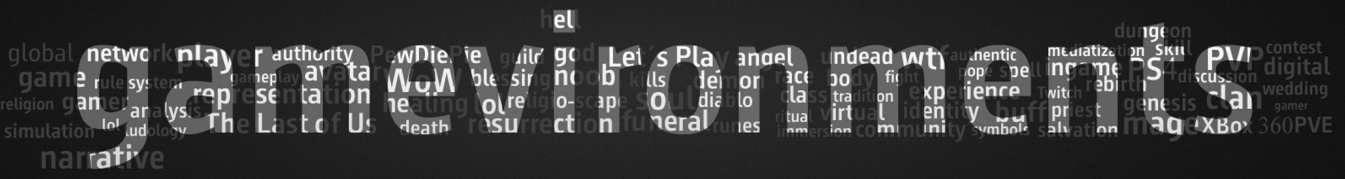
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Hollow yet Hopeful? Sky Islands, Hubris, and Gravity in Video Games

Gaspard Pelurson

Abstract
This article explores the symbolic significance of sky islands in gaming culture and beyond, framing them as critical dystopian spaces. Using the Queendom of Zeal (Zeal) from *Chrono Trigger* (1995) as a focal point, it examines how these floating landscapes function as both escapist fantasies and cautionary tales. Frequently represented as advanced ancient civilisations, sky islands offer players a vision of idyllic yet precarious utopias that challenge the norms of the world below. This article argues that the narrative and visual elements of Zeal highlight its paradoxical nature as both a utopian ideal and a dystopian reality. Drawing primarily on utopian and game studies, this analysis presents Zeal as a complex fictional world that is both merciless and inspiring. The discussion is then contextualised through queer theory, interpreting the defiance of gravity as a metaphorical challenge to normative structures. In doing so, it echoes queer theorists' pursuits of utopian thinking as a means to challenge dominant norms and envision more inclusive futures. Ultimately, this study explores the idea that sky islands articulate queer hope and queer futurity even through their destruction. They are antinomic spaces, at once sites of unsustainable hubris, political voids, and imaginative possibility. In doing so, they invite players to reflect on progress, power, and the cyclical nature of time, capturing both the risks and the possibilities of envisioning new worlds.

Keywords: Sky Island, Chrono Trigger, Queer Hope, Video Game Gravity, Dystopia, gamevironments

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Released in 1995, *Chrono Trigger* featured a layered time-travel story with a dynamic combat system and multiple endings. As a SNES Japanese role-playing game (JRPG), it is still considered a defining title in the genre (Frick 2023) and has paved the way for the trope of floating islands in video games, particularly in JRPGs, which have traditionally been narrative-driven. In *Chrono Trigger*, the Queendom of Zeal, an ancient civilisation predating the mediaevalesque *present time* at the beginning of the game by 12.000 years, is remarkably advanced, thriving in a world of magic and technology. Arriving in Zeal for the first time is an indelible experience. As the player ascends above the clouds a hidden archipelago reveals itself, floating effortlessly in the sky, adorned with cascading waterfalls and brimming with mystery and opulence.

Islands in the sky frequently leave players questioning their existence. The physics and reasoning behind these floating landmasses are rarely explained and they are often isolated from the world below, their presence sometimes hidden from the surface, making them a well-established trope in gaming culture (TVTropes 2025). Offering an exotic setting for players and guaranteeing their escapism, sky islands have appeared in games as early as *Sky Kid* (1985) or *Sonic the Hedgehog 2* (1992) and have continued until today (*The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom* (2023)).

Yet, their roles and lore often take on greater significance in role-playing games (RPGs), and in particular, JRPGs. The latter experienced a golden age in the 1990s (Moher 2023, Yamakami and Barbosa 2015), with their popularisation in the West largely attributed to *Final Fantasy VII* (2022). This exposure also enabled many gamers to discover older titles. This era was seminal in establishing numerous narrative and visual tropes, such as the amnesiac protagonist, the practice of storming non-playable characters' houses and taking any collectible items in sight without remorse, and floating islands. In these, sky islands often signify the existence

of an advanced ancient civilisation prior to a devastating cataclysm. They are mysterious remnants of a pre-fall idyll, a Saturnian golden age that can never be reclaimed, evoking regret and self-reflection on our own imperfection. Frequently more technologically advanced, they may serve as a refuge for an oppressed population, a fresh start for a new society, or a base for controlling the lands beneath them.

Utopian spaces such as sky islands have often been imagined as metaphors for alternate, and potentially better, forms of society where dominant norms are challenged or undone. As Schulzke (2014) argues, video games provide fictional environments that invite players to reflect on and question their own realities. In a similar vein, the work of queer theorists like José Esteban Muñoz (2009) and Jack Halberstam (in Dinshaw et al. 2007) has long centred on the deconstruction and reimagining of worlds through a refusal of neoliberal and hyper-capitalist structures. Given this, it is not a stretch to consider how certain game environments may serve as fertile ground for queer world-making. Thus, this article asks to what extent sky islands can be understood as metaphors for a queer reimagining of society and as potential vessels for queer political thought.

While Zeal isn't the first instance of a sky archipelago in video games, I argue that it plays a crucial role in the game's narrative and serves as a foundational example of a dystopian sky island, one whose characteristics and fate have been repeatedly replicated in later games. Through the example of Zeal, this article examines the relationship of sky islands with utopian and dystopian dynamics, their cathartic role in the games where they appear, and their paradoxical nature as both empty vessels and potential catalysts of queer hope, queer futurity and of using gravity as a metaphor for normativity.

Consequently, this article first delves into a comprehensive literature review of (sky) islands as utopian and dystopian spaces; it investigates their recurrence in gaming cultures and the relationship between queer hope and utopia. It then dissects Zeal's introduction as an ideal and advanced society before exploring its apocalyptic fall, a fate shared by many other floating realms. Finally, it explores how Zeal articulates the tension between queer hope and queer futurity and how, ultimately, its defiance of gravity serves as the common denominator for reading sky islands as complex figures of dissidence.

Methodological Details

The analysis is grounded in the author's direct engagement with the game, including three complete playthroughs and a review of full-game walkthroughs on YouTube to revisit and examine key sequences. This process mirrors Carr (2017) approach, which combines initial play for pleasure with subsequent, more analytical replays. Notes were taken during focused play sessions, with particular attention to Zeal's introduction, visual representation, and narrative function. The use of walkthroughs allowed for the examination of sequences that might be missed or overlooked in a single playthrough, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of Zeal's role in the game.

