Krisztina Gaál & Dániel Herczeg

Playing the "Ambiguous Utopia": The influences of Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) in Turnfollow's *Before the Green Moon* (2023)

Preceding the launch of the Nintendo Switch version of their game, the developers of *Before the Green Moon* confirmed in a social media post that Ursula K. Le Guin's 1974 novel *The Dispossessed* was one of their key inspirations (@turnfollow). In our presentation we wish to examine how these inspirations manifest in the finished game.

In *The Dispossessed* — lauded as "the most important utopia since Skinner's *Walden Two*" (Jameson 230) — we follow the Shevek, who walks a metaphorical line between two cultural and physical words. The novel's two-pronged narrative follows Shevek's early life and socialisation in the "primitive" anarchist commune of Anarres, and in his adulthood the migration to the "developed" capitalist Urras.

In *Before The Green Moon* the player arrives at a little town at the border of the two cultural worlds: the post-apocalyptic anarchistic planet; and the capitalistic new land, the titular moon. These worlds are linked together by a space elevator, and the settlement surrounding it, "a decaying rural truckstop town" (Yang), one which periodically gets flooded by lunar tourists and the litter they leave behind (Static Canvas). Here, the player is tasked with earning "enough company scrip to buy a ticket to the moon" (Yang) and "the only way to make money is to get farming, get scavenging and in the in-between, live" (Static Canvas).

In our presentation we talk about how the two works discuss the dichotomies embedded in them: anarchism and capitalism; living in, and after a commune; the physical and social barriers dividing the two societies; how they view gender and relationships differently; and how these dualities mold Shevek and the Player Character.

In both pieces people from the two sides co-exist with, divide from, and interact (or not) with each other. Both Shevek and the Player have a liminal status: both an insider and an outsider. Sticking out is freedom, but it does not bring stability. They are both privy to but not accepted in the two sides of these coins.

We talk about how both the book and the game impose a twist in their chosen genres. *The Dispossessed* is a feminist anarchist space adventure where the two opposing social ideas and the protagonist stuck between them are reflected by the nonlinear narrative structure. *Before the Green Moon* is a farming simulator but one which "evokes a gritty reality of farming that something 'cozy' like Stardew Valley never asks of you — when there's unexpected dilemmas and you have to choose what stays and what goes" (Yang). Another aspect of the farming sim genre, that it is "both as indoctrination into, and escapism from, anxieties caused by neoliberal ideology underpinning the late-capitalist apparatus championing productivity, progress, and quantifiable result generation" (Bódi 51) — which the game addresses by contrasting the planet's communal way of living (visiting the other villagers, giving them gifts, spending time them in cutscenes) with the industrial mode of production of the moon (sowing, maintaining, and harvesting crops).

Another important aspect of the game is its visuals: inspired by *Harvest Moon 64* (@turnfollow), it was both praised by some for looking like a prerendered background within a real-time 3D render (yoppi) and described by others as "a decaying GameCube game [where e]verything is beautifully bathed in the sickly yellow rust of 2004 Xbox games" (Yang). We briefly examine how these visual qualities contribute to the player's longing for change that moving to the moon may bring.

Keywords
Ursula K. Le Guin, farming simulator, anarchism, neoliberalism, Before the Green Moon, The Dispossessed

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Authors' statements

Krisztina Gaál is a currently unemployed junior game developer. Her major is Game Design, although she is proficient in 3D modelling, Cinematic Design and Level Design. She develops her video game in her spare time.
She received her Game Art and Design MA at the University of Film and Theatre Arts and a Costume and Set Designer BA at the University of Kaposvár. She worked on short films, video games and most recently on architecture models. Her work was exhibited at the International Conference of Interactive Digital Storytelling in 2022. She's a regular participant of game jams, and her team received the "Jam Innovator" award at the first HunJam in 2022.

