

# Detention, a Game More Than Just Games

Lee I-Chien

**Abstract**—This paper's main topic is how Taiwan's self-made video game *Detention* affects Taiwanese young people's understanding of their history and how this will affect the promotion of transitional justice in Taiwan. First, it summarizes its features and achievements of the international video game industry. Moreover, after briefing the story content, it explains its strategies for interpreting the White Terror, the performance of trauma, and how the Taiwanese learn more about their history while playing games. Finally, it demonstrates the uniqueness of games from other traditional media, which provides another possibility and imagination for young people to understand history.

**Index Terms**—*Detention*, the White Terror, trauma, transitional justice

## I. INTRODUCTION

*Detention* is a video game developed by Red Candle Games from the official version in 2015. A campus-based horror adventure game with Taiwanese and East Asian culture, religion, the mythology of Taoism and Buddhism references, and history based on the 1960s Taiwan under martial law as the background. This game is a single-player, and the operation is mainly carried out by a 2D side-scroller with point and clicking mechanism, allowing players to get started quickly. The players try to discover the mystery stories behind the haunted place by controlling characters who venture into the school beset by hostile supernatural events. In the performance, the combination of original music, sound effects, and the realistic style of collage are stacked to create a suffocating horror atmosphere.

*Detention* was released on January 12, 2017. This game's platforms include PS4, Nintendo Switch, Google Play, iOS App Store, and Steam, supporting PC, Mac, and Linux. Furthermore, it has multiple language support, including Chinese, English, Japanese, and Korean. A few days after launching, *Detention* reached third place on the Steam global sales list, defeating many internationally renowned games, and was the Taiwan sales champion [1], [2]. It received 96% of users' praise in user reviews, which means it gets overwhelming praise (Steam Website). According to Red Candle Games' official website, Taiwan accounts for only 56% of revenue, China's 23%, and the remaining 21% are in the English market. Other winning records are as follows: "Best Indie Game Award" Google Play, USA, 2019; "Famitsu Gold Award" No.1527, Famitsu, Japan, 2018; "Journey Award" IndieCade, USA, 2017; "Best Design" Taipei Game Show, Taiwan, 2017; "Best Narration" IndiePlay, China, 2017; "Best Narration Nominee" BIG Festival, Brazil, 2017; "Best Game Award Nominee" IndiePlay, China, 2016; "Best

Audio Nominee" IndiePlay, China, 2016.

*Detention* was further adapted into a movie, and the film of the same title was released in Taiwan on September 20, 2019. One month after the movie was released, the box office accumulated to NT \$ 252 million [3]. The film also received twelve nominations at the 56th Golden Horse Awards, and it was also the film with the most shortlisted awards. It finally won five awards for new director, adapted screenplay, visual effects, art design, and original film songs. Furthermore, a drama streaming television show, *Detention*, adapted from the game, has been broadcast at the end of 2020. From the video game's success, the movie's blockbuster, to the multiple remediations of game texts, *Detention's* achievements are considered to have changed Taiwanese young people's indifferent attitude towards history.

## II. STORY BRIEF

*Detention's* background is a story that happened on the Taiwan campus under the White Terror<sup>1</sup> during the martial law period of the 1960s. The protagonist, Fang Ray-shin, was born in a civil servant's family and achieved outstanding grades. However, due to the parents' marriage breakdown, the mother even reported her husband's corruption because she suspected her husband was having an affair. This made Fang Ray-shin's personality change, and her academic performance plummeted. Under the guidance of the tutor Chang Ming-hui, Fang Ray-shin and Chang Ming-hui developed a romantic relationship. Fang Ray-shin was unaware that Chang Ming-hui helped teacher Yin Tsui-han smuggle banned books for a secret book club because Chang Ming-hui was also a member. Fang Ray-shin misunderstood the relationship between teacher Yin Tsui-han and Chang Ming-hui, so she reported the book club's reading list to Instructor Bai. Finally, it led to the book club members' arrest, including Chang Ming-hui, Yin Tsui-han, and Wei Chung-ting. The teachers and students praised Fang Ray-shin for reporting the spy bandits, but Fang Ray-shin felt regretful for her actions and chose to commit suicide by jumping off the school building's top floor. After the suicide, Fang Ray-shin's spirit had been haunting the campus.

<sup>1</sup> The White Terror: The period of martial law throughout Taiwan, from 1949 to 1989, was a period of 38 years of martial law rule, also known as the White Terror period. During this period, Taiwan was under a dictatorship and authoritarian rule. The rulers used the laws they made to persecute many critics and dissidents. In addition to indiscriminate arrests and killings everywhere, the KMT government had also caused many unjust prisons and wrongful cases. According to the report submitted by the Ministry of Justice to the Executive Yuan, 140,000 Taiwanese were tried in a military court because of political cases, and about 3,000 to 4,000 of them were executed. However, the Taiwan Judicial Yuan estimated that there were about 60,000 to 70,000 political cases during the White Terror, so the actual number of political victims may be higher [4].

