Searching for Happiness in 'Other Worlds'

Utopias and Dystopias in Japanese *Isekai*

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the popular, but under-researched genre, of *isekai*. Although the wider medium umbrella under which *isekai* falls — anime, manga and light novels — have received increasing critical attention, the *isekai* is a genre that has only begun to be academically explored over the last three to four years, particularly from 2020 onwards. Literally translating to 'another world,' it is a branch of the familiar portal-quest fantasy category that has, particularly in recent years, formed its own, distinctive formulas and tropes. This thesis makes an important contribution to unpacking and understanding this surprisingly complex and nuanced genre that offers readers and viewers both entertainment, and a way of thinking about relevant issues to do with personal happiness and self-fulfilment. In this thesis, I will offer an analysis of three *isekai* narratives through the primary lens of utopian and dystopian discourse, highlighting the way in which the *isekai* explores both human desires and fears. Hybridity is a key finding of my analysis, with the genre not only juxtaposing and combining utopia and dystopia, but also, old and new worlds, portal-quest and immersive fantasy elements, and Western and Japanese literary and cultural perspectives. This hybridity points to the entangled, interconnected nature of utopia and dystopia itself.

The three texts I have chosen all follow the contemporary *isekai* trend of featuring adult protagonists (as opposed to teenagers), the "Japanese Salaryman/woman", worn out by work and modern society. The three series that I analyse are *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime* (2014) by Fuse, *By the Grace of the Gods* (2017) by Roy, and *I've Been Killing Slimes For 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level* (2017) by Kisetsu Morita. Each of these new worlds is structured in a way that encourages the protagonist to embrace personal desires that were suppressed on Earth, and provides a sense of healing. With the skills and knowledge inherited

from Earth, combined alongside the new abilities the protagonists gain as they are reincarnated or summoned into the new world, the central characters are granted the opportunity to create a new, utopian life for themselves. By extension, they exert an influence on the land and people around them to ultimately forge a more utopian world. The way that the protagonists navigate and explore their relationship between both old and new worlds, as well as their old and new selves, further reveals a more complex relationship between utopia and dystopia. The recurring cultural aspects present in these texts, most notably cuisine and business practices, emphasises the desire for cultural fusion, as well as offering insightful social critique. While the new world also contains dystopian elements, I propose that the *isekai* can be viewed as a new reimagining of a Japanese utopia.

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My friends, who gave me the push I needed to start this thesis.

My Mum, who has always shown endless support throughout my studies.

My Dad, who was actually the one that accidentally introduced me to the world of anime in the first place.

Table of Contents

Introduction

On 30 July 2021, an article was posted on the anime-streaming company Crunchyroll's website, titled: 'Rimuru Takes Over NYC with Massive Hand-Painted Slime Mural'.[1] Reading this, I was delighted and amused in equal measure. The delight, first and foremost, came from the fact that one of my favourite anime series currently had a 50' x 24' promotional mural majestically displayed at W 31st Street and 7th Avenue, New York – with the effort of being hand-painted, no less. It signalled both the growing influence of anime, as well as the popularity of the series itself. The amusement arose from the fact that, mere weeks prior, I had finalised my thesis topic as an exploration of the anime *isekai* fantasy genre; and the core text I had in mind was none other than the very subject of the mural – *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*.

There has been a long history of scholarly interest in the wider umbrella medium of anime.[2] The *isekai*, however, is a genre that has only begun to be academically explored over the last three to four years, particularly from 2020 onwards. My Masters thesis frames the *isekai* analysis through utopian and dystopian discourse. Hybridity is a key finding of my analysis, with the genre not only juxtaposing and combining utopia and dystopia, but also old and new worlds, portal-quest and immersive fantasy elements, and Western and Japanese literary and

