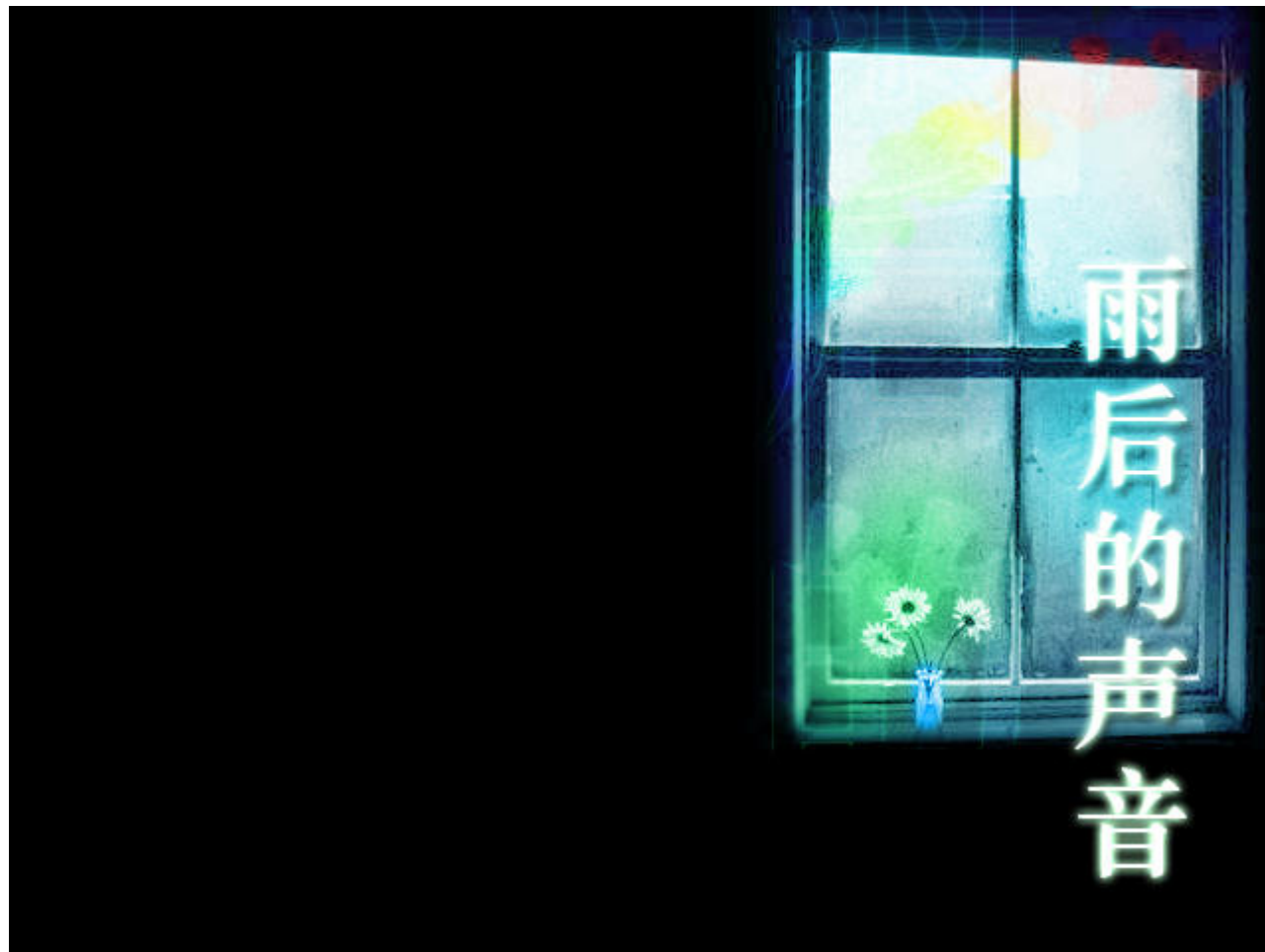


Songs of Memory

雨后的声音

Game Design Document

Xuanlin Zhu
December 16, 2025



Contents

1	Project Overview	4
1.1	Origin	4
1.2	Goal I: Autobiographical Allegory	5
1.3	Goal II: Homage to the Indie Game-Making Community	6
1.4	Goal III: Meta-Media Experimentation and Research Foundation	6
2	World Building	7
2.1	Geography and History	7
2.2	A Sample Region: Rainbow City	8
2.3	Aesthetics: The Principle of Radical Hybridity	9
3	Narrative Design	10
3.1	Design Philosophy	10
3.2	The Dog: Capitalism and Identity	11
3.3	The Aphasia: Language and Power	12
3.4	The Starving Girl: Body and Memory	13
3.5	The Fire God: Scholarly Responsibility	15
3.6	The Idealist: Well's Character Arc	17
3.7	The Finale: Coffee, Mara, and the Meaning of Suffering	19
3.7.1	The Narrative Arc: Two Battles, Confession, and Resolution	19
3.7.2	Character Design: The Observer Revealed	20
3.7.3	The Danmei Aesthetic: Restraint and Rupture	20
3.7.4	Cultural Framework: Lu Xun	21
3.7.5	Script: The Finale	21
4	Selected Side Quests	25
4.1	Design Philosophy: Academic Easter Eggs	25
4.2	The Chomsky Gorilla Quest: Linguistics and Affection	26
4.3	The Castration Quest: Dilemmas of Activism	27
5	The Diegetic Archive	29
5.1	Embedding Literature in Gameplay	29
5.2	Historiographic Practice: The Contradiction	29
5.3	Portrait of Character: Well and Blanc	32
6	Future Methodology: Automated Archaeology	37
6.1	The Problem: The "Dark Archive" of Logic	37

6.2 Proposal: Logic-as-Text Transformation 37

6.3 Pilot Validation: Two Crucial Breakthroughs 37

6.4 Scalability and Limitations 38

6.5 Conclusion: From Digital Archaeology to Computational Literary History 38

1 Project Overview

1.1 Origin



小说 | 勃朗日记（四）

临晚的时候，气温突然间降下来，而这里的黄昏只有一瞬，在温水一样的天穹中，刹那间太阳就失了踪迹，只留下我一个人，站在无边无际的寒夜之中。月亮摇摇地步上沙丘，微笑地俯临人间，漫天的芒星全是它的冷眼。

Figure 1: *Blanc's Diary* (《勃朗日记》) on WeChat Official Accounts Platform. The original novella first released in 2016.

The project began as a diary-format novella titled *Blanc's Diary* (《勃朗日记》), which I wrote in 2016 upon graduating from high school. The form was inspired by Eugene O'Neill's *The Great God Brown*, particularly its use of masks, fragmented identity and the role building of Cybel, the “Mother-Earth” figure.

Over the following years during my undergraduate studies, the novella expanded into a full RPG built in RPG Maker XP. I devoted substantial time to the project, transforming what was originally a literary exercise into an interactive narrative containing over **100,000 words** of text.

The game was designed with three primary goals in mind, unified under an overarching thematic commitment to **existentialism**. This philosophical framework, drawn from Camus's response to absurdism and Sartre's emphasis on authentic choice, served as the integrating lens through which the game's disparate elements cohere.

小说 | 勃朗日记（四）

临晚的时候，气温突然间降下来，而这里的黄昏只有一瞬，在温水一样的天穹中，刹那间太阳就失了踪迹，只留下我一个人，站在无边无际的寒夜之中。月亮摇摇地步上沙丘，微笑地俯临人间，漫天的芒星全是它的冷眼。

Fiction | *Blanc's Diary* (IV)

As evening fell, the temperature dropped suddenly. Here, dusk lasts only a moment—in a sky the color of lukewarm water, the sun vanished in an instant, leaving me alone in the boundless cold night. The moon swayed up over the dunes, smiling down upon the world, while the stars scattered across the sky watched with cold indifference.

1.2 Goal I: Autobiographical Allegory

The first goal was to create an allegorical space that reflects my personal experience of displacement.

I grew up in Shanghai and graduated from one of the city's top high schools. Upon graduation, my classmates scattered across the world: to Peking University, Tsinghua, Fudan, and universities overseas. The sense of a community dispersing, of connections becoming memories, became the emotional core of the game.

The city of **Lila** (里拉) serves as a fictional stand-in for Shanghai. Its geography deliberately mirrors the urban landscape:

- **Stock exchange** (大富翁交易所) representing the city's financial identity
- **Lan'Xin Hotel** (兰心大饭店), alluding to the historic Lyceum Theatre
- The distinctive *longtang* alleyways defining Shanghai's residential fabric
- A **river** bisecting the city, echoing the Huangpu

Most characters in the game have, at some point in their backstories, spent time in Lila before scattering to the far corners of the world—mirroring the diaspora of my own graduating class.

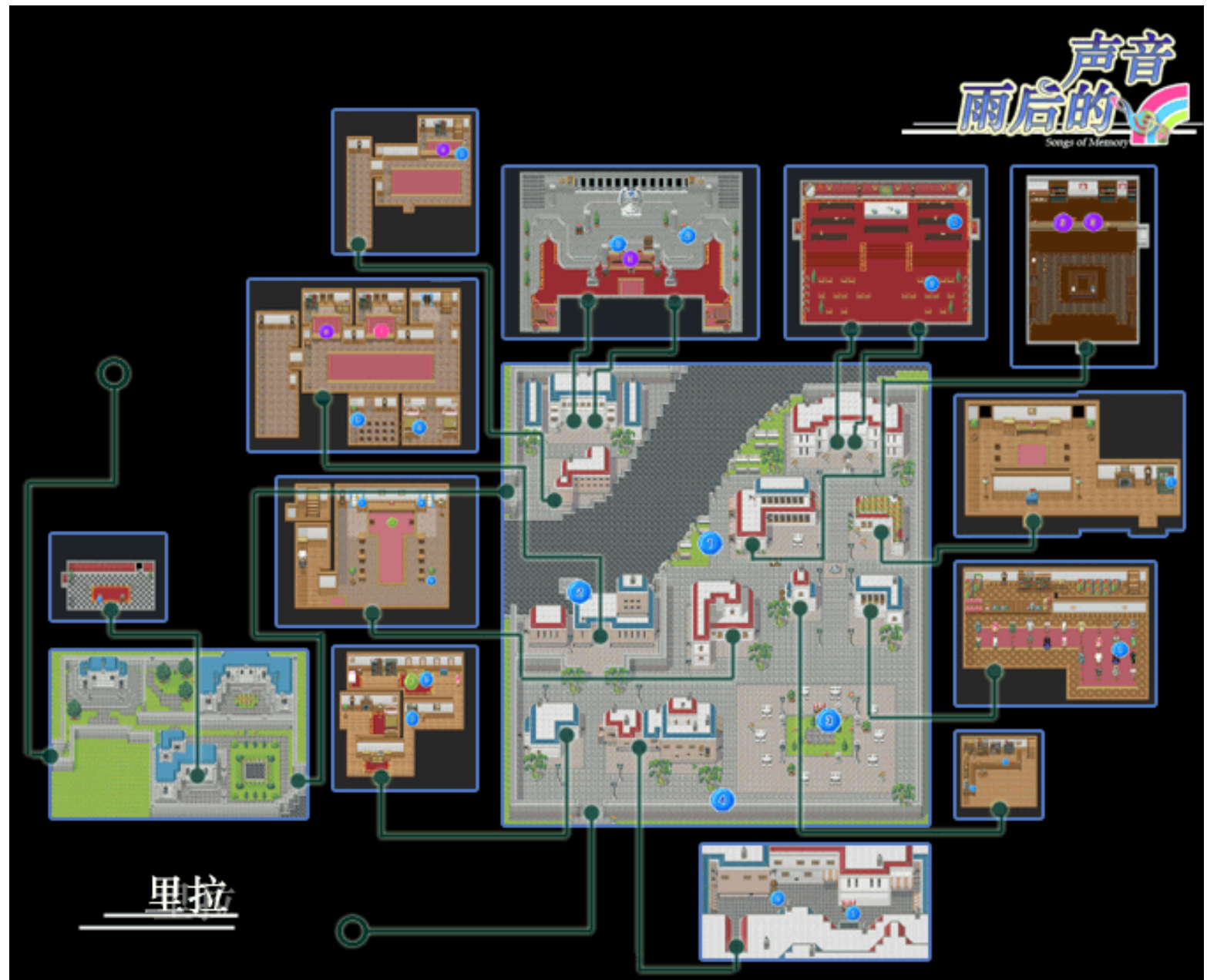


Figure 2: Map of Lila. The city echoes Shanghai's geography: a river dividing the districts, a stock exchange, Lan'Xin Hotel, and the characteristic *longtang* alleyways.

1.3 Goal II: Homage to the Indie Game-Making Community

The second goal was to pay tribute to the early 2000s Chinese indie game-making community, particularly the forums centered around *66rpg.com*.

This was the era of BBS culture, when amateur developers shared RPG Maker projects, wrote HTML walkthroughs by hand, and built communities around vernacular creativity.

The **Ranger Guild** (游侠公会) in the game functions as a direct homage to this culture. Characters are identified by internet aliases rather than traditional fantasy names (e.g. “Lsmh”, “Winter”) simulating the social dynamics of an online bulletin board.

目录 > 支线剧情一览	
支线剧情一览	
(附录1: BP获得一览)	
(附录2: 支线剧情点数获得一览)	
任务名	游月记楔子
有效期限	Lsmh加入后, 离开彩虹城前 (进入三一堂后不可触发)
触发方式	和木桶武器店贝奥武甫对话
任务流程	和木桶武器店贝奥武甫对话得到180提示, 到朵云轩若望处买到野禽, 交给贝奥武甫, 贝奥武甫会赠送菜谱《木瓜水》。
备注	向若望购买野禽时身上金钱必须大于180提示;
奖励	《木瓜水》
任务名	神魔异事录
有效期限	Lsmh加入后, 得到牌片・Lsmh前
触发方式	在公会游侠技能教室和梦蝶战斗过一次后, 和兽座对话
任务流程	和兽座对话, 获得《神魔异事录》和秘籍《万物鉴定指要》。
备注	获得《神魔异事录》后, 开启怪物图鉴系统
奖励	《神魔异事录》、《万物鉴定指要》

Figure 3: 2000s style HTML guide with hyperlinks.

1.4 Goal III: Meta-Media Experimentation and Research Foundation

The third goal was to test the possibilities of embedding substantial literary media within an interactive game structure.

The game contains approximately **70,000 words** of original embedded text across multiple genres and registers: pseudo-scriptural cosmology, classical Chinese vernacular fiction, May Fourth-style modernist prose, and scholarly gazetteers. These texts are not supplementary lore but integral to gameplay: some are performed as in-game storytelling sequences, others function as collectible items that reveal character psychology, and still others provide geographical descriptions that correspond precisely to the game’s actual map layouts.

In pursuing this design approach, I inadvertently created the ideal test case for my future research methodology (Section 7). The game’s combination of **narrative density** (approximately 300,000 words of total readable content) and **good documenting behavior** (clear variable naming, structured maps, meticulous guidebooks)—cultural practices inherited from the *66rpg.com* community—makes it a perfect candidate for exploring how AI can perform literary archaeology on interactive narratives by treating game logic as readable text rather than requiring visual gameplay.

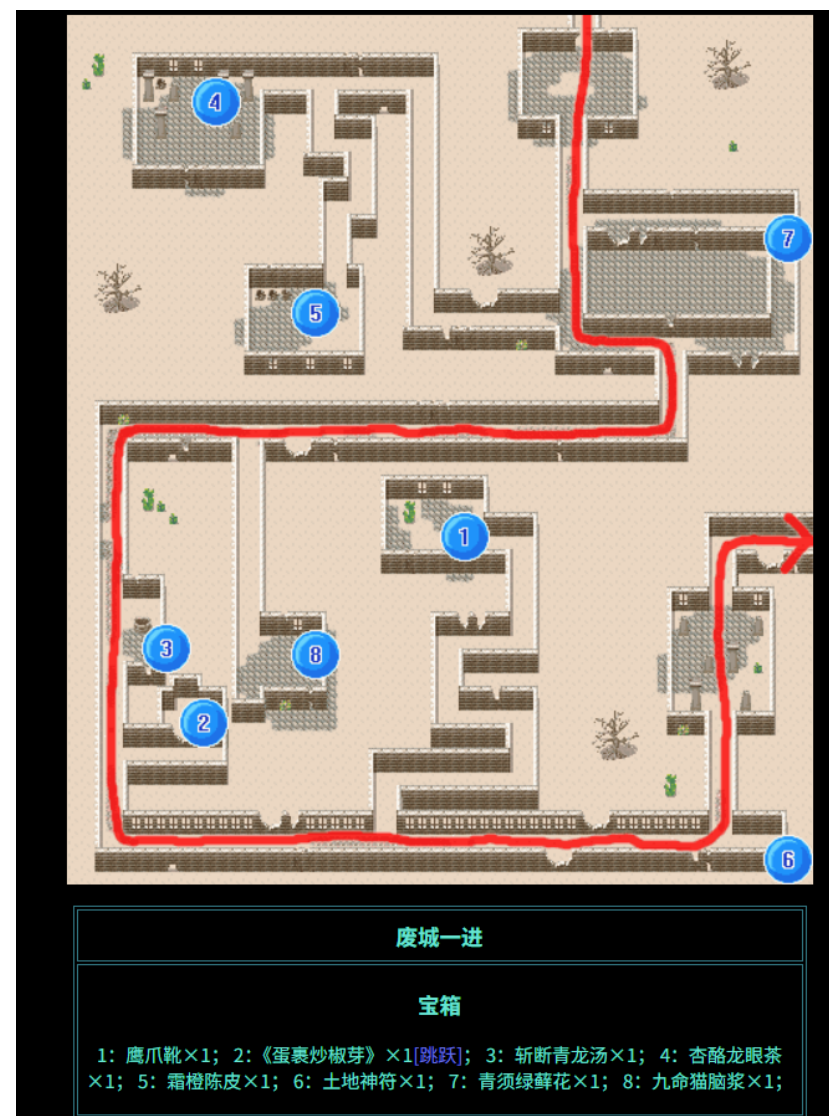


Figure 4: 2000s Indie Game-Making Style walkthrough and chest contents of labyrinth.

