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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the concept of utopia across different cultures, analyzing the ideal lands in Eastern and Western societies. The author categorizes utopian ideals into two types: Thomas More-style utopias, which aim for social and political perfection, and Arcadian ideals, which prioritize individual inner peace and escape from society. The author compares the ways of entering, the environments, the lifestyles, and the consequences of leaving mentioned in these stories to identify the visual language involved. These visual elements of ideal lands provide a solid foundation for the author's visual thesis, a video game that allows players to build their own ideal world. Overall, this paper highlights the universal human desire for a perfect world and the various cultural expressions of that desire while offering the author's own answer to the ideal land.

THE UTOPIAN QUEST:
A VISUAL AND CULTURAL EXPLORATION OF IDEAL LANDS

by

Lingyin Luo

B.F.A., Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, 2017

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Illustration

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Introduction

From ancient times to the present, a kind of ideal land has been depicted in many different cultures. Such places are commonly referred to as “Utopias.” The word first came from a novel written in Latin by the English writer Thomas More, which was published in 1516. He fictionalized a perfect state located on an island, and this state was named Utopia. At first, he used the Latin word “nusquam,” meaning nowhere. Instead of this name, he eventually used a Greek compound word when he published it¹. The prefix “ou” is the Greek word for “no” or “not,” and “topos,” which means place. By adding “ia,” a toponym, the term “utopia” was formed as we know it today². In contrast, those places where people are no longer free and happy, where they have to be cautious and fearful in order to survive, are called Dystopias.

Utopia has become a byword for all perfect places in Western culture. However, the concept of an ideal land actually predates the emergence of this term. It can be found in the myths and folklore of various cultures. Many early mythical ideal lands and afterlives were only collectively referred to as utopian fantasies after the word "utopia" was coined. Strictly speaking, the concepts of some ideal places do not truly align with the utopian desire for progress and improvement. For instance, some ideal places in Eastern cultures are fundamentally related to escape from society. They advocate for embracing an idyllic life, away from political corruption

¹ John M. Rist, “From Dreamland ‘Humanism’ to Christian Political Reality or from ‘Nusquam’ to ‘Utopia,’” *The Review of Metaphysics* 69, no. 4 (2016): 752.

² “Utopia | Definition, Examples, & Facts | Britannica,” Britannica, accessed September 21, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/utopia>.

and fickle society, in order to achieve inner peace. If one were to find a more appropriate term in Western culture to represent this type of ideal place, it would probably be Arcadia. Arcadia, a region located in the central Peloponnese of Greece, is characterized by its mountainous terrain. Mythology describes it as the abode of the shepherd god Pan, and in literature, it is often used as a symbol of the Golden Age of Greek mythology. As such, the term Arcadia has come to signify an idyllic and idealized way of life. Whatever the nature of the ideal place, all of them are—as the etymology of utopia notes—nowhere, unreal.

In people's descriptions, those ideal places generally have a perfect political system with fair distribution and no crime. Everyone is able to live a life without worrying about food and clothing. The residents are less likely to have negative emotions as well. Are those ideal places actually like that? If nothing else, they epitomize people's aspirations for perfection. A “utopia” must not be a barren desert, as a rich natural environment is necessary as support. After all, in the case of insufficient resources, people are prone to conflict due to inequality of distribution. Thus, in the ideal places that people might imagine, whether it is a valley surrounded by mountains or an island that requires sailing to reach, there must be certain fundamental and universal environmental factors that act as a foundation for sustenance.

Discovering these visual commonalities greatly aided in the creation of my visual thesis. I wanted to design a game that would allow players to build their own ideal land from scratch, with an animal as the main character. To do this, I needed to understand the ideal realms that

others had created, and why they were so desirable. It was important to consider that although the characters in the game were animals, it was humans who played the game and could resonate with the world created by the animal protagonist. I certainly could not rely solely on my own imagination to construct the game's atmosphere. The existing utopian works in this world were fantasies carefully designed and refined by human beings. They represented idealized solutions provided by humans to eliminate negative aspects of real life, such as disease, hunger, war, and so on. The purpose of this paper was to study their entry methods, environment, lifestyle, and the consequences of leaving, in order to organize the visual language within them and enrich my own visual work.

