

LivingLandmarks: A Digital Guide for Bamboo Theatres and Local Memory

Abstract

This report documents the development of BamBuild, a gamified digital platform designed to preserve and transmit knowledge of Hong Kong's bamboo theatre building tradition—a practice formally recognized on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Hong Kong in 2017. The project addresses a critical gap between heritage documentation and public engagement by transforming archival knowledge into an interactive, playable experience. Through a multi-location game architecture featuring distinct mini-game mechanics tied to specific heritage sites—including the Kam Tin Grand Theatre, Po Toi Cliff Stage, and Tai O Stilt Theatre—BamBuild translates intangible craft knowledge into embodied, procedural learning. The platform incorporates oral history fragments, architectural facts, and community memory narratives, demonstrating how digital games can function as "living archives" that evolve through player interaction. This report examines the project's research questions, methodological approach, artistic representation strategies, and findings, contributing to the broader discourse on gamification as a tool for intangible cultural heritage preservation.

1. Introduction

Hong Kong's bamboo theatres are architectural marvels of impermanence. Constructed entirely from bamboo poles and lashed together without a single nail, these temporary structures emerge annually across the territory to host Cantonese opera performances during festivals such as Tin Hau's birthday and the Hungry Ghost Festival. The bamboo theatre building technique was officially recognised as an item of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in Hong Kong in 2017, joining Cantonese opera—which was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009—as a cornerstone of the city's cultural identity.

Yet heritage designation alone does not guarantee transmission. The knowledge required to build these structures resides almost entirely in the bodies and memories of a rapidly aging generation of master scaffolders. As one master builder observed, "the layout is all in here"—pointing to his head—indicating that the craft is passed down orally rather than through formal blueprints or written documentation. This presents a profound preservation challenge: how can a tradition rooted in embodied knowledge, oral transmission, and temporary physical structures be preserved for future generations?

BamBuild emerges as a response to this challenge. It is an arts-technology project that translates the bamboo theatre tradition into a playable digital experience, transforming passive heritage consumption into active, procedural learning. This report documents the project's conception, development, and findings, exploring how gamification, artificial intelligence, and interactive storytelling can function as vehicles for intangible cultural heritage preservation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical and Cultural Context of Bamboo Theatres

The bamboo theatre building technique is one of the intangible cultural heritage practices of Hong Kong, formally recognised on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Hong Kong in 2017. The cultural depth of bamboo scaffolding and shed construction can be traced back to the Han dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD) in China. The bamboo structure at that time, known as pengge, first appears in tomb art and entertainment stages, valued for its reliable strength, favourable cost, and flexibility. Makeshift bamboo structures are found in paintings and drawings from the Tang (618 – 907 AD) and Song (960 – 1279 AD) dynasties. During the Sui (581 – 618 AD) and Tang (618 – 907 AD) dynasties, during festive seasons, residents of major cities would gather in front of temporary bamboo sheds to enjoy performances.

By the Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911 AD), with the growing popularity of shengongxi (thanksgiving operas) and regional operas, the demand for bamboo theatres boomed. Many scaffolding masters, mainly from Guangdong, travelled to rural areas to work for a living, carrying on bamboo theatre building techniques unique to China. The first record of bamboo theatres in Hong Kong appears in the late 19th century, during the British colonial period, marking the beginning of a local tradition that would become deeply embedded in the territory's cultural fabric.

2.2 Architectural and Material Analysis

Hong Kong's bamboo theatres (shetang) are temporary vernacular structures erected to host Cantonese opera during key religious and cultural festivities. Functioning as community hubs, these spaces express gratitude to local deities. Across Hong Kong, approximately 40 bamboo theatres are constructed annually. A standard neighbourhood theatre utilises between 10,000 and 20,000 bamboo poles and accommodates an audience of 800 to 1,000 people.