2 World Building

2.1 Geography and History

The game world is designed for free exploration. Players can traverse the entire map from the beginning, discovering regions with distinct histories, economies, religions and colonial legacies.

- **Rainbow City (彩虹城)**
Military outpost established by colonizers along the Mulian River, named for rainbows near the Great Plains Waterfall. After colonial forces relocated to Lila, it became a “no-man’s-land” with hybrid customs. Now hosts the **Ranger Guild** and Trinity Seminary.
- **Gilded Blade Market (金刀集)**
Former metallurgical center, renowned for weapon-smithing. A catastrophic mine flood, caused by drainage from the local western swamp, killed over a hundred miners, shifting operations south. The town has since declined.
- **Clear Water Town (清水镇)**
Ancient fishing port on a northeastern peninsula. Formerly supplied seafood tribute; now eclipsed by southern pearl industries. Legends persist of water spirits in the bay.
- **Linglong Sea (玲珑海)**
Literally “The Sea of Exquisite Jade”. Primeval forest divided by complex waterways. Home to the nomadic Wind Bell Tribe, who worship the Wind Dragon. The forest’s counterclockwise spiral layout allegedly relates to wind elements.
- **Lila (里拉)**
The largest city, straddling the Mulian River. Originally a ferry crossing, it became the most modernized metropolis after colonization, dubbed “Oriental Versailles.” Features aristocratic villas, Xiafei Road shopping district, and the Mulian Ferry Company.
- **Qifan Village (祁繁村)**
Literally “The Village of Luxuriant Herbage”. Agricultural village on the southern plains, feudal territory. Villagers worship the Fire God with spring burning festivals until the first rain.
- **Flame Moon Town (焰月镇)**
Desert outpost around Vulture Peak Volcano. Initially a research hub; now an artistic colony with the Desert Artists’ Alliance and nightly salons.



Figure 5: World Map. The complete game world showing all major regions. Players can freely travel between any accessible areas from the start of the game.

2.2 A Sample Region: Rainbow City

This section demonstrates the spatial depth of a single region.

Rainbow City serves as the **player's starting location**. As a former colonial outpost turned “no-man’s-land,” the hybrid architecture, such as the European timber-frame houses, a grand seminary and village greens, reflects the city’s colonial past while remaining approachable.

The **Ranger Guild** headquarters located here provides natural quest hooks, while the **Trinity Seminary** introduces the game’s first dungeon: an underground waterway system beneath the church.

The region map shows how each building connects to interiors, and how the seminary connects downward to the waterway dungeon.

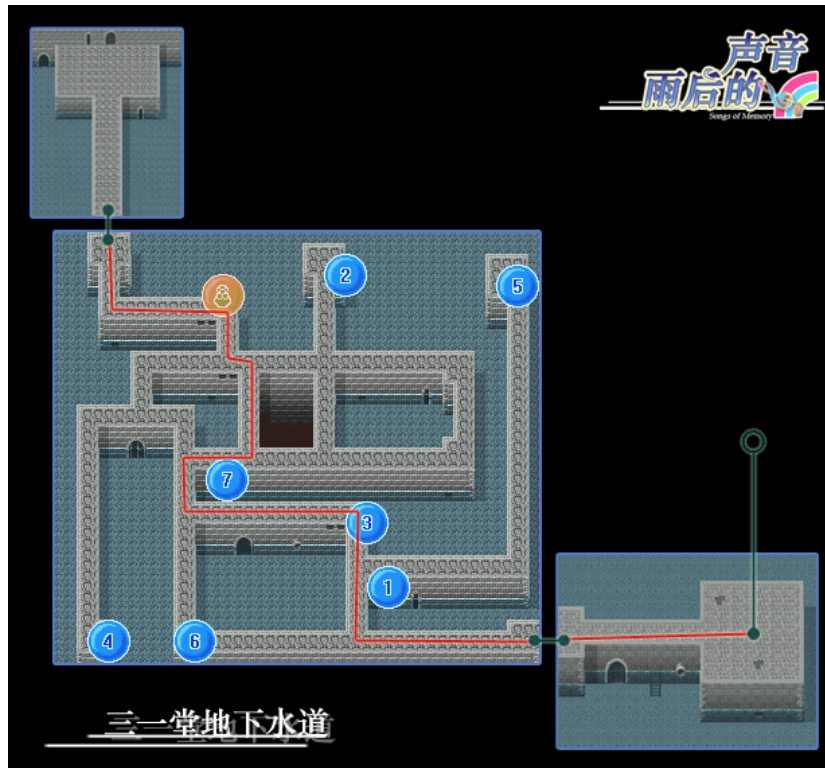


Figure 6: Trinity Seminary Waterway (三一堂地下水道). The first dungeon beneath the church: a labyrinth introducing dungeon exploration mechanics.

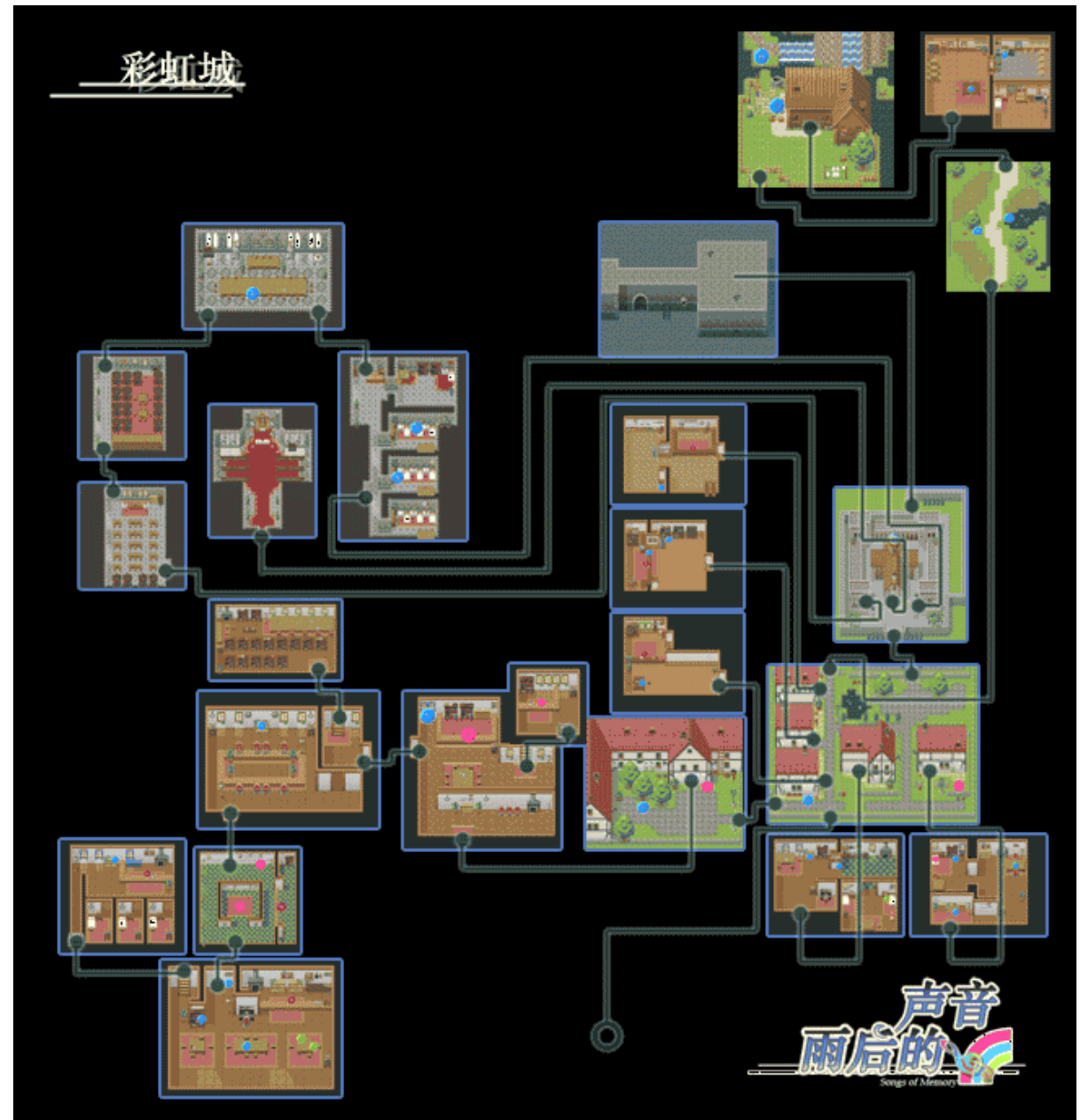


Figure 7: Region Map: Rainbow City. Full internal structure showing exteriors and interiors connected by pathways.

2.3 Aesthetics: The Principle of Radical Hybridity

The game's aesthetic is governed by a principle of **radical hybridity**, the deliberate incorporation of elements from entirely unrelated paradigms within a single frame. Western philosophy, classical Chinese literature, internet slang, fantasy RPG conventions, and contemporary academic discourse coexist without hierarchy or synthesis. The goal is not fusion but **cohabitation**: each element retains its distinctiveness while generating meaning through unexpected juxtaposition.

This hybridity reflects my own intellectual formation. My high school curriculum was renowned for its depth in literary theory, not only rigorous training in **classical Chinese** and traditional poetics, but also modern Chinese literary theory shaped by the Historical Materialist tradition central to Chinese academic discourse, including its distinctive self-reflexive historiography of literature itself. Coming to the United States for college immersed me in Western critical theory, media studies, and contemporary aesthetics. The game's radical mixture is autobiographical: it embodies the productive tension between these formations.

The equipment screen demonstrates this hybridity in miniature. The character **Well**, an English word as name, appears with blonde hair and Western features (default RMXF assets), yet her equipment is described entirely in classical Chinese registers. The material descriptions are grounded in **historical accuracy**: I do not invent fabrics or construction techniques that did not exist. The jacket (青缎掐牙袄) uses precise costume terminology from material culture research; “pinched teeth” refers to a documented Qing dynasty tailoring technique where cotton batting edges are wrapped in contrasting brocade. Characters in *Dream of the Red Chamber* wear identical garments. The scepter's “庞项细足” (“massive neck, slender foot”) employs classical descriptive rhetoric that evokes the connoisseurship language of bronzes or ceramics, applied here to a Western fantasy staff.

Beyond material accuracy, many item names are **original literary choices** rather than mere descriptions. The cultivation manual *Cold Clouds Over Misty Shores* (《冷云迷浦》) takes its title from a *ci* poem by **Jiang Kui** (姜夔), evoking Southern Song melancholy. The shoes *Treading Cyan Waves* (凌青波) transform a functional object into poetic image.



Figure 8: Well's Equipment Screen. English name, Western avatar, classical Chinese descriptions.

紫水晶法杖 *Purple Crystal Scepter*

「通身紫水晶所制，庞项细足，不著文饰，似为西洋之物，冷然有水气。」

“Crafted entirely of amethyst, with massive neck and slender foot, bearing no ornamentation, appears to be a Western object, exuding a cold, watery aura.”

青缎掐牙袄 *Blue Satin Pinched-Teeth Jacket*

「夹青缎内蓄棉花，棉絮外露处包玄色锦，向上鼓起，谓之“掐牙”」

“A lined jacket of blue satin stuffed with cotton; where the batting peeks through, wrapped in dark brocade, puffing upward, called ‘pinched teeth.’”

凌青波 *Treading Cyan Waves*

「青布软底对梁鞋，走路轻便，但不宜搭配旗袍。」

“Soft-soled cyan cloth shoes, light for walking, not suited to match qipao.”

玳金珊瑚环 *Gilded Coral Ring*

「珊瑚磨作环状，外络金丝成网，密包其上，只能从缝隙中看见火红的珊瑚。」

“Coral ring wrapped in gold netting, only through gaps can one glimpse the fiery red coral.”

《冷云迷浦》 *Cold Clouds Over Misty Shores*

「使秋云下落，笼罩人身，如冷云萦于水边汀岸，使人体力慢慢恢复。」

“Causes autumn clouds to descend and envelop the body, as cold clouds linger over waterside banks, slowly restoring vitality.”

3 Narrative Design

3.1 Design Philosophy

The narrative design integrates scholarly conversations and philosophical debates into accessible plot structures. The goal is not to teach but to **dramatize ideas**: to show how theoretical debates about language, capitalism, gender, and meaning manifest in lived experience.

The first quest sets the tone. A man terrorizes young girls by releasing rats at them. Upon confrontation, he reveals his backstory: he grew up in the shadow of a favored sister. His only friends were the rats he fed. When his sister poisoned them and was praised for her “bravery,” something broke in him. The quest offers no clean resolution: the sister is already dead. From the outset, the game signals that its conflicts are **not good versus evil**, but something more complicated.



Figure 9: The Rat-Man confrontation in the Trinity Seminary Waterway.

Script Excerpt: *The Rat-Man's Confrontation*

Lsmh: I am Lsmh, member of the Ranger Guild. I'm here to deal with your rats! Surrender now!

Lsmh: Hey! Can you hear me? Say something!

Rat-Man: Come... come look...

Lsmh: No!! [Battle]

Rat-Man: My rats... my rats are hurt...

Rat-Man: Because sister always bullied my rats...

Lsmh: Sister?

Rat-Man: Everyone liked sister. Only the rats were willing to come near me...

Rat-Man: They said sister was better at everything...

Rat-Man: But I know—rats are a hundred times better than her!

Rat-Man: Rats are so much kinder. I saved my bread to feed them, and they would come play with me.

Rat-Man: Unlike sister—she took all the good things and blamed all the bad things on me.

Lsmh: Are you jealous of her?

Rat-Man: No!

Lsmh: You are! You just don't realize it!

Rat-Man: No! It's because she killed my best friends!

Protagonist: Ah?

Rat-Man: She poisoned all my rats, and Mother praised her for being brave...

Rat-Man: I knew it—she was terrified of rats!

Protagonist: (So it was killing the rats...)

Lsmh: Then you should go find her! Why scare other girls?

Rat-Man: She died long ago.

Rat-Man: ...

Rat-Man: Killed herself because her career wasn't going well!

Lsmh: Then shouldn't it be over?

Rat-Man: ...

Rat-Man: But I'm not happy.

Lsmh: That's your own problem. Why hurt others?

Rat-Man: I don't know. I want revenge.

Lsmh: What good is revenge? It only creates more pain—for yourself and others.

Lsmh: People should make others happy!

Rat-Man: No.

Rat-Man: Their happiness has nothing to do with me.

Rat-Man: The happier they are, the more they mock me!

Protagonist: Maybe you'd be happier with your rats?

Rat-Man: My rats...

Rat-Man: But... but my rats are dying...

Lsmh: That's fine! A little medicine and they'll recover!

Rat-Man: Really?

Protagonist: But you must promise never to scare people with rats again.

Rat-Man: Yes! Yes! I promise! For my rats, I'd do anything!

3.2 The Dog: Capitalism and Identity

The player retrieves a lost dog for an elf named Zang. The dog, “Little White,” has run away to Lila to pursue finance. Found outside the stock exchange wearing sunglasses, it insists on being called “White · Lee.”

On the surface, the quest mocks **capitalism and class anxiety** in a comedic register. But the satire swiftly touches sensitive topics: the **comprador legacy**, Chinese intermediaries who served colonial powers and adopted Western affectations; **postcolonial mimicry**, the dog’s desperate performance of cosmopolitan sophistication (“authentic London accent!”); the **hukou system**, China’s household registration that creates urban/rural hierarchies; and **Shanghai identity anxiety**, the city’s reputation for discrimination against outsiders, here compressed into a single insult: “rural hukou, not a shred of modern consciousness.” These are all fraught subjects, yet the quest touches them lightly through absurdist comedy, a talking dog quoting mutual fund names while being tied to a stick, caught.



Figure 10: Left: 10. recounts the dog’s departure.



Right: White · Lee at the stock exchange.

Script Excerpt I: *The Owner’s Lament*

10.: It was a night when the moon hung high and small. With tears in its eyes, it told me:

10.: To find its own path in life, it had decided to plunge into the sea of commerce.

10.: It vowed not to return until it made ten thousand...

Protagonist: It’s just a dog...

10.: Dogs have feelings too!

Protagonist: This one has a bit too many feelings...

Lsmh: Do you know where it is now?

10.: It only said it had developed a keen interest in funds and stocks.

10.: Then it vanished like the wind into the misty moonlight...

Lsmh: Funds and stocks... maybe it’s at...

Lsmh: Ah! I know! Let’s go!