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[1] Joseph Luster, 'Rimuru Takes Over NYC with Massive Hand-Painted Slime Mural', *Crunchyroll*, (2021) <https://www.crunchyroll.com/anime-news/2021/07/29/rimuru-takes-over-nyc-with-massive-hand-painted-slime-mural> [accessed 1 August 2021]

[2] For recent scholarship on the anime medium and its evolution, see: Bolton, Christopher, *Interpreting Anime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), JSTOR < https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.5749/j.ctt20fw7d7>; Clements, Jonathan, *Anime: A History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), ProQuest Ebook Central <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/detail.action?docID=4763277>; Hu, Tze-Yue G., *Frames of Anime: Culture and Image-Building* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), ProQuest eBook Central <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/reader.action?docID=677415&ppg=16>

cultural perspectives. Literally translating to 'another world,' *isekai* is a branch of the familiar

portal-quest fantasy category that has, particularly in recent years, formed its own, distinctive

formulas and tropes. A key aspect that sets *isekai* apart from other fantasy literature is its unique

approach to its characters and worldbuilding. While the popular and frequently recycled young,

chosen hero trope still exists in the genre, I am particularly interested in *isekai*'s highlighting

of older protagonists – Japanese salarymen and women, dead on their feet from surviving the

onslaught of society. The *isekai* they are sent to – often through reincarnation – are filled with

monsters and magic. Despite the harshness of the *isekai*, I propose that the protagonists

discover a utopian sense of freedom and healing, as they make use of knowledge from their old

world to shape their own place in the new one. This internal journey provides a fascinating

cultural insight on what makes a world "utopic" or "dystopic." The realistic inclusion of the

protagonist's knowledge and sharing of Japanese food and customs, in the notably medieval

Western setting of most of these *isekai* worlds, also creates complex new dynamics between

the two cultures.

The three main texts that I will be drawing on are *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a*

Slime (2014) by Fuse, *By the Grace of the Gods* (2017) by Roy, and *I've Been Killing Slimes*

For 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level (2017) by Kisetsu Morita.[3] The first of these texts,

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime, is the most well-known of the three series, and has

already received some critical attention.[4] All three of these works have their origins as web

novels, then were revised and printed for publication as light novels, before being adapted into

manga and anime. For the purposes of my research, I will be mainly focusing on English

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[3] Fuse, *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime,* trans. by Kevin Gifford (New York: Yen Press, 2017).

[4] At the time of my research, there was on English conference paper specifically focused on this series, as well as several articles in different languages: Murakami, Brandon, 'Utopian Yearnings and "Real Life" in the *Shōnen Isekai Tensei Shitara Slime Datta Ken* ("Slime Isekai"): Community, Progress, and Nation Building', *ImageText* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 2021) <https://imagetextjournal.com/utopian-yearnings-and-real-life-in-the-shonen-isekai-tensei-shitara-slime-datta-ken-slime-isekai-community-progress-and-nation-building/> [accessed 16 June 2022].

translations of the light novels, originally published in Japanese, which contain the most content and detail, as well as the anime, which is the more widely available and visual adaptation.[5] Light novels – the source of many anime adaptations – are a medium that has been described as 'a mashup of Young Adult, manga, fanfiction and art', and 'the halfway point between a manga and an actual novel', where a manga is written out in the form of a novel. Each book is typically shorter than a traditional novel, and, though text-based, features manga-style illustrations spread throughout the chapters.[6] I am only using the official English translations of the light novels, as well as official Funimation/Crunchyroll subtitle translations for the anime. Throughout the thesis, I will be using a shorthand of the series names, shortening them to *Slime*, *Grace,* and *300 Years* respectively.[7]

There are several shared key elements between these three *isekai* series that are crucial within my thesis. First, there is the age of the protagonist. Satoru Mikami, the protagonist of *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*, is 37 years old. Ryoma Takebayashi from *By the Grace of the Gods* is 39, while Azusa Aizawa from *I've Been Killing Slimes For 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level* is the youngest at 27. Within a genre populated by familiar portal-quest tropes of teenage heroes being summoned to avert a looming crisis, these older, socially-experienced protagonists challenge the image of the "naïve young saviour". While many familiar tropes are still present – such as the protagonists being uniquely gifted with certain magical abilities – what is also highlighted is the protagonists' application of knowledge from