This study adopts a focused analytical approach to Zeal in *Chrono Trigger*, drawing on the methodological frameworks of Fernández-Vara (2024), Carr (2017), and Juul (2005). The analysis centres on three key axes: narrative, space, and intertextual interpretation, selected for their capacity to illuminate Zeal's thematic and cultural resonance as a utopian/dystopian space and for their relevance to the game's design

and storytelling. Following Fernández-Vara's (2024) argument that game analysis depends on the careful selection of "building blocks" (ibid., 5) such as representation, space, values, and mechanics, this study isolates the components most suited to its research question.

Prioritising narrative and spatial elements as "building blocks" (ibid.) was justified for three main reasons. First, the article focuses on a small portion of the game: the arrival and destruction of Zeal. Second, it aims to use Zeal as a conversation starter for sky islands which, while differing in design, often shares similar symbolic and performative values in other games. Third, although *Chrono Trigger* features a dynamic turn-based battle system, player agency within Zeal is relatively limited. While the gameplay remains engaging, the battles and strategies available in this section contribute little to the interpretive questions at stake, as the game's progression is largely linear. Hence, concentrating on narrative and spatial analysis offered the most productive avenues for interpreting Zeal's symbolic and thematic significance, while inviting comparison with other floating worlds in game design and storytelling.

Focusing on how Zeal's story is told through cutscenes, dialogue, and environmental storytelling, this article's narrative analysis draws on Juul's (2005) distinction between game stories and player experience and on Carr (2017) approach to textual analysis, which incorporates structural, textual, and intertextual dimensions. Zeal as a game space is considered alongside its narrative, as the floating island shapes both its story and meaning. Following Jenkins (2004), spaces are treated as *narrative architectures* with analysis focused on layout, visual design, and their relation to the broader game world. This approach is further informed by Wolf (2001), who emphasises game spaces as sites of meaning, including mise-en-scène, camera angles, and the interplay

between two- and three-dimensional representation.

Building on this foundation, the analysis also considers Zeal's intertextual connections. Games often evoke associations with other media and cultural texts (Fernández-Vara 2024), and Zeal participates in a broader tradition of sky islands in games, from *BioShock Infinite*'s Columbia (2013) to more recent titles, as discussed by Farca (2018) and Nyman and Teten (2018). This intertextual perspective is guided by Barthes' (1977) emphasis on connotation and association, and by Carr (2017) argument that culturally situated meanings are inseparable from textual analysis. By linking Zeal to these broader cultural and media contexts, the analysis situates the game within a network of narrative, spatial, and intertextual significance.

Building on these three approaches, this article employs queer game studies as a lens, drawing on Ruberg (2019) and Ruberg and Shaw (2017) to highlight games as spaces of resistance, ambiguity, and hope. Queerness in games involves the disruption of norms, mechanics, and expectations and offers a way to imagine alternatives to dominant structures. This perspective resonates with sky islands like those in Zeal, that function as removed, transformative spaces, and guides the latter half of the article's analysis of Zeal's disruptive and utopian potential.

By deliberately focusing on *Chrono Trigger*'s Zeal, this study highlights the importance of revisiting older games, showing how foundational titles can deepen our understanding of game narratives and spaces. This approach counters the field's frequent emphasis on contemporary releases and the cycles and commercial imperatives of the gaming industry, which often shape scholarship according to trends in production and consumption. Unlike disciplines such as literature or film studies, where the canonisation of classic works remains central, game studies often

hesitate to engage with earlier titles. This reluctance endangers the preservation of significant cultural artifacts and forecloses avenues for historical reflection (Newman 2012), risking the erasure of crucial knowledge under the relentless pressure of a neoliberal emphasis on the new.

Floating Dreams: Sky Islands, Utopia, and Queer Hope in Video Games

Sky Islands in Gaming Cultures

From *Genshin Impact* (2020) to *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom*, floating islands are a common yet extraordinary feature in video games. Within the many sky islands found in JRPGs following *Chrono Trigger*, a few notable examples stand out. For instance, *Xenogears* (1998) presents Shevat and Solaris: two warring civilisations, one floating above the clouds and the other orbiting in space. Shevat (Figure 3) serves as a fleeting but hopeful respite in a turbulent journey, while Solaris plays the role of the primary antagonist. Similarly, the Floating Continent of *Final Fantasy VI* (1994), operated by ancient magic, ends up crashing and changing the face of the world. The same occurs to the Great Silver Shrine (Figure 4) in *Skies of Arcadia* (2000), a game that ironically features only islands in the sky. The shrine is presented as a metallic structure orbiting around the planet even higher than the other sky islands. It is a haven for the presumably "disappeared" Silver civilisation, surpassing all others technologically and responsible for putting an end to an ancient war by purging the entire planet. Finally, Exire (Figure 5) from *Tales of Symphonia* (2003), offers respite for the half-elves who are victim of oppression down below.

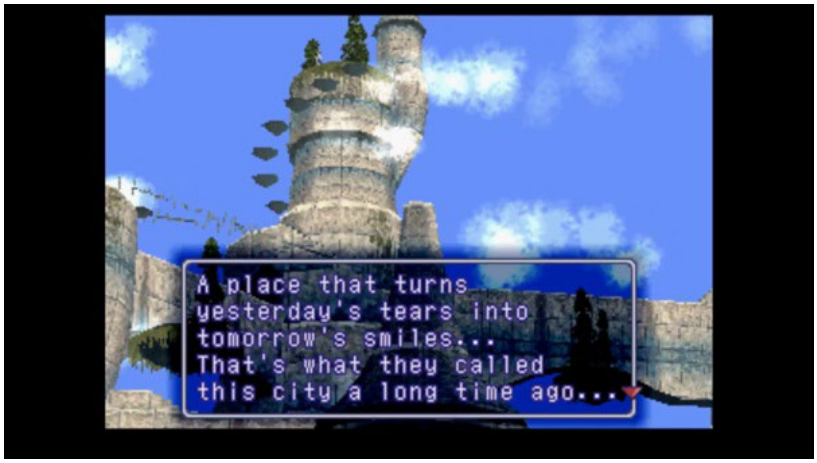

Figure 1. An inhabitant of Auphel Aura, the capital of Shevat, introduces its civilisation to the party. *Chrono Trigger*.