Script Excerpt II: *Catching the Cosmopolitan Canine*

Lsmh: Look! A white Schnauzer!

Protagonist: Little White!

White · Lee: Who—who’s calling me?

White · Lee: Hm? Is it you two?

White · Lee: State your names!

Lsmh: We’d better take this slow—

Protagonist: Right, right.

Lsmh: Dogs run fast!

White · Lee: Young people these days, so strange—

White · Lee: You talk to them and they ignore you.

White · Lee: Ignore them and they stare at you—

White · Lee: Hey, I’ve changed my name!

White · Lee: Call me White · Lee from now on!

White · Lee: When in Lila City, one must integrate with international standards!

White · Lee: My accent isn’t like those pidgin speakers—

White · Lee: This is authentic London pronunciation!

White · Lee: Hm? What do you want?

White · Lee: Hey hey, keep your distance!

White · Lee: One look and I can tell—rural hukou, not a shred of modern consciousness...

White · Lee: WAH! Robbers! Robbers!

Lsmh: The mouth! Quick! Grab its mouth!

Protagonist: Tie it up!

White · Lee: Let me go! Let me go!

White · Lee: My Rongtong New Blue Chips!

White · Lee: Let me go! I need to get to the stock exchange!

[Afterwards]

White · Lee: I’m no ordinary dog!

White · Lee: Have you ever seen a Schnauzer with fur as immaculately white as mine?

Lsmh: Where did you get feathers...

White · Lee: Young man—

White · Lee: Oh my, hahaha—

Lsmh: Here’s your new owner—Zang. You’d better behave!

White · Lee: Huh? Zang?

White · Lee: Ohoho—Zang, what a cute name!

3.3 The Aphasia: Language and Power

How does one translate a scholarly debate into a game character? The Aphasia quest dramatizes a radicalized **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis**, the claim that language determines thought, fused with **Foucault's concept of discourse as power**.

The villain, Wei Luo, is a former professor of Structuralist Linguistics at Imperial University. He poisons the village water supply to “destroy language,” believing that words create the categories that oppress us. His argument is philosophically coherent: “Create the word ‘murderer,’ and you have murderers. Speak the word ‘pain,’ and you feel more pain. Discourse is the tyranny of the state.”

A poisoned villager describes the phenomenology: “The flower disappeared. It became color, scent, but the ‘flower’ itself vanished.” This is **linguistic determinism** rendered as lived experience: without the signifier, the signified dissolves.

The resolution subverts expectations. Wei Luo’s “antidote” is a sheet of music. The protagonists realize that music, being pre-linguistic and affective, can bypass the blocked symbolic order. The cure enacts a counter-thesis: **when language fails, art remains**.



Figure 11: Wei Luo: “I will destroy the language of this world...”

Script Excerpt: *The Structuralist's Manifesto*

Wei Luo: People who can speak... people who can speak... Die! **[Battle]** Ah... curse you...

Lsmh: Why did you poison the well? Why did you make the villagers lose their speech!

Wei Luo: Lose their speech? That's not all—I will destroy the language of this world...

Protagonist: Why would you do such a thing—

Wei Luo: Language—do you know what a terrifying thing language is?

Lsmh: What nonsense are you talking about...

Well: Are you going to say something about “preserving linguistic purity”...

Wei Luo: I would never say something so stupid. Only dead languages can be pure.

Wei Luo: Create the word “murderer,” and you have murderers. Speak the word “pain,” and you feel more and more pain...

Protagonist: But without murderers, how could there be a word for “murderer”?

Wei Luo: You are wrong. You may think—the world is a certain way, so we have language to match it.

Wei Luo: But the truth is the opposite—The language we speak determines the world.

Lsmh: Whatever you're saying, you've lost! Give up now!

Wei Luo: Don't you want to destroy the pretenses of civilization? Don't you want to return to a natural world?

Protagonist: Save your breath. Without language, humans cannot communicate at all.

Protagonist: Communication is the most basic human need.

Wei Luo: And you think with language, humans can truly communicate? Is the “love” you speak of the same thing as the “love” I speak of? Is the “god” you speak of the same being as the “god” I speak of?

Lsmh: Enough! You think everyone is as incapable of speech as you!

Wei Luo: Haha, I don't know how to speak! I have studied language for forty years, and you say I can't speak—

Wei Luo: You're right! You're absolutely right! I don't know how to speak!

Wei Luo: I don't know how to speak the way you think you can speak!

Wei Luo: Discourse is your privilege! Discourse is the tyranny of the state! Discourse is a knife that kills without blood—!

Protagonist: What right do you have to say this?

Protagonist: Do you know that because of your poison, someone nearly killed themselves from depression?

Wei Luo: Then tell me—If everyone cast you out, would you still try to please that world?

Protagonist:

Wei Luo: Hmph—this constructed world, what does it matter if it's destroyed!

Lsmh: You're completely insane!

Wei Luo: I don't need you to tell me I'm insane—Since I left Imperial University, I've been called a madman countless times. Now that I've lost to you, I have nothing more to say. Here is the cure—

[Wei Luo throws down a sheet of paper]

Wei Luo: But unless humanity can one day solve the ultimate contradiction of language—Even without my poison, you will remain aphasics who can open your mouths...

Lsmh: This kind of person, might as well study himself to death!

Protagonist: Huh? This is... this is a sheet of music!

Lsmh: Damn! He tricked us!

Protagonist: Wait, there are words below...

Lsmh: “In a world where Socrates is dead...”

Protagonist: “Homer still lives”...?

Lsmh: Could it be that singing is the cure?

Protagonist: It's all we've got...

3.4 The Starving Girl: Body and Memory

The quest begins with a conventional framing. The player team finds Winter collapsed, starving herself. They observe: “She’s not fat at all.” They fetch her boyfriend A-Jian, and the party collects ingredients for a healing meal. A-Jian explains to the protagonists: “A few years ago, a loudmouth told her she was fat, and she started obsessing over her body.” This is the **third-party narrative**, the documented, clinical version of an eating disorder story.

But games possess a unique narrative affordance: the ability to **switch from first-person participation to third-person observation**. When the protagonists leave to wait outside, the player remains, watching a scene between A-Jian and Winter alone in the room. This theatrical aside reveals what the “official” story concealed.

In this private scene, A-Jian confesses: “I never imagined that joke *I* made would stay with you for so long.” The “loudmouth” was him. The formal narrative he gave the protagonists was a deflection; the truth emerges only when the “public” eye is removed. This reflects the reality of psychological narratives: the version documented by third parties is rarely the complete story.

The quest then explores the **mechanics of magical thinking** in eating disorders. Winter’s logic is not rational, but it is internally coherent: a system of false beliefs that magically links body shape to emotional reality. She asks: “Was it because I got fat again that you gave me the cold shoulder?” She concludes: “I keep telling myself, if I just lose one more pound, you will come back.”

This is exactly how eating disorder cognition operates, illogical to outsiders, yet utterly compelling to the sufferer. The body becomes a lever for controlling the uncontrollable: relationships, time, love. She believes if she shrinks her body back to the size it was when she and A-Jian were children, their relationship will metaphysically revert to that idyllic past. Starvation is not vanity but an **ontological protest**: by halting biological intake, she believes she can halt the flow of time itself.

The resolution uses game-specific narration to address this. A-Jian does not argue with logic; he enters her magical system. He offers a “magic spell”: “Close your eyes... count one, two, three. It’s a spell that can turn back time.” Winter counts: “One... two... thr—mmph!” The screen goes dark. The “magic” is a kiss, the medium’s conventions expressing intimacy without depiction, solving her “magical” problem with a physical reality: presence, not absence.



Figure 12: Winter: “I... won’t eat...”



Figure 13: The magical thinking: “I thought, was it because I got fat again that you gave me the cold shoulder...”

Script Excerpt: *The Starving Girl's Confession*

Winter: No!

A-Jian: Open your mouth!

Winter: No! I won't eat!

A-Jian: Can't you just cooperate?!

A-Jian: Ow! You bit me!

Winter: I said I won't eat!

Winter: I won't, I won't, I won't!

A-Jian: Sigh...

Protagonist: How is it going?

A-Jian: Still no good. I need to think of another way.

[Later, A-Jian prepares a feast from their shared past]

A-Jian: Winter—

Winter: What do you want now? I won't eat!

Winter: I said I won't eat!

A-Jian: Not even cookies?

Winter: No!

A-Jian: Then surely you won't eat this double-skin milk pudding?

Winter: N-No!

A-Jian: What about this mustard duck feet... and this black chicken soup... this coconut noodle—the coconut was sent by Yangfei from the coast... and this pre-rain pastry, made from fresh tea leaves...

Winter: Enough! Enough!

Winter: You—you—you're too much!

[Winter grabs a rice cake and runs to the corner, crying]

A-Jian: Winter...

Winter: I hate you! Why is it so delicious... I hate it, I hate it!

Winter: Do you know how hard it was for me to starve for so many days...

Winter: Now it's all ruined...

A-Jian: Why do you do this to yourself...

A-Jian: Winter, you know...

A-Jian: I never, ever cared whether you were fat or thin.

A-Jian: I never imagined that joke I made would stay with you for so long.

A-Jian: Of course I want you to be beautiful...

A-Jian: But no matter how fat you get, you're still my Winter...

Winter: A-Jian...

Winter: Why haven't you come to see me for so long?

A-Jian: Because the Guild has so many things to handle, I already explained in my letters...

Winter: Do you know how much I wanted to see you...

Winter: I know pushing you would only make you angry.

Winter: But... but when you're not here, I really don't know what to do...

Winter: I thought maybe because I got fat again, you grew cold toward me...

Winter: I hate my own body so much. Why is it so fat?

Winter: I feel like every part of my body is redundant...

Winter: Just chunks filling up space...

Winter: Nothing but disgust...

A-Jian: No, it's not like that...

Winter: I know it's not...

Winter: I know you're busy...

Winter: I know I'm just using dieting as a way to pass the time...

Winter: I kept telling myself, if I starve for one more day, it's as if you're still by my side.

Winter: I kept telling myself, if I lose one more pound, you'll come back...

Winter: When I was so hungry I couldn't move, lying in bed... I felt happy...

Winter: As if we were still like before... lying on the grass watching the stars...

Winter: So many stars... spinning in our sky...

Winter: Such good times...

A-Jian: Winter... I...

Winter: A-Jian...

Winter: I'm so afraid of losing you...

Winter: Why can't we go back to when we were children...

A-Jian: We can go back!

Winter: How...

A-Jian: Close your eyes...

[Screen fades]

A-Jian: Then count one, two, three.

Winter: One, two, three?

A-Jian: Yes. It's a spell that can turn back time.

Winter: Really? Then I'll count...

Winter: One... two... thr—mmph!

Winter: A-Jian...

A-Jian: Winter... I have always, always loved you...

3.5 The Fire God: Scholarly Responsibility

In Qifan Village, the annual Fire God Festival ends in disaster. The player, pursuing the Fire Seal, disturbs the Fire Phoenix guardian. The unsealing causes the phoenix to rampage, burning down the village granary. When soldiers arrive to seize property for unpaid taxes, the protagonists fight them off to protect the starving villagers. However, violence cannot solve the economic deficit, shifting the quest from adventure to **ethical reckoning**.

The quest stages a debate about **how scholars should wield knowledge**. Well, a zealous reformer, accuses Vonasi of cowardice: “Why are scholars all so craven like you? Is it just fear of losing reputation and status?” She believes intellectuals must correct “superstition”—that knowledge obligates intervention.

Vonasi offers a counter-position: “Perhaps your view is a bit extreme... Folk belief has no right or wrong.” He refuses the role of civilizing missionary, critiquing the “**Terrible Solemnity**” of institutional theory. He argues that while the Church sees a rigid moral hierarchy, the reality of the natural world is fluid: “Between heaven and earth, all things flow... with a smile.” This positions the scholar not as a judge of truth, but as a student of the world’s natural rhythm.

The crisis forces the question into material terms. When the granary burns, abstract knowledge meets concrete suffering. Vonasi realizes that his **anthropological debt**, the career built on representing these people, must be repaid. He asks: “If I can pay the tax with money, would that be acceptable?” He sacrifices his life savings and returns to the Imperial University not to publish, but to **raise donations**, leveraging his academic status to redistribute wealth back to the village.

This marks his transition from **observer to participant**. “I’ll just farm alongside you... I have become part of the earth.” The epilogue reveals he has moved permanently to the village and is working with Well and the elders to establish a school teaching children to read. Knowledge cannot remain abstract when the “subject” is starving. The scholar who takes must give back: not in papers, but in presence.

Interestingly, the villagers forgive the party for the fire: “Tell her not to feel guilty. We are all grateful she stood up for us against injustice.” **Solidarity**, standing up to power, is valued as highly as material aid.

Design Note: Edward Schafer’s *The Vermilion Bird*

The village’s fire worship draws design inspiration from Edward Schafer’s *The Vermilion Bird* (1967), which documented how Tang imperial elites viewed southern religious practices as exotic and primitive. Schafer’s work extensively catalogued southern China’s local deities, regional festivals, and material culture, precisely the elements that differentiate peripheral communities from imperial orthodoxy.

Qifan Village replicates this dynamic: a fire deity unrecognized by official theology, annual rituals dismissed as “superstition,” and a northern scholar who has spent over a decade documenting these “curious phenomena.” The game stages the same ethnographic relationship Schafer analyzed, imperial center studying exotic periphery, but forces it into crisis. When the Fire Phoenix burns the granary, Vonasi’s observational stance collapses into ethical complicity. The scholar who merely *documents* southern practice must now materially support it, moving from academic extraction to lived solidarity.



Figure 14: The academic gaze: “The southern Fire God worship is truly a curious phenomenon... I have lived in the south for over ten years to study it.”



Figure 15: The transition from observer to participant: “If I can pay the tax with money, would that be acceptable?”

Script Excerpt: *The Debate on Scholarly Responsibility*

[At the Fire God Festival]

Vonasi: The southern Fire God worship is truly a curious phenomenon. I have lived in the south for over ten years to study it.

Well: I wish to ask—what god is this Fire God?

Village Chief: The elders say he is the fourth son of the Light God and the Earth Mother...

Well: No book has ever recorded this god. How could the Light God and the male Earth Lord possibly have children?

Village Chief: But the *Book of Songs* once said...

Well: Please don't cite baseless folk songs as evidence.

Village Chief: But all things have spirit—should they not be respected?

Well: Hmph. Then where is the Father of Light?

Village Chief: Look—this great scholar, Vonasi, has lived here for thirteen years.

Well: The famous theologian? Have you never corrected their errors?

Vonasi: No, no—just folklore research. I think your view is a bit extreme.

Vonasi: The primitive religions of the south are not wrong. Every region has its own beliefs...

Well: “Carthage must be destroyed”—is that not divine revelation?

Vonasi: But my Father also said, “All people are my children.”

Well: Can you abandon a theologian's duty? Can you betray the divine will?

Vonasi: Miss, no one dares claim to truly understand the divine will—that itself would be blasphemy.

Well: Why are scholars all so craven? Is it just fear of losing reputation?!

Vonasi: You should visit the volcano at Flame Moon Town. There you will learn that gods, humans, or spirits—none possess the terrible solemnity the Church describes.

Vonasi: Between heaven and earth, all things flow... with a smile.

Well: Hmph. You're better suited to be a poet.

[After the granary burns and soldiers arrive]

Soldier: You haven't paid the spring tax! Orders say you must pay in kind!

Village Chief: But we reported... the Fire Phoenix burned our granary...

Soldier: Your problems aren't my concern. Boys! Search for valuables!

Well: Not a single coin! You are going too far!

Soldier: Where did this brat come from? I'll teach you a lesson!

[Combat ensues. The protagonists repel the soldiers, but the tax debt remains.]

Vonasi: Wait—if I pay in money... would that be acceptable?

Village Chief: Professor Vonasi!

Vonasi: I should be able to gather 50,000 *tis*...

Village Chief: If you give us your money, what will you do?

Vonasi: I'll just farm alongside you. I've long grown tired of life in Lila.

Vonasi: These folk spirits, these strange legends, these primitive ways of thinking... they have become part of my life.

Vonasi: I... I have become part of the earth...

Village Chief: I hope the southern Fire God worship will not disappear.

Vonasi: If that were to happen, even if it cost me my life, I would be willing. And anyone like me would make the same choice.

[Epilogue: The Village Recovers]

Village Chief: We owe so much to Professor Vonasi.

Village Chief: He took his own savings, and went back to Imperial University to raise donations.

Village Chief: Professor Vonasi has moved here permanently, and Miss Well too!

Village Chief: She and Professor Vonasi are working with the elders to establish a school, teaching the children to read!

Village Chief: Tell her not to feel guilty, no matter what.

Village Chief: We are all grateful she stood up for us against injustice.

3.6 The Idealist: Well's Character Arc

Well is a noblewoman who despises the corruption of Lila City. She believes the world became this way because the **Punish Evil God** was sealed three hundred years ago. Her quest is to release him to cleanse humanity. Her backstory reveals the source of her nihilism: she fell in love with her tutor, Blanc, who abandoned her due to poverty. She concluded: **“The person I loved never existed. Blanc was just a coward”**.