Part I: The Ideal Lands in Eastern Cultures

As a result of frequent cultural exchanges, the term utopia has been widely used in Eastern culture. Nevertheless, in China, there is an older term used to identify an ideal land, and that is “Taohuayuan,” which means “Peach-Blossom Spring.” This term has been passed on to Japan as “Tougenkyou,” but the meaning is exactly the same. The name comes from a fable written by Tao Yuanming—an ancient Chinese poet—in 421 CE. He was a pioneer of the Fields and Gardens poetry genre. The life he advocated is close to the Arcadian life. His influence was so profound that the article was included in middle school textbooks and is a required piece for all Chinese students to be able to recite.

The article tells the story of a fisherman who accidentally discovered an isolated village during the Jin Dynasty (266 to 420 CE) in China, where the people lived a peaceful lifestyle but had no idea of the changing outside world. They only knew that their ancestors had lived here in seclusion since the Qin Dynasty (221 to 207 BC), and they did not know anything about the



Figure 1: a section of *Peach Blossom Spring* shows fisherman entering the cave that serves as the entrance to the village (the red circle).

Qiu, Ying. *Peach Blossom Spring [Taohua Yuan]*, Poem by Tao Qian (365–427). Ink and color on paper, <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/29998/peach-blossom-spring-taohua-yuan-poem-by-tao-qian-36542>.

dynasties that followed. After the fisherman left this village, he tried to bring others to find this village again, but he could no longer find the location³.

In this story, the peach blossom forest is the entrance to the ideal place, and there is a narrow tunnel at the end of this forest leading to the village in the mountains. This can be seen in the paintings of Qiu Ying, a Chinese artist of the Ming Dynasty (1368 to 1644 CE), whose scroll of the Peach Blossom Spring is painted exactly as described in the article (see figure 1).

It is worth mentioning that there is no supernatural power in the Peach Blossom Spring.

There are only beautiful rural landscapes:

“There, on a plain stretching away, austere houses were graced with fine fields and lovely ponds. Dikes and paths crossed here and there among mulberries and bamboo. Roosters and dogs called back and forth.”⁴

The residents of that village can neither use magic nor be immortalized. The only mystical element in the story is that the fisherman could not return to the Peach Blossom Spring in the end. The fisherman made some marks along the road when he left, but he was later unable to find

³ Yuanming Tao, *The Selected Poems of T'ao Ch'ien*, trans. David Hinton (Copper Canyon Press, 2016).

⁴ Tao.

the place, no matter how he searched. This situation may have been because his memory was flawed, or the village was protected by some supernatural power.

Since this article was written, Peach Blossom Spring has gradually come to symbolize various forms of secluded paradises. Another painting by artist Qiu Ying (see figure 2), *Immortal Realm of the Peach Spring*, is a more personal interpretation of Peach Blossom Spring. It is obvious that this piece integrates more of the mythical fairyland concept. The mountains rise and



Figure 2: Qiu, Ying. *Immortal Realm of the Peach Spring*. Ink and color on silk, <https://www.tjbwg.com/cn/collectionInfo.aspx?Id=2572>.

fall, buildings stand above the clouds, and people sit by the streams listening to music. Many ancient Chinese literati yearned for such a life surrounded by natural scenery and accompanied by good friends.



Figure 3: Yuan, Jiang. *Penglai Island*. Color on silk. Palace Museum, *Wikimedia Commons*, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:YuanJiang-Penglai_Island.jpg.

Yuan Jiang, a painter of the Qing Dynasty, also painted buildings surrounded by clouds in the mountains, but what he painted was not the Peach Blossom Spring. This painting shows a very different place from the Peach Blossom Spring – Penglai Island (see figure 3).

