How Shenmue has Remained Relevant

Shenmue is an action-adventure video game released for the SEGA Dreamcast on December 29, 1999. The game, as well as its two sequels, follow Ryo Hazuki on his quest to find his father's killer. It's widely known for its ambition, and considered ahead-of-its time by many in certain aspects, but also a failure in others. Conversations surrounding the mechanics and technology in modern games can find *Shenmue* being involved in some shape or form. Today, the series is looked differently in the eyes of the majority since the release of *Shenmue III* (2019), a widely disappointing follow-up to the last entry considering the 18-year gap since *Shenmue II*'s (2001) release. Issues including the quality of voiceovers, tedium in gameplay and dated controls are considered attributes to the series' drop in popularity and anticipation leading up to the third installment. However, the initial game's legacy as a title that included and introduced what many popular titles today rely on validates its relevance in gaming discussions.

There are many things to unravel and discuss regarding *Shenmue* and its importance in video game history. For now, the goal of this paper is to delve into some of the main mechanics that *Shenmue* utilized and introduced at its release, examine how a few of the most popular franchises today implemented and expanded upon those mechanics, and look at how *Shenmue* stands today for its use in video game tourism, something that has garnered more popularity recently as the use of real locations in games raise in quality.

One of the reasons for *Shenmue*'s criticism lies in the tediousness of its day and night cycle. In the game, players can freely explore Yokosuka, Japan to their leisure while unraveling Ryo's father's murder. To do this, the player questions the neighborhood residents and various merchants throughout the limited but dynamic city. Many non-playable characters (NPCs) of

Yokosuka follow a unique schedule and routine to give the world a feeling that games struggled with at the time: The feeling that the world is living and reminiscent of a city that exists in reality. To further accomplish this, the day and night cycle and clock was implemented to guide the player, usually determining at what time they might find an NPC of interest. A notable encounter with this occurs when Ryo needs to search for sailors. After discovering that the sailors only come out to the bars at around 9:00 p.m., the player is left having to either find something else to do, or wait until then to progress. The player is also able to sleep, allowing Ryo to skip time when it got late. However, this was also unavailable until the clock struck 8:00 p.m., resulting in more waiting.

Despite the sped up clock, to the series was still scrutinized by many at the time. Frank Provo brings up how easy it is to be bored in *Shenmue* in his review, claiming "By the time you're driving forklifts and participating in the game's QTE-filled conclusion, hours upon hours of boredom will have taken their toll." (Gamespot, 2000) However, the game's popularity at the time show this wasn't the experience every player had with the game. Author and game designer Ian Bogost commended *Shenmue* and its push for spending time outside of the main story, claiming the "abstruseness and free movement" makes wandering the city its own reward. (Bogost pg. 94)

The introduction of one of the game's main combat mechanics also made waves throughout game history that can still be felt in recent generations. The quick-time event, or QTE, is a short, cinematic sequence requiring the split-second input of a button that determines the outcome. This mechanic in general, make the players reaction time a factor in the events that play out in certain situations. An early QTE sequence, involves a fight instigated by two shady

men on the street. Success will have the men flee, but failure will result in Ryo getting pummeled to the ground.

Even with the game's inclusion of fighting game-style combat reminiscent of SEGA's *Virtua Fighter* (1993)*,* the majority of action takes place in the form of QTEs. Whether QTEs add to *Shenmue*'s enjoyment is arguable, and since release has been a topic for future games heavy with QTE sequences. Pawel Grabarczyk perfectly describes the purpose for the mechanic, saying "they provide the least minimal agency in a sequence which would have been otherwise completely non-interactive." Grabarczyk also brings up the criticisms that QTEs face, which boils down to players questioning if they're worth using when the sequences can just play out themselves rather than calling for agency from the player for the sake of it.

Shenmue had a major emphasis on the intractability with the world and its many non-playable characters, or NPCs, that populate Yokosuka. The game also incorporated RPG elements allowing players to advance the story to their pace, or take a break from Ryo's quest and spend time at the arcade with a handful of mini-games. At the time, the game set itself apart from the open-world games that preceded it, mainly by taking advantage of the hardware advances that the SEGA Dreamcast provided. On top of what we've previously discussed, levels of intractability such as objects that can be picked up and examined from cabinets, amount of building interiors, and uniquely voiced NPCs all set standards for gaming environments for the upcoming generation and beyond. I think it's important to examine the games following *Shenmue*'s release and innovations that allowed the game to maintain relevancy in the past two decades.

An example of the effect that *Shenmue* had on existing franchises at the time is *Grand Theft Auto III* (2001). The original two games in the series were vastly different than *GTA* games we know today, being presented from the top-down perspective. While other games before *Shenmue* were presented in 3d before, like *Super Mario 64* (1996) and *Tomb Raider* (1996), never were they as detailed as they were here due to hardware limitations. Even at the release of *GTA III*, *Shenmue* remained the gold standard for NPC interactivity within open-worlds, as *is* sacrificed graphics for a much larger map that was also dense in NPC population. As observed by Gonzalo Frasca, aspects where *GTA III* exceeded like traversal, storytelling, and freedom reveal what may have caused *Shenmue* to be considered a failure today. The changes in priorities in world design that Rockstar made shaped the future of both the *GTA* series and gaming in general, but without *Shenmue* showing us what an open-world games can do, *GTA III* might not have been the game we know today.

The mechanic of day-and-night cycles is also something that has evolved over time and the idea of not being able to do something until a particular time of day would be built upon what *Shenmue* had accomplished. While simple uses of day-and-night cycles come often, like monsters appearing after sunset in *Minecraft* (2009), similar implementations have existed since way before *Shenmue.* However, there are a few titles that are more similar to how *Shenmue* utilizes time for immersion, including some of todays most popular games.