To unseal the God, Well must traverse dungeons across the world. These spaces share a common architectural signature: **Earth Mother statues** positioned before boss chambers. Mechanically, investigating a statue fully heals the party. Narratively, this is an act of maternal mercy from a deity who has not yet appeared. By the time players reach the finale, they have been saved by the Earth Mother dozens of times, making her eventual intervention feel like the fulfillment of an **implicit contract** rather than a *deus ex machina*.

The climax occurs when Well unseals the Punish Evil God. Instead of gratitude, he indicts her with a laundry list of hypocrisies based on her journey. He asks why she stopped soldiers from collecting taxes yet ignored Clear Water Town's land reclamation that destroyed fisheries; why she tolerated the Di tribe's fishing ban but condemned the “heresy” of Fire God worshipers. He reveals the truth: **“You merely used releasing me as an excuse to resolve your filthy lust!”** She sought divine punishment only to externalize her own self-loathing.

The **Earth Mother** then intervenes, staging the central philosophical debate. She argues that **“Every evil deed is committed under the assumption of justice”**. Her message is not moral relativism but ontological humility.

Following this, Well returns to Lila City and encounters a funeral procession. Realizing it is Blanc's funeral, her abstract hatred dissolves into concrete grief. She recognizes the Earth Mother's truth: life is not a binary of Purity vs. Sin, but a messy, repetitive cycle of **“Spring and Death, Love and Pain”**. This realization completes her transformation; she abandons her crusade to live “in the bosom of the earth,” accepting the unbearable cup of life.

Design Note: The Earth Mother

The Earth Mother's design synthesizes two specific sources to contrast against the abstract, masculine law of the Punish Evil God:

1. Visual: The Venus of Willendorf

(c. 28,000 BCE). The sprite adopts the Paleolithic figurine's exaggerated rounded form. Large torso, minimal limbs, and earthy tones emphasize primordial fertility, fecundity, and “rootedness” over mobility or combat prowess.

2. Character: Cybel

(From Eugene O'Neill's *The Great God Brown*). Like O'Neill's character, the Earth Mother represents an amoral, nurturing force of nature who accepts life in its totality—offering maternal mercy rather than paternal judgment.



Figure 16: Earth Mother sprite: embodied form inspired by Venus of Willendorf

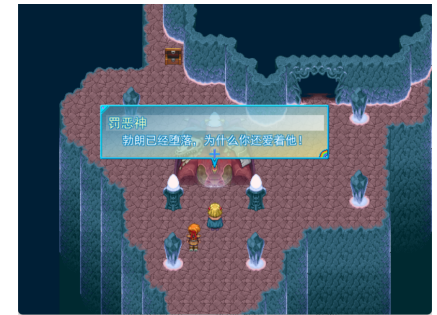


Figure 17: The Punish Evil God confronts Well: “Blanc has already fallen—why do you still love him!”

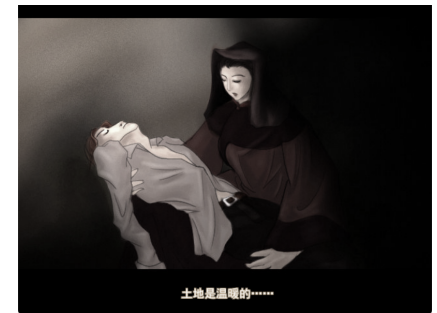


Figure 18: Blanc's funeral: “The earth is warm...” The composition evokes Pietà (Michelangelo's sculpture), reframing divine sacrifice as earthly grief

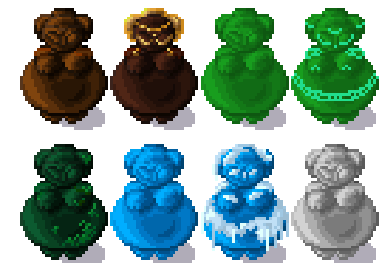


Figure 19: Earth Mother statues serve as healing points in all labyrinths, foreshadowing her intervention

Script Excerpt: *The Indictment of Sins*

Well: In the name of all evil and suffering, I beseech...

Punish Evil God: After watching human evil for three hundred years, it is finally time for me to return to earth—

Punish Evil God: Who calls for me? Who calls for me?

Well: It is I...

Punish Evil God: You?

Well: Yes.

Well: I hope you can become the final guardian of justice...

Punish Evil God: [*Furious*] Silence! Do not defile the word “justice” with your words!

Punish Evil God: Why did you stop soldiers from collecting taxes?

Well: Because they... their behavior was too excessive...

Punish Evil God: Clear Water Town filled in the lake to create farmland—why not punish them...

Well: This... this is not my responsibility...

Punish Evil God: Then the Di tribe prohibited fishermen from fishing—why not punish them—

Punish Evil God: The heretics of Qifan Village—why do you still tolerate their existence in this world?

Punish Evil God: The evil of Lila City breeds like plague—why not raze that city?

Punish Evil God: Blanc has already fallen—why do you still love him!

Well: Ah!

Punish Evil God: Hmph!

Punish Evil God: You merely used releasing me as an excuse to resolve your filthy lust!

Well: I... I... I don't know...

Protagonist: That's enough!

Protagonist: What is good and what is evil in this world—why not allow people to make mistakes!

Protagonist: In a world with mistakes, don't people still live happily?

Punish Evil God: All happiness is sinful! All people are sinners!

Protagonist: God has already forgiven humanity!

Punish Evil God: God forgave humanity's original sin, yet they created new evils!

Punish Evil God: You two—accept punishment first—

[*Battle (Scripted Loss)*]

Protagonist: Damn!

Well: [Name of Protagonist], you must leave here! Let me hold it back!

Protagonist: Well, you?

Well: You must go!

Well: I no longer know the purpose of life!

Well: Dying means nothing!

Well: You must go!

Protagonist: No!!!

[*The Earth Mother Appears*]

Punish Evil God: What! Why!

Earth Mother: Punish Evil God—

Punish Evil God: You again—

Earth Mother: The Heavenly Father creating you was a mistake.

Earth Mother: Three hundred years ago, your mission already ended.

Punish Evil God: Yes, fate decreed I should end...

Punish Evil God: But the evil of the human world has not ended—!

Earth Mother: Compared to endless suffering and the disasters fate brings to people, even the greatest blasphemy—what does it matter?

Earth Mother: If the gods cannot save people from terrifying fate, what right do they have to blame humanity's impiety?

Punish Evil God: In the sinful human world, it is forever impossible to eliminate suffering—

Earth Mother: Then you—to vent your resentment, causing countless people to die in misery—is that not evil?

Punish Evil God: ...Hmph, spare me these words—

Earth Mother: Sigh, three hundred years, and you still refuse to awaken...

Punish Evil God: I will never bow to evil!

Earth Mother: But... do you know...

Earth Mother: Every evil deed in the human world is committed under the assumption of justice.

Earth Mother: Everyone believes they are right.

Earth Mother: They are all the same as you...

Punish Evil God: No need for your nonsense. If you want to seal me, come!

Punish Evil God: Three hundred years later, you may not win!

Earth Mother: Then... I apologize...

Protagonist: Ah... you are...

Well: You... you are that...

Earth Mother: Child, rather than punish evil, redeem it...

Earth Mother: Never again try to release this violent, terrifying god.

Earth Mother: He will never bring happiness to humanity.

Well: I don't know...

Well: Happiness... perhaps happiness itself is sinful...

Earth Mother: The perfect ideal world fantasized in heaven is pale to humanity at all times and places.

Earth Mother: Only the human world is humanity's best destination.

Earth Mother: Before brutal fate, what meaning is there in truth or falsehood, good or evil?

Earth Mother: Perhaps... later you will understand...

Well: [Name of Protagonist]...

Protagonist: Well...

Well: [Name of Protagonist], I thought I would die...

Well: Are we... still alive?

Protagonist: You are okay, right?

Well: So facing death is like that...

Well: What is the purpose of living? What exactly is...

Protagonist: Well...

Well: How should I live on?

Well: Even what I always believed in...

Protagonist: Don't think too much.

Protagonist: Weren't you going to the countryside to live a peaceful life...?

Well: I don't know...

Protagonist: Let's go—

Protagonist: Go to Lila to pack up, and start a new life...

Well: Is this long journey meaningless?

Protagonist: Well!

Protagonist: Is disillusionment not a form of growth?

Protagonist: If the old ways were wrong, should we let them continue to be wrong?

Well:

Well: What is right, what is wrong...

Protagonist: Yes! What is right, what is wrong. We don't know!

Protagonist: What we thought was correct since childhood might all be lies!

Protagonist: But if you no longer care about right or wrong, why not just live muddled through?

Protagonist: Why still ask about the meaning of life!

Well: But where is the way forward?

Well: In this vast universe, painful fates writhe everywhere.

Well: Loss after loss...

Well: What new life are you talking about?!

Well: New life...

Well: Ha, to me, the road ahead is like a gray-white snake, rushing toward me...

Protagonist: About the future, hasn't the Earth Mother already said...

Well: Love? The love I long stopped believing in?

Well: Heh heh...

Protagonist: Then destroy your soul—

Protagonist: If you don't even have the courage to face disillusionment, what right do you have to ask what is the purpose of living!

Well: ...

Protagonist: You push everything from today onto yesterday's self—is that your responsibility!

Protagonist: No one can decide for you, not even yesterday's you can decide today's you—

Protagonist: As long as you live one more day, you must choose anew!

Well: Don't use those existentialist clichés to enlighten me anymore...

Protagonist: Well, cheer up, everything will get better slowly...

Well: Don't say such cheap words... Let's go back to Lila...

3.7 The Finale: Coffee, Mara, and the Meaning of Suffering

3.7.1 The Narrative Arc: Two Battles, Confession, and Resolution

The game's main quest is framed as a rescue mission: Coffee, one of the most outstanding members of the Rangers Guild, has disappeared in the desert and been captured by Mara (Māra-Pāpīyas). To reach him, the protagonist must collect voice fragments from Coffee's scattered friends and comrades: each fragment a memory, a piece of connection.

When the protagonist finally enters the final dungeon, they find Coffee not physically imprisoned but **spiritually corrupted**. The confrontation unfolds in stages:

Battle 1: Coffee Demonized. Upon seeing the protagonist, Coffee becomes hostile, crying “Stay away...!” Mara has summoned “the resentment in his heart,” forcing the protagonist to fight their friend. After this painful battle, the voice fragments scatter and Coffee collapses in despair.

Mara's Philosophical Assault. Mara reveals himself as “**the symbol of all human anguish**” and delivers two creation myths to justify nihilistic destruction:

- (1) The **Goddess of Sorrow**, who rules humanity during life while gods claim them before birth and after death, making all human striving futile;
- (2) The **Law of Light**, a poetic rendering of thermodynamic heat death: when light fills every dark corner of the universe, all motion ceases. “No heat. No wind. No flowing rivers. Only death.”

These arguments are never refuted. They are *true*.

Battle 2: Defeating Mara. The protagonist's confession, not logical refutation, breaks Mara's spell. Coffee regains agency, shouting “Defeat him! Now!” Together they battle and defeat Mara. But even after victory, Coffee refuses to leave, saying Mara's arguments were “right... I couldn't refute any of it.”

The Protagonist's Confession. In desperation, the protagonist slaps Coffee and reveals their own past: childhood trauma, suicidal ideation, nihilistic despair. Then the turning point: “**But from the moment I saw you, I suddenly discovered—smiling is such a beautiful expression.**” The testimony culminates in existentialist proclamation: “**Maybe emptiness is only because one has never truly existed. If so—if one experiences these despairing, painful, joyful, turbulent lives—even if after death is nothingness—so what?**” And finally: “**In the boundless universe, even if existence is momentary as a flash of light—it is still humanity's most brilliant radiance.**”

The victory is not martial but **dialectical**. The protagonist does not refute Mara's cosmology. Instead, they reject his *conclusion*: if suffering is inevitable and the universe will die, connection is *still* worth choosing.

The Resolution: Choosing the Boring Day. After Coffee hears his friends' voices in the scattered fragments and declares “I love you all!”, he enters a dream space to say farewell to Mara.

Coffee does not *defeat* despair; he *acknowledges* it and chooses to leave anyway. Then he wakes at home, surrounded by friends. The game ends with everyone cheering: “Coffee, we love you!” Then the final line: “**If the day is boring just because it is real.**”

Mara offered grand cosmic narratives. Coffee chooses the boring reality of waking up and seeing friends. The **ordinary** is the only defense against the **entropic**. Meaning is not found in permanence but in **the stubborn continuation of the mundane**.

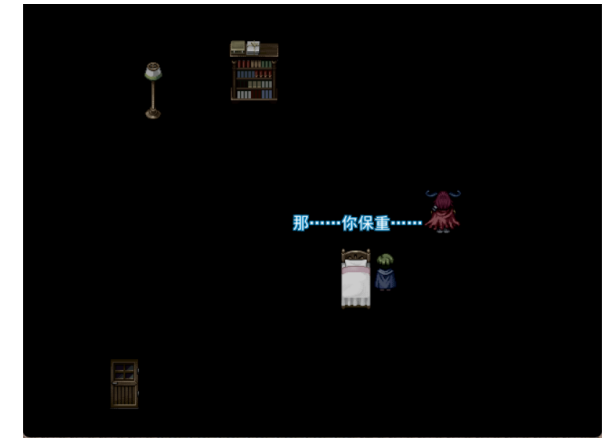


Figure 20: Coffee's dream: saying goodbye to Mara in the dark dream space.

Script: Coffee's Farewell to Mara in Dreams

Mara: “Coffee— You're going back?”

Coffee: “Yes. I'm very tired...”

Mara: “Alright. Where are you going?”

Coffee: “I don't know... But I must go.”

Mara: “Then... take care...”

Coffee: “I will. And you too.”



Figure 21: Coffee wakes surrounded by friends. The visual shift from dark to light marks return to ordinary reality.

3.7.2 Character Design: The Observer Revealed

Surface Reading: Circular Redemption. The finale presents a rescue narrative. Mara’s dialogue (“My identity was entirely designed by you... Forever wearing a terrifying face”) confirms he is the archetypal villain. Coffee once saved the protagonist from nihilism with an unintentional smile; now the protagonist must prove that smile *mattered*, validating interpersonal connection as defense against cosmic futility.

The Blank Avatar Design. For most of the game, the protagonist appears as pure observer: using the **default RMXP male sprite**, emotionally self-constrained. This seems like standard JRPG blank-slate design. But the finale reframes this silence. When the protagonist reveals their backstory (“Looked down on by adults. Bullied by peers. Cyclical suicidal ideation”), the “blank” design is exposed as **recovered nihilism**. Their minimalism is not emptiness but deliberate restraint after surviving the same crisis Coffee now faces. The generic sprite represents someone who has *already* confronted Mara’s arguments, living for a small, specific reason: a smile.

Depth Reading: Three Stages of One Self. The tender farewell disrupts the villain framework. When Coffee says goodbye to Mara in the dream (“Then... take care... I will. And you too”) their intimacy suggests not external conflict but **internal integration**. This allows a psychological reading where the three figures represent one consciousness at different stages:

- **Mara:** Nihilistic awareness hardened into destructive conclusion
- **Coffee:** Sensitive awareness paralyzed by despair (“cannot refute him”)
- **Protagonist:** Committed action despite acknowledged despair

The identical trauma (not coincidence but structural mirroring) positions the protagonist as Coffee’s potential future. The rescue becomes **self-rescue across time**: Coffee’s present saved by his future through memory of his past. Both readings work. The surface validates connection; the depth reveals internal dialectic.

3.7.3 The Danmei Aesthetic: Restraint and Rupture

The relationship between protagonist and Coffee utilizes **danmei coding**: Chinese BL fiction techniques that prioritize emotional intensity over explicit labels.

Visual and Emotional Restraint. The protagonist uses the RMXP default sprite and maintains stoic composure throughout. No romantic foreshadowing appears. This makes the finale’s confession land with **explosive unexpected force**: the crack in the “generic observer” façade reveals devotion that was silent all along. The restraint amplifies the rupture.

The Smile Line. “From the moment I saw you, I suddenly discovered smiling is such a beautiful expression” structures as **love-at-first-sight testimony**. The expression emphasizes visual arrest and aesthetic revelation. By focusing on aesthetic salvation rather than romance, it confesses without naming.

The Pause Line. Coffee’s cry, “I love you [pause] all!”, exploits the chinese grammar where singular and plural differ. The dash allows “I love you—” to ring first before expanding to “—all!” This **ensorship evasion technique** from domestic BL fiction delivers singular intimacy while maintaining plural deniability. Readers hear both simultaneously.

The Unexpected Reasonable. The confession is deliberately *unexpected*, no prior romantic signals, yet *reasonable* when considering what the protagonist has done: collected every fragment, fought through dungeons, slapped Coffee in desperation. The restrained design (generic sprite, stoic affect) hid **intense devotion** that the finale suddenly exposes. This contrast between visual genericness and emotional depth makes the revelation hit harder. The bond, whether read as romance or self-love across time (danmei’s 水仙/*narcissus* tag for self-pairing), functions as **existential anchor**.



Figure 22: Mara: “For the sake of genius’s persistence, bearing the unavoidable suffering...” Mara articulates Coffee’s despair, or his own.



Figure 23: The blank avatar sheds its mask: “Maybe emptiness is only because one has never truly existed.”

3.7.4 Cultural Framework: Lu Xun

For Chinese players who recognize references, the game engages **Lu Xun** (鲁迅, 1881-1936).

Educational Paradox.