Penglai Island is not just the invention of a particular writer, but rather a fictional island with a sacred mountain whose legend has been passed down through a combination of oral tradition and various literary works. It is generally considered to be located in the Bohai Sea, a marginal sea in eastern China. The famous ancient Chinese historian Sima Qian wrote in the *Records of the Grand Historian* that Qin Shi Huang—the first emperor of the Qin Dynasty— had sent a thousand boys and girls as sacrifices to the sea in search of Penglai Island in order to get the immortality elixir, but he ultimately failed. The animals on the island are all white, and there are palaces built of gold and silver. The people who live there are immortal. In Chinese tradition, white has many symbolic meanings, such as brightness, purity, and wisdom. People have developed an admiration for white animals for this reason⁵. Moreover, the rarity of albino animals in nature makes them even more precious. Many people have been captivated by the legend of this island, full of precious metals and rare animals, and are eager to find it in the real world. However, not everyone is qualified to become immortal and enjoy such a life, so Penglai Island itself has its own ways of securing its borders:

⁵ Min Yang, “Worship of White Animal Spirits - Ancient Chinese Theory of White Auspicious Animals,” *Studies of Ethnic Literature* 02(2003) (n.d.): 25–31, <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1002-9559.2003.02.003>.

*“Seen from afar, the three spirit mountains looked like clouds but, as one drew closer, they seemed instead to be down under the water. In any event, as soon as anyone got near to them, the wind would suddenly come and drag the boat away, so that in the end no one could ever reach them.”*⁶

This magic effectively prevents human beings from setting foot on the island.

The influence of the *Records of the Grand Historian* was so profound that many later works refer to it, such as the novel *Flowers in the Mirror* by author Li Ruzhen, a Chinese scholar of the Qing Dynasty (1636 to 1912 CE). The first chapter of the novel uses *the Records of the Grand Historian* and other ancient documents as an introduction to Penglai as a magical place where flowers never fall, and grasses are green in all seasons. Based on these elements, he describes more details about Penglai Island. He mentions many names of places and buildings, such as the Cave of Beauty where the Fairy of a Hundred Flowers lives, the red pavilion named Lament for Beauty Pavilion, and the Village of the Moon in the Water.

In the story, a man named Tang Ao and his friends travel by boat and arrive at a place called Little Penglai after a storm. The island was incredibly beautiful. The animals, such as cranes and deer, let themselves be patted and were not afraid of people. They found a white gibbon with red

⁶ Qian Sima, *Records of the Grand Historian of China, Vol. 2*, trans. Burton Watson (Columbia University Press, 1971), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb06046.0002.001>.

eyes holding some magical rock fungus, so they grabbed the fungus and ate it. Other people who ate the fungus felt sick in the stomach, and this action was accompanied by diarrhea, but Tang Ao seemed to be fine. When everyone was ready to leave Little Penglai, they realized that Tang Ao had already walked into the deep mountain and no longer intended to go back. He ate divine food along the journey, became immortal, and stayed in Penglai⁷.

Another ancient book that Li Ruzhen mentions in his novel is *the Record of Heretofore Lost Works* written by Wang Jia of the Jin Dynasty (266 to 420 CE). It contains detailed descriptions of the rare animals and beautiful landscapes of Penglai. For example, the island has jade-colored bamboo producing pearl-sized fruits. A divine bird named Qing Luan often lands on its branches. Under the bamboo is sand as fine as dust and, when the wind blows, the sand rises like a mist. Every time this happens, the immortals of the island come to enjoy the view and listen to the sound of the bamboo leaves being blown by the wind. They will also step on the stairs decorated with gold, silver, and jewels to drink the dew, the consumption of which allows one to live a thousand years.

The ideal places in the East are inseparable from nature. This may be related to the philosophical and religious beliefs of ancient China. Back then, people often thought that their

⁷ Ruzhen Li, *Flowers in the Mirror*, trans. Tai-yi Lin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965).

physical and social situations were connected to nature. Therefore, the more abundant and beautiful the natural environment is, the better it is for human well-being.