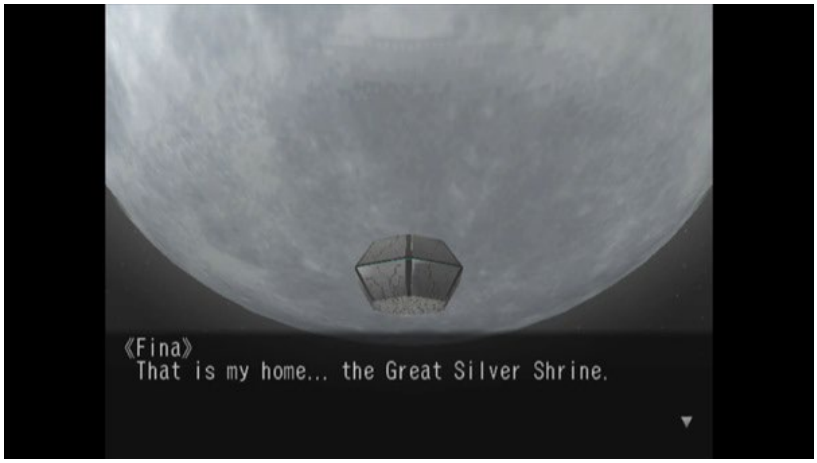

Figure 2. The arrival to the Great Silver Shrine. *Skies of Arcadia*.

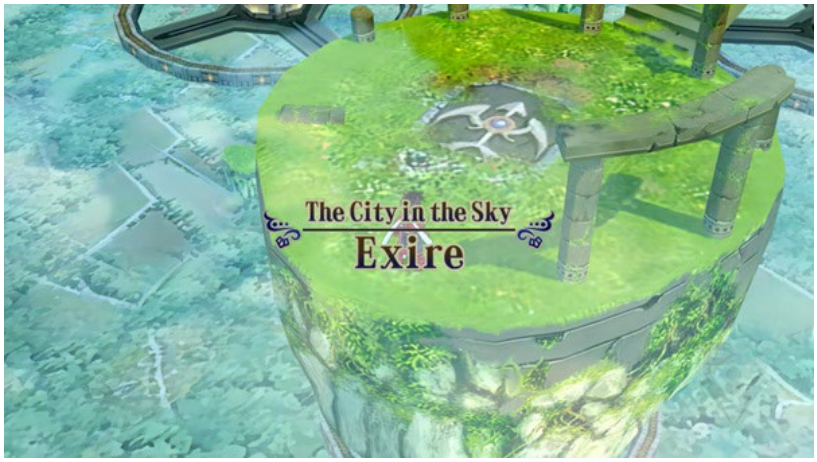

Figure 3. Arriving in Exire, a green floating city above green fields. *Tales of Symphonia*.

Celestial locations have also appeared in many other genres, such as the action-

adventure *Gravity Rush* franchise (2015-2017), located in floating cities. Several Western games have also incorporated them, such as Columbia from *Bioshock: Infinite*, a dystopian and extravagant city floating above the clouds, or less recently Etheria, from *King's Quest VII* (1994) depicted as a land aloft that is the home of the faerie race.

Many games, however, use sky islands merely as a fantasy setting without much further development, serving primarily as backdrops rather than deeply integrated gameplay elements. Examples include Xen in *Half-Life* (1998), Loot Island in *Fortnite* (2017), the Shattered Isles in *Dauntless* (2019) as well as the islands in *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom* and *Genshin Impact*. These examples include platforming areas or dungeons to explore and loot, and also mere décor used for world-building.

The popularity and recurrence of sky islands in games could be attributed to their appeal as dynamic settings with apparent fragile and unpredictable natures, making them intriguing places to explore. TVTropes (2025) notes the overwhelming recurrence of sky islands having "a higher-than-normal failure rate," suggesting that these civilisations are ultimately doomed to fall. Rudd (2010, 267) also explores the concept of the magical island through the lens of Howl's Moving Castle (an anime and a book, granted) and reads them as places of wonders and instability, echoing the utopian/dystopian predisposition of such spaces. Rudd discusses how the titular castle, constantly in motion, undermines traditional ideas of stability and rootedness. By deconstructing the notion of a static home, the story challenges the reader to rethink the concept of islands as fixed entities. Rudd challenges patriarchal norms, demonstrating that castles and homes can benefit from shedding their traditional gravitas becoming more porous, fluid, and dynamic, rather than sedentary and bound by paternal rigidity.

From Islands to Sky Islands: Utopian declensions

The metaphor of the island has held a significant place in literature, culture, and even law (Nicolini and Perrin 2020), consistently presenting itself as a rich and versatile symbol (Hoffie 2009, Gillis 2007, Hannabuss 1983). This construct extends beyond its physical geographical boundaries to become a canvas for exploring ideas of isolation, community, utopia, and dystopia.

Imbued with symbolism, islands function 'as a signifier of isolation, of loneliness, of being cut off from a broader community, and at other times as a microcosm of wider society, or again as a potentially perfect creation of community: as a utopia', or a dystopia, as a place "that breed[s] cultures premised on conditions of oppression, deprivation and fear" (Hoffie 2009, 9). As spaces of potential where everything is possible, they are also fragile environments (Nicolini and Perrin 2020, 216) both tangibly and symbolically. Whether it is the migration crisis of the Comoros or the rising waters threatening the Caribbean, among other examples, islands are susceptible to cascading social fractures. This makes them compelling yet concerning cases of isolation (ibid., 216-217), drawing parallels with their fictional and literary counterparts. These parallels amplify their metaphorical power as symbols of both paradise and precariousness.

Gillis (2007) explores the historical and cultural significance of islands, positioning them as pivotal in Western mythological geographies. He notes that islands have been seen as places for "heroic journeys and holy quests," (Gillis 2007, 274) often serving as transformative spaces within narratives. The tradition of seasonal sojourning reflects a modern continuation of this mythical function, where islands are not permanent homes but destinations for temporary refuge and reflection, providing a "sense of temporal and spatial rootedness" (ibid., 278) lost in the ever-connected

mainland. This connection to temporary escapism ties into the broader cultural fascination with islands as places of both spiritual and physical retreat. This relationship is also explored in Hannabuss' (1983) work, which builds on the metaphorical potential of islands and suggests that they are paradoxical representations of isolation and connectedness. They are separated from the mainland yet maintain a unique identity formed by this separation. This duality allows islands to function as spaces of societal experimentation, serving as microcosms where new social norms can be tested.

Since Thomas More's Utopia (1997), numerous narratives and definitions of utopia have emerged. Sargent (1994, 9) outlined a comprehensive set of definitions for different types of utopias, which have been widely referenced. Sargent defines a utopia as a "non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space." A dystopia is similar but is intended to be viewed as "considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived" (ibid.). A critical utopia also describes a better society but includes "difficult problems that the described society may or may not be able to solve" (ibid.), offering a critical view of the utopian genre.