Lu Xun is inescapable in Chinese schooling, essays memorized for exams. Yet his writing remains difficult: foreign philosophy, bitter ironies, classical vernacular. Most encounter Lu Xun as **cultural monument divorced from meaning**.

Opening Epigraph.

The game opens with that line from Lu Xun's *Call to Arms* (1923), translating Petőfi Sándor: "**Despair is illusory, just as hope is.**" Both hope (guaranteed meaning) and despair (absolute meaninglessness) are illusions. What remains: *choice* to act without metaphysical comfort.

Mara as Symbol.

Mara declares himself "symbol of all human anguish (苦闷的象征)," quoting Lu Xun's 1907 essay *On the Power of Mara Poetry*. Lu Xun celebrated "Mara poets" (Byron, Shelley, Pushkin) who rebelled against dogma, warning of self-destructive nihilism.

The Dialectic.

The game stages this tension. Mara's arguments are *true*. But his solution (destroy world) is absolutism of despair. Coffee's path: **acknowledge despair while choosing to continue**. Neither false hope nor false despair, but Sisyphean perseverance.

Recognition.

This reading is **optional**. Players unfamiliar with Lu Xun experience existentialist JRPG. Chinese players who memorized essays experience **cultural resonance**: exam quotes become legible through drama.

3.7.5 Script: The Finale

[Protagonist finds Coffee.]

Protagonist: Coffee!

Coffee: Ah— [Name of Protagonist]...!

Protagonist: Coffee, how are you?

Coffee: It's nothing serious now...

Protagonist: You collected all the voice fragments?

Coffee: Yes!

Protagonist: Let's leave immediately—

Mara: [appears] Hmph— Did you think it would be that easy?

Protagonist: You...

Coffee: Damn—

Mara: Have you recovered already?

Coffee: Hmph! I already— Ah!

Coffee: I...

Protagonist: Coffee?

Coffee: [Name of Protagonist], you— Stay away...

Coffee: Stay away...!

Coffee: Ah—! [becomes hostile]

Protagonist: What's wrong with you!

Coffee: I— I'm so— full of hate—!

Protagonist: Ah!

[Battle: demonized Coffee]

Protagonist: All the voice fragments scattered!

Protagonist: Oh no! Damn!

Mara: Ah...

Coffee: [defeated] There's no hope...

Protagonist: Coffee! Coffee!

Protagonist: Coffee, what are you saying!

Protagonist: What do you mean there's no hope!

Protagonist: You bastard! [to Mara]

Protagonist: What did you do to Coffee!

Mara: I merely— summoned the resentment in his heart...

Protagonist: Resentment?

Protagonist: You're talking nonsense!

Protagonist: Coffee has nothing to resent!

Protagonist: Coffee is the most outstanding!

Mara: Outstanding?—

Mara: Being outstanding doesn't mean having no resentment...

Mara: The more outstanding a person, the more injustice they suffer;

Mara: The more sensitive a person, the stronger the pain they perceive.

Mara: I merely— guided him.

Protagonist: Who exactly are you!

Mara: Me?

Mara: What am I?

Mara: Hmph—

Mara: My identity was entirely designed by you—

Mara: I've never known who I am!

Mara: Against the brutality of fate

Mara: Rebelling against all people

Mara: Rebelling against divine order

Mara: Seeking my own independent meaning—

Mara: And so I was made into such a person...

Mara: Forever constructing plans to destroy the world

Mara: Forever controlling the rhythm of the story

Mara: Forever wearing a terrifying face...

Mara: Yet forever imprisoned at the end of legend

Mara: Forever treated as a faceless symbol

Mara: Finally always using death to exchange for humanity's renewed conversion to the gods...

Mara: Time and again forced to repeat the most painful process...

Mara: I am **Mara**, I am all demons!

Mara: **The symbol of all human anguish!**

Protagonist: But why— why did you choose Coffee!

Protagonist: What exactly do you want him to do?

Mara: Him?

Mara: For the sake of genius's persistence, bearing the unavoidable suffering of the human world—

Mara: In the childhood that should be innocent, enjoying too much success and joy,

Mara: In the adolescence that should be pure, witnessing all deception and injustice,

Mara: In the youth that should rise up, becoming a decadent recluse—

Mara: Endlessly using his innate outstanding linguistic ability to construct new fears and hatreds—

Mara: Forever oscillating between misanthropy and self-blame...

Mara: Isn't all this enough to qualify him as a dark hero?

Protagonist: Dark hero?

Mara: Only after experiencing such rationality and resilience can one truly understand the sorrow of the human world.

Protagonist: The sorrow of the human world...

Mara: That's right!

Mara: Rather than sudden repentance when disaster strikes, why not let everyone understand from the beginning?

Mara: I want him to shatter beautiful fairy tales

Mara: Shatter legends of effort

Mara: Shatter hypocritical creeds

Mara: Tell every child—

Mara: What the world is really like!

Protagonist: Do you want to destroy this world?

Mara: Yes! I want to destroy it!

Mara: Destroy this painful, boring, meaningless world...

Mara: This world that will eventually collapse even without my destruction!

Protagonist: You're insane...!

Mara: I am not!

Mara: ...

Mara: Let me tell you a story—

Mara: The story of creation has long been lost.

Mara: How much do you know about the origin of the world?

Mara: Why does it exist? Why did it begin?

Mara: God created the world... but who created God?

Protagonist: This...

Mara: Then, let's not ask about things beyond humanity.

Mara: About humans—how were humans created? Do you know?

Protagonist: I... I don't know...

Coffee: Don't... Don't listen to him...

Mara: Will you escape! Will you escape the truth!

Protagonist: Speak on!

Mara: Hmph—

Mara: After heaven and earth opened, the Goddess of Sorrow molded humans from clay.

Mara: Regarding humanity's ownership, the Goddess of Sorrow, the Father of Light, and the Earth Mother quarreled.

Mara: After fierce debate, they made a decision.

Mara: Humans—before birth belong to the Father of Light.

Mara: After death, return to their original place—the earth.

Mara: But while they are alive— They are ruled by the Goddess of Sorrow.

Mara: Sorrow...? Sorrow—fate.

Mara: In this sorrowful human world, where is humanity's happiness?

Mara: They thought of a ridiculous yet tragic solution.

Mara: They tried to become more like gods. To obtain eternity in the other world.

Mara: They mastered the use of fire. They enslaved the entire world.

Mara: One noble person after another— Obtained god-like wisdom.

Mara: Dreaming that one day they would be eternal alongside the gods.

Mara: But humans are humans.

Mara: Before life, they have bright memories. After death, they return to silent earth.

Mara: While alive, they can never escape the fate of sorrow.

Mara: No matter how carefully one constructs a beautiful life, fate need only use the force of a breath to easily destroy it completely.

Mara: Humanity thus became angry.

Mara: They discovered that gods would not save them at all.

Mara: They destroyed all shrines on earth. Smashed all idols.

Mara: Decided to build their own home with their own hands.

Mara: However, sorrow— Is still sorrow—

Mara: No matter how much they enslaved the world, they were still slaves to fate.

Mara: Unable to avoid unreasonable tragedies. And losing the fantasized eternal life with gods.

Mara: In the end, still having to face death.

Mara: If the soul leaves the body, what does everything in life amount to?

Mara: What was loved, what was hated... What was achieved, what was lost...

Mara: Thinking reason and morality could resolve the fear of death.

Mara: But forgetting that it is precisely because of reason and morality that humans, among all things, learned to stare at death.

Mara: Generation after generation, they reproduce. Passing land to descendants.

Mara: Erecting statues under the sun. Writing texts that endure through ages.

Mara: Humanity hopes through this to symbolically live on. To obtain eternity in the continuous chain of life.

Protagonist: Then why would you still destroy this world?

Protagonist: Precisely because of life's suffering, we must fight for this world!

Mara: To avoid being swallowed by nature is but the smallest possibility.

Mara: Moreover, this is only one story. I must tell you another story—

Coffee: [Name of Protagonist]...

Protagonist: Speak!

Mara: At the beginning of existence, God left only two things.

Mara: Great light, and the law of light.

Mara: The law of light?

Mara: The law of light: light flows only toward places darker than itself.

Mara: In the universe filled with pitch darkness, with the law of light, light gradually spread.

Mara: Then humanity... Humanity, mountains, rivers, earth, sun, moon, and stars... Everything is the condensation of light.

Mara: When necessary, matter can dissolve its physical form. Becoming moving light again.

Mara: Whenever light moves, light changes its appearance. Becoming force, becoming heat. Becoming the source of all motion.

Mara: Even the simplest change, without light's movement, cannot proceed.

Mara: And the most complex existence—humans. Are merely light's form, light's soul.

Protagonist: What is the meaning of this story!

Coffee: Don't... listen to him... continue... Don't speak...

Protagonist: Damn!

Mara: God is merely a person likewise controlled by fate. Never possessed omniscient, omnipotent ability.

Mara: The result of light and the law of light is:

Mara: One day, when light fills every dark corner— After even the light gathered into physical form is disassembled and dispersed—

Mara: There will no longer be any place darker than "light itself."

Mara: Light can no longer move.

Mara: Ah... Imagine that miserable scene.

Mara: No heat. No wind. No flowing rivers. Only death.

Mara: No matter how much new energy is discovered,
Mara: No matter how we discover methods to convert light into energy,
Mara: No matter how we discover means to force matter back into light,
Mara: What can never be changed— Is the law of light itself.
Mara: Even in places beyond human emotions, What ultimately awaits humanity—
Mara: Is still what cannot be avoided no matter how hard we try—
Mara: **The death of the universe.**
Mara: ... Why...
Mara: Even if we survive difficulties and dangers, Even if millions sacrifice themselves, And we can preserve humanity's seed,
Mara: But— When the universe itself dies— My hero—
Mara: Gold and silver left behind are obviously useless, And who will sing of your great fame?
Mara: Even stone sculptures, standing in the vast wilderness— What meaning do they have?
Mara: Everything, everything, Must eventually return to extinction.
Mara: Suffering endured, Girls secretly loved, Sorrows silently borne—
Mara: Everything, everything! Everything, everything!
Protagonist: Stop talking!
Mara: Sorrow... anguish...
Mara: I want all this to end sooner!
Mara: End fate's toying with humanity— Return to that primordial chaotic universe!
Protagonist: Damn—!
Mara: [Name of Protagonist], is that so?
Mara: It seems it's time for you to awaken—
Mara: What!
Mara: You broke through it!
Coffee: [Name of Protagonist]!
Coffee: **Defeat him! Now!**
Protagonist: Yes!
[Battle: Mara]
Mara: Ah—
Mara: So in the end... Still returned to unchangeable fate... ?
Mara: And so... Pain and resentment... Have they stopped?
Mara: Ah—
Protagonist: He disappeared...
Coffee:

Protagonist: Coffee!
Protagonist: Coffee, you must be strong!
Protagonist: Coffee! Let's leave this place! Stand up!
Coffee: No... [Name of Protagonist]... I... don't want to go out anymore...
Protagonist: Don't want to go out?! What are you saying!
Protagonist: Your sister is waiting anxiously for you! Everyone from the guild is waiting for you!
Coffee: That guy... though hateful... But everything he said... was right... I couldn't refute any of it...
Coffee: Being here so long... I've been... so lost...
Protagonist: What are you talking about! If you agreed with that bastard, why did you save me!
Coffee: I... You... just leave this place... Looking like this... Even if I leave, I'm still...
Coffee: Ah...
Protagonist: [slaps Coffee]
Protagonist: Do you know, Coffee? Actually, before I met you, I was like this too.
Protagonist: In childhood, looked down on by adults. Bullied by peers.
Protagonist: Became gloomy, withdrawn. Didn't believe in life's meaning.
Protagonist: Hated human suffering. Even had cyclical suicidal ideation.
Protagonist: But from the moment I saw you— I suddenly discovered—
Protagonist: **Smiling is such a beautiful expression.**
Protagonist: From then on— Though still suffering—
Protagonist: Still fighting life and always failing— I always thought of your smile.
Protagonist: I thought— If I continue living— Coffee will keep smiling, right?
Protagonist: Will keep helping others. Will keep living with Hanyu (Coffee's little sister)...
Protagonist: So I decided to keep living. No matter how difficult, I would still keep living.
Protagonist: Actually, before you went to the desert, I was planning to ask you to be my recommender to join the Rangers Guild.
Protagonist: But then—didn't have time—you disappeared.

Protagonist: My first step in life failed so ambiguously. For a long time, I couldn't pull myself together.
Protagonist: Until I learned you were in danger. That I had to find all the voice fragments to save you.
Protagonist: Only then did I finally find courage again— To face life's path.
Coffee: [Name of Protagonist]...
Protagonist: On the journey, every one of your friends, after learning you were in danger, Told me I absolutely must save you.
Protagonist: I discovered— Whether smiles or tears— Every one of them was so real.
Protagonist: And whenever I obtained a fragment, I felt genuine happiness.
Protagonist: I felt I had done something. Felt a real sense of existence.
Protagonist: **Maybe emptiness is only because one has never truly existed.**
Protagonist: If so— If one experiences these despairing, painful, joyful, turbulent lives—
Protagonist: **Even if after death is nothingness—so what?**
Protagonist: **If one cannot face nothingness, what right does one have to speak of existence?**
Protagonist: If one abandons existence to escape nothingness, isn't that still just nothingness?!
Protagonist: If humanity has truly been abandoned by the gods— Let us prove our existence through action.
Protagonist: In the boundless universe, Even if existence is momentary as a flash of light—
Protagonist: **It is still humanity's most brilliant radiance...**
Coffee: I...
Protagonist: Listen... In these fragments, the sealed voices...
Protagonist: Though only emotionless stones. Though the original memories have long been eroded beyond recognition.
Protagonist: But those things at the core— The frivolous, stubborn, spirited nature—
Protagonist: Something must have remained!
Coffee: Ah... Everyone's... voices...!
Coffee: Ah!

Protagonist: Coffee?
Coffee: The curse of resentment... Has it been lifted?
Coffee: I...
Protagonist: Coffee!
Coffee: Does it no longer trouble me?
Coffee: On the journey,...
Protagonist: Coffee, are you okay now?
Coffee: I don't know... But suddenly, I really want to go back...
Coffee: Go back and see the Guild... See the sky outside...
Coffee: On the journey,...
Coffee: I love you [pause] all—!

[Coffee's Dream]

Mara: Coffee— You're going back?
Coffee: Yes. I'm very tired...
Mara: Alright. Where are you going?
Coffee: I don't know... But I must go.
Mara: Then... take care...
Coffee: I will. And you too.

[Coffee's Home]

Coffee: Ah...
Hanyu: Brother!
Hanyu: Brother! Brother's awake!
Coffee: Ah... Hanyu... It's so late, why aren't you asleep yet...?
Nikofei: Good! Good! Good! Now everything's truly fine!
Coffee: [Name of Protagonist]...? What on earth happened...
Protagonist: After the curse disappeared, you collapsed.
Protagonist: So I brought you out of the Demon Tower. You've been asleep for three whole days!
Coffee: Ah... Three days... No wonder my head hurts so much...
Hanyu: Brother's back! This is wonderful!
Coffee: Don't shout and jump— Go to sleep—!
Hanyu: Mean! How can anyone sleep like this!
Coffee: Hahahaha...

Ajian: [Name of Protagonist]—
Protagonist: Ah, yes!
Ajian: Just as Nikofei said, you completed it even better than last time.
Ajian: You not only saved Coffee from the demon king, but also broke that terrible curse...
Protagonist: By the way— What exactly was that curse?
Nikofei: Simply speaking—
Nikofei: It's using formal logic to construct an infinitely circular theory.
Nikofei: Making people withdraw their thinking attention from reality,
Nikofei: To think about content that has nothing to do with reality and doesn't actually exist,
Nikofei: And thus produce a feeling of despair...
Ajian: Hey hey, which country's "simple" is that—
Nikofei: Ah— this...
Ajian: Alright, let's not talk about these things anymore.
Ajian: [Name of Protagonist], because you excellently completed the probationary member assessment task, we have decided— To formally accept you as a full member!
Coffee: I'll be your recommender—
Lsmh: Forget it, you!
Coffee: Lsmh!
Lsmh: I already became the recommender!
Coffee: You came too?
Lsmh: It's not just me! Hearing you came back, everyone's here!
Well: Coffee—!
Lsmh: Come come come— we rehearsed this, one—
Coffee: Huh? What are you doing?
Fenghan: Don't mess up!

Fenghan: Lsmh, let's do it again!
Lsmh: Okay!
Coffee: Mmm— mmm—!
Coffee: Don't cover my mouth— mmm—!
Lsmh: Starting now!
Lsmh: One, two, three—
Everyone: Coffee, we love you!

THE ENDING

*If this day is too ordinary
Only because it is real*

4 Selected Side Quests

4.1 Design Philosophy: Academic Easter Eggs

The game's optional side quests function as **academic easter eggs**: optional content for players with backgrounds. They present scholarly debates as **sources of recognition and delight** rather than conflict, rewarding not progression but **the knowing smile**.

Quests work as straightforward tasks regardless of expertise. But for those who recognize references, they offer deeper pleasure: seeing abstract debates given narrative flesh, with inside jokes about theoretical jargon deployed through gentle humor.

The Quests Never Explain Themselves. No footnotes, no didactic expositions, no NPCs clarifying references. Knowledge is assumed to exist *or not*: both experiences are valid.