Dániel Herczeg defines himself as an aspiring game developer and game studies enthusiast. What began as an interest in video essays and game analyses snowballed into a multi-semester audition of the Game Art & Design course at University of Film and Theatre Arts Budapest. He received his Dramaturgy MFA at the Akademie für Darstellende Kunst Baden-Württemberg with a thesis about the *Disco Elysium* and the history of tabletop and computer roleplaying games. His work was lauded at the Hungarian National Conference of Students' Research Societies and exhibited at the International Conference of Interactive Digital Storytelling in 2022.

Martial Arts (Wuxia) Indie Gaming: Fan-Made Personalized Utopia Imaginations Shaped by Algorithms and AI

This paper explores the intersection of Wuxia's utopian imagination within the Chinese context and the dynamic, interactive nature of indie Wuxia games. By integrating a ludological approach with fan studies, this study examines how game fans reimagine and personalize utopian visions through their collective participation in game production, facilitated by the advancements in algorithms and AI technology. Wuxia, a genre deeply rooted in Chinese martial arts, has transcended various media forms, including novels, films, and video games, forming a transmedia genre as argued by Jenkins (2006). Song (1999) and Chen (1992) highlight that Wuxia narratives carry a utopian imagination of Chinese people within a virtual world. Danesi (2024) posits that video gaming's broad appeal lies in its capacity for players to autonomously create imaginary worlds, contrasting with the passive consumption of novels or films. Lee & Soep (2023) suggest that computer science and coding empower individuals to create digital products with social impact. Through ludological analysis of the most popular Wuxia indie games and discourse analysis of interactions between game designers and fans on online platforms, this study aims to demonstrate the utopian imagination within a fan participatory ecosystem. It also examines how fan participatory culture fosters diverse personalized utopian imaginations.

As Aarseth (2001) argued, video games are allegories of space. Wuxia games, as a prominent local genre in Chinese-speaking regions, create spaces imbued with utopian imagination. Juul (2019) analyzes the indie gaming system in the Western context, arguing that the indie community competes with the capital-controlled game industry, amplifying communities' creativity and voices through indie games. In the Chinese context, this study addresses several unanswered questions: How do indie games carry utopian imaginaries? How do they compete with mainstream discourse for the right to define utopian world imaginations? What agencies do these games demonstrate within the indie gaming community? And how do algorithms and AI technologies shape and empower the gaming community? The Chinese gaming community, being the largest in the world, offers a rich field for understanding how collective utopian imaginaries are shaped by AI and transmedia narratives.

This study argues that Wuxia indie games strive to build a highly interactive, high-freedom gaming utopia independent of capital and political control. These games, driven by fan passion, seek to expand fan discourse while competing with online giants and stringent gaming regulations for the right to define and shape Wuxia utopias. By employing database narratives, Wuxia indie games offer players freedom to build characters, storylines, and ethical frameworks through their choices. Through the lens of participatory culture (Jenkins

et al., 2015), players actively reconstruct personalized worlds and narratives within the games. They contribute their ideas and preferences during the development process and engage in interactions with designers and fellow players. These games challenge established authorities and social taboos through their innovative world-rule design, offering diverse gender representations and choices that enhance player freedom. These agencies are further developed through interactions that reflect the collective voices of the community. With the support of rapidly advancing algorithms and AI, the barriers to Wuxia game production are significantly lowered, enabling more fans to transition from players to game creators. The high degree of randomness in game design necessitates that other fans complete the narrative and utopian imagination. These fan-based personalized Wuxia utopias introduce various utopian imaginings and choices, empowering individuals to visualize utopian dreams with the aid of AI. This inclusive and liberal tendency within the player community fosters diversity in virtual worlds, which can translate into real-world diversity thinking. However, it is essential to recognize that the use of algorithms, databases, and AI in re-imagining and designing utopias remains predominantly in the hands of a technologically and educationally advantaged segment of the fan base.