Part II: The Ideal Lands in Western Culture

When it comes to Western ideal lands, Thomas More's fiction "Utopia", as mentioned, was a foundational text. To express his dissatisfaction with the real world, More conceived of a more



Figure 4: 1518 Thomas More *Utopia* (November Edition) Map. Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Thomas_More_Utopia_November_1518_Vtopiae_Insvla_%2B_Vtopiensivm_Alphabetvm_\(The_Folger_Shakespeare_Library\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Thomas_More_Utopia_November_1518_Vtopiae_Insvla_%2B_Vtopiensivm_Alphabetvm_(The_Folger_Shakespeare_Library).jpg).

idealized system. Due to its over-idealization, this conception could never be used in real life; it serves as satire ridiculing the problems occurring in society at that time.

Through the fictional character Raphael Hythlodæus, the book describes an island where life is ideal. The entire island takes the shape of a crescent moon, with a strait running through it. The transportation on the island is convenient, but it is very difficult for people to enter the harbor from the outside. There are reefs and shoals all over. Even the Utopians themselves cannot completely guarantee safe access to the harbor, and foreigners who are not familiar with the route are more likely to hit the reef and sink their ships. This unique geographical condition makes defending Utopia easier. The capital, Amaurotum, is located on a hillside with a nearby river, Anydrus. Another small river runs through the city and eventually joins the Anydrus River. The urban landscape features well-maintained streets, and every house has a garden, lush with delicious fruits and beautiful flowers. In the early days, the houses there were low and made of wood and mud. Later on, they developed into three-story buildings with glass windows for wind protection.

Douwe Fokkema, a Dutch sinologist, mentions in his book *Perfect Worlds: Utopian Fiction in China and the West* that, until the 18th century, most European utopian stories are located on islands, which was very much related to navigation at that time⁸. People during this time lacked a

⁸ Douwe Fokkema, *Perfect Worlds: Utopian Fiction in China and the West*, *Perfect Worlds* (Amsterdam University Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048514861>.

holistic view of the world, and there were many blank spaces on the global map, triggering imaginings of utopias. The residents of the utopian islands could easily defend themselves against invaders by relying on their geography. Reduced contact with the outside world would allow them to develop their own national system without influence. This is the perfect stage for utopian imagination.

In addition to this kind of island utopia based on the age of navigation, there are also some ideal places with a more mythical quality; one utopia of this type is Avalon. It takes a slightly different shape in different works. Some of the descriptions are close to the idea of arcadian life but, at the same time, there are some concepts of the afterlife mixed in. Avalon is the legendary island where King Arthur finally rested. The earliest person to describe Avalon was Geoffrey of Monmouth, who wrote in *Historia regum Britanniae* around 1136 that King Arthur was sent to Avalon to heal after a battle with Modred. Arthur's sword Caliburn was also forged in Avalon⁹. Fourteen years later, Geoffrey wrote another poem featuring the wizard Merlin. In the poem, Avalon is called "the island of apples" or "The Fortunate Isle." The entire island is ruled by Morgan and her sisters, and it is rich in produce, with grains and fruits growing naturally without the need for farmers to cultivate them. Morgan has a talent for healing, and it was she who received King Arthur after the Battle of Camlan, and she was responsible for his health. King

⁹ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain* (Penguin UK, 2015).

Arthur was placed on a golden bed and waited to return to his kingdom after his wounds were cured¹⁰. Edward Burne-Jones' painting *The Last Sleep of Arthur in Avalon* shows a badly wounded King Arthur sleeping on Morgan's lap, next to golden buildings and lush gardens. In Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem, Avalon is depicted as a weatherproof island-valley with deep meadows and orchards¹¹. If such an island were to be easily found, the long-sleeping King Arthur would be constantly harassed by future generations. Therefore, in some tales, the island is hidden by Morgan via magic. In Marion Zimmer Bradley's novel, *Lady of Avalon* (1997), Avalon is surrounded by mists. The island is located between the human world and the world of Faerie, and those who have not learned ancient magic cannot get there¹².



Figure 5: Burne-Jones, Edward. *The Last Sleep of Arthur in Avalon*. Oil on canvas, 1898 to 1881. Museum of Art in Ponce Puerto Rico, *Wikimedia Commons*, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Burne-Jones_Last_Sleep_of_Arthur_in_Avalon_v2.jpg.

¹⁰ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, accessed October 29, 2022, <https://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/eng/vm/index.htm>.