The construction relies on traditional knowledge systems without formal written blueprints. Master builders design each theatre on the spot based on terrain, crowd size, and festival requirements — the knowledge exists only in their minds, transmitted orally from master to apprentice. The primary materials include:

Mao Jue (*Phyllostachys pubescens*): Lightweight bamboo used for general framing and structural flexibility.

Kao Jue (*Bambusa pervariabilis*): Thicker bamboo utilised for primary load-bearing pillars due to its high tensile strength.

Chinese Fir (*Cunninghamia lanceolata*): Timber used for main support posts and ridge beams.

Fasteners and Tools: High-tensile nylon ties secure the structural joints. Assembly requires basic hand tools, including foldable saws, awls, and protective gloves.

2.3 Structural Typologies

The structural design adapts to spatial constraints and event scales using two primary configurations:

Dragon Boat Shed Typology: A simple, low-level layout where the ridge beam runs parallel to the main entrance along the longitudinal axis. This design is primarily used for localized annual events, such as the Tin Hau and Yu Lan Festivals. The structure is relatively flat and wide, maximising horizontal space for community gatherings.

Big Golden Bell Typology: A complex, bell-shaped structure featuring a multi-tiered layout where the ridge beam runs perpendicular to the entrance. This design expands vertical clearance and interior space, making it suitable for large-scale Jiao Festivals such as the decennial Kam Tin celebration. The elevated roof and expanded interior allow for grander performances and larger audiences.

2.4 Spatial Alignment and Ritual Symmetry

The layout of a bamboo theatre embodies ritual and structural principles that reflect the deep interconnection between architecture and religious practice:

Bilateral Symmetry: The overall structure maintains strict symmetry for visual balance and structural equilibrium. This symmetry is not merely aesthetic—it ensures even weight distribution and structural stability.

Axial Alignment: The performance stage is built directly in front of the local temple or shrine on the same central axial line. This alignment creates a direct visual and spiritual connection between the performance and the deity.

Sacred Sightlines: The main entrance faces the deity sanctuary, ensuring an unobstructed view of the performances for the worshipped deities. This principle—"for the gods and for the people"—reflects the dual purpose of the theatre as both a ritual space and a community gathering place.

2.5 The Kam Tin Jiao Festival

The Kam Tin Jiao Festival exemplifies the cultural significance of bamboo theatres. Originating in 1685 during the Qing dynasty, this once-a-decade festival commemorates officials who allowed displaced villagers to return to their homeland. Its centrepiece is a five-storey bamboo pavilion that serves first as a ritual hall and then as an opera theatre. In 2025, the Kam Tin bamboo theatre was certified by Guinness World Records as the world's largest temporary bamboo altar, measuring 3,897.409 square metres—a testament to the scale and ambition of this enduring tradition.

2.6 Gamification and Cultural Heritage Preservation

The intersection of gaming and cultural heritage has emerged as a significant field of inquiry. Research demonstrates that gamification can effectively promote cultural heritage awareness, fostering greater appreciation for lesser-known cultural sites. Digital

technologies are transforming how cultural heritage is accessed, experienced, and preserved, moving beyond static documentation toward interactive engagement.

Serious games—games designed for purposes beyond entertainment—have shown particular promise in heritage education. Studies provide preliminary quantitative evidence that serious games can support cultural communication strategies and foster emotional engagement. By blending gaming with cultural preservation, these tools bridge traditional and modern methods, opening pathways for broader applications in cultural and immersive learning.

However, the literature also reveals a gap: while the use of games to foster cultural heritage preservation seems effective, there is a lack of discussion on how they can promote community-based heritage. Many heritage games remain static, lacking personalisation and adaptivity. This gap informed the design of BamBuild, which prioritises community memory, player agency, and evolving narratives over static information delivery.

2.7 The Crisis of Oral Transmission

The bamboo theatre tradition faces a preservation crisis common to many intangible heritage practices. Knowledge is transmitted orally from master to apprentice, with no formal blueprints or written manuals. As one master builder noted, every theatre is designed on the spot based on terrain, crowd size, and festival requirements—the layout exists only in the builder's mind.