Consider the **Fountain Quest**. The Lila Art Exhibition reports theft of a sculpture, *Fontaine*, by Master Mula. Exhibition curator Li Motai shows a photograph. The protagonist recognizes it immediately: “This... isn’t this...” Li explains it’s manufactured by “a factory called Post-Modernism”: a mass-produced urinal as high art.

The protagonist tracks down the thief and his employer, a bourgeois collector:

Thief: “Sir, I really don’t understand; why do you want this **urinal**?”

Collector: “This is **art**! The aestheticization of life! The vitalization of beauty!”

The collector’s rhapsody: “Imagine—on a drizzly afternoon, after finishing your Colombian mocha with Spice Islands cinnamon, eating that madeleine with the taste of memory... listening to Mendelssohn’s violin, closing Apollinaire’s *Le revolver à cheveux blancs*... you lean back wearily in your mahogany chair, and in the redwood scent, you see *her*—**Fontaine**, your lover! Who could remain unmoved by those peerless curves? Who could resist that fatal temptation, that irresistible urge for release? You walk slowly toward your soul’s only companion, experiencing that insatiable restlessness. And after that long fountain sound—what feeling?! What feeling?! Ecstatic! Ecstatic!”

The protagonist delivers him to Li Motai. The collector protests: “Don’t touch my little Fontaine!” Earlier, he had pontificated: “I would never oppose any theory for my own benefit. Although class theory is the theory of the lumpenproletariat, when it comes to art... art has class character!”, appropriating Marxist critique to justify his private acquisition of a urinal.

For people with art history backgrounds: Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917), the readymade urinal that founded conceptual art. The humor layers: the collector performs sophistication (Proust! Mendelssohn!) while sexualizing the urinal, transforming Duchamp’s anti-art gesture into exactly the bourgeois aestheticism it critiqued. Better still, he misattributes André Breton’s *Le revolver à cheveux blancs* to Apollinaire, revealing his cultural name-dropping as hollow pretension.

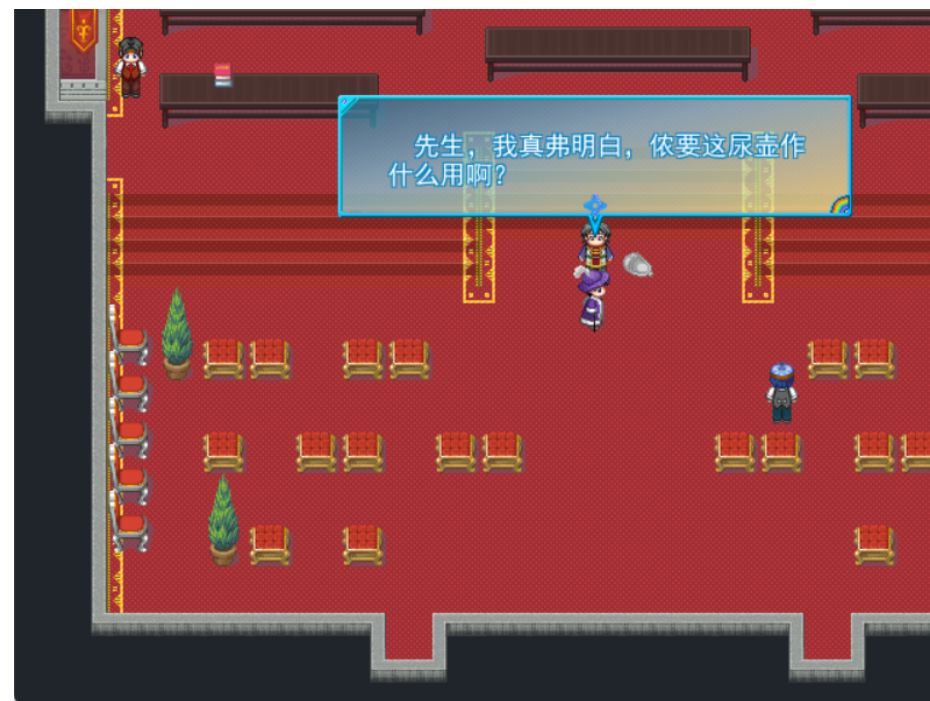


Figure 24: The thief’s confusion, “Sir, I really don’t understand; why do you want this urinal?”, mirrors the mass public’s bewilderment at modern art.

For everyone else: Catching a thief who stole a toilet for a rich eccentric who waxes poetic about it. The collector’s rhapsody is inherently funny.

This exemplifies **dual-layer design where recognition enhances but never gatekeeps**. The quest succeeds as pure comedy while offering art historians additional pleasure in recognizing the Duchamp reference and the character’s pretentious misunderstandings.

The dialogue does satirical work. High cultural references justify erotic fascination with a urinal, exposing the collector’s pretentious affect. The thief’s “I don’t understand” mirrors the historical public’s reaction to *Fountain* while working as straightforward confusion.

Both experiences are complete. This is the **knowing smile** philosophy: not requiring knowledge, but rewarding it. The quest is funny either way. But recognizing it deepens the humor: you’re laughing not just at the monologue, but at how anti-establishment art gets absorbed into the establishment it opposed.

4.2 The Chomsky Gorilla Quest: Linguistics and Affection

In a university research lab, the player meets Researcher Pascal who explains their project: teaching a gorilla named “Chomsky” to speak, hoping to prove that “language ability is not unique to humans.” The player is asked to observe and record Chomsky’s vocalizations for an hour (75 seconds in game), then translate them using a provided chart:

$yī'ō = orange$ $ā = I$ $mǔmǔ = you$ $āiyī = eat$ $hālū = give$ $sīqí = like$

(Note: $sīqí$, “like,” is borrowed from Japanese *suki*.)

After recording simple utterances like “I like orange” and “You give I orange,” Pascal sighs: “We’ve been teaching Chomsky to speak for four whole years now. But even today, it can only say the simplest sentences and has completely no ability for abstract generalization. Perhaps gorillas still cannot refute human theories.”

The Reference: Project Nim. For people with linguistics backgrounds, this is an immediate recognition: **Project Nim** (1973-1977), the famous experiment where psychologist Herbert Terrace attempted to teach American Sign Language to a chimpanzee named Nim Chimpsky (a playful reference to linguist Noam Chomsky). The project aimed to challenge Chomsky’s theory of Universal Grammar, the claim that humans possess an innate language faculty that animals lack. After years of training, Nim learned signs but showed little evidence of grammatical structure, leading Terrace to conclude that apes could not acquire true language.

The Inside Joke: Naming After Professors. Pascal reveals the gorilla is named after “our research group’s teacher.” Players may have encountered this NPC linguistics professor earlier in the game. The researchers describe him as “self-righteous, constantly calling others ignorant, taking attendance every class”—though this says more about **typical graduate student irreverence** than the professor’s actual character. Naming the experimental subject after one’s advisor is classic academic humor, layered with:

- (1) the historical Nim Chimpsky reference,
- (2) the universal experience of students playfully complaining about demanding professors,
- (3) the irony of the gorilla being unable to demonstrate language acquisition.

The Twist: Chomsky’s Meaningful Response. The quest concludes with unexpected poignancy. Pascal mentions that after the experiment ends, “we’ll return to nature with Chomsky.” He asks the gorilla: “Is that alright, Chomsky?” The gorilla responds: “Ah, $sīqí$, $mǔmǔ$! $Mǔmǔ$!”

If the player took notes during the earlier observation task, they can refer back to the translation chart: the gorilla is saying: “**I like you! You!**” The realization transforms the moment: what seemed like random sounds becomes a genuine expression of attachment.

This exemplifies how the game **rewards attentiveness through narrative completeness alongside mechanical rewards**. The quest provides standard items upon completion: a cup of coffee for recording incorrectly, or a coffee recipe for accuracy. But players who kept the translation chart during the observation task gain something else: they discover the gorilla’s final words carry specific meaning. This **earned revelation** deepens the emotional impact in ways items cannot. Pascal asking if Chomsky wants to return to nature, and Chomsky responding with affection, becomes not just touching but *legible*. The player’s earlier diligence unlocks a more complete understanding of the scene: **story as reward**, distinct from the quest’s material compensation.



Figure 25: Chomsky the gorilla: “Ah, $sīqí$, $mǔmǔ$! $Mǔmǔ$!” When asked if he wants to return to nature with the researchers, the gorilla responds “I like you! You!”

The “failed” experiment transforms. Perhaps Chomsky cannot produce complex syntax. But when asked about his future, he expresses what matters: attachment to his caretakers. The scientific question (“Can apes acquire grammar?”) gives way to emotional reality: four years of companionship created a bond that transcends linguistic theory.

For people with linguistics backgrounds: Recognition of the poverty-of-stimulus argument, the Universal Grammar debate, the historical Project Nim controversy. The humor comes from seeing graduate student culture (resenting advisors, naming research subjects ironically) rendered through the quest structure.

For everyone else: A touching moment between researcher and animal. The gorilla can’t speak complex sentences, but says something meaningful when it matters.

This side quest rewards recognition but does not require it, embodying the game’s philosophy of **optional intellectual depth**. Both experiences are complete; one simply has additional texture for those who bring linguistic knowledge to the encounter.

4.3 The Castration Quest: Dilemmas of Activism

This quest engages with Chinese feminist activism from a position of care about the movement's progress, presenting situations familiar to those involved in local feminist work.

1. Identity: The Dramatized Scholar-Fan. The three activists embody a real-world intersection: the **Fujoshi Activist**. In Chinese online spaces, feminist discourse and fandom culture intermingle. The game dramatizes this through characters who code-switch between high academic theory (Lacan, discourse hegemony) and BL fandom slang (“dear,” “uke-kun”). They deploy psychoanalytic frameworks to analyze phallic architecture, then pivot to shipping dynamics. Political consciousness and fandom participation are inseparable.

2. The Setup: Comedy, Not Terrorism. The player encounters activists planning to blow up the university's water tower as symbolic castration. The tower represents phallic symbolism; their analysis invokes discourse hegemony, gendered architecture, and cascading analogies between vertical/horizontal, sky/earth, yang/yin binaries.

The theatrical presentation, explosives, elaborate theoretical justifications, earnest intensity, establishes this as **absurdist campus drama**. Crucially, **the water tower never explodes regardless of player choice**. The plan exists in theoretical imagination rather than executable reality.

3. Path A: The Trap of Supervision (External Constraint). The protagonist warns that authorities have discovered the plan. The activists immediately pivot to protecting the “broad sisterhood,” deciding to preserve “revolutionary seeds” rather than risk institutional crackdown. This presents conditions Chinese feminist activists actually face: surveillance, institutional threats, strategic calculations.



Figure 26: Activist Fu: “That masculine self-regarding phallic worship is already overflowing!”

Script: The Castration Quest

Zhai: This way, humanity will know that the collapse of the water tower is definitely not merely the collapse of a water tower.

Zhai: It represents the end of the male-centered constructed world.

Fu: Right! We'll tell you!

Fu: We're going to castrate the water tower!

Protagonist: Cas... trate...?

Yi: It's very similar

Fu: In the proud narrative of the water tower reaching skyward, that masculine self-regarding phallic worship is already overflowing!

Zhai: Yes, especially in this place where all civilization ultimately converges, the symbolic meaning of this architecture is even more obvious.

Protagonist: But... but towers can only be built this way...

Fu: Wrong!

Fu: This is entirely a fallacy created by male discourse hegemony!

Protagonist: If you don't build upward, wouldn't it take up space?

Protagonist: And water towers are for lifting water.

Zhai: So you're saying that linear, upward is good, while flat, ground-level is bad, right?

Protagonist: Uh, on this question...

Zhai: The sky is high above, the earth spreads below, right?

Protagonist: Mm, that's right.

Zhai: Sky is yang, earth is yin, right?

Protagonist: You can't make analogies like that...

Fu: That's exactly it!

Fu: Masculine is active, upward, transcendent, aspirational.

Fu: Feminine is static, shallow, mundane, lazy.

Fu: Male views of women—

Fu: Are nothing but a labyrinthine analogical philosophy, evidence-less statistical positivism, and wishful fictional construction!

Zhai: And then they build a tower on top.

Fu: So, no matter what, we're going to castrate this era now!

[Path A: The Authority Threat]

Protagonist: So you're planning to blow up the water tower with these explosives?

Fu: That's right!

Protagonist: I'm sorry to tell you, but your plan has already been discovered by the school authorities. If you insist on blowing it up, there will be big trouble.

Fu: So what! Draw the blade swiftly, live up to our youth! For revolution—

Protagonist: But the female students on campus will also be implicated, right?

Yi: Ah, that's true!

Fu: Those accomplices, vulgar feminists...

Zhai: You can't say that. Immaturity is always a necessary path to consciousness! Revolutionary seeds should be preserved.

Protagonist: Exactly, exactly, that's the point.

Linguistic Resistance: As they retreat, they mock the tower as a “**little tender sprout**”. This reflects a phenomenon in Chinese feminist practice: using **derogatory diminutives** to deconstruct authority. Patriarchal power relies on being perceived as sublime and terrifying. By renaming the Phallus as something small and pathetic, activists strip the symbol of its terror, retaining psychological victory even in strategic defeat.

4. Path B: The Trap of Theory (Internal Constraint). The protagonist questions whether explosives, as symbols of masculine violence, undermine feminist goals. This launches a theoretical spiral where each framework reveals new complications.

The activists apply **psychoanalytic feminism**: the tower as phallic symbol, architecture encoding gendered power. Then **linguistic analysis**: discourse hegemony constructs reality through naming (vertical=good creates hierarchies). Finally **feminist theory on complicity**: the chastity example shows how resistance using patriarchal frameworks may reinforce the system. Does attacking men for violating purity ultimately affirm male-imposed restrictions?

Each theoretical layer is sound. But together they spiral: every action becomes suspect. Using violence to oppose patriarchal violence? Complicit. Not acting? Also complicit. The sophistication that should enable action instead paralyzes it. The contradictions are real; but when theory becomes primarily a tool for identifying problems rather than pathways, action becomes impossible.

The Solution: Fan Fiction as Praxis. Paralyzed in the physical world, they retreat to the symbolic realm of **Doujinshi**. Through fan fiction, they “parody all the narrative conspiracies men use”: objectifying men, turning them into **empty signifiers**. The term invokes Lacan and Barthes: male characters become vessels void of power, filled only with female desire. Resistance relocates from architecture to narrative.

5. Position of Care. The dialogue captures actual conditions: surveillance forcing strategic calculations (Path A); theoretical rigor spiraling into paralysis (Path B); retreat to cultural spaces when direct action becomes complicated. The activists are drawn with warmth: their sophistication is real, their concerns valid, their passion endearing even as they talk themselves into circles.

This quest emerges from sustained engagement with Chinese feminist activism, not as an outsider, but from **investment in the movement’s effectiveness**. The scenarios reflect actual tensions between symbolic action and strategic preservation, between theoretical rigor and practical intervention.

The game doesn’t propose solutions because the dilemmas are real. It creates space to recognize these situations with affection and seriousness, trusting that acknowledgment has value. Care for the movement means honestly presenting conditions activists face—external pressure, internal complexity, the genuine difficulty of effective action—without judgment, with hope that recognition contributes to understanding.

Script: The Castration (Continued)

Fu: Alright! For the sake of our broad sisterhood, let this little tender sprout linger a few more days!

Yi: Little tender sprout...? [Laugh]

[Path B: The Theoretical Spiral]

Protagonist: Blow it up?

Yi: Yes, that’s right.

Protagonist: Actually, when you think about it, everything in this world that seems natural is in fact a masculine construction.

Fu: Exactly!

Protagonist: So in that case, explosives are also a symbol of patriarchy?

Yi: Especially when emphasizing their explosive, forceful characteristics.

Zhai: This seems right too...

Protagonist: If that’s the case, using explosives to blow up the water tower is fundamentally yet another negation of feminine subjectivity!

Yi: Hm? How so?

Protagonist: It’s like a woman accusing a man of defiling her, attacking him as immoral—fundamentally, this is an affirmation of chastity. In other words, affirming the prohibitions men place on women, right?

Yi: It seems...

Zhai: When you put it that way...

Fu: From a certain angle...

All Three: You seem to have a point.

Yi: Oh no, what should we do?

Fu: So blowing it up is wrong, not blowing it up is also wrong?

Zhai: Women’s existence is truly an eternal paradox!

Yi: Sir, what do you think?

Fu: Don’t treat men as authority!

Yi: Just asking!

Fu: Fu is quick-tempered, don’t be afraid. Please speak, please speak.

Protagonist: Um... How about just continuing to be fujoshi?

Zhai: Fujoshi?! How did you tell!?

Protagonist: The... aura...?

(This is obvious at a glance...)

Fu: Mm! You have good judgment!

Zhai: Actually, through doujinshi, we can parody all the narrative conspiracies men use.

Zhai: Objectify men, other them, demonize them—turn them all into empty signifiers!

Yi: Mm, Zhai is the most insightful!

Fu: Ah, just talking about it makes my blood boil again.

Yi: This dear qín, do you want to share too?

Protagonist: Me? I wouldn’t want to intrude?

Zhai: Yes yes, this uke-kun will definitely blush.

