Promoting Yokosuka via Video Game Tourism: The case of the Shenmue Sacred Spot Guide Map

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Studies of the relationships between mass media and tourism are relatively new, and in development mainly since the early 1990s (Berić et al. 2013, 19). Tourism based on texts and icons of popular culture, however, is anything but new: "From visiting the fictional home of Sherlock Holmes at 221b Baker Street to finding the birthplace of Charles Dickens in Portsmouth, enthusiastic followers have been able to make connections to texts and people through travel since the Victorian era" (Geraghty, 2019). Buchmann et al. (2010) and Busby and Klug (2001, 316) have made use of the terms "film tourism" and "movie-induced tourism" to describe the "tourist visits to a destination or attraction as a result of the destination featured on the cinema screen, video or television" (Busby and Klug 2001, 316). Brooker (2007), Imai (2010) and Geraghty (2019), on the other hand, prefer the term "pilgrimage". Previously confined to the field of religion, the notion of pilgrimage was used by Imai (2010, 1) for the analysis of "votive tablets" (*ema*) at the Washinomiya Shrine in Saitama Prefecture, a sacred place that became famous thanks to the *anime Lucky Star*.

This "secular pilgrimage" (Geraghty 2019) offers a secure place in which fans can play with notions of identity and cultural heritage. Visitors want to replicate the emotional experience of reading, watching or playing by immersing themselves into familiar spaces and places they have only previously encountered through the screen or page (Geraghty 2019). As stated by Brooker (2007, 443), "fan pilgrimage is about pretending, performance and making the new from the familiar and quotidian". While the linkage between tourism and mass media is well documented, not much research has demonstrated the linkage between tourism and video games. Traditionally, connections between these two fields have been reduced to gamification processes of tourism experiences (Xu et al. 2013). This reduction, however, seems insufficient. It is still an under-appreciated phenomenon halfway between tourism and fan studies (Hudson et al. 2011). Its impact on tourist destinations is difficult to measure especially in locations that already receive a large number of tourists every year. Drawing on previous works, this research aims to analyze the case of *Shenmue* and Yokosuka as a remarkable example of video game-induced tourism.

Shenmue (SEGA-AM2 2000) is an action-adventure game published by Sega for the Dreamcast console. The player controls martial artist Ryo Hazuki as he sets out in revenge for the murder of his father in 1980s Yokosuka, Japan. Much of the appeal of

the games lies in how accurately the Japanese city is recreated (see Figures 1 and 2). Since the last game was released for the Xbox in 2002, fans from all over the world have worked to keep the memory of Shenmue alive, building a strong online community around the creation of unofficial translations, wikis, guides, secrets, and pieces of fan art. Perhaps the most intriguing activity, and the one that inspired this study, has been the pilgrimage of certain fans to the geographical locations recreated in *Shenmue*. These fan journeys have indirectly helped the small town of Yokosuka, with just over 400,000 inhabitants, to receive significant media attention through the Internet.

Figure 1: Real life Dobuita street in Yokosuka, Japan (Carvell 2017).

Figure 2: Dobuita street as depicted in *Shenmue* (GameSpot 2013).

In 2017, the Yokosuka Action Committee for the Promotion released the "Shenmue Sacred Spot Guide Map" (cocoyoko.net, 2017), a leaflet designed to attract *Shenmue* fans and guide them in their search for the most famous corners recreated in the first game. This resource resembles the so-called "movie maps" (Hudson and Ritchie, 2006), products aimed to ease film tourists to trace the locations where famous films took place. So far, it was *Shenmue* "pilgrims" who had to search for themselves the locations recreated in the game, but now it is the city council that takes charge, making the most of a small but constant source of tourists who travel to Yokosuka expressly

for this purpose. The Yokosuka Action Committee for the Promotion has put into practice what Gjorgievski and Trpkova (2012) explain:

> While tourism is often the "unintentional consequence" of media, destinations should develop "intentional strategies" to capture some of the value generated, considering that even a small percentage of the world's millions of gamers could end up representing a significant uptake for some destinations.
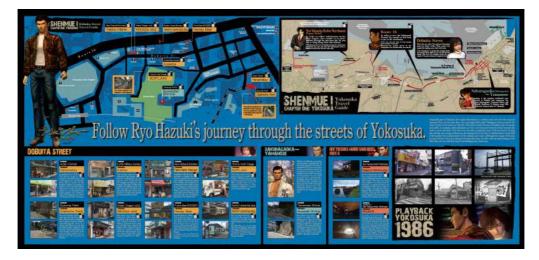

Figure 3: "Shenmue Sacred Spot Guide Map" (cocoyoko.net 2017).

The current research is at this moment at a preliminary stage. However, some secondary sources have already revealed the positive impact that the "Shenmue Sacred Spot Guide Map" has had on both the city and the *Shenmue* pilgrims. According to Yokosuka City's Culture, Sports and Tourism Department official Eriko Furusaki, "the reaction of *Shenmue* fans was huge after this guide came out. Not only Japanese fans came, but also foreigners. Many foreigners who came to Yokosuka to pick up this guide actually live in Japan" (Kaneda, 2018). Keeping in mind that for now, the guide can only be collected domestically, it is reasonable to assume that its release has attracted a great number of collectors.

Some important questions that would shed light on this case study in particular are related to the impact of the *Shenmue* campaign on the number of both domestic and international tourists. Due to the "non-touristy" nature of the city of Yokosuka, it is intriguing to know whether the campaign has affected the stream of both fan and non-fan tourists. For that purpose, access to first hand sources —interviews with both public institutions and *Shenmue* visitors, tourism statistics, reports, city maps, leaflets, pictures, and so on— would be needed. Further research would also help us answer important questions on video game-induced tourism/pilgrimage, such as: Does playing a game in which a destination is depicted change the image of the player regarding the destination? What specific aspects of the game motivate players to visit the destination? Does culture play any role in affecting how players respond to the games and their motivational appeals? (Hudson et al. 2011). These and other issues might be revealed in the future by more extensive research.

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