¹¹ Lord Tennyson Alfred, "Idylls of the King: The Passing of Arthur," text/html, Poetry Foundation (Poetry Foundation, October 26, 2022), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45325/idylls-of-the-king-the-passing-of-arthur>.

¹² Marion Zimmer Bradley, *Lady of Avalon* (Penguin, 2007).

Avalon cannot be considered a complete afterlife, after all, because, in most descriptions, King Arthur is neither buried there after death nor in the form of a spirit to spend the afterlife there; instead, he exists in a long sleep, waiting for the day when he will continue to rule over his country. The island is also inhabited by non-dead people, including Morgan and her sisters. Moreover, in some paintings, Merlin and the Lady of the Lake are on the island.



Figure 6: The people in the red circle is the wizard Merlin and the Lady of the Lake.

Archer, James. *The Death of King Arthur*. oil on canvasmedium. James Archer, 1860, *Wikimedia Commons*, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Death_of_King_Arthur_by_James_Archer_\(1860\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Death_of_King_Arthur_by_James_Archer_(1860).jpg).

Part III: Eastern Style Ideal Lands in Western Literature

Shangri-La is now a city in Yunnan Province, China. It was not originally called by this name but was renamed Shangri-La in 2001 via government approval. Meanwhile, there is another town in Sichuan Province, also named Shangri-La. What made all these places pursue the name Shangri-La? The name comes from a novel written by British author James Hilton, called *Lost Horizon* (published in 1933). The book describes a village in a Himalayan valley with comfortable living, abundant resources, and long-lived people¹³. This book has made many people see the tourism value in it, so many places are trying to use the name to attract more tourists. Shangri-La is an Eastern utopia depicted by a Western writer, and although the novel is set in Tibet, the author had never been there before he wrote it. He depicts Tibet from an Orientalist perspective, a utopia that fulfills the dreams of the Western world.

The protagonists of the book are taken to an isolated valley after their plane crashes and the pilot dies. The locals call the mountains Karakal, which means “blue moon.” The wind and snow are kept out of the valley, and the weather inside the valley is like spring. The land is fertile, and the glaciers high above turn into small rivers and streams that irrigate the farmland. Although people in the valley basically do not communicate with the outside world, the living facilities have a modern standard. For instance, there are central heating systems and flush toilets in the

¹³ James Hilton, *Lost Horizon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1933).

temple. The temple has a library with valuable documents and artworks from various parts of the world. The pavilion in the garden even houses a harpsichord and a grand piano. These things brought in from the outside world are bought with gold by the people in the valley, relying on their rich gold mines.

After a comfortable life, two of the protagonists, Conway and Mallinson, finally decided to leave with a porter. A Manchu girl, Lo-Tsen, who had already lived in Shangri-La for a long time, also chose to leave with them. The manuscript documenting this bizarre journey ends here, and the rest is revealed in a conversation between the novelist who wrote it and his neurologist friend. Conway was found in a hospital with all his memories lost. A very old-looking woman took him to the hospital, and the woman also died of an illness soon afterward. No one can prove that she is the same Manchu girl who left Shangri-La with Conway and, if so, she must have started to age extremely fast after being away from the valley. Mallinson's end is not spelled out, and Conway seems to not want to talk about it after he regains his memory, perhaps having perished on his perilous trip. Those who choose to leave do not end happily, and Shangri-La remains hidden in the mountains, untouched by the world.

Part IV: Ideal Land in video game

Sakuna: Of Rice and Ruin is a Japanese action role-playing simulation video game released in 2020. Its development team has only two core members, but it still won players' praise for its excellent content.

In the game, the protagonist controlled by the players is the daughter of the harvest goddess and war god, Princess Sakuna. She inherited her parents' abilities and is regarded as a high-ranking goddess. Relying on the large amount of rice left by her mother, she lives a gluttonous and lazy life at Mihashira Capital in Lofty Realm. However, her comfortable life was spoiled when she encountered a group of mortals who had strayed into the Lofty Realm due to war and famine. As mortals are not allowed to enter the Lofty Realm, disputes arise between Sakuna and these individuals, and she tries to expel them. During the argument, they accidentally caused a fire that burned down the gods' tribute storehouse. The head goddess was very angry and exiled her to Hinoe, Isle of Demons, along with those mortals who were in trouble. The island has only farmland and huts left by her mother, which cannot be compared to the extravagant life of the Lofty Realm. In order to provide food for herself and others, she can only grow rice while fighting the demons on the island. In this process, she truly realizes her responsibility as a god.