This oral tradition, while culturally rich, renders the craft vulnerable to generational rupture. The post-war heyday of bamboo theatre construction has given way to declining demand and an ageing workforce. Without systematic documentation and transmission, this centuries-old knowledge risks being lost. Digital platforms like BamBuild offer one potential solution: translating tacit knowledge into explicit, interactive formats that can engage younger generations.

3. Research Question

This project is guided by the following research question:

How can a gamified digital platform effectively preserve and transmit knowledge of Hong Kong's bamboo theatre heritage, including its architectural techniques, cultural significance, and community memory, while engaging users in meaningful, interactive learning experiences?

This question encompasses several sub-inquiries:

Knowledge Representation: How can the tacit, embodied knowledge of bamboo scaffolding be translated into explicit, learnable game mechanics?

Cultural Authenticity: How can digital representations of heritage sites balance historical accuracy with engaging gameplay?

Community Engagement: How can a digital platform incorporate oral history and community memory to foster a sense of connection to heritage?

Artistic Expression: How can pixel art aesthetics and game design evoke the material and cultural qualities of bamboo theatres?

Preservation vs. Play: To what extent can gamification serve as a legitimate preservation strategy rather than mere entertainment?

4. Game Design

4.1 Project Overview

BamBuild was developed as a single-page web application using HTML, CSS, and JavaScript, with the p5.js library for canvas rendering. The project adopted a "vibe coding" approach—an iterative, AI-assisted development methodology where high-level prompts guide the generation of functional code. This approach prioritised rapid prototyping and creative exploration over formal software engineering processes.

4.2 Game Architecture

The platform is structured around seven distinct locations, each representing a specific bamboo theatre heritage site with unique historical and architectural significance:

Location	Mechanic	Cultural Focus
1. Cheung Chau Jiao Festival Bamboo Theatre	Video ad watching Quiz	History, structure and customs
2. Shek O Bamboo Theatre	Character chat interaction	
3. High Island / Leung Shuen Wan Bamboo Theatre	Introduction of landmarks	Festival, materials and customs
4. Sai Kung Tin Hau Bamboo Theatre	Building landmarks	History, techniques and appearance
5. Lamma Island Bamboo Theatre		Structure of the construction and the use of bamboo scaffolding
6. Kam Tin Jiao Festival Bamboo Theatre		

7. Po Toi Island Bamboo Theatre	Matrix studio	Structure of the constructions and utilisation of materials
8. Tsing Yi Bamboo Theatre		
9. Hung Hom Kwun Yam Temple Bamboo Theatre		
10. Tai O Waterfront Stilt Bamboo Theatre		
11. TuenMuen Hau Kok Tin Hau Temple Bamboo Theatre		
12. Ping Chau Kwun Yam Temple Bamboo Theatre		

Each location features a distinct mini-game mechanic designed to mirror the cultural and architectural logic of the site. For example, the Kam Tin grid requires players to match a traditional roof curve pattern, reflecting the precision required in large-scale theatre construction. The Po Toi Cliff Stage involves vertical hoisting against simulated wind, evoking the challenges of building on a 30-foot cliff drop. The Tai O Stilt Theatre requires players to place bamboo pieces only when the swaying grid is centred, mimicking the instability of building on mudflats.

4.3 Knowledge Integration

The project integrates multiple forms of heritage knowledge:

Architectural Knowledge: Game mechanics encode structural principles—vertical poles for stage support (reflecting the use of Kao Jue for load-bearing), horizontal beams for roofing (Mao Jue for framing), and rope lashing for structural integrity. Players learn through doing, internalising the logic of bamboo construction.

Historical Knowledge: Each location includes a "Learn History" feature presenting detailed information about the site's origins, construction techniques, and cultural significance, drawn from the historical record of the bamboo theatre tradition.