Building on these definitions, alongside the insights of Kateb (1963) and Huntington (1982), and the literary contributions of Le Guin (1974) and Butler (1993), Moylan (2000) identifies and navigates the disagreements between definitions of classical, anti-, and critical utopias and dystopias. He provides useful differentiations of core traits between the sub-genres (see Table 1):

The Critical Dystopia

Historical Antinomies

Utopia	Anti-Utopia
(historical)	(universal)
(novum)	(pseudo-novum)

Literary Forms

utopia/eutopia	**anti-utopia**
(radical hope)	(cynicism, despair)
dystopia	**pseudo-dystopia**
(militant pessimism)	(resigned pessimism)
(epic, open)	(myth, closed)
critical dystopia	**anti-critical dystopia**

Table 1. Moylan 2000, 195.

In his retrospective, Moylan draws upon the strong ties between utopian/dystopian narratives and political contexts, the rise of capitalism, and the race to new technological prowess.

These themes are especially evident in video games, where dystopian worlds offer a compelling space for exploring neoliberal anxieties and critiques (Pérez-Latorre and Oliva 2019). Intersecting with many other fantasy and sci-fi genres such as steampunk, cyberpunk, and post-apocalyptic fiction, they appeal through their "power fantasies," "exploration allure" (Farca 2018, 121), and the escapism they provide. Within this context, islands serve as "naturally restricted, isolated setting[s]" that enable designers to construct complete and self-contained worlds (Nyman and Teten 2018, 371-372). Their spatial limitations not only support coherent worldbuilding but also explain why players cannot venture beyond the boundaries of play. This design principle aligns with broader cultural perceptions of islands as perfect, possessable units of land, understandable and contained spaces that invite exploration, ownership, and control.

Because of this dual nature as both isolated realms and complete wholes, islands have long served as a metaphorical tabula rasa for mainland imaginations, making them a particularly compelling narrative and design tool in gaming (ibid., 372-373). This approach is evident in games like *BioShock* (2007), where the underwater city of Rapture serves as an isolated utopia turned dystopia. The game explores the collapse of an ideal society due to its inherent contradictions, prompting players to reflect on the nature of utopian aspirations and their potential pitfalls. As such, these game spaces continue the long tradition of islands as sites of utopian experimentation and critique (ibid., 379).

Echoing this idea, Schulzke (2014, 331) argues that video game islands "encourage players to consider the problems responsible for producing dystopia and serve as warnings against allowing these problems to exist in the real world." This mirrors the traditional use of islands in literature as spaces where social norms can be questioned and new possibilities imagined. Together, these interpretations highlight how the island motif not only structures gameplay but also shapes moral and philosophical engagement.

Finally, through the study of *Bioshock Infinite*'s Columbia, Farca (2018) introduces further nuances about the subdivisions of utopia and argues that "utopia is not opposed to dystopia, and that both genres essentially hold the same function, for at their core they are wish-fulfilment, revolving around the dream for a better future" (Farca 2018, 62). Farca blurs the lines of some of the definitions provided above and argues that while differences between utopia and dystopia do matter when it comes to categorisation, they do not necessarily impact the triangular relationship between the game, the player, and their external environment.

As Vieira (2013, 1) similarly observes, "there are more affinities binding utopia and dystopia together, with regard to their aims and objectives, than differences setting them apart," a point that reinforces Farca's (2018) reading of Columbia. The latter (2018) demonstrates that Columbia is initially presented as a utopia before promptly unveiling its darker side. Farca (2018, 93) also differentiates between the video game dystopia as a classical dystopia, in which "the gameworld's diegetic characters (and, figuratively, the player) are crushed by the dystopian regime," and a critical dystopia, in which "the prospect of hope lies within the bounds of the gameworld." He identifies two variants: one in which the player's fate is predetermined, and they are "assigned the role of a catalyst" (ibid.) (which applies to this article's case study), and another in which the player has the choice to become this catalyst.

Farca (2018, 403) describes the relationship between dystopian games, players, and culture as a "tripartite dialectic" mediated by fictionality, in which gameplay allows players to reorganise social norms, conventions, and troubling tendencies within the structure of the gameworld. In doing so, the dystopian setting thus serves as a "refracted mirror of the familiar and unfamiliar" (ibid.), estranging players just enough to encourage critical reflection on societal structures. Through this dynamic, video game dystopias operate not only as immersive narratives but also as tools for ethical and cultural engagement (Farca 2018, 102), prompting players to consider the real-world implications of the worlds they inhabit.

Utopia and Queer Hope

While dystopian video games often serve as cautionary tales that prompt critical reflection on real-world structures, they also open spaces for imagining alternative futures. This potential for reimagining and resisting dominant narratives aligns with broader theoretical discussions of utopia and hope. In particular, the concept of

queer hope, which emerges from engagements with utopian thinking, complicates traditional notions of futurity and societal progress. The language around queer hope is often entangled with the antirelational turn in queer theory, particularly embodied by Edelman's concept of queer negativity. Transforming Bersani's (1987) critique of the sanitisation of sexuality into a broader critique against societal reproduction, Edelman (2004) challenges the dominant ideology of reproductive futurity, symbolised by the image of the innocent child. For Edelman, the Child represents the future and serves as the "perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, [and] the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention" (Edelman 2004, 84). This leads Edelman to envision a queer ethics that opposes the future and the Child that symbolises it.

Nuancing Edelman's argument, Halberstam (Dinshaw et al. 2007, 85) asserts that "for some queers, particularly for queers of colour, hope is not something one can afford to lose." In the same vein, Muñoz (2009) challenged Lee Edelman's rejection of futurity, arguing that it presumes the privilege of a secure future; one denied to many, particularly non-white queers. Instead of queer negativity, Muñoz (2009, 1) championed queerness as "the rejection of a here and now" and the insistence on "concrete possibility for another world." Expanding on this, Bliss (2015) engages with the politics of hope through a black feminist lens, questioning whose futures are made possible within Muñoz's vision. He critiques how black people are excluded from mainstream politics of hope, arguing that "black feminist theorising… haunts the political imaginary articulated in queer negativity" (Bliss 2015, 83). He calls for a utopian vision free from the "tyranny of positive affect" (ibid., 91) and rooted in "the tacit assumption that the world… is a fundamentally unacceptable place" (ibid., 90).

Similarly, Silverbloom (2024) links hope to capitalism and colonialism, contending

that it acts as an enforcer of privilege. Drawing on Ahmed (2006), she describes hope as a "speech act that does not do what it says" (Silverbloom 2024, 808), a tool for avoiding real change. Utopian spaces have often fuelled the hopes of queer communities by embracing the impossible and challenging societal pragmatism. In line with Duggan and Muñoz's (2009) views that queer hope is a risky enterprise, Silverbloom (2024, 808) pushes for a re-evaluation of hope that resists complicity with these oppressive systems. She argues that queer hope is akin to a project of refusal, which entails imagining queer utopias: alternative worlds that are not purely abstract but are instead rooted in specific historical struggles and a collective spirit, whether already realised or still possible.