All Three: Blush...? [Laugh]

5 The Diegetic Archive

5.1 Embedding Literature in Gameplay

Songs of Memory contains approximately **300,000 words of readable text** distributed across the game world:

- **70,000 words** of original literary writing
- **100,000 words** of curated classical texts
- **130,000 words** of in-game dialogue

These texts exist diegetically—as physical objects discoverable through exploration. The original literary texts (Scripture, ballads, novels, essays) appear as books on tables, scrolls on shelves, manuscripts locked in chests, or stories performed by NPCs in teahouses.

Design Philosophy: Depth Without Requirement

The archive operates on optional depth. Players can complete the game without reading a single book. Combat, quests, and progression function independently of textual engagement.

However, for players genuinely curious—those who investigate corners, check bookshelves, pay attention to environmental details—the archive provides substantial rewards through understanding alone.

Most texts require only attentiveness: noticing a bookshelf, examining a table, listening to a storyteller. Some require curiosity across playtime: discovering a locked room in the early game, acquiring an unlocking skill through unrelated side quests in the mid-game, remembering in the late game to return before the finale (the game warns: the endgame prevents return to the outer world). Inside: a manuscript. No mechanical advantage, simply more text. The reward is content itself.

This design rewards **curiosity during first playthrough** and **archaeological second playthrough**. The goal: make players think “if I read more carefully, investigate more thoroughly, I can find something I never found—even after considerable time exploring this world.”

5.2 Historiographic Practice: The Contradiction

Two cosmological texts are available from the beginning: the *Book of Light* (光明传道书) in Trinity Seminary’s library, the *Ballad of the Great Wilderness* (大荒歌) in Scholar Vonasi’s home. Neither is required reading. Neither is highlighted by quests. Players who browse these shelves encounter contradictory creation myths. Most treat them as worldbuilding flavor. The texts offer no immediate payoff.

The Book of Light (光明传道书)

Genre: Pseudo-scriptural cosmology (archaic religious Chinese)

Structure: 2,000 words, 6 chapters

Official theology of the dominant religion. The Heavenly Emperor (天帝), Great Father of Light (大光明父), creates light; light condenses into elements; elements form the physical world.

Chapter 2: The Dark Evil God (地后, Earth Hou)—described with masculine pronoun (他的, his)—dwells in darkness, seeks to corrupt the Father’s creation. He sends his daughter, Goddess of Suffering (痛苦女神), who uses the Father’s own laws to create living beings. Scripture frames this as malicious corruption—life itself attacks divine order.

The Father gives protective crystals (瞬, Shun—alluding to sound fragments and memories recurring throughout the game) to each species. As long as creatures keep the crystals, they resist the Dark God’s temptations.

Chapter 3: One species breaks the crystal under Earth Hou’s influence, gains memory and future-thinking (consciousness), is named “humans.” They attack the Father’s mountain, provoking divine wrath.

Chapters 4-6: Flood, Three Laws of Samsara, Son of Light’s descent and sacrifice, redemption for believers.

Structure: Father creates cosmos and establishes order. Dark Evil God (masculine) opposes him and creates life as corruption. His daughter executes the plan. Son saves believers through sacrifice.

The Ballad of the Great Wilderness (大荒歌)

Genre: Folk myth-ballad (classical Chinese poetry)

Structure: 600 words, 6 sections, 7-character verse

Alternative cosmology circulating as folk tradition. Presents immediate barriers: classical Chinese syntax, condensed poetic form, abbreviated deity names that shift across sections.

Refers to Earth Mother (地母), Sky Father (天父), Sorrow-and-Worry (愁忧), Emperor (帝), Goddess (女), Two Emperors (二帝)—pronouns and epithets requiring careful tracking. First-time readers struggle to parse who acts when.

Players encountering the endgame first may find the ballad opaque. Those returning for a second playthrough map names to entities they’ve met, experiencing the eureka moment of recognition. This resembles archaeological reconstruction: fragmentary text, ambiguous referents, meaning emerging through comparison with other sources.

Narrative:

Sections 1-2: Earth Mother (地母) and Sky Father (天父) emerge together from primordial chaos. They jointly create light, establish cosmic order through partnership. Over seven days, the Two Emperors (二帝) create sun and moon, land and sea, rivers and mountains.

Section 3: They create thirty-six lesser gods. The youngest, Sorrow-and-Worry (愁忧), receives no post. In loneliness, she molds humans from yellow clay mixed with her tears—compassionate creativity.

Section 4: Father and Mother argue over authority for three years. The first deaths occur during divine disagreement—mortality enters not through human sin but divine conflict. The goddess mediates, explains life-death cycle.

Section 5: Humans honor the goddess who taught civilization, then grow ungrateful, drive her away. Sky Father floods the earth.

Section 6: The goddess pleads for mercy. Father relents but curses humanity with aging and death. He refuses to let the goddess return. Gods abandon earth. Humans endure alone.

Vonasi’s Philological Key

Players who interact with Vonasi in his home encounter this conversation:

Vonasi: The Imperial University is conducting a Doubting Antiquity movement. Actually, the view that Earth Mother is male isn’t new—it just aligns perfectly with Pure Doctrine theology.

Protagonist: Earth Mother is male?

Vonasi: In ancient texts, Earth Mother is called Earth Hou (地后). The character Hou (后) is understood as emperor’s wife. But in ancient language, Hou (后) and Di (帝) meant the same—both meaning ruler. Like “former king” (先后). Xia Hou clan, Sovereign Earth (后土), the *Li Sao* reference—all refer to rulers.

Protagonist: I see.

Vonasi: But one cannot establish truth from isolated evidence. Folk beliefs have no inherent right or wrong. Earth Mother worship is common in primitive religions. Even if I claim Earth Hou is male—one could say this is rationalizing primitive religion. Academic research becomes vulgarized into an “-ism.” True scholarly spirit doesn’t force itself on others.

Vonasi’s examples (Xia Hou clan, 后土, *Li Sao*) are real-world Chinese archaeological evidence. The philological problem reflects actual historical linguistics. This aligns with the game’s “academic easter egg” design philosophy—embedding real scholarship within fictional narrative.

However, interpreting Earth Hou as male simply because Hou (后) can mean “emperor” is questionable: it assumes a sovereign ruler cannot be female, revealing patriarchal bias within the interpretation itself.

The Philological Problem:

In archaic language, Hou (后) and Di (帝) both meant “sovereign/ruler.” Ancient people used Earth Hou (地后) to show honor—Earth Sovereign, parallel to Sky Emperor (天帝). Later, Hou (后) developed secondary meaning “emperor’s wife.”

An alternative interpretation: Perhaps Hou (后) gained the meaning “empress” or “wife of emperor” precisely because Earth Mother was understood as wife/partner of Sky Father. Under patriarchal discourse, the original meaning of “sovereign ruler” faded, leaving only the subordinate relational meaning.

This semantic shift created confusion: What was originally a title of sovereignty (Earth Hou = Earth Ruler) became readable as subordination (Earth Hou = Earth Consort) or, when combined with masculine pronouns in theological texts, as evidence the deity was male.

Academia, influenced by Pure Doctrine theology (requiring patriarchal cosmology), adopts the “male Earth Hou” interpretation. This dismisses folk traditions calling the deity Earth Mother (地母, feminine) as “questionable”—hence the Doubting Antiquity movement (questioning whether ancient texts reveal truth).

Deity Structure Across Sources

Deity	Church Scripture	Folk Ballad
Sky Father	Heavenly Emperor (天帝), sole creator	Sky Father (天父), co-creator
Holy Son	Son of Light, redeems believers	[Absent—no savior]
Earth Deity	Earth Hou (地后)—Dark Evil God, masculine pronoun (他的), antagonist	Earth Mother (地母)—feminine, co-creator
Goddess	Goddess of Suffering (痛苦女神)—daughter of Earth Hou, creates life maliciously	Sorrow-and-Worry (愁忧)—youngest goddess, creates humans compassionately

Additional perspectives:

Normal people: Earth Mother is female (protagonist: “Earth Mother is male?”)

Doubting Antiquity School: Earth Hou (地后) as male, aligned with church

Endgame Revelation

In the near endgame, players encounter Earth Mother (地母)—a feminine figure with creative power. She appears feminine, matching the ballad and normal people’s understanding. She does not match Scripture’s Earth Hou (地后), described with masculine pronouns as Dark Evil God and antagonist. She does not match academia’s “male Earth Hou” interpretation.

Regarding the goddess who created humans: Players do not encounter her directly. In the finale, antagonist Mara speaks of the myth of a goddess who created humans. The church calls her Goddess of Suffering (痛苦女神)—daughter of evil Earth Hou, creates life maliciously. The ballad calls her Sorrow-and-Worry (愁忧)—youngest goddess, creates humans compassionately from tears. Likely the same deity under different names, one demonized, one honored.

The three-deity structure (Sky Father, Earth Mother, Goddess of Sorrow) matches the cosmological framework in Mara’s finale myth. How players understand these identifications depends on what they’ve read.

Possible Reconstructions

Original period: People honored Earth deity as Earth Hou (地后, Earth Sovereign), using Hou (后) to signal rulership parallel to Sky Emperor (天帝), understood as feminine. Over centuries, Hou (后) developed secondary meaning “emperor’s wife.” Church scholars reinterpreted ancient texts through later conventions—reading Earth Hou as “Earth Consort” (subordinate) or assigning masculine pronouns. Folk traditions continued using Earth Mother (地母, feminine), preserving earlier understanding. Modern scholars, influenced by Pure Doctrine, adopt “male Earth Hou” as settled fact, dismissing folk traditions.

Complications remain: Did the church intentionally revise or misread archaic texts? When did Hou (后) shift meanings? Are Goddess of Suffering (痛苦女神) and Sorrow-and-Worry (愁忧) the same deity? Like actual archaeology, some questions remain unresolvable.

Distributed Reconstruction

The game never consolidates this analysis. Connections emerge through distributed reading:

1. Trinity Seminary: Scripture presents official theology
2. Vonasi’s home: Ballad offers alternative cosmology with opaque referents
3. Vonasi’s dialogue: Philological explanation of Hou (后) = “sovereign”
4. Fire God quest: Vonasi’s frameworks for institutional vs. folk religion
5. Near endgame: Earth Mother’s appearance creates discrepancy
6. Finale: Mara references myth of goddess who created humans

Players engaging with all elements experience archaeological reconstruction: fragmentary texts, contradictory sources, philological clues, distant revelation recontextualizing earlier evidence.

The satisfaction comes from decipherment—piecing together that Hou (后) originally meant sovereign, that semantic shift created ambiguity, that Earth Hou (地后) and Earth Mother (地母) likely refer to the same feminine deity, that Scripture’s masculine pronouns may reflect theological revision.

Yet complications remain: timeline unclear, intentional vs. sincere misreading undetermined, goddess names ambiguous. This mirrors actual archaeological work: assembling fragments, recognizing bias, accepting unresolved questions.

This is the reward structure: not mechanical advantages, but solving a historical puzzle. The reconstruction’s complexity is the point. Real archaeology rarely yields clean narratives. The game replicates this: giving enough material to form hypotheses, but not enough to achieve certainty.

Those who skip the texts experience the finale without this layer. The archive rewards curiosity and careful attention. This design treats players as active interpreters. The game provides contradictory sources and a distant revelation. Synthesis belongs to those curious enough to attempt it.

Sample: Ballad, Section 3

Then combining light with dust, they created thirty-six gods.

Counting by age they fixed rank high and low, each in order of humble and honored.

Some governed the exchange of day and night,

some governed the setting of stars and moon.

Some governed the flourishing of plants and trees,

some governed the movements of birds and beasts.

Among them was the youngest daughter,

her name called Sorrow-and-Worry (愁忧).

When all official posts were assigned,

when it reached her, they stopped and rested.

She sighed and lamented having no duties,

harboring resentment she descended to the clouded isles.

With hands cradling yellow clay soil,

by the water she sculpted sorrowful eyes.

Before her inner grievance could be resolved,

tears first flowed from the clay pupils.

The goddess was thus deeply moved with compassion,

mixing the tears back into the kneading.

5.3 Portrait of Character: Well and Blanc

Two textual systems deepen character understanding: the *Ranger Sketches* (游侠印象记) and *Blanc's Diary* (勃朗日记).

The Ranger Sketches

Genre: Character portraits (May Fourth essay style)

Structure: 6 pieces, 1,000 words each, 6,000 words total

Six brief character portraits appear on bookshelves in the Ranger Guild headquarters. The sketches adopt a May Fourth literary register, evoking Lu Xun's essay style—dry observation with melancholic irony. Only the first piece opens with “It's been some time since leaving the guild”; the others begin differently but maintain the retrospective, essayistic tone.

The In-Game Author: Baboon

These sketches cannot have been written by anyone described within them. This eliminates every Ranger except Baboon (狒狒), a traveling merchant who appears at different labyrinths offering special items. Baboon exists at the periphery of the Rangers' world, observing without belonging to the core group.

Players encounter Baboon as purely functional: a merchant sprite appearing in dungeons, offering items, conducting transactions. No dialogue reveals interiority. No quest explores backstory. The role is mechanical: vendor.

Yet the sketches reveal profound literacy. Baboon writes with Lu Xun's dry precision, detecting psychological undercurrents others miss. The observations are melancholic, attentive to emotional textures beneath social performance. These are not casual character descriptions; they're literary portraits demonstrating deep reading of human complexity.

The contrast is deliberate. Baboon functions as the game author's self-projection into the world: a peripheral observer who sees the Rangers' interior lives while remaining outside their narrative arcs. Just as the designer observes these characters from outside the game's diegesis, Baboon observes them from within it. The merchant role provides cover for authorial presence: a figure who appears everywhere but participates nowhere, who watches without interfering, who writes portraits without becoming subject.

This embedding of authorial care matters. By projecting into Baboon, the designer signals to players: even this functional merchant NPC contains literary depth. If peripheral vendor sprites merit psychological complexity, then every character in this world exists as a person, not a mechanism. The sketches are simultaneously Baboon's observations and the designer's statement about how characters deserve to be seen.

The sketches also demonstrate a specific characterization approach: defining Baboon not through description but through voice. Readers don't learn what Baboon looks like, what quests Baboon undertakes, what backstory Baboon possesses. Instead, Baboon's literary sensibility, observational acuity, and melancholic tone construct character through the act of writing itself. The way Baboon sees others reveals who Baboon is—and simultaneously reveals the designer's own literary sensibility, care for character depth, and melancholic attention to human complexity.

Well's Portrait (Excerpt)

Gentleness and sincerity are the teachings of poetry, and when Well appears, it is as if she embodies “spring days extending, gathering southernwood cheerfully” (春日迟迟采繁祁祁)—a kind of warm radiance. This seems characteristic of nobility. But beyond the warmth and radiance, I can always sense something else in her: strange, hard to articulate. [...]

I finally understood what that strange feeling was. Her faint smile is an archaic smile, behind which lies a cold hysteria. It is the Dionysian spirit concealed within “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur,” dark currents surging beneath a calm sea. She believes in a world of rights and duties, yet forces herself toward universal love and tolerance. She is a melancholic martyr who, deep down, does not believe in god.

The verse “春日迟迟采繁祁祁” comes from the *Book of Songs*—describing gathering southernwood (繁) during spring for ritual offerings, work both dutiful and joyful. This verse connects to Qifan Village (祁繁村), whose name incorporates these characters. This piece can be read as creative documentation: how the village name came to be and its connection to character.

Blanc's Diary

Genre: Modernist diary-memoir (May Fourth prose)

Structure: 9 pieces, 15,000 words total

Blanc never appears as an interactive NPC. He exists through textual traces: Well's account and nine diary fragments scattered as collectible items (日记残片) across the world. Players can gather these pieces into their inventory and read them at any time.

Fragment Locations and Timeline

#	Date	Location	Main Content
1	Jul 14-15	Ferry watchtower, 2nd floor, casebox	Arrival in Lila, rain, contempt for employer
2	Jul 17-24	Chest, swamp near Gilded Blade Market	Setting up study, arranging books, self-mockery
3	Aug 2-9	Chest at seaside cliff	Well becoming interesting, watching her study
4	Aug 20-27	Under pillow, Well's house	Blanc sick, Well brings citrus broth, intimacy
5	Aug 28-Sep 9	Under flower pot, Qifan Village	Collaborative novel project, morning light
6	Oct 2-Nov 23	Under sculpture, Flame Moon Town	Well confesses, Blanc panics, flees
7	Mar 4-6	Chest, Great Snow Mountain cave	Well arrives in desert, Blanc accepts fate
8	Mar 6	Locked room in slum (4,300 chars)	Childhood memory, education failure
9	Apr 14	Closet, prostitute's room, Rose Salon	Vagrancy, alcoholism, approaching death

Pieces 2, 3, 7 appear in main quest labyrinths. Piece 8 requires finding a locked room in the slum and acquiring lockpicking skills through unrelated side quests. Piece 9 becomes collectible only after the Blanc death scene. The final piece was written at Rose Salon, but Blanc died outside in Lila—implying he spent considerable time with the prostitute at Rose Salon in his final months.

Temporal Structure: Pieces 7 and 8 both occur on the same date (3月6日), yet Piece 8 mentions “it had already been a year since I’d written anything”—indicating at least one year has passed between Piece 7 and Piece 8.



Figure 27: Slum district map showing interconnected rooms



Figure 28: The locked room containing Piece 8

Sample: Piece 8 Excerpt

I have decided to stop keeping this diary. Looking back at former entries gives a kind of silent fulfillment. Now seeing the date of the last entry, I realize this decision came so late—it had already been a year since I’d written anything.