Compared to all the ideal places mentioned earlier, Hinoe is obviously less ideal in terms of environment, and it is introduced as a punishment for the arrogant protagonist. Sakuna must abandon her carefree life in the Capital and take a boat to this island of Demons to atone for her mistakes. The island is full of dangers, a variety of demon beasts rampant. It has four changing seasons, and winter is cold. There are also dangerous volcanoes on the island. Even the head



Figure 7: Two very different views of Hinoe Island from *Sakuna: of Rice and Ruin Artbook* (2020).

goddess cannot bring this island under her control. Its landscape is, of course, beautiful, but mortals without fighting abilities can hardly survive there, and even the gods—Sakuna's parents—may be sacrificed in the battle with demons. The land of Hinoe not only nurtures demons, but its fertility also nourishes all forms of life. The trees on the island are huge, and the rice that Sakuna planted there has become an important tribute to the capital. Of the mortals who followed Sakuna there, two of them chose to stay on the island to continue their lives and became the new gods of the Lofty Realm. The other three mortals who chose to leave also achieved success in life because of their own experiences on the island: the missionary wrote many books combining her

insights to create a new sect; the young boy who studied blade forging became a well-known forger; the young child who could understand and empathize with the feelings of humans and animals grew up to become a farmer trusted by everyone around him. The goddess did not send down divine punishment on the mortals who trespassed on her domain, but she became friends with them and let them freely choose to stay or leave. *Sakuna: Of Rice and Ruin* gives all the good characters a happy ending.

Part V: Similarities and Differences

The Ways of Entering

Most ideal lands cannot be reached easily, which is their means of self-protection. There are basically several ways to reach them:

1. Long trek (Penglai, Shangri-la)
2. Getting lost or having an accident (Peach Blossom Spring)
3. Magic (Avalon)
4. Having someone from the ideal land to lead the way (Shangri-la, Utopia)
5. Present at a particular time (Sakuna: Of Rice and Ruin)
6. Death (the afterlife in Mythology and many religions)

Moreover, these methods can be combined. For example, accidentally discovering the ideal land that only appears at certain times during the journey, finding the magic door after a long trip, and so on. They must not be a place that can be visited many times in a short period of time, and the people who can arrive must be selected. Maintaining a quantitative number of people is an important way to ensure that the entire resource system of the ideal places can function properly.

Environment

The ideal lands can be located on islands, valleys, underwater, and underground, where geography is a barrier to isolating the outside world. In order to show the "ideal," the place must have a rich natural environment, which can be manifested in the form of rare and beautiful scenery, rich mineral veins, huge old trees, fields that can be harvested without much work, and fruit trees whose branches are bent by fruits, etc. Because humans are designed to consume nature, then nature's self-restoration speed must be slightly higher than human consumption speed to remain stable.

Lifestyle

People in the ideal lands have different lifestyles in different works, among which there are those that use industrial products and those that maintain a completely agrarian civilization, depending on the era of the works' birth. The core idea must be a high quality of life at a slow

pace. Residents should not be overworked to make ends meet. If they work all day just to barely support themselves, there will be no time to enjoy their lives. Modern technology can be employed, but the capital behind it should not be allowed to encroach upon the ideal lands. It is not that modernization and politics are unacceptable in the ideal lands, but that the corrupt parts of business and politics are unacceptable. Their "ideal" lies in their ability to encompass all the good parts of the real world and discard all the bad parts.

The consequences of leaving

The most difficult choice that outsiders entering an ideal place usually face is whether to stay or leave. The decision to depart often entails a range of varied consequences, both positive and negative, with the latter predominating in the majority of instances. The positive consequences are generally that people gain something valuable (or abilities) from the ideal lands, while the risks are more varied. There are also people who leave unharmed but want to return because of regret or other reasons, but the result is that they can not find their ideal lands again. In some stories, the protagonists would choose to stay in the ideal lands and completely say goodbye to their lives before. Many of these people became immortal or ascended to godhood because they ate food or elixirs from the ideal lands.