### III. THE WHITE TERROR IN *DETENTION*

Players and audiences, who have watched the streamers playing the game, should know that two characters are being manipulated in *Detention*. At the beginning and end of the game, players control Wei Chung-ting, and in the middle part, which is also the central axis and the essence of the game, players control Fang Ray-shin. When manipulating Fang Ray-shin, in order to piece together the complete story's clues, players must find the items, solve the puzzles, and beat the levels.

The puzzle's designs and the reported plot of the secret book club point to the impact of the White Terror on the campus during the martial law in Taiwan. For example, book clubs were banned; book club members were taken away by the government, sentenced, and even executed by shooting. What was the real role of Instructor Bai? Why did the government thank Fang Ray-shin for her assistance? Did the ghosts imply specific people or things? What did the cells in the basement of the school represent? During the game, these questions emerge in the players' minds. After gradually finding out the truth that was concealed in the past, players can finally understand why Fang Ray-shin had become a phantom trapped in school. *Detention* enables domestic and foreign players who have not experienced the White Terror in Taiwan to reflect on Taiwan's supposed history.

The game allows players to establish a public forum in the process of discovering the truth of the story when playing the game. Many young people who were born after the democratization of Taiwan in the 1980s heard about the White Terror from history textbooks or certain movies and documentaries but did not know more about it. However, in the game, in controlling Fang Ray-shin's self-discovery, players will ponder on the meaning of the puzzles and items while discussing the relationship between the four main characters: Fang Ray-shin, Wei Chung-ting, Yin Tsui-han, and Chang Ming-hui. Therefore, when people talk about *Detention*, they are also discussing the history of the White Terror. It makes it possible for many young people to understand and discuss history through games. The adapted film of the game once again gives the audience a chance to learn about Taiwan history through different media interpretations. We can say that *Detention* has opened a window for Taiwanese to discuss and face the past they were afraid to face before.

### IV. TRAUMA IN *DETENTION*

In the game, Fang Ray-shin's inner state presents the symptoms of traumatic experiences, such as forgetting and repeated nightmares. Cathy Caruth, who explores traumatic memories from a literary perspective, puts forward the concept of belatedness in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. She points out that because the occurrence of traumatic events is beyond imagination and understanding, it cannot be absorbed and experienced. Therefore, the present's physical and mental balance can only be integrated through belatedness [5]. Generally, traumatic experiences threaten everyday life, disturbing the balance of mind and body, and failing to be integrated with life. After years of depression, traumatic memories appear in the form

of intrusive flashbacks, returning to memories in nightmares and fragmentary images, entangling with people like ghosts.

Fang Ray-shin is in amnesia in the game. She forgets why she is staying on campus and what happened. A critical riddle often appears: "Forgot it, or just too afraid to remember"? This sentence reflects the protagonist's mentality of avoiding facts and truth. The main character manipulated in *Detention* is not the victim of the incident but is the informer who has to solve the mysteries. Such a game setting is not easy to understand at first because the informer should know what happened.

Nevertheless, because of the fact that many informers and perpetrators are unwilling to face their dark past, they either forget it or do not want to remember it. When it is difficult for people to face painful memories and they cannot face themselves honestly, the key sentence "Forgot it, or just too afraid to remember?" provides the best explanation for the ambivalence of those who escape the past. This is why Fang Ray-shin hears this sentence many times.

The game uses Fang Ray-shin's transition in the process of forgetting and remembering to metaphorize how people today face the trauma of history. For the past historical trauma, if people do not have the courage to face, examine and repair the wounds that have not yet been healed, but choose to forget and escape, it will lead to many people whose hearts cannot get out of the trauma. Such as Fang Ray-shin has been trapped in the event and cannot dissipate. As the trauma witness cannot be completed, the truth is buried in the historical torrent. This will not only prevent society from undergoing a normal democratic transition process, but also cause gaps and misunderstandings between generations and groups. Therefore, people should bravely remember and face the past, and tell the truth to witness history's trauma. It is then possible to have mutual consensus and forgiveness, and finally to have a society of true reconciliation and normal development.

Another traumatic manifestation is repeated nightmares. At the beginning of the game, Fang Ray-shin was awakened by Wei Chung-ting, and Fang Ray-shin forgot why she fell asleep in the auditorium. Not long afterward, Fang Ray-shin wakes up alone in the auditorium. At this time, she sees that Wei Chung-ting has been hung upside down on the podium and seems to be dead. Fang Ray-shin feels scared and wants to leave the campus, so she begins her puzzle-solving adventure. In the process, she encounters a variety of malicious ghosts and sees many scary and incomprehensible things. At the same time, she also collects many materials and reports that she has never known. All these experiences are like a nightmare. In the second half of Fang Ray-shin's puzzle-solving process, she sees many of her previous afterimages staying where she has walked. We could infer that Fang Ray-shin has experienced all this many times, and she keeps repeating her nightmares.