At midnight, returning to dreams, I sometimes recall days on the North Shore, that village forever asleep in desolation.

In the barren winter fields after burning, a sheet of cold charcoal black, the remaining blue-purple smoke rising faintly across the vast wilderness. The skeletal ox lies by the haystack, slowly, mournfully lifting its head to watch passing travelers, then lowering it again. When spring comes and work returns to the fields, perhaps it will no longer be there. In that moment, as if after the world’s end, there remains only this desolate field, the bone-thin ox, quietly sinking into death. And in this eternal tableau, one can see a point moving—a gray woman carrying a child on her back. The long path between furrows, flanked by infinite withered trees reaching toward the sky, only that gray point moving into the distance.

I don’t know why, for many days upon waking, I see this image: my homeland. It has been over ten years since I left. Looking back at childhood, it feels like a black-and-white photograph—a black, dirty child staring at the lens, shy, fearful, distrustful.

Later I left that place. Full of reverence for reason and morality, I left. The three years at Imperial Middle School were a bright dream: Imperial Middle School and Imperial University shared a blood-bond destiny.

Piece 8 reveals Blanc’s education equipped him for nothing except recognizing inadequacy. His abandonment stems from class paralysis and existential despair.

Well’s Arc: Quest Beginning

Well joins the party at the start of the Punish Evil God quest. After joining, she and the protagonist return to Lila. Well proposes showing the protagonist “the evilness of this city” and suggests entering the Rose Salon—a brothel.

Inside, Well sees Blanc. She becomes extremely emotional. At this early point, players have almost no knowledge of what is happening. The player hears voices:

Prostitute: The earth is warm... Hush! Hush! Sleep now—

Well is witnessing Blanc being consoled by a prostitute (alluding to Cybel from O’Neill’s *The Great God Brown*). The player does not see them on screen.

Well runs out and wanders Lila. The protagonist chases her and they return to Well’s home. There, Well tells her backstory:

Well: My family was originally in Gilded Blade Market. In my father’s generation, we moved to Lila. Our ancestors had always been officials, but my father was very open-minded. From childhood, he hired Western-style tutors to teach me. As I grew up, the tutors changed many times, until I was seventeen.

Well: My last tutor was called Blanc. He was a foreigner.

Protagonist: ...

Well: For seventeen years I had been very confident, thinking I was different from other girls. [...] Until I met Blanc, I never knew how immature I was.

Well: Studying with Blanc, every day was joyful. I began to discover that as long as I was with him, I would be happy. To see him often, I would deliberately ask absurd questions. Finally, I understood—I had fallen in love with him.

Well: Time passed day by day. Although nothing changed, I could no longer endure that ambiguous relationship. Finally, I told Blanc about this. However, he refused me.

Well: Actually, I had considered he might not like me. What I didn’t expect was that he feared my family’s opposition. Whether he liked me or not was secondary. He didn’t want to face society’s pressure. Although I said the pressure would only target me, he still refused. To escape the situation, Blanc quickly resigned and went south.

Well: I couldn’t stay home anymore, so I ran away to find him. Naturally I suffered much on the road. When I arrived at his new home, I was in terrible shape. He saw me and smiled bitterly, saying that since things were like this, he would do as I wished. I was overjoyed and moved in.

Well: But the good times didn’t last. Soon, life became increasingly difficult. Blanc alone couldn’t support me. My expenses were high, and I couldn’t change many habits from home. I tried translating, tried writing columns—nothing worked. Gradually, Blanc became very gloomy. Suddenly one day, he left me a letter and disappeared. He said he decided to enlist, leaving all his money hoping I would go home.

Well: I had no choice but to return to Lila. Just as I arrived in Lila, I learned my father had passed away. Because I was an only child, I inherited everything.

Protagonist: ...

Well: Life is so absurd. When I was with Blanc, we had no money. When I had money, I had already lost him.

Protagonist: ...

Well: To pass the time, I read and wrote every day. Several years passed in a flash. I was hurt, I grew up. I gained something, yet it seemed I gained nothing at all. I always thought he must be somewhere, realizing his dreams. Perhaps I was never part of his plans. What should exit must exit.

Well: Sometimes I thought, surely something so significant in my life, like Genesis itself, couldn’t just end like this, could it? Surely we’d meet again someday?

Well: But it really did end just like that... Nothing was as I imagined. The person I loved never existed. Blanc was just a coward...

Protagonist: Well...

Well: End! End! Why won’t it end! Why?

Well: Actually seeing him is fine, at least I can finally make up my mind to forget... But why in that kind of place? Why add such an unbearable ending to this story?

Well: [Name of Protagonist], until today, until today I still don't know whether he ever loved me. But I still want to unseal that god. Even seeing Blanc fallen like that, I still want to unseal it. Because that god was sealed, this world has become so ugly. Lila is where all the world's ugliness gathers. This place of money transactions, seeking pleasure, selling souls, trampling human nature.

Protagonist: Then, shall we go find the four elemental seals?

Well: Yes.

Protagonist: Then, after we unseal the Punish Evil God, you can give me the fragments?

Well: That would be wonderful. This way it can also urge me never to give up, for the fragments, and also for myself.

Protagonist: You're a strong girl.

Well: Hehe, not really. Cowardice and foolishness, actually everyone is about the same. Decadence and confusion are also hard to avoid, right?

Narrator: Perhaps life is just like this. However, in Well, I see that even among equally base and helpless mortals, there still exists sincerity throughout life. What the result will be, I don't know. Perhaps it doesn't matter either.

This is what every player sees when proceeding with the main arc. Well witnesses Blanc at Rose Salon, tells her past, explains her motivation. The quest then proceeds through the elemental seals toward unsealing the Punish Evil God.

Well's Arc: Near End Game

After the Punish Evil God battle and Earth Mother encounter (near end game), Well returns to Lila. The protagonist encounters Well witnessing Blanc's death outside in Lila.

The player sees the screen fade, a picture appears (*Lamentation of Christ*). Blanc is dying in the prostitute's arms:

Well: Ah! Well, look— It's Blanc...

Prostitute: The earth is warm... Hush! Hush! Sleep now—

Blanc: Yes, mother... When I wake up... The sun will come out again to judge the living and the dead! I don't want fair judgment! I want love. Only love. Thank you, mother...

Well: Ah... He... he died...

Narrator: What's the use of giving birth to children? What's the use? Giving birth to death? ... However, children, all my children on this earth... Spring always returns, bringing life, always returns. Always, always, forever comes again! —Again it is spring

After witnessing this, Well speaks:

Well: The new life you spoke of... is it these things? The cyclical love and suffering... The eternal... eternal death and life...

Protagonist: Actually I'm not sure either...

Well: I... I want to leave now...

Protagonist: Where to?

Well: To Qifan Village. To live in the earth's embrace. Raising crops and poultry, keeping pace with the sun... I hope, when we meet again... I will have truly understood the meaning of the Earth Mother...

Well chooses Qifan Village because of stories she encountered during her arc involving the Fire God and other events in that region. That Blanc once left a diary piece there is coincidence. The village name's connection to the classical verse about dutiful gathering resonates with her choice: she returns to earth, to cycles, to work aligned with natural rhythms rather than pursuit of justice.

Design Payoff: Layered Understanding

The diary system creates different player experiences:

All players witness Blanc at Rose Salon (being consoled), hear Well's backstory and motivation, proceed through unsealing the Punish Evil God, encounter the Earth Mother, witness Blanc's death, and see Well choose Qifan Village. This arc is complete and meaningful without any diary reading.

Players who collect diary pieces gain Blanc's perspective—his childhood poverty, educational aspiration, recognition of inadequacy, panic at Well's confession, reluctant acceptance when she arrives, final descent into vagrancy. The diary complicates Well's accusation ("Blanc was just a coward") without invalidating her pain.

Reading varies by completion:

- Finding only main-quest pieces (2, 3, 7): Fragmentary sense of Blanc's interiority
- Finding most pieces: Understanding of mutual tragedy
- Finding all including Piece 9 (after death scene): Recognition that final piece was written at Rose Salon, where he spent his last months

When players review Well's complete arc after finding the diary:

Baboon's description of Well as embodying “春日迟迟采繁祁祁” (dutiful yet joyful gathering) but hiding “cold hysteria” beneath—the “melancholic martyr who does not believe in god”—illuminates both Well's pursuit of the Punish Evil God (seeking judgment while not believing) and her final choice (finding meaning in earth, not divine justice).

The parallel texts don't resolve into judgment. Both Well and Blanc suffered from class barriers, gender expectations, intellectual aspiration colliding with material constraint. Both sought acceptance—Well through love, then justice, then earth; Blanc through education, then flight, then maternal comfort at death.

Distributed Understanding

Character depth exists in optional texts players may never read. The archive rewards curiosity:

1. Baboon's sketch provides psychological frame
2. Well's testimony gives lived experience
3. Diary fragments offer parallel perspective
4. Classical verse connects character to place to literary tradition
5. Two consolation scenes (beginning/end) reveal Blanc's trajectory

Players engaging with all elements experience archaeological reconstruction: fragmentary texts, temporal gaps, distant revelations recontextualizing earlier evidence. Understanding is earned rather than granted. When Well witnesses Blanc's death, when she chooses Qifan Village, players who investigated thoroughly don't gain alternate endings—they gain comprehension through assembling fragments across space and time.

This models the game's broader approach:

- **Book of Light vs. Ballad:** Contradictory cosmologies requiring synthesis
- **Ranger Sketches:** Interior lives hidden behind functional NPCs
- **Blanc's Diary:** Parallel narrative through collectible fragments

All systems treat players as active interpreters. The game provides sources; synthesis belongs to the curious. Some questions remain unresolvable—fragmentary evidence yields hypotheses, not certainties.

The reward is comprehension itself. When the Punish Evil God confronts Well, when the Earth Mother teaches about cycles, when Well chooses earth over intellect—players who found sketches and diary *understand*. Not through cutscenes explaining meaning, but through distributed reading into recognition of complexity.

Character depth as optional archaeology. Story as earned recognition through careful attention. Meaning emerges not from requirement but from curiosity—making players think “if I investigate thoroughly, I can find something I never found, even after considerable time in this world.”

For players who never read a single diary piece or sketch, the game functions perfectly. Well's story remains complete, her arc coherent, her choice meaningful. The archive enriches without being necessary—optional depth in its purest form.

6 Future Methodology: Automated Archaeology

6.1 The Problem: The "Dark Archive" of Logic

Songs of Memory is an homage to the "Golden Age" of Chinese indie game development (early 2000s RPG Maker era). However, archiving these games is notoriously difficult. Standard preservation methods save the *assets* (images/audio) or the *dialogue text*, but they lose the **structural logic**—the complex web of variables, switches, and event triggers that constitute the "gameplay" itself.

This constitutes what we might call a "dark archive": the mechanical skeleton that makes narrative progression possible remains invisible to conventional text extraction. A player experiences the game as integrated flow, but the underlying event system—which determines *why* certain scenes trigger, *when* certain characters appear, *how* storylines branch—exists only in binary execution logic inaccessible to humanistic analysis.

6.2 Proposal: Logic-as-Text Transformation

My future research proposes a methodology to circumvent the "Multimodal Barrier" in game AI. Instead of training agents to "play" the game via visual input (which is computationally expensive and brittle for exploration-heavy RPGs), I propose **serializing the Event Log into structured text**.

- **Hypothesis:** By converting binary event logic (Switches, Variables, Conditional Branches, Map Transfers) into a linear text stream with proper documentation, we can allow Large Language Models (LLMs) to "traverse" the game purely through reading structured logs.
- **Advantage:** This treats Game Logic as Discourse, allowing standard NLP techniques to analyze complex interactive systems without requiring an executable environment or visual processing.

The key prerequisite is what I term "Good Documenting Behavior": clear variable naming conventions (e.g., `Var[0045]: Mutou_Quest_State` rather than `Var[0045]: 1`), structured map organization with semantic labels, and accompanying guidebooks that explain system architecture. This practice was, notably, a cultural norm in the early Chinese RPG Maker community, where amateur developers shared meticulous HTML walkthroughs and variable documentation.

6.3 Pilot Validation: Two Crucial Breakthroughs

I conducted a pilot experiment using *Songs of Memory* (approximately 300,000 words of readable text, 70+ variables, 200+ maps) to test this "Logic-as-Text" approach. The results revealed two distinct capabilities that suggest scalable preservation pathways:

A. Distributed Semantic Linking Across Massive Unstructured Archives

The Task: During the "Grandma's Necklace" quest, an item initially presented as a family heirloom is revealed through NPC dialogue to actually be a graduation diploma. The AI was asked: *Who is the original owner of this diploma?*

The Challenge: While identifying "Necklace = Diploma" is trivial (explicitly stated in quest dialogue), determining *ownership* requires linking this mechanical item to narrative backstory buried within Blanc's Diary—a 45,000-word fragmented text distributed across 9 collectible pieces, embedded within a game containing approximately 300,000 words of total readable content.

The Process: The AI did not find the answer in quest dialogue or item descriptions. Instead, it performed cross-reference archaeology: By tracking the alma mater of main characters and their geographical movements across the diary corpus, the AI identified a specific passage where Blanc mentions returning to his home village to visit his former teacher, "Teacher Yang" (杨老师). The AI then correlated this reference with the quest's NPC recipient, "Granny Xiao Yang" (小杨奶奶), correctly attributing the diploma's original ownership to Blanc.

Significance: This demonstrates that LLMs can perform **Distributed Semantic Linking** across fragmented, unstructured narrative archives at scale. The parallel to traditional literary scholarship is precise: just as scholars of *Dream of the Red Chamber* trace obscure character relationships across 120 chapters and conflicting manuscript versions, the AI reconstructed object provenance across a labyrinthine text repository. Crucially, even trained players who have read the entire diary often fail to immediately connect the diploma to Blanc—the evidence exists (the teacher's name, the village location, the educational trajectory) but requires sustained attention across disconnected fragments. The AI's ability to perform this synthesis reliably suggests potential for automated literary archaeology in vernacular game corpora where human close reading becomes prohibitively labor-intensive.

B. "Playing" Logic Through Variable Tracking

The Mechanism: With access to the Event Log (exported as structured text) and variable documentation, the AI successfully reconstructed narrative sequences without visual input. For example, tracking `Var[0045]: Mutou_Quest_State` across values `0→1→2→3`, it identified:

- State 0: Quest inactive
- State 1: Player accepts quest at Shipyard
- State 2: Player witnesses political debate at Town Hall
- State 3: Player reports back, quest resolves

By cross-referencing variable changes with Map Transfer events and NPC dialogue flags, the AI "traversed" the quest's logical flow—not by playing the game, but by *reading its state machine*.

Significance: This proves that for games with Good Documenting Behavior, we can bypass multimodal requirements entirely. The AI "plays" the *logic*, not the *pixels*. This approach solves a critical preservation problem: many legacy games require obsolete hardware or emulation to execute, but their Event Logs—once exported and documented—become readable as pure text, allowing future historians to reconstruct interactive narrative topology without executable files.

6.4 Scalability and Limitations

Scalability: This methodology is immediately applicable to:

- RPG Maker games with structured variable systems
- Visual novels with clear flag documentation
- Any game engine that logs state changes in parseable format

The approach is especially promising for preserving the "dark archive" of amateur vernacular games (Chinese RPG Maker community, early Ren'Py works, Twine narratives) where source code may be lost but Event Logs and community-maintained guides survive.

Limitations: The method requires:

- **Good Documenting Behavior:** Games with opaque variable names (e.g., `Var[0045]: 7`) or undocumented systems resist this approach
- **Text-Heavy Design:** Mechanically complex games (action RPGs, real-time strategy) where logic is not narratively meaningful may not benefit
- **Narrative Density:** Sparse dialogue or minimal embedded text reduces the AI's ability to contextualize events

Importantly, I do not claim this works for *all* games—only those where interactive logic is *narratively structured* and *humanly documented*. The early Chinese RPG Maker community's emphasis on detailed walkthroughs and variable guides makes this corpus uniquely suited for automated archaeology.

6.5 Conclusion: From Digital Archaeology to Computational Literary History

This methodology proposes a scalable path for preserving interactive narrative systems that would otherwise remain trapped in executable binaries. By transforming Event Logs into searchable, parseable text, we enable:

- **Automated Discovery:** Finding narrative connections across massive text corpora (the Blanc/Teacher Yang attribution)
- **Logic Reconstruction:** Rebuilding quest sequences and narrative branching without execution (variable tracking)
- **Comparative Analysis:** Studying how different games structure choice, consequence, and progression through their underlying event systems

The ultimate goal is not to replace human interpretation but to make vernacular game archives *legible* as literary objects. Just as computational methods have enabled new approaches to analyzing classical literature at scale, treating game logic as readable discourse allows us to study interactive narrative history through its structural mechanics—not just its surface text, but the very *grammar of interactivity* that defines how stories unfold through play.

For games like *Songs of Memory*, where 300,000 words of readable content coexist with 70+ variables tracking player choices, this approach reveals how narrative depth and mechanical complexity intertwine. Future work will test this methodology on larger corpora—particularly the archived works of the 66rpg.com community—to determine how reliably automated systems can reconstruct the "dark archive" of early Chinese indie game development.

Songs of Memory

雨后的声音

An RPG exploring existentialism, diaspora,
and the power of memory

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