Thus, nurturing queer hope is precarious. Practising hope as refusal involves building the capacity to endure within an unliveable present, a bleak future, and the hard everyday labour of imagining and enacting new arrangements for existence (Hartman 2019). In relation to this, the article subsequently interrogates how sky islands can function as fertile sites for queer hope, but also highlights their inevitable fragility and potential for destruction.

"There will be no more fear or sadness, only eternal peace." (*Chrono Trigger* 1995)

Chrono Trigger tells the story of an epic quest through different time periods to prevent a global catastrophe caused by Lavos, an alien form that mysteriously arrived on the planet thousands of years ago. Characters include Crono, a young swordsman, a girl named Marle and Lucca, Crono's mechanic friend. The game starts in 1.000 AD, a medieval-fantasy setting. They are then joined by Frog, a swordsman turned into a frog (unsurprisingly) from an older time (600 AD), Robo, a robot (surprise again!)

from a very bleak future devastated by Lavos (2.300 AD), and Ayla, a prehistoric warrior chief from 65.000 BC. The heroes discover that Lavos has been feeding on the planet's energy for millions of years, growing stronger with each era. They decide to confront the alien in an epic final battle to alter history and save the world from its grim fate. The game experiments with non-linear storytelling, particularly in its final act and through New Game+, where players unlock greater freedom and multiple endings. While it retains the linear structure typical of 1990s JRPGs on the first playthrough, its innovative approach to time travel and branching narratives set it apart as a pioneering title. Its core themes revolve around friendship, sacrifice, and the possibility of changing one's destiny.

Towards the latter half of the game, after traveling both into the future and far back into the origin of Lavos' crash (65.000 AD) the group lands in 12.000 AD, the era of magic. The player discovers that the earth is mostly battered by icy winds and that the few humans living on it are miserable. As mentioned in the introduction, they discover a *Skyway* (Figure 1) and are transported to Zeal, where dreamlike music plays over floating villages and advanced magical and technological achievements (Figure 2). It is quickly revealed that beings without the gift of magic are relegated to the planet's surface, deemed fitting as "they lack [Zeal's inhabitants'] talents" (*Chrono Trigger*). Many additional characters are introduced in a short span of time: the Queen of Zeal, who is revealed to be one of the main antagonists of the game using the power of Lavos to support her queendom, her children Janus, a young boy with prophetic ability, and Schalla, who possesses exceptional potential even surpassing her mother's abilities.

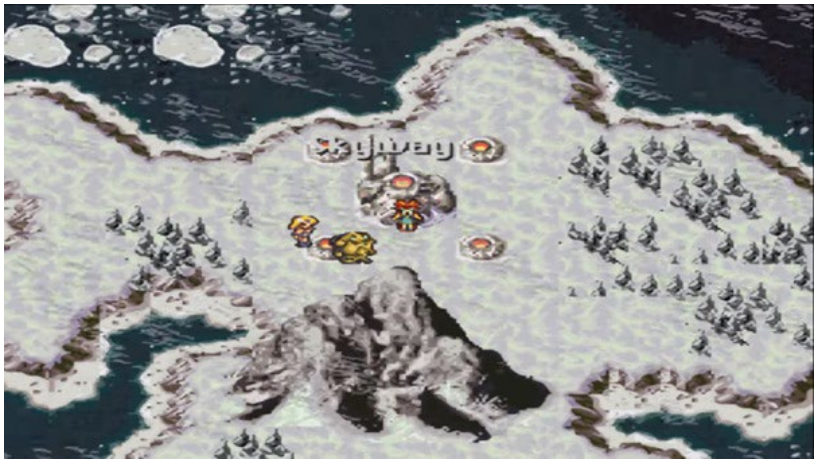

Figure 4. Entering the Skyway. *Chrono Trigger*.

Figure 5. Exploring Zeal's world map. *Chrono Trigger*.

The technology and magic of Zeal are unmatched, with progress driven by a newly harnessed energy source, later revealed to be Lavos. Much like Laputa in Gulliver's Travels (Swift 2014) which dominates the land below, Zeal is referred to as the "center of the universe" (*Chrono Trigger*), underscoring its civilisation's unchecked supremacy and reckless ambition over neighbouring countries. Despite its remarkable advancements, the player learns that the queendom has taken a darker turn: Zeal operates as an absolute monarchy with the Queen exerting total control over research, innovation, and lost technologies.

The exploration of Zeal is a shining example of spatial gradation, with the tone

shifting as the player gets closer to the Queen's palace. This is exemplified through NPC dialogues, which first help set the scene for the player by introducing Zeal's leader and researchers and praising the queendom's modernity. As the player advances, exploring new buildings, navigating the mini-map, and approaching the queen's palace, the NPCs' tone subtly shifts to reveal growing doubt and fear.

No combat occurs in this section and interactions with Zeal's inhabitants remain optional, but this escalating tension is also reinforced by the changing music. At the party's arrival "Corridors of Time" (Mitsuda 1995) Zeal's theme is being played, a deeply emotive and orchestral piece by Yasunori Mitsuda. Melancholic yet hopeful, blending strings, piano, and woodwind into a poignant, introspective journey, it arguably mirrors the game's themes of time, choice, and consequence, cementing its place as a beloved classic in video game music (Abent 2020). As the player makes it to the queen's palace, 'Zeal palace' is being played. The music is starkly minimalist, tense, foreboding, and hypnotic, with repetitive one-note motifs that build an atmosphere of creeping dread and inevitability. Unlike the layered emotion of "Corridors of Time" (Mitsuda 1995) its rigid, pulsing rhythm feels like a ticking clock, amplifying the game's themes of doom and unyielding fate. This contrast underscores Zeal's duality: initially a beacon of utopian promise, reminiscent of More's (1997) Utopia and Hoffie's (2009) idealised sky islands, but ultimately a harbinger of doom.