In *Shenmue,* the game can actually end on its own if the player spends 137 of the in-game days without reaching the end, making time go against you if you take too long to progress. A game notorious for having time restrains is *Dead Rising* (2006), which takes place in the span of 6 real-time hours, giving the game multiple endings based on how much you accomplished

within the time. A more extreme example of day-night cycles is the *Animal Crossing* series, where each game uses the system clock to have a real-time 24-hour cycle. While different from *Shenmue* overall, going to different stores and interacting with unique NPCs are important in both games' worlds, and each show how flawed a time cycle can be compared to the *GTA* or *Yakuza* games, where what buildings you can enter or what missions you can start aren't affected by time.

The idea of QTEs introduced to gaming is a major factor of controversy regarding *Shenmue*'s legacy. When the mechanic was implemented into new and existing series like *Resident Evil* and *Batman: Arkham,* gamers questioned why games with a history of unique, genre defining contribution took upon themselves to include what many say to be a lazy game mechanic. The two games I'm alluding to, *Resident Evil 6* (2012) and *Batman: Arkham Origins* (2013) added QTEs to their gameplay, either making the simple task of climbing a rope in RE 6 a "cumbersome" QTE event, or reducing use of the genre-defining combat *Arkham* is known for in the anticipated fight with Deathstroke in *Origins*.

QTEs in gaming history have also been seen as distasteful depending on the context of the sequence. In the original *God of War* games on the Playstation 2, players were able to engage with a QTE mini-game involving the protagonist, Kratos, sleeping with multiple women, where his performance depends on the players input. In an arguably worse case, the reboot of *Tomb Raider* in 2013 included a QTE sequence players had to successfully complete in order to prevent Lara Croft from being sexually assaulted by an NPC.

To me, one of the most undeniable effects that QTEs had on the industry are in the form of games developed by (and similar to) Quantic Dream. In a similar fashion to *Shenmue,* its most

popular titles, like *Heavy Rain* (2011) and *Detroit: Become Human* (2018) utilize QTEs as a primary mechanic and mostly revolve around stories involving detective work. The studio's work is mainly associated with the term "cinematic," as while the player is mostly performing an action at all times, the game plays out in a similar fashion to that of a film. The games also take more advantages of QTEs and have evolved the mechanic over several games since its first title to include QTEs *Indigo Prophecy* (2005). Where some games let you try QTEs again or don't have major effects on story, games like those from Quantic Dream innovate to make a failed QTE sequence affect what can happen in the game entirely.

The last thing that attributes to *Shenmue*'s legacy and innovation, derives from its setting. The game is set in Yokosuka, Japan, and is modeled entirely after pieces of the real-life city. Though it's out of the range of conversation in some cases, it really was the first breakthrough game to recreate a known location with accuracy, and the trend that *Shenmue* jumpstarted goes beyond simply recreating a city to accurate proportions. Simone Bregni, Ph.D., who has been thoroughly examining foreign learning through digital media, calls *Shenmue* "much more than a video game because it allows you to 'live' the city in all its facets." I think this way of looking at the game is interesting, and makes me think of games today that accomplish the same.

In terms of accuracy, I think games like *GTA V* (2013) achieve making a fictional representation of Los Angeles feel accurate using similar locations, like the Observatory and Venice Beach, and its parodying of American culture through radios and various NPCs. Similarly, the *Yakuza* games' depiction of Kabukicho, Tokyo's red-light district, in the form of Kamurocho achieves the feeling of being lived in with loads of activities and NPCs that offer more engagement than most games today. While both of these games might inspire fans to one

day visit these recognizable locations, it can seem flawed to use them as touring guides or truly

accurate representations of what these locations offer, due to them being fictionalized versions of

real places.

Separately, more and more games involving historic locations as means of education. In

an interview with Bregni, he acknowledges Ubisoft for the educational applications in some of

its games. The exploration mode included in *Assassin's Creed Origins* (2017) for example,

allows students to visit a virtual representation of Alexandria, Egypt, and the efforts in

reconstructing the lost dialect of "Koine," was commended by Bregni. Since Bregni's comments

on Ubisoft, the company has also been recognized for providing one of the only forms of virtual

tourism for one of the world's most important historic monuments in its original state, Notre

Dame, which lost parts of its architecture to a fire in 2019.

Other Ubisoft games today also utilize modern technology to recreate real cities, like

Watch_Dogs 2 (2016) and *The Division 2* (2019) and the near perfect portrayal of San Fransisco,

and the 1:1 recreation of Washington D.C., as claimed by Ubisoft. All of these examples are

relevant to *Shenmue*'s legacy because it shows how much games can be used to preserve various

important locations and representations of cultures during a specific time.

On top of these uses for the game's accurate portrayal of Yokosuka, *Shenmue* has been

used to promote tourism in the city in recent years as well. In *Games and Play in the Creative,*

Smart and Ecological City (Leorke, Owens, 2021), a chapter is dedicated to the city of Yokosuka

and its promotion of the city in the form of the Shenmue Sacred Spot Guide Map. While a

seemingly niche reason for tourism to rise, they concluded that it's nearly impossible to connect

the city's economic growth since the pamphlet's introduction, but it still proves that the game has struck new relevance after years since the series' downfall.

　　　Since the last installment in the series, *Shenmue III* (2019), and its failure to meet fan expectation as well as garner new audiences, I feel the original game stands prominently in gaming history despite the many reasons that might have attributed to its eventual demise. I feel its necessary to look at this game's place in the history of many popular franchises today, and recognize how even a game considered bad by many can be influential in different ways in terms of mechanics and world-design. It's not a game that needs to be experienced by everyone, but in the process of looking back at how games have evolved, the contributions made by *Shenmue* are too prominent to be ignored.

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