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Adoption and Adaptation of Sekai Kei in Visual Novel Game: *Witch on the Holy Night* (2010-2019)

Sekai Kei refers to a combined theme or genre of "apocalyptic crisis and school romance". (Tanaka, 2013). As one of the products of the collapse of Japan's bubble economy, Sekai Kei works are popular among unemployed and socially disconnected male Otakus. Similar to the Lacanian psychoanalysis of video games, Sekai Kei is seen as a direct connection between the imaginary and the real, and in this process, the symbolic order of society is hidden and replaced by the surreal simulacrum (Tanaka, 2013). Since the prosperity of the anime work *Neon Genesis Evangelion* in 1995, the theme of Sekai Kei has rapidly expanded to the entire Japanese ACG (animation, comics, and games) field, such as Takahashi Shin's manga *Saikano* (2000-2001), Shinkai Makoto's animated films *Your Name (2016), Weathering with You (2019) and Suzume* (2022), and Altus's JRPG series *Persona* (1996-present). On the other hand, the popularity of visual novel games (VNG) and Sekai Kei almost overlap in terms of time and their target audience. As a subset of text adventure games, some VNG works have multiple plot lines for players to choose from, while others do not. In general, VNG is a hybrid genre of novels, slides, games, and animations, and its concrete definition remains controversial in academia. This research will explore the crossroads of Sekai Kei and VNG through a case study.

The visual novel game *Witch on the Holy Night* (released in 2010 and remade in 2019) was created by Japanese game scriptwriter Nasu Kunihiro. Inspired by *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, this VNG was rewritten from his early text novel work. At the beginning of the millennium, Hiroki Azuma proposed a notion called database consumption. It refers to a consumption mode of accessing the "database" of elements that constitute a work, including modular character designs, narrative patterns, and musical styles (Perdijk, 2020). This concept reveals not only the logic of consumption but also the logic of production in contemporary popular culture (especially Japanese ACG culture): the consumers consume specific elements in the databases rather than cultural products as a whole, and producers will also appropriate the elements to recreate new cultural products by accessing the database. Viewing *Neon Genesis Evangelion* as a database of the series of contemporary ACG works with Sekai Kei themes, this research will discuss the adoption and adaptation of *Witch on the Holy Night* for Sekai Kei elements based on the theoretical framework of database consumption. In addition, the previous studies focus more on discussing Sekai Kei as a narrative genre or a literary style, rather than recognizing it as a visual or auditory style. In this research, I will focus not only on the issues of storytelling but also on encoding the visual-audio style of Sekai Kei as part of the data consumed.

In terms of narrative adaptation, despite referring to the character designs and dramatic conflicts of Neon Genesis Evangelion (the isomorphism between the grand narrative of the external world and the individual romantic relationship), the story of *Witch on the Holy Night* narrows the scope of the crisis and is no longer related to the

apocalypse of the world, but rather to the territorial disputes between the "witches". More precisely, it responds more directly to the urban modernity of post-bubble economy Japan than *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, because the stage of the story is occupied by the coexistence of declining and developing urban landscapes in Japan in the late 1980s: abandoned amusement parks and emerging commercial streets are juxtaposed, and the high-rise steel and concrete in the city center covers the lost marginal urban areas. Accordingly, the audio-visual style of *Witch on the Holy Night* enhances the narrative. Rich cinematic storyboards and tranquil orchestral soundtrack combine to form a series of urban montage sequences, constituting a re-imagination of the past: a haunted time and space. The CGI performance calculated by the KRKR engine renders the daily scenery into various spectacles, establishing new visual references for the Sekai Kei visual style of polarization. At last, this research responds to the long-standing controversy about VNG: Should visual novels be classified as games, novels, or animations? Both as postmodern hybrid genres, the combination of Sekai Kei and VNG may provide a new angle to the argument: *Witch on the Holy Night* fits better with Espen Aarseth's understanding towards "game" or "supernovel", and it should be "a perspective rather than a formal category." (Aarseth, 2023).

Keywords: Visual Novel Game, Sekai Kei, Database Consumption

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