This narrative arc resonates with Farca's (2018) analysis of *BioShock Infinite*, where the player's unguided immersion in Columbia allows its ambiance to unfold organically: "there is no guide to show [the player] around, no one to tell him about the city's distinctive excellences. Yet, this is not necessary, for he experiences Columbia directly and absorbs its ambiance" (Farce 2018, 48). Much like Zeal, Columbia "lets dreams

become a reality" (ibid., 35). Both embody a tale of Babelic grandeur that has been retold across various forms of media throughout human history. Reaching unexplained and impossible heights, Zeal stands as a place that defiantly secedes from the ruling principle or gravity, and presents an alternative, often fantastic and excessive model to the reality down below. Yet, as with Columbia, Zeal's initial utopian veneer cracks to expose a dystopian core, traversing the spectrum of Sargent's (1994) definitions (Figure 6)

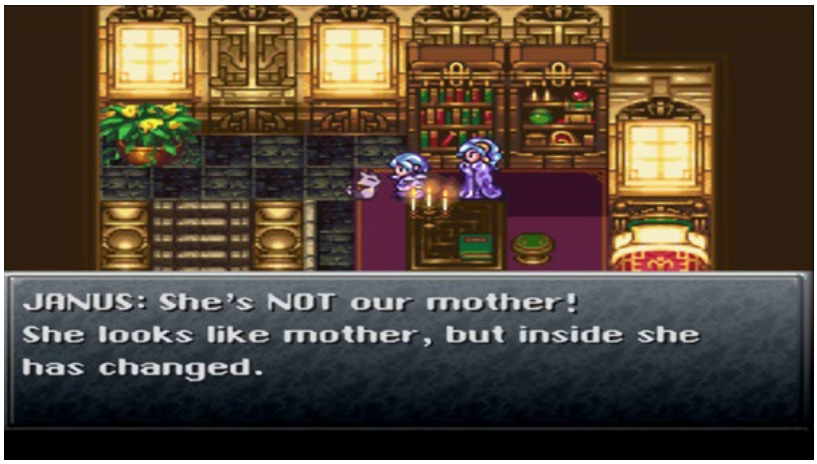

Figure 6. Schala and Janus arguing. *Chrono Trigger*.

While only an illustration amongst many, Zeal is a great starting point to understand and encapsulate how islands in the sky came to popularity in gaming cultures. Among its many successors, a clear theme emerges: the impulse to separate and protect itself from the world below. As mentioned previously, sky islands often serve as a sanctuary for oppressed ethnicities (*Tales of Symphonia*'s Exire) or surviving communities (*Skyward Sword*'s Skyloft, *Xenogears*' Shevat), but can also harbour ancient powers (*Skies of Arcadia*'s Silver Shrine, *Final Fantasy 6*'s Floating Continent) with the potential to change the world forever.

Sky islands themselves are residues of a grand ambition to master the forces of nature. They also are a lamentation of what was lost maybe because they were the

closest to achieving a Saturnian golden age. Either havens or harbingers, floating islands that play a significant role in a game's lore and narrative often meet dramatic ends often due to their hubristic ambitions. Examples are abundant; Shevat and the Floating Continent crash, Columbia is erased from all timelines, and the Great Silver Shrine is repurposed as a missile to help the party infiltrate the antagonist's fortress. I suggest that Zeal shares many traits with its celestial successors. Concurrently a utopia and a dystopia, its extraordinary status foreshadows an inevitable fall, especially for islands that play a pivotal role in the story. After being dazzled by the wonder of flight, something deep inside us longs for the spectacle of their descent.

"… Zeal, where dreams can come true. But at what price?" (*Chrono Trigger* 1995)

Doreen, an NPC and resident of Zeal, foreshadows the queendom's hidden corruption with this haunting question, expressing concern over the Queen's ominous new direction. This warning becomes reality when the characters' first visit to Zeal ends in their imprisonment and eventual expulsion. Upon their return, they no longer have access to the teleporter to the islands. Before they can use the Skyway again, they must complete a series of quests, including freeing one of the Queen's imprisoned opponents on another distant floating mountain. Only then can they ascend once more. This arduous process, culminating in the climb up floating rocks tethered to the earth by a massive chain, powerfully underscores Zeal's isolation and separation from the surface world.

Upon reaching the Queen's palace a second time, the party is taken to the depths of the sea, to the Ocean Palace, one of the game's dungeons where Lavos resides. This requires the player to explore and go through a series of intense confrontations,

leading to the Queen and Schala summoning Lavos. The latter easily defeats the party and kills Crono, the main protagonist. Using the last remnants of her energy Schala saves them, but not before Lavos destroys Zeal. The once-beautiful archipelago crashes into the ocean, leaving the player to witness its dramatic downfall. In a final devastating twist, the Queen's son is revealed to be Magus, the game's early antagonist, who sees his sister sacrifice herself once again. Zeal's downfall thus unfolds as both spectacle and tragedy: a vivid cautionary tale of the ruin that follows humankind's reach for godlike power.

While Zeal's fall delivers a powerful moral resolution within the game's narrative, its deeper significance extends beyond the story itself. As Schulzke (2014) observes, video game islands provide players with opportunities to critique and test fictional and real-world societal models. In this light, Zeal becomes a near-perfect embodiment of Sargent's (1994) concept of critical dystopia, inviting players to reflect on the rise and fall of the queendom. It is also made clear that the Queen was not always evil; her initial intentions were largely benevolent and driven by a desire to achieve advanced technological and magical progress. This ambition was rooted in hopes of curing illness and attaining eternal life. As a result, Zeal's morality is shown to be uncertain as it still incorporates notable nuance. Its rise and fall encapsulate the tension between utopian ambition and dystopian collapse.

Whether Zeal qualifies as a critical utopia or dystopia is open to interpretation; however, the latter seems more fitting. In Baccolini's words (2000, 13) Zeal offers a world that retains "a utopian core" yet seeks to "deconstruct tradition and reconstruct alternatives" by presenting a fantastical environment and society that symbolically marks a clear departure from the settings that precede and follow it in the game. Indeed, unlike other *Chrono Trigger*'s locations, which are deeply embedded within

broader historical continuities, Zeal appears almost as a self-contained anomaly; an advanced yet insular society whose fate is entirely its own.

Chrono Trigger stands among the early games that pioneered what Nyman and Teten (2018, 375) describe as "morally ambiguous virtual worlds", enabling designers to construct richer utopias and more chaotic dystopias with a complexity previously unseen. Baccolini (2000) similarly observes that many critical utopian works, including Butler's *Parable series* (1998-2005), several of Margaret Atwood's novels, and the writings of Katharine Burdekin, blur the boundaries between utopia and dystopia, reinforcing the conceptual fluidity between the two forms.