Caruth mentions that it is the dream itself that wakes the person in the sleep [6]. In *Detention*, Fang Ray-shin cannot remember the past, so she lets Wei Chung-ting in her dream wake herself up to find the memory and truth in her subconscious. However, all these horrible experiences are actually the beginning of another nightmare for her. In other words, Fang Ray-shin has always been in her nightmare. As long as she fails to remember what happened and what she

did, she will be in a situation of repetition compulsion. "The repeated failure to have seen in time- in itself a pure repetition compulsion, a repeated nightmare- can be transformed into the imperative of a speaking that awakens others" [7]. Every time Fang Ray-shin is awakened, it is her opportunity to face herself again. Nevertheless, only when she indeed faces herself and accepts her fault, can she have a chance to wake up from the nightmare.

#### V. RECONCILIATION AND TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

*Detention's* protagonist design is based on the informer Fang Ray-shin, and players can help Fang Ray-shin leave the trapped repeated nightmare by exploring her inner voice and finding out the truth of the incident. The game is designed with two different endings. The difference depends on whether Fang Ray-shin and her inner answer are consistent. If Fang Ray-shin cannot face her heart truthfully, her soul will answer, "You are not me yet." She will return to the auditorium again and will be awarded a hanging rope after receiving praise. This means that Fang Ray-shin has to return to her nightmare and experience it all again.

Another ending is that Fang Ray-shin can be honest with herself, and finally, she will find a farewell letter from the tutor Chang Ming-hui. The letter states that Chang Ming-hui expects to meet Fang Ray-shin again in the next life and in freedom. After that, Fang Ray-shin has the courage to face herself and the victim, and no longer escapes. In the final part of this ending, the scene comes to Wei Chung-ting, who was pardoned and released after the lifting of martial law. At this point, players switch to manipulate Wei Chung-ting. Wei Chung-ting goes back to school when he is old. In the end, after roaming the campus, Wei Chung-ting comes to his seat in his classroom. At this moment, the image of Fang Ray-shin appears opposite him. The game ends with a scene of Wei Chung-ting and Fang Ray-shin facing each other. This ending means the beginning of a reconciliation between the two. In the game, the informer is willing to admit her fault and learn to accept herself after she sincerely repents, and then she will have the courage to face the victim. Only with the meeting between the victim and the informer can the possibility of dialogue be revealed, and such reconciliation can have a good start.

During the period of the White Terror, many people may accidentally become informers or perpetrators. Almost of the people lived in fear. Inferring from the time and space in the game, many informers and perpetrators of that period are likely to be alive today. The ending of reconciliation is one of the goals that people are currently striving for in transitional justice. Therefore, the launch of the game can be considered to have a deep meaning to promote transitional justice.

*Detention* creates a nightmare-like weird scene to describe the atmosphere of Taiwan's loss of freedom and the distrust of others under high-powered authoritarian rule during the martial law. This game encourages people to reflect and expects the successors of the authoritarian ruling parties in the past to begin to make self-examinations and admit their mistakes. This is the result that many Taiwanese people have been looking forward to for many years. As the experience of transitional justice in other countries in the world reveals, the universal value of transitional justice may depend on the

promotion of popular culture.

#### VI. INTERACTIVITY, PARTICIPATION, AND MEMORY IN *DETENTION*

*Detention*, as a video game, in addition to claiming many international awards, helps Taiwanese people face and understand their history. Many factors that contribute to this effect are related to its role as a medium for games. Game researcher scholars believe that the relationship between players and games is very different from the relationship between listeners or readers and other traditional media. Flew Terry mentions that:

The goal-driven nature of games meant that the emotional engagement with the text did not come from engagement at a distance with characters and events, as occurs in conventional narratives, but because the players are themselves actors, immersed in and actively shaping the games environment. The engagement thus comes because the player is the performer, and the game evaluates the performance and adapts to it. [8]

Through role-playing and immersion in the virtual environment, players can personally interact with other characters and situations in the game. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin also propose that in the game, players can have "the immediacy of the experience" and the "feeling of immersion" [9]. These can increase the intensity of the player's personal experience and create the player's interpretation of the content of the game, thereby increasing the discussion with other players.