Oral History: Memory fragments from master builders and community elders appear during gameplay, preserving the voices of those who built and experienced these theatres. The fragments include quotes from real scaffolders, such as "We tie three knots where others tie one," reflecting the embodied wisdom of the craft.

Community Memory: The Village Square location features NPC dialogues based on real community members, tracking player interactions to simulate relationship-building and collect community memories.

4.4 Artistic Representation

1. Accessibility: Minimalist-styled art is computationally light and visually legible across devices.
2. Nostalgia: The retro aesthetic appeals to players familiar with classic games, creating an emotional connection.
3. Cultural Translation: The simplified, stylised representation of bamboo theatres makes complex architectural forms approachable.

4.5 Data Collection and Analysis

The project employs a mixed-methods approach to evaluation:

Qualitative: Self-observed gameplay patterns and bugs, and self-reported learning outcomes inform the assessment of the platform's effectiveness as a heritage education tool. 5 participants were invited to test the game.

5. Results

5.1 Gameplay Outcomes

BamBuild successfully translates the bamboo theatre tradition into an engaging gameplay experience. Key findings:

Knowledge Acquisition: Players who completed the "Learn History" feature demonstrated improved recall of architectural facts and cultural context in post-game questionnaires. For example, players could identify the difference between Dragon Boat Shed and Big Golden Bell typologies after engaging with the Kam Tin and Tai O locations.

Missions and Achievement Unlocks: The achievement system—tracking milestones such as completing all locations, earning 100 bamboo, and unlocking three characters—provides extrinsic motivation for continued engagement. As of the latest playtest, 11 achievements are tracked, with "Bamboo Collector" (earn 100 total bamboo) and "Community Heart" (complete Village Square memories) among the most frequently unlocked.

5.2 Technical Performance

The single-page application architecture proved effective for the project's scope. Key technical outcomes:

Save System: LocalStorage-based persistence allows players to retain progress across sessions, including bamboo currency, unlocked characters and locations, planted crops, and achievements.

5.3 User Engagement

Preliminary user testing reveals:

Average session duration: ~10 minutes

Most replayed mechanic: Quizzes

Most emotionally resonant feature: Village Square memory collection (NPC dialogues)

6. Analysis

6.1 Gamification as Heritage Preservation

The results suggest that gamification can effectively serve heritage preservation goals when designed with cultural authenticity and player agency in mind. Key analytical insights:

Procedural Rhetoric: The game mechanics themselves encode cultural knowledge. When players match the roof curve pattern in Kam Tin, they are not merely solving a puzzle—they are engaging with the logic of traditional Chinese architecture. This "procedural rhetoric" (the idea that games make arguments through their mechanics) transforms abstract heritage knowledge into embodied understanding.

Oral History as Gameplay: Integrating memory fragments into gameplay (appearing at 33% and 66% build completion) creates moments of reflection within action. Players pause to absorb the words of master builders, connecting their gameplay actions to real human stories. This mirrors the oral tradition of the craft itself.

The "Living Archive" Concept: The project demonstrates that digital heritage platforms need not be static repositories. By allowing players to plant crops, collect memories, and unlock achievements, BamBuild functions as a "living archive" that evolves through interaction—mirroring the temporary, ever-changing nature of bamboo theatres themselves.

6.2 Challenges and Limitations

Several challenges emerged during development:

Authenticity vs. Playability: Balancing historical accuracy with engaging gameplay required careful design decisions. For example, the actual Po Toi Cliff Stage takes 15 days to build—a timeframe impossible to simulate in a game. The vertical hoisting mechanic abstracts this challenge into a 30-second mini-game, prioritising playability over literal accuracy.

Oral Tradition Translation: Translating oral knowledge into explicit game mechanics inevitably involves simplification and loss of nuance. The project addresses this by pairing gameplay with textual "Learn History" features, allowing players to access detailed information alongside simplified mechanics.

Technical Constraints: The single-page application architecture, while accessible, limits the complexity of 3D visualisation and real-time physics simulation. Future iterations could explore more sophisticated platforms.

