

Shan-shui Game: Worldbuilding for a Pluriverse Through Relational Game Assets

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INTRODUCTION

In *Playing Nature*, Chang (2019) proposes the notion of the Mountain-Water game to reconsider the entanglement of humans and nature in discussions of nonhuman games. Her idea draws from traditional Chinese *shan-shui-hua* (山水畫)—literally “mountain-water painting.” Using games such as *Journey* (2012) and *Mountain* (2014), and engaging theories mainly from Yifu Tuan’s topophilia and Jakob von Uexküll’s animal life-worlds, Chang examines the human-environment relationship in games by shifting away from an anthropocentric lens. She treats *shan-shui* games as more than visual aesthetics, situating them within theoretical movements like new materialism and posthumanism that emphasize entanglement between human and nonhuman entities. This framework resonates with emerging scholarship in posthuman game studies, particularly work on distributed and agential play (Fizek, 2021; Wilde, 2023; Mustola, 2021). Nevertheless, why do we rely so heavily on Western theoretical lenses when discussing *shan-shui* games? What might change if we re-center the history, theory, and experience of Chinese *shan-shui-hua* and bring them more directly into game studies?

Hui (2021, p.141) introduces *shan-shui* in the context of cosmotechnics to “resituate humans and their technological world within a broader cosmic reality, where the cosmic and moral orders are unified via technical activity” (p. 141). Rooted in Daoist philosophy of oppositional continuity, where shan (mountain) corresponds to yang and shui (water) corresponds to yin, *shan-shui* reflects a recursive understanding of technology. This view differs markedly from Western cybernetics, with its focus on control, feedback, and regulation, shifting from mechanism to organicism. Inspired by Hui’s cross-cultural approach, which centers *shan-shui* within Daoist and Neo-Confucian traditions as a means of understanding technology, my ongoing research reintroduces Daoist *shan-shui-hua* into game studies. This research began with a study of the *shan-shui* tradition in the Song–Yuan dynasties (960–1368), approaching *shan-shui* as a cosmic body. *Shan-shui-hua* in the Song–Yuan dynasties (960 – 1368) was not merely a guide and depiction of self-cultivation (Gesterkamp, 2022) or an anthropomorphic metaphor (Hennessey, 2024), but a cosmic body orchestrated into a unified rhythm with the human body (Li, 2021). In contrast to Chang’s (2019) observation that the grand landscape in the game *Journey* minimizes player bodily

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presence, Song–Yuan Daoist painters saw human existence as immense within the landscape (Li, 2021). One example is Huang Gongwang (1269–1354), a Daoist literati painter and one of the “Four Masters” of the Yuan dynasty, who translated internal alchemical visions into painting, rendering each stage of the process. This understanding of dissolving boundaries between body and cosmos invites us to rethink the design of virtual game environments in ways that move beyond anthropocentric norms while still enhancing player agency. Moreover, *shan-shui* is more than a natural phenomenon; it is a Daoist “perception of the raw material of nature” (Huang, 2012, p. 173). In Daoist traditions, *shan* represents a true form (zhengxing, 真形) that refers to a higher realm of existence and transcendent reality (Liu, 2021; Huang, 2012). Daoist practitioners created script-like landscapes, such as “dragon script,” registers, and talismans, and used them in the rituals, including summoning supernatural powers within the landscape and the myriad mountain and water deities (Huang, 2012). This tradition of “writing as landscape” understands *shan-shui* as an interactive, multisensory, and transmedia experience characterized by constant change, reshaping, and mirroring (Huang, 2012, p. 186).

Bringing this tradition into conversation with game studies suggests new ways of conceptualizing *shan-shui* games as embodied, multisensory environments rather than static scenic backdrops. I extend Daoist perspectives on *shan-shui-hua* beyond Chang’s *shan-shui-game* by analyzing the game *Mountain* (2014) and the game asset creation in my ongoing game project *Standing Within*, a standing meditation game rooted in Daoist tradition. By analyzing *Mountain* (2014), I argue that an idle game such as *Mountain* presents the virtual landscape not as an external entity controlled by the player, but as a cosmic body that connects with players through affective and emotional resonance. I also draw on my ongoing game project *Standing Within*, in which natural assets such as trees and mountains are procedurally generated in relation to the player’s body, as an example of creating a *shan-shui* game through relational game asset making. Together, these two examples demonstrate how the concept of *shan-shui* in Chinese tradition can provide a lens for understanding game assets as embodied forms in relation to the player’s body.

Taken together, I argue that using the *shan-shui* tradition to analyze and create game assets constitutes a worlding process that centers the Chinese tradition of *shan-shui*, rather than situating game analysis solely within Western frameworks. Both worlding and worldbuilding confront the postcolonial, racist, and patriarchal structures embedded in capitalist modernity (Langlois, 2023; Kondo, 2018; Cadena & Mario, 2018; Escobar, 2017). Worlding is not merely a form of discursive representation but also a process of temporalization that generates multiple temporalities grounded in non-Western imaginaries (Cheah, 2016). Focusing on game assets in the *shan-shui* tradition as part of a worldbuilding project rooted in the history and theory of Chinese *shan-shui-hua* offers a way to rethink games beyond merely representing *shan-shui*. My aim is not to claim the superiority of one framework or to reinforce an East/West binary. Instead, I propose a comparative approach that expands and diversifies our understanding of player–game relations through the lens of *shan-shui*.

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