Part VI: The Visual Thesis

For my visual thesis, I wanted to focus on visual development: designing characters, environments, and user interfaces for a simulation role-playing game. This game allowed players to collect different inspirations through non-player characters (NPC) and create their own ideal lands.

Game Story

The background of the game is that the player-controlled protagonist rents a shop to sell art supplies in the big city. Despite the considerable income generated by the shop, the protagonist finds themselves constantly fatigued due to the hectic pace of city life. At this point, with the guidance of the first NPC, the protagonist found that painting a scenic mural in the shop's storage room can make the mural come to life as a utopian paradise. The natural landscape provides solace to the protagonist, who struggles with the stresses of city living, and spending time in this mural world after work dissolves the exhaustion caused by their daily grind. Nonetheless, the protagonist soon realizes that this mural world cannot be maintained indefinitely. The vivid, lifelike scenery will gradually fade, weather, and ultimately disappear, leaving only a small amount of white sand-like material piled up in the corner. In order to maintain this comfortable environment all the time, players have to redraw the mural at regular intervals to keep this fanciful world alive and ensure a haven for relaxation.

The Game's System

The game comprises of two distinct settings: a store, which represents materialism, wealth, and reality; a fantasy mural world within a storage room, representing spiritual satisfaction and idyllic pastoralism. Being active in different environments will change two different values. This value system is at the core of the entire game, and both rewards and penalties are tied to it.

The shop is associated with material value, which increases as income and quality of life improve. Conversely, the ideal land is associated with spiritual value, which signifies inner peace and contentment in the spiritual realm. Drawing on real-life examples, any activity that promotes relaxation, such as sleeping, meditation, reading, or traveling, can elevate this value. For the protagonist, the most relaxing thing is to rest in an ideal land of their own creation. The increase in material value brings spiritual needs, and neglecting these needs can result in greater fatigue. Furthermore, extended stays in the ideal land, although emotionally gratifying, can lead to impoverishment in reality and a decline in quality of life due to reduced working hours. Players who aim to play the game for a long time must keep a balance between these two values. A perfect balance will trigger game rewards, while extreme prominence of a value can make the game more difficult.