This tension is articulated in *Chrono Trigger* not only through Zeal's narrative but also through the player's experience, which oscillates between passive observation and the illusion of meaningful action. This dynamic is constructed across the two visits to Zeal. The first visit is defined not by conflict but by the quiet pleasure of exploration: the player is invited to wander through tranquil landscapes, converse with serene inhabitants, and absorb the dreamlike beauty of the queendom. The absence of combat, combined with the ethereal soundtrack and luminous visual design, creates a contemplative rhythm that evokes curiosity and wonder. In this moment, the world of 12.000 BC appears as an age untainted by technological excess or environmental decay.

The second visit transforms this initial sense of calm into urgency. The player must now engage actively with the game's mechanics, navigating an extended dungeon, confronting a series of demanding battles, and ultimately witnessing the destruction of the archipelago. The transition from peaceful observation to intense struggle renders Zeal's collapse both emotionally and mechanically affecting. The design

briefly sustains the illusion that the player might intervene to alter the outcome, only to reveal the inevitability of tragedy. In denying the possibility of salvation, *Chrono Trigger* transforms Zeal's downfall into a meditation on fate, power, and the limits of human agency. The queendom's end thus becomes not only a narrative catastrophe but also an experiential one, compelling the player to confront the fragility of utopian ambition.

This distinctive narrative positioning makes Zeal an ideal case study for examining utopian and dystopian dynamics in video games. Such engagement also resonates with Maziarczyk's notion of *Playable Dystopias* (2015), as discussed by Farca (2018, 110), who emphasises the "creative dialectic with the implied player." Players do not merely consume dystopian narratives, their participation becomes an aesthetic experience that translates into an ethical response, prompting reflection on the shortcomings of their empirical world and, potentially, inspiring them to resist dystopia. *Chrono Trigger* thus illustrates how video games can provoke complex thematic engagement despite their comparatively modest technical, textual, and narrative means when set against contemporary titles.

By allowing players to oscillate between participation and observation, the game turns its pixelated aesthetic into a reflective medium for interrogating energy use, resource exploitation, and the ideological underpinnings of technological progress. Here, the argument that game environments, and in this case, sky islands, provide players with opportunities to critique and test both fictional and real-world social models is reinforced (Schulzke 2014, Lizardi 2014). Zeal's issues may serve "as warnings against allowing these problems to exist in the real world" (Schulzke 2014, 331). By presenting a deceptively simple yet conceptually layered critique of progress, hubris, and governance, *Chrono Trigger* demonstrates how such spaces operate as

experimental thought environments through which players can reimagine and reassess the structures of their own societies.

"Come, dear friends. Perhaps I can persuade Lavos to share his dreams with you" (*Chrono Trigger* 1995)

Queen Zeal's aim is to gain immortality and rule over the world below, a goal she pursues through the disruption of gravity, which in this section is read as a symbol of normativity. Her floating queendom embodies this detachment and superiority, with its elevation serving as a symbol of transcendence above the ordinary. Through exploring Zeal, the player uncovers the origins of the archipelago and, in doing so, gain a physical and metaphorical vantage point over the world of *Chrono Trigger*.

The player's first encounter with Zeal is marked by exclusion, as the party is banned upon arrival and forced to find an alternative route. This restriction not only emphasises the kingdom's difficult access but also underscores its extraordinary nature. Zeal's power is tied to its occupation of extreme geolocations, from the ocean's depths to the heights of its floating islands, enabling technological advancement. As the player navigates these literal and metaphorical extremes, they engage with Zeal's defiance of gravity and actively traverse its excessive spaces. Gameplay thus mirrors the civilisation's dramatic rise and fall, reinforcing the narrative's thematic contrasts.

Many works of popular culture read the defiance of gravity as a symbol of hubris. For example, the fall of the flying city of Netheril, first introduced in the campaign *Netheril: Empire of Magic* (Butler 1996), occurs due to the unbridled greed of an archmage, who ultimately brings about the destruction of his home, family, friends,

people, and an entire civilisation; an event referenced as recently as in games like *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023).

Such transgression also aligns with Michel Foucault's genealogical critique, which seeks to uncover the historical and cultural processes that shape our understanding of norms and power structures. Foucault's genealogical method, as outlined in works such as *Surveiller et Punir: Naissance de la prison* (1975), challenges the notion that current norms are inevitable or universally valid. Instead, it reveals how these norms have been constructed through specific historical, social, and political contexts. Foucault (1977, 139) argues, "[g]enealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times." Resonating with Foucault's argument, Zeal, among many other video game sky islands, subverts gravity not only as an aesthetic fantasy but as a challenge to the so-called universal and natural order. Rather than serving as mere decorative backdrops, these floating worlds offer a symbolic disruption of established normative power structures.

When viewed through a queer theoretical lens, the suspension of gravity becomes an act of defiance, a rejection of both physical constraints and the normative frameworks they embody. Gravity, in this context, is not simply a physical force but a metaphor for the oppressive weight of normativity and conformity. Zeal, then, despite its villainous framing, emerge as sites of contestation, embodying the possibility of alternative ways of being and existing.

In relation to Muñoz's work, the defiance of gravity can be read as a literal queer and hopeful act: both literally and spiritually striving toward a new "horizon" (Muñoz 2009, 11), a "rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete

possibility for another world" (ibid., 1). Reaching for the sky is an excessive yet necessary endeavour, one that echoes the framing of utopianism by queer scholars and black feminists, who see it as "grounded in a refusal of the present world" (Silverbloom 2024, 820). This queer refusal implies a commitment until the very end; as Hartman (RCMC 2018) states, "we must imagine the end of the world, we must wish for it, we must invite it," suggesting a necessary apocalyptic catharsis to clear the ground for a new world. As such, the existence of Zeal, even if fleeting, challenges the rigidity of the world below offering a precarious glimpse of what could be. As a lost civilisation, Zeal invites the player to reflect on, and critique, its trajectory. Initially, it is framed as an alluring utopia: a floating queendom of technological marvels, detached from the constraints of the earthbound world. Its elevation is not just physical but ideological, embodying a rejection of the normative order and a pursuit of transcendence.

However, reading Zeal as a symbol of queer hope is complicated by its hubristic ambition and inevitable downfall. It risks being perceived as a hollow emblem of utopia, one that evades the difficult task of envisioning concrete paths toward realisation. As a lost civilisation, its status troubles any straightforward reading of queer hope: they are not just symbols of what could be, but also of what was and what failed. This contradiction embodies the tension between Muñoz's (2009) queer hope and Edelman's (2004) rejection of futurity. Lavos represents a timeless, destructive force that, after feeding on the planet's core, threatens to unleash catastrophe across any era or timeline. As an incomprehensible and destructive presence, Lavos kills Crono the silent protagonist, disrupting the narrative's linear progression and echoing Edelman's figure of the Child as a symbol of heteronormative futurity. Zeal's downfall is not just a cautionary tale about hubris but a manifestation of queer negativity in Edelman's terms: a refusal to sustain the

existing order, even at the cost of its own erasure.