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[5] At the time of writing this thesis, the latest official English releases for these series are: *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime, Volume 13*, *By the Grace of the Gods, Volume 10*, and *I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level, Volume 11.*

[6] Light novels, like manga, are often serialised in the form of multiple volumes. Many light novels originate as web novels on sites such as *Shosetsuka ni Naro*, where aspiring authors are able to publish their original works, and is later picked up by publishers for official serialisation.

Crunchyroll Extras, What Are Light Novels? | Video Essay, online video recording, YouTube, 17 Oct 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HyVDebg_ko4> [accessed 20 November 2021];

The Anime Man, *The Beginners Guide to Light Novels,* online video recording, YouTube, 10 Feb 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-cXIcyfPJ_0> [accessed 20 November 2021]

[7] While I am aware of the more common, "formal" shorthands of these series (*Tensura* and *Kamihiro*), as I am using the official English translations of the series names, I will use English shorthands to avoid confusion for referencing.

Earth to benefit their lives in the new world. This often takes the form of *building* something –
a town, a business, personal and political relationships.

Having worked as "corporate slaves" during their time on Earth, the *isekai* world serves
as a second chance for these protagonists to live the carefree life that they have longed for and
to rediscover their identities. This is symbolically represented through the second key narrative
element: reincarnation. As one of the most common "gateways" to another world (next to the
classic "hero summoning"), the process of reincarnation, when applied to these texts in
particular, becomes a symbolic representation of casting aside a former life of restrictive
submission and embracing personal desires. In the case of *300 Years* and *Slime*, in particular,
these desires are expressed through the protagonists' new bodies, with the former becoming
immortal and the latter becoming a monster. Overall, these themes of self-discovery and
finding happiness in another world parallels key aspects of utopia, and also presents aspects of
Earth as dystopian.

In *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*, Satoru Mikami is stabbed to death by a
stranger on the street. While bleeding out, he reflects on the mediocracy of his life, which he
concludes he did not live to the fullest. In a sequence that resembles video game character
creation, all of his responses to the sensation of dying – fluctuating body temperatures, pain,
and blood loss – inexplicably link to the gaining of certain skills and abilities, as well as the
construction of a new, bloodless body.[8] The combination of these abilities, all linked to his
final thoughts before death, result in his reincarnation into another world as a slime – the
weakest species of video game monsters. After awakening in his slime body in a new fantasy
world similar to a real life video game, and taking on the new name of Rimuru Tempest,
Rimuru gradually transforms a goblin village into a major trade and economy centre. Rimuru's

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[8]Fuse, *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime Volume 1,* trans. by Kevin Gifford (New York: Yen On, 2017),
     pp. 3-4.

aim is fundamentally simple and utopian: to 'create a world that's easy to live in, the way [he] picture[s] it. A bountiful world where people could be as content as possible.'[9] Though his abilities, as well as new found-family of powerful allies, provides the military strength to back up this utopic goal, what ultimately allows him to make this dream a reality is his knowledge from Earth – his specified job as a general contractor, general information about societal structures and economy, and cultural aspects such as food and clothing.