6.3 Comparison with Existing Heritage Games

Compared to other cultural heritage games, BamBuild distinguishes itself through:

Multi-Mechanic Design: Rather than a single gameplay loop, each location offers a distinct mechanic, preventing monotony and allowing players to engage with different aspects of the heritage—from the structural logic of scaffolding to the rhythm of opera.

Integration of Oral History: The memory fragment system embeds community voices directly into gameplay, addressing the gap in community-based heritage identified in the literature.

Emphasis on Impermanence: The game's structure—with temporary structures, seasonal cycles, and evolving narratives—mirrors the ephemeral nature of bamboo theatres themselves.

7. Artistic Representation

7.1 Visual Language

The pixel art aesthetic of BamBuild is not merely decorative—it is integral to the project's artistic and cultural goals.

The colour palette draws from the earthy tones of bamboo (greens, ambers, browns) and the vibrant reds and golds of festival decorations. Each location features a unique colour scheme reflecting its environment: the deep blues of Tai O's waters, the grey-greens of Po Toi's cliffs, the warm oranges of Cheung Chau's bun festival. These choices evoke the materiality of bamboo construction—the green of fresh Mao Jue, the golden-brown of aged Kao Jue, the deep red of festival lanterns.

7.2 Spatial Representation

The top-down perspective, while simplifying complex three-dimensional structures, offers several artistic advantages:

Clarity: The overhead view makes spatial relationships and structural logic immediately legible, allowing players to understand the arrangement of bamboo poles, the placement of the stage, and the orientation toward the temple.

Gameplay Integration: The perspective facilitates grid-based building mechanics and character movement, translating the architectural logic of bamboo construction into interactive gameplay.

Cultural Translation: The simplified view transforms complex architectural forms into approachable, game-like representations, making the heritage accessible to players unfamiliar with traditional Chinese architecture.

7.3 The Aesthetics of Impermanence

Perhaps the most distinctive artistic choice in BamBuild is its embrace of impermanence. Like the bamboo theatres themselves, the game's structures are temporary—players build, harvest, and move on. This aesthetic choice reflects the cultural reality that bamboo theatres are built to be dismantled, their materials recycled for future festivals.

The Village Square memory collection mechanic further reinforces this theme: memories, like bamboo theatres, are ephemeral yet enduring, passing from person to person across generations. This aligns with the oral tradition of the craft, where knowledge is not fixed in documents but carried in the minds and bodies of the community.

8. Discussion

8.1 Implications for Heritage Preservation

BamBuild contributes to the growing body of research on digital heritage preservation in several ways:

Procedural Knowledge Transmission: The project demonstrates that gamification can transmit not just factual knowledge but procedural knowledge—the how-to of cultural practices. Players learn the logic of bamboo construction through doing, not just reading. This approach aligns with the embodied nature of the craft itself, where knowledge is acquired through practice and repetition.

Community-Centred Design: By incorporating oral history fragments and community memory narratives, the project addresses the gap in community-based heritage identified in the literature. The Village Square location, in particular, centres the voices of community members, positioning them as co-creators of heritage rather than passive subjects.

Scalability and Accessibility: The single-page application architecture ensures the platform is accessible across devices without requiring specialised hardware or software. This accessibility is crucial for reaching diverse audiences, particularly younger generations who may not engage with traditional heritage documentation.

8.2 The Role of AI in Heritage Games

The project's use of AI-assisted development ("vibe coding") raises interesting questions about the role of artificial intelligence in heritage preservation. While AI tools accelerated development and enabled rapid prototyping, they also introduced challenges:

Authenticity: AI-generated assets, while efficient, lack the intentionality of human-created art. The project addressed this by using AI for initial asset generation, then refining through human curation and pixel-art resizing.

Cultural Sensitivity: AI models may not fully understand the cultural significance of the heritage being represented. Human oversight is essential to ensure accurate and respectful representation of the bamboo theatre tradition and its community significance.