Yet, it is precisely this failure that makes Zeal a compelling site for queer analysis. Schala's poignant final words encapsulate Zeal's ambivalence as both a place of doom and dream: "I know you will not be able to forgive her, but please do not hate my mother or our kingdom" (*Chrono Trigger* 1995). Despite her mother's cruelty and Schala's own sacrifice to save the party, she demonstrates a profound love for her homeland, transcending simple notions of good and evil. This emotional complexity reinforces Zeal's duality, both a utopian dream and a tragic downfall, situating it within the uneasy intersection of queer hope and anti-reproductive futurity. In this tension, Zeal emerges as both an emblem of aspiration and refusal: a world that reaches toward transcendence even as it embraces its own end.

It is precisely in this unresolved tension that Mari Ruti's (2017, 18) notion of queer ethics becomes pertinent. For Ruti, queer ethics need not be confined to perpetual deferral or outright rejection. Instead, they can emerge from the act of opting out: a discerning withdrawal "capable of seeing through the imaginary lures of heteronormative futurism" (ibid., 107), which still leaves room for transformation. Zeal's ruins, scattered across time and space, become a space for players to engage with this ambiguity. The civilisation's appeal lies in its initial promise of liberation, but its downfall forces a reckoning with the limits of utopian visions. In this sense, sky islands as lost civilisations do more than inspire hope or despair; they demand critical reflection. Their very impermanence, both in the narrative and in the player's experience, challenges passive consumption urging us to consider what it means to strive for queer futures while acknowledging the precarity of such endeavours. As a lost and doomed civilisation, Zeal is not just a symbol of possibility or destruction, but a call to imagine otherwise, even in the face of inevitable collapse.

Queering Gravity, Floating Vacuity?

Chrono Trigger's enduring impact on gaming culture, particularly through Zeal, demonstrates how the sky queendom, as an archetypal floating continent in video games, creates a critical experience that remains relevant today. Through its immersive narrative and symbolic use of sky islands as spaces of both wonder and introspection, the game challenges players to reflect on their own beliefs, wondering what Zeal could have been, but also what it could achieve. More broadly, the fall of Zeal is only one among many floating worlds that tell a different yet similar story. Indeed, while each sky island requires a slightly different and nuanced reading, owing to the specific narrative and gameplay particularities of the game in which it appears, numerous parallels can be drawn between Zeal and other notable sky civilisations.

For example, the Great Silver Shrine, the Floating Continent, and Alcamoth in Xenoblade Chronicles, the floating capital of the Eryth Sea, all serve as the backdrop for crucial plot twists and major revelations in their respective stories.[i] This is unsurprising, as these locations, depicted as the *other* or the *beyond*, offer an external perspective on the world and allow players to piece together the narrative from an otherworldly viewpoint, detached from the grounded realm. In all these examples, the world below stands in stark contrast to the lofty ideals embodied by the floating islands, which express hope in its most radical form by challenging and actively resisting an otherwise inescapable force.

Additionally, just like Lavos' killing of Crono as a potential symbol of heteronormative futurity, some of the aforementioned examples evoke the same queer tension between hope and futurity. For instance, worlds are bound to the sacrifice of an *innocent* figure reminiscent of that of Edelman's child, as seen with Ramirez in *Skies of Arcadia*'s Great Silver Shrine and Kallian, the rightful prince of Alcamoth, among

others.

These similarities have earned sky islands their place as a distinctive video game trope, one that shouldn't be dismissed. Their collapse often becomes a spectacle of both schadenfreude and catharsis, marking the ultimate defiance of gravity itself. As recurring sites of gravitational anomaly, sky islands reveal much about the societies they represent and their relationships with the worlds below. Examining this trope invites us to reconsider how games construct space, power, and possibility, and how gaming cultures, in turn, offer critical frameworks for understanding our own environments beyond the screen.

Future research could pursue several academic directions, each extending beyond the scope of this article and engaging the topic from multiple perspectives. The first would be to examine more closely gravitational anomalies in gaming culture. In popular culture, gravity challenges rigid structures and opens new ways of imagining worlds untethered from convention. Whether it is the levitation in *The Exorcist* (1973) or Elphaba flying off the handle in *Wicked* (2024), countless cinematic and video game examples demonstrate that gravity anomalies have long been associated with the abnormal, the bizarre, and the supernatural, and therefore merit closer examination.

Another, more specific aspect that Sky Islands emphasise is verticality. From intertextual and player-experience perspectives, as well as from a game design standpoint, verticality has become increasingly prominent in three-dimensional environments, a perspective that recalls Benjamin (1932) reflections on altitude and the acquisition of vision and insight through spatial elevation. Franchises such as *Xenoblade*, *Monster Hunter*, *Dark Souls*, and the more recent *Pokémon Legends: Z-A*

title all engage with vertical environments with heightened emphasis. Exploring how verticality affects the player, and how forms of game flânerie in 3D environments emphasising the vertical dimension shape one's experience, could further illuminate the relationship between player agency, spatial perception, and narrative immersion.

Finally, this article suggests that Zeal and other islands often promise radical new orders, only to risk collapsing under the weight of their own contradictions, crashing spectacularly to the ground. Their failure suggests that such ideals may never be fully realised, but their very construction articulates both queer hope and refusal, a defiant reaching for worlds that do not allow themselves to be bound by gravity or normativity. Writing in a time of shifting global alliances, resurgent threats, and vainglorious politics, I am curious to see whether players will draw parallels between the narratives and tropes they engage with during play and the structures shaping their own daily lives. Rather than passively consuming these narratives, players may find themselves reflecting on how the structures of power, desire and loss that shape Zeal also underpin their own lived realities. Perhaps it is this paradox: the perceived vacuity of gaming, its relegation to mere entertainment, and its dismissal as a non-serious practice, that ultimately embodies the queer potential of celestial archipelagos. Their contradictory nature ensures that sky islands remain a relevant and recurring presence in the gaming landscape, inviting continual reimagination of what is possible.

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[i] The Great Silver Shrine is where the party learns that the Silver Civilisation, despite their advanced power and presumed wisdom, was actually responsible for the Rain of Destruction, an atomic-like force that ravaged the planet. While they could simply survive, the Floating Continent is a remnant of an ancient world. Alcamoth and Prison Island is where an ancient giant is imprisoned; it is later revealed that this giant was possessed by a god-like spirit, who actually birthed part of the world in which the game is set.