The protagonist of *By the Grace of the Gods,* Ryoma Takebayashi, reincarnates into an *isekai* world after hitting his head in his sleep, exhausted and overworked in his role as a corporate slave. Unlike Rimuru, who abruptly finds himself in the other world after hearing the skills announced by the Words of the World, Ryoma directly meets three of the gods, who assure Ryoma that he has been chosen to be sent to another world. Ryoma's only desire is to live a peaceful, happy life that he could not on Earth, which the gods grant by reincarnating him in the body of an eight-year-old child with his memories intact, as a second chance to enjoy life from the beginning. In a similar video game sense of character creation as Rimuru, Ryoma's skills and abilities are carried over from his life on Earth, indicative of his overall character traits. After living a peaceful, simple life for three years alone in the woods with his vast collection of slime familiars, Ryoma accepts the offer of a noble family he aided to once again be integrated into society, and is welcomed into their family. Unwilling to only live supported by their kindness, Ryoma makes use of his "cleaner slimes" – which eat dirt, grime and mould – to open up his own laundry shop, "Bamboo Forest", as well as other business ventures, with the aid of his Earth knowledge.

I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level begins with a summative self-introduction: 'Azusa Aizawa, twenty-seven, female, single. Corporate wage

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[9]Fuse, *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime Volume 3,* trans. by Kevin Gifford (New York: Yen On, 2018), p. 81.

slave.'[10] After 50 days overwork without break, passing out, and dying at her desk, Azusa, similarly to Ryoma, finds herself before a goddess. After expressing her regret at living purely for work, the goddess promises her a new life of being able to do whatever she pleases. Hearing this, Azusa half-jokingly requests to be reborn into an immortal body, which the goddess approves without hesitation. After being reincarnated with a home located in relaxing highlands, Azusa lives out her dream of a 'slow, lazy life.'[11] Just like Ryoma, her goal in the new world is to recuperate from her exhausting life as a corporate slave. 300 years later, she is still perfectly content with this life. Due to her lifespan, even the minimal effort she puts into defeating slimes was enough for her to reach the video game style "maximum level" of this world, level 99. After this fact is accidentally revealed to the public, she becomes known as the "strongest witch", and is soon challenged by a Red Dragon looking to test her power. Despite her concerns about her slow-paced, easy-going life coming to an end, Azusa becomes surrounded by new friends and, like Rimuru and Ryoma, discovers a "found family".

Isekai and Fantasy

As the core topic of my research, it is necessary to ask: what is *isekai*? Despite the growing academic interest in anime, the *isekai* genre has not yet received a great amount of critical attention. However, as a genre – for it has indeed become an identifiable *genre* amongst anime fans, alongside "romance", "adventure" and "comedy" – it has seen a vast surge in popularity, particularly from 2017 onwards.[12] With the Japanese (异世界) directly translating into 'another

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[10] Morita, Kisetsu, *I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level Vol 1,* trans. by Taylor Engel (New York: Yen On, 2018), p. 1.

[11] *I've Been Killing Slimes For 300 Years And Maxed Out My Level Episode 1 – I Maxed Out My Level,* dir. by Nobukage Kimura (Showgate, 2021), in *Crunchyroll* <https://www.crunchyroll.com/ive-been-killing-slimes-for-300-years-and-maxed-out-my-level/episode-1-i-maxed-out-my-level-811093> [accessed 16 November 2021]

[12] Paul Price, 'A Survey of the Story Elements of Isekai Manga', *Journal of Anime and Manga Studies,* 2 (2021), 57-91<https://doi.org/10.21900/j.jams.v2.808> (p. 58).

world' or 'different world', it is a term that largely speaks for itself: the protagonist will be involved with various quests and events – depending on the genre – that occur *in another world*.[13] In its broadest sense, the *isekai* narrative connects to several key tropes in fantasy stories, particularly the portal quest elements of series like C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* series (1950) and the immersive elements of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1954) universe.[14] However, while that may be true under the literal definition of the term as "another world", *isekai* as an anime genre comes with its own set of conventions that set it apart from the broader umbrella of fantasy.