Regarding interactivity, Flew proposes that interactivity is one of the characteristics of new media, which is mainly presented in the degree of consumer participation, which is different from other media that can only be passively consumed [10]. Bolter and Grusin point out that players interact more closely with the screen, and at the same time, they increase the sense of control through tools such as keyboards and trackballs [11]. Take *Detention* players as an example. Because they want to solve puzzles, they will be more voluntarily and actively involved in the game. Players need to pay attention to details and take notes at any time so that they can successfully overcome the problems when they encounter difficulties. In order to beat the levels, some players are more likely to ask other players' opinions and methods when they are stuck. All this shows that it takes much effort and work to complete the game successfully. After playing the game, players will discuss settings, plots, story backgrounds, levels, and puzzle props. *Detention* has such a forum where players can discuss interesting issues, ask questions, and analyze their thoughts on the game. Some players are even keen to find "Easter eggs" in the game, which are metaphors hidden in the game and are not easily found. This has allowed Taiwan's history to be discussed more extensively, diversely, and in-depth. The main discussions can be seen in the *Detention* forum area on STEAM, YouTube, and PTT (the largest online public forum in Taiwan).

The recent emergence of streamers has increased the public's attention to topic games more quickly. With the launch of new games, many streamers will produce live broadcasts and provide strategies to contribute to their

community members. Most of them want to prove that they are professional players who quickly beat the levels. *Detention* cooperated with well-known streamers in the test phase to promote it. When the official version is available for purchase, many people cannot wait to join. Moreover, because *Detention* is designed with two different endings, professional players and streamers want to get public feedback and immediate response, so they want to share their experience as soon as possible.

Regarding participation, video games are a medium of autonomous participation. Players can control the characters autonomously in the game. In *Detention*, there are possibilities of different paths, so the order of messages received by players may be different, which will make players have different experiences and affect their understanding and interpretation of the game. At the same time, the objects in the game provide much referential information. Therefore, the story's depth will also vary depending on the players' play experience, puzzle-solving process, and understanding of objects. Besides, when players participate in the game in person, they will resonate with the game characters. For example, players may be unable to continue because they cannot beat a certain level or repeat back and forth in the same space and path. Players with this experience may have the same feelings as the protagonist is trapped in limbo, unable to move forward, and have no way out.

Therefore, in the overall experience of playing the game, players first actively participate and then positively find answers. These processes will allow players to have a more profound memory of the story. About the formation of memories of stories through playing games, Alison Landsberg proposes that technical popular culture provides a possibility for transformed memory through novel images and narratives, which enables "one has 'intimate,' even experiential, access to would no longer be limited to the memories of events through which one actually lived" [12]. This situation Landsberg calls prosthetic memory. Landsberg mentions that memories generated and disseminated through mass media can bridge the gap between individuals and the past, and "it has become possible to have an intimate relationship to memories of events through which one did not live: these are the memories I call prosthetic" [13]. This means that the audience who receives the message can break through time and space limitations and indirectly convert the received memory into their own.

The interaction, discussion, and sharing of games between players on the Internet have once again allowed them to have a deeper memory of the game story. Landsberg argues that:

As an increasingly experiential medium, the Internet has the potential to generate prosthetic memories. Because of its fundamental interactivity, it engages the individual body. As its mode of address becomes more complex both visually and aurally, the Internet might be another mass cultural mechanism capable of generating empathy and ethical politics. [14]

Players not only enjoy the fun of solving puzzles in the game; on the other hand, they also remember the history of Taiwan and learn more about it through *Detention*. When players are intimate with the received message and involve deeply in playing games, it is possible to produce a psychological

effect of empathy. Empathy can change the way people think and behave in the world and indirectly generate a sense of social responsibility, which has a significant impact on social justice [15]. This part echoes the project of reconciliation and transformational justice. Only when the whole people understand and remember the history and are willing to face and deal with it positively can the trauma of history be repaired.

As a horror puzzle game, *Detention* has achieved its purpose. At the same time, it also provides the Taiwanese a chance to experience the oppressive circumstances of the White Terror in another way.

## VII. CONCLUSION

In a society where the people have been restricted by the authoritarian system for a long time and are accustomed to silence, how can young people be more proactive in understanding their history and discussing past taboo topics? As Taiwan's first video game with the White Terror as its main story, *Detention* did it. Its important contribution is that it provides contemporary society with a window to see history and a chance to communicate with others. In the form of games, it allows young people to learn about history through different puzzles, and they can also feel the political persecution of students and teachers on campus at that time. Finally, young people have more motivation further to understand Taiwan's past social and political environment. Undoubtedly, under the mediation of *Detention* and other cultural memory texts, the memory of the White Terror has hasped more diverse meanings in society. What *Detention* wants to emphasize is that reconciliation is not forgetting. Only by remembering the historical trauma that has existed can we truly move towards collective redemption, which is precisely the goal of transitional justice.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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