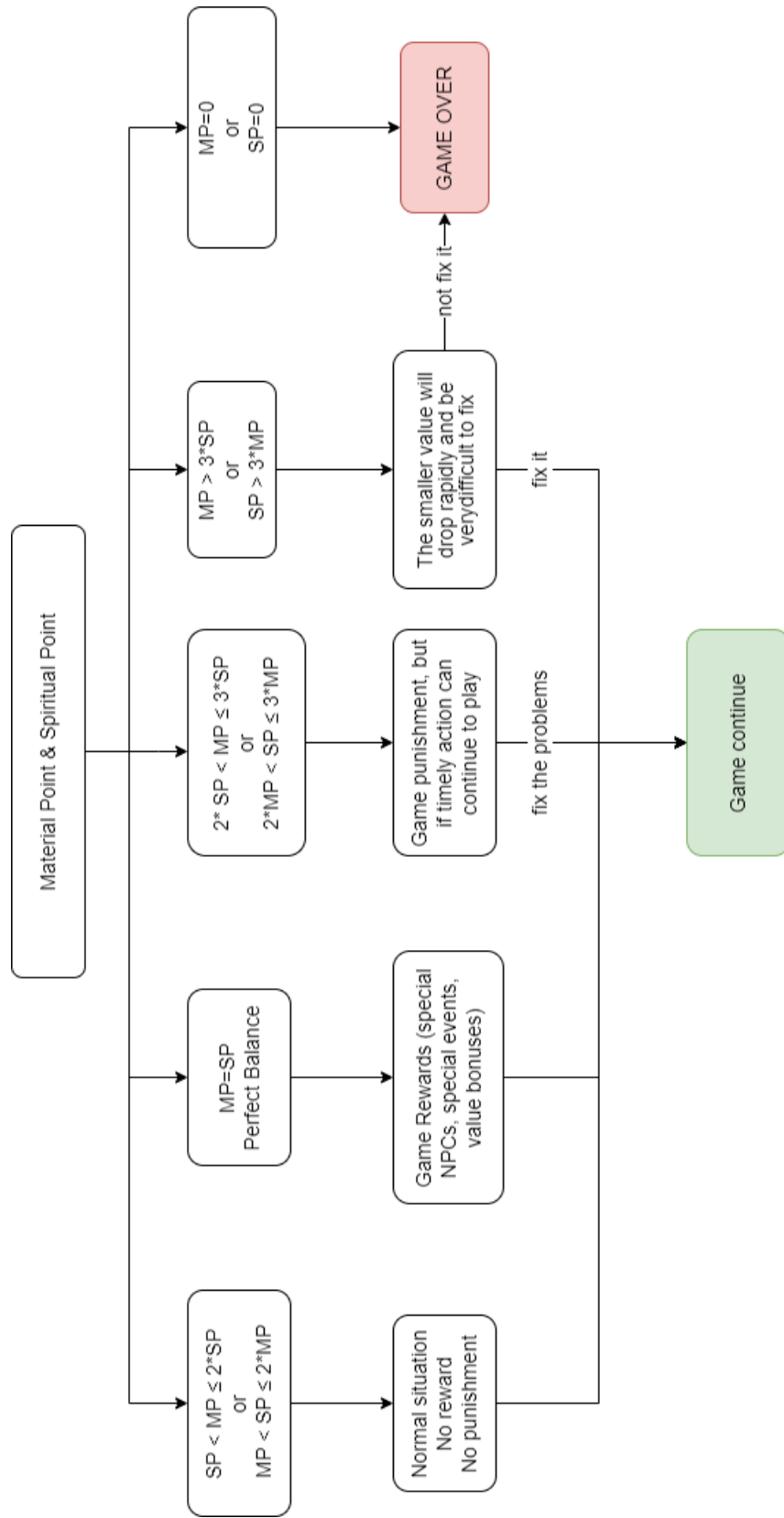


Figure 8: The Value System

The Environment and Life in Ideal Mural World

As an ideal land, this fantasy mural world is closer to the concept of "Arcadia" or "Peach Blossom Spring" than the utopia in More's novel. It is a place where the protagonist can gain inner peace. In contrast to the previous concept of the ideal place, i.e., once you leave, you can hardly return, the mural world in the game has the characteristic that you can go back and forth at will. Players get "inspiration" by communicating with NPCs and then paint the inspiration on the wall. The content of the painting is divided into two types, one is the background of the environment that needs to be painted on the wall to become reality, such as the sky, ground, and buildings. One is the small objects used to decorate the background, which can be painted on paper and then brought into the mural world, such as plants and furniture. Things in the mural world (including the background) will slowly disappear over time, but the fruit of plants from the mural world can be kept permanently. They can be processed and turned into new items in the shop or traded to NPCs for new inspiration or sketches.



Figure 9: Environment design: the fading tree

Character Design

Because fantasy creatures are often mentioned in stories of ideal lands, the character designs in this game are based on animal figures. At the same time, each character will incorporate designs that do not belong to the original animal's characteristics, such as the protagonist with ginkgo-leaf-like gills and the snow ferret with a paintbrush tail, etc.



Figure 10: Characters design: player character



Figure 11: Characters design: non-player character Felipe

Conclusion

There is an old Chinese proverb that says, “You cannot get fish and bear’s paw at the same time,” meaning that people cannot seek two incompatible things at the same time, akin to the English expression, "Have one's cake and eat it too." When faced with a choice, I often ponder why it is impossible to select all options. This visual thesis emerged partially from my yearning to “want the convenience of living in a big city while enjoying the natural beauty of the countryside”. In fact, we are constantly balancing work and rest in our real life, and everyone is looking for the best balance that belongs to themselves. Could this state of balance, in and of itself, be regarded as a form of utopia?

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