My interest in the *isekai* genre, beyond the fascinating worlds and stories it creates, is in the way it has shaped itself as a fantasy genre. As I will argue within this Introduction, the *isekai* is a unique genre that does not fall neatly under a single category of fantasy. Brian Attebery writes that "fantasy" is often associated with, or restricted to being something formulaic, 'specialised in audience and appeal', and maintaining a sense of 'consistency and predictability'. [15] Attebery's summarised fantasy 'recipe' is: Vaguely medieval world + (potentially ecological) problem + prophecy to solve + villain with convenient blind spot + magical creatures + ordinary hero (prophesised saviour) with comic sidekick + old advisor.[16] Though many different versions of fantasy stories have been written since Attebery's *Strategies of Fantasy* was published in 1992, this formula, broadly speaking, still arguably applies to a large majority of fantasy narratives. *Isekai* stories are no exception. The new world that the protagonist is reincarnated/summoned into is typically based on a Western medieval setting, with an abundance of magical creatures. The hero of the *isekai*, though granted unique abilities,

[13] Price, p. 58.

Curtis Lu, 'The Darker Sides of the Isekai Genre: An Examination of the Power of Anime and Manga' (Masters Thesis, University of San Francisco, 2020), in *University of San Francisco Scholarship Repository, Master's Projects and Capstones* <https://repository.usfca.edu/capstone/1009> [accessed 16 June 2022], p. 3.

[14] C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012);

J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001)

[15] Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 1-2.

[16] Attebery, p. 10.

starts off with a humble, mundane life on Earth. The problem and "villain" may take different forms compared to traditional fantasies, depending on the additional genres – such as *By the Grace of the Gods*, a slice-of-life *isekai* in which the protagonist starts a laundromat shop in his new world, and most problems are business-orientated. However, the more traditional "villain" still very much exists, forefront examples being *Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-* (2014), which centres around the core plot of the struggle for the throne, and *The Rising of the Shield Hero* (2013), in which the protagonist is summoned into the role of a legendary hero.[17] The prophecy element of the formula is less present, though is still integrated into some narratives (again linking to the fated legendary hero). The specific *isekai* addition to the formula, meanwhile, includes the transportation from the real world to the fantastic through a "hero summoning" or, as highlighted within my three case studies, reincarnation.

In an significant link between his formula and gaming, Attebery states:

> Formula fantasy can be very predictable indeed. It has even spun off a do-it-yourself variation of the fantasy role playing game. In such games players follow a sort of recipe for collectively "writing" fantasy stories, sometimes through words alone, sometimes with the aid of props and costumes.[18]

This mention of gaming is particularly intriguing in an *isekai* context, as the fantastical new world the protagonist enters often directly and deliberately incorporates Japanese Role Playing Game (JRPG) elements. As Rachel Hutchinson identifies, 'Japan is home to some of the largest videogame development companies in the world – Nintendo, Square Enix, Konami, Sega, Namco Bandai and Capcom to name a few.'[19] These games are 'not only highly regarded for

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[17] Tappei Nagatsuki, *Re:ZERO -Starting Life In Another World-, Volume 1*, trans. by ZephyrRz (New York: Yen On, 2016)
Aneko Yusagi, *The Rising of the Shield Hero, Volume 1*, trans. by One Peace Books (New York: One Peace Books, 2015);

[18] Attebery, p. 10.

[19] Rachel Hutchinson, *Japanese Culture Through Videogames* (London: Routledge, 2019) Taylor & Francis eBooks <https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.4324/9780429025006> [accessed 29 December 2021], p. 1.