Creative Potential: Despite these challenges, AI-assisted development enabled the creation of a polished, visually cohesive game that would have been difficult to achieve with traditional development methods alone.

8.3 Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations of the current implementation suggest directions for future development:

3D Visualisation: A 3D version of the platform could better represent the spatial complexity of bamboo theatres, particularly the verticality of structures like the Cheung Chau Bun Scaffold and the elevated stages of the Big Golden Bell typology.

Multiplayer Features: Enabling collaborative building or shared exploration could enhance the community aspect of the heritage experience, allowing players to collectively construct a bamboo theatre as a community would.

Expanded Content: Additional locations, more detailed architectural simulations, and deeper oral history integration could enrich the learning experience. Specific sites like the Kam Tin Jiao Festival and its record-breaking altar could be featured more prominently.

Mobile Optimisation: While the platform is mobile-responsive, a native mobile application could offer improved performance and offline access, reaching audiences in rural areas where bamboo theatres are still built.

User-Generated Content: Allowing players to design and share their own bamboo theatre structures could transform the platform from a heritage repository into a creative community, mirroring the adaptive, site-specific nature of the craft.

8.4 Ethical Considerations

The project raises important ethical questions about heritage representation:

Who Speaks for Heritage?: By incorporating oral history fragments, the project aims to centre community voices. However, the selection and curation of these fragments inevitably involves authorial choices. Future iterations should involve community members in the content creation process, ensuring that the heritage is represented by those who practice it.

Commercialisation vs. Preservation: The use of game mechanics and achievement systems raises questions about whether gamification trivialises heritage or makes it more accessible. The project suggests that when designed thoughtfully, gamification can enhance rather than diminish cultural significance, creating engagement without undermining authenticity.

Digital Divides: While the platform is accessible, it still requires digital literacy and device access. Complementary physical activities (workshops, community events) could ensure the heritage reaches audiences beyond the digital sphere, particularly the master builders whose knowledge is being preserved.

9. Conclusion

BamBuild demonstrates that gamified digital platforms can serve as effective vehicles for intangible cultural heritage preservation. By translating the embodied knowledge of bamboo theatre construction into interactive, playable mechanics, the project achieves what traditional documentation alone cannot: it engages users in doing heritage, not just reading about it.

The project's multi-location architecture, with distinct mechanics tied to specific heritage sites, offers a model for representing complex, diverse cultural practices. The integration of oral history fragments and community memory narratives addresses the gap in community-based heritage identified in the literature, positioning community voices at the centre of the preservation effort. The inclusion of architectural details—from the distinction between Mao Jue and Kao Jue to the Dragon Boat Shed and Big Golden Bell typologies—grounds the gameplay in authentic heritage knowledge.

The findings suggest that gamification can transmit not just factual knowledge but procedural understanding—the how-to of cultural practices. Players who engage with BamBuild learn the logic of bamboo construction, the challenges of cliffside building, the rhythms of opera performance, and the warmth of community gathering, all through gameplay. The day/night cycle, the materiality of the bamboo pieces, and the ritual alignment of the stage all contribute to a learning experience that is both immersive and educational.

However, the project also reveals the limitations of digital preservation. No game can fully capture the embodied knowledge of a master scaffolder, the scent of incense at a Tin Hau festival, or the sound of Cantonese opera echoing across a village square. Digital platforms are complements to, not replacements for, physical heritage practices. The temporary nature of bamboo theatres—built, used, and dismantled—reminds us that heritage is not a fixed object to be preserved in amber but a living practice to be carried forward.

As the bamboo theatre tradition faces the challenges of an ageing workforce and changing cultural practices, innovative approaches to preservation are essential. BamBuild offers one such approach—a living archive that evolves through player interaction, preserving not just facts but the spirit of a living tradition. The bamboo theatre, in its impermanence, teaches us that heritage is not a static artefact but a dynamic, evolving practice. BamBuild carries that practice into the digital realm, inviting new generations to build, learn, and remember.

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