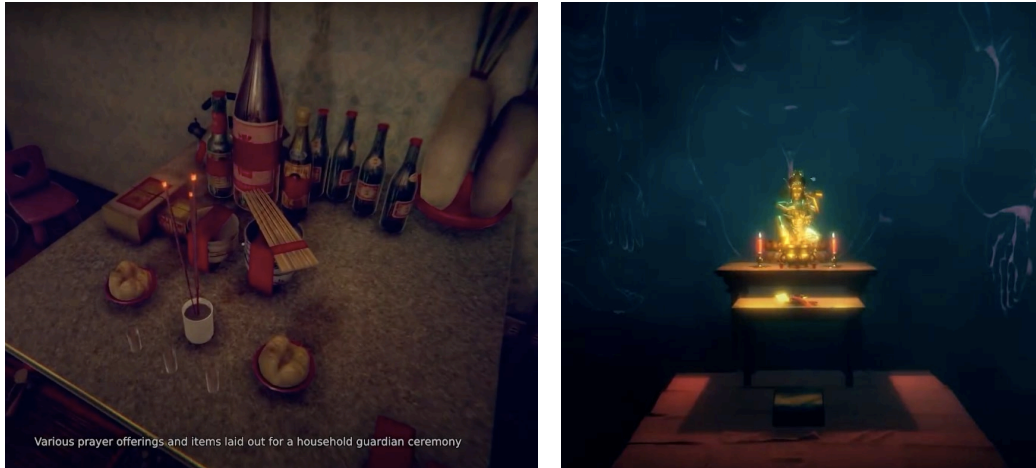


Figure 5. Screenshots from the game *Devotion*; (left) common offerings and items for a household guardian ceremony can be seen; (right) Feng Yu performs the Guan Ling Rite, a Taoist ritual where a person's spirit is guided to travel to the nether world

Again, akin to *Detention*, music is another major vessel for nostalgia in *Devotion*. “The Rainbow Star Stage” (*Qicai xing wutai* 七彩星舞台) recreated in the game is a homage to “Five Lights Award” (*Wu deng jiang* 五燈獎), a popular singing contest in Taiwan that was televised from 1965 to 1998. Moreover, “Lady of the Pier” (*Matou guniang* 碼頭姑娘), a song featured in the game as the mother Li Fang’s song, is specially made to resemble songs from the 1980s Taiwan. According to the composer Chang Wei Fan, the production team’s aim was to create as nostalgic a song as possible, and so they invited the drummer who played for Teresa Teng, the iconic Taiwanese singer active in the 1970s-90s, as well as the saxophone player who played on the “Five Light Award” show, to participate in the recording (Chang, 2019).



Figure 6. Screenshots from the game *Devotion*. (left) A vinyl record of “Lady of the Pier”; (right) “The Rainbow Star Stage” is being aired on a vintage television.

*Devotion* may be a cautionary tale that offer many players a teary lesson, but the horrors of cults continue to haunt the locals. Cult-related news of missing persons and deaths in Taiwan can be found without much difficulty. Local players during their playthroughs also note that similar experiences must have happened to real people around them. To give an example, in 2019, a 26-year-old woman was beaten to death for trying to leave another local cult named China Baiyang Sigui Lingbao Holy Path (*Zhonghua bai yang si gui lingbao shengdao* 中華白陽四貴靈寶聖道) while at least ten more followers were reported missing (Song & Feng, 2019). Feng Yu’s fatherly love for Mei Shin in *Devotion* has certainly moved hearts of many - yet his blind faith is not entirely fictional, but also stands as a brutal reminder to both local and foreign players of the dangers that cults have brought to the lives of many.

Upon an examination of *Detention* and *Devotion* as historical representations and reimaginings in the context of Taiwan, we can observe that video games do have the capacity to establish a historically authentic relationship with a traumatic past for the audience, offering them a restorative gaze from the also-turbulent present for the sake of a better future. I believe the role of gameplay and player audience reception in these two games, as well as the topic of games as historical representations in the context of Southeast Asia, merits further research.

### Acknowledgements

I thank Dr. Ang Sze-wei, Dr. Daniel Elam, Dr. Fiona Yuk-wa Law, and Dr. Alvin K. Wong for their guidance and continuous support. Without them, I would not be able to begin this project in the first place.

### Ludography

*Detention* 返校 (standard edition) (2017), Android/Nintendo Switch/PlayStation 4/PC [Game], Red Candle Games: Taiwan

*Devotion* 還願 (standard edition) (2019), PC [Game], Red Candle Games: Taiwan

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