their production standards, but also sell millions of copies annually across the globe, drawing players in with their unique perspective on universal human ideas.'[20] Crucially, '[c]ulture and videogames are thus related in a number of different ways', with videogames being able to 'reflect the "social unconscious," expressing the ideas, assumptions and anxieties of their designers' as well as receiving acknowledgement as 'one of the major narrative forms through which social and political issues are critiqued and problematised by Japanese artists.'[21] Hutchinson specifically highlights the JRPG as having 'attracted much scholarly attention for its "textual" or "literary" nature, with tightly structured linear scripts, deep psychological character development', often told through between 50-100 hours of gameplay that 'is certainly comparable to a work of literature in the sense of a constructed narrative.'[22] In the article 'A Survey of the Story Elements of Isekai Manga', Paul Price notes that 'recent growth in the number of isekai manga is linked to the advent of computer roleplaying games and the "standard" worlds they create.'[23] This is a trend that began to become popular from 2010 onwards, with stories prior to 2010 (that would now fall into the category of *isekai*) following a more traditional portal-quest formula, and generally not including role-playing game elements.[24] These '"standard" gamic world[s]' use familiar key tropes and visual cues that allow authors to 'freely use the various elements of the standard worlds with the expectation that they will be understood without explanation by the reader.'[25] Just as Attebery has identified a formula to (Western) fantasy, this relatively recent addition of gamic elements has become a familiar staple in fantasy anime, manga, and light novels.

A primary example of this can be seen in *Slime*. Even before Rimuru is reincarnated into his new world, he undergoes a form of character creation, in which his responses to his

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[20] Hutchinson, p. 1.
[21] Hutchinson, p. 3.
[22] Hutchinson, p. 6.
[23] Price, p. 63.
[24] Price, pp. 63-4.
[25] Price, p. 68.

present state (bleeding out on the streets after being stabbed) decide his species, unique abilities, and stats.[26] All of the creatures in the new world, human and monster, have their powers estimated through a video game-like letter ranking system, from E to S rank. Denizens of that world are also able to learn "Skills" and "Arts" – both specific gaming terms. The world of *By the Grace of the Gods* takes this system even more literally, where all humans are able to see their stats, skills, class etc. physically "printed" on a slate, complete with numerical measurements of strength and magic. Taking advantage of these video game backgrounds, *isekai* narratives tend to incorporate these gaming terminologies into their worldbuilding. While these tropes are frequently incorporated into non-*isekai* fantasies, the unique position of the *isekai* protagonist (linking to what I will argue are its roots in escapism and desire fulfilment) allows this gaming aspect to be exploited by structuring the world in a way that is "familiar" to the protagonist. Though not always present, video game elements have steadily become a recognisable trope within the *isekai* formula, as well as fantasy as a whole.

While these standardised, gamic settings can be useful in storytelling, Price also warns that 'the resulting patterns of the elements in such stories behave as if they are a product of a mechanical sampling of a database (the grand nonnarrative) and which can retroactively be captured in an actual database,' with only 'superficial' changes to the repeated common formula.[27] This ultimately leads to 'the hallmarks of the isekai manga that the stories are the same, the characters are stock, and the affects of the story are identical.'[28] To draw again on Attebery, however, I will argue that despite its potentially restrictive nature, the existence of these fantasy formulas does not necessarily limit the scope of the genre. Attebery asserts that '[e]very element of the formula may be present in a tale of sparkling originality. For some writers, narrative constraints seem to act as spurs to the imagination. Like the rules of grammar,

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[26] Fuse, *Slime Vol 1*, pp. 5-6.
[27] Price, p. 82.
[28] Price, p. 82.

such limitations enable invention even while restricting it.'[29] Furthermore, '[a]s the rules grow more definitive, the game becomes easier for the novice, and, at the same time, more challenging for the expert, the artist who wishes to redefine the game even as she plays it.'[30]

Due to the increasing popularly of the genre, as well as the success of its basic formula, the *isekai* has undergone a fascinating process of evolution and adaptation. The most immediately identifiable shift is its increasing self-awareness. The recognisability of the *isekai* tropes creating widespread memes such as "Truck-*kun*" (a term coined online, born from the frequency of protagonists getting into truck-related traffic accidents as a plot device for dying, and suddenly finding themselves in another world).[31] The genre itself has grown to both sarcastically and wholeheartedly embrace its own clichés. One form this can take is the protagonist – being a citizen of modern Japan – having full knowledge and awareness of the *isekai* formula. When Ryoma from *By the Grace of the Gods* finds himself sitting in front of three gods who regretfully inform him of his death, his reactions are, 'You see it all the time in manga and anime,' and 'I see! So I'm going to another world! Do I go like this, or do I get reincarnated 'cause I'm dead? Do I have some kind of job I need to do?'[32] Similar examples can be seen in other recent *isekai*, such as *The Hero is Overpowered but Overly Cautious* (2017).[33] In the anime adaptation, when the 'hero' Seiya expresses confusion at promptings to view his skills and stats, the goddess who summoned him remarks, 'I guess you haven't done a lot of gaming.'[34] These inclusions serve two main purposes. Mainly, these moments of self-

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[29] Attebery, p. 10.

[30] Attebery, p. 10.

[31] 'Truck-kun', *Know Your Meme* (2017) <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/truck-kun> [accessed 19 November 2021]

[32] *By The Grace of the Gods – Ryoma, With the Slimes (episode 1),* dir. by Takeyuki Yanase (Funimation, 2020), in *Funimation* <https://www.funimation.com/v/by-the-grace-of-the-gods/the-beginning-of-a-new-era-with-the-slimes> [accessed 12 November 2021]

[33] Light Tuchihi, *The Hero is Overpowered But Overly Cautious, Volume 1,* trans. by Matt Rutsohn (New York: Yen On, 2019)

[34] *Cautious Hero: The Hero is Overpowered but Overly Cautious – This Hero is Too Arrogant (episode 1),* dir. by Masayuki Sakoi (Kadokawa Pictures Inc., 2019), in *Funimation* <https://www.funimation.com/v/cautious-hero-the-hero-is-overpowered-but-overly-cautious/this-hero-is-too-arrogant> [accessed 13 November 2021]

awareness are emphasised for comedic, sometimes parodic reasons, such as Ryoma, in his excited outburst, eagerly displaying his knowledge of *isekai* clichés, and the gods' exasperation at how he has bypassed all need for explanation on their part. Secondly, it serves as a narrative shortcut through (depending on the story) potentially non-relevant questions and horrified responses such as "what happened", "why am I here", "what is going to happen to me", as a form of suspension of disbelief.

This can perhaps be seen as a subversion of "wonder". Fantasy, Mendlesohn states, is 'dependent on a dialect between author and reader for the construction of a sense of wonder'.[35] Wonder, as Attebery defines it, is 'an alternative formulation of the idea of estrangement', which has been seen by Viktor Shklovsky as 'the essential operation of all literature: through the formal manipulation of their linguistic representatives we are made to see familiar objects and experiences as strange, distant from ourselves.'[36] Tolkien also links this to the crucial fantasy element of 'Enchantment', which 'produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside; but in its purity it is artistic in desire and purpose.'[37] *Isekai* narratives have become particularly distinctive by deliberately creating these scenarios in which the estranged and defamiliarised fantasy world can be seen as familiar again, often through the protagonist's snarky remarks. This subversion of wonder, despite being set in a fantastical world, links back to the core of fantasy. As Rosemary Jackson states:

> Fantasy is not to do with inventing another non-human world: it is not
> transcendental. It has to do with inverting elements of *this* world, re-

[35] Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p. xiii, ProQuest eBook Central <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/detail.action?docID=1110030> [accessed 14 August 2022]

[36] Attebery, p. 16.

[37] J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories', in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays,* ed. by Christopher Tolkien (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1983), pp. 109-161 (p. 143).

combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something

strange, unfamiliar and *apparently* 'new', absolutely 'other' and different.[38]

As part of this subversion, fantasy and mimeses share an inseparable relationship. As Kathryn Hume summarises, 'Fantasy is any departure from consensus reality.'[39] Mimesis relies on fiction for narration and imagination – it is what separates a story from a factual report of an event.[40] Fiction depends on mimesis to provide the 'solid ground' for it to stand on, offering recognisable objects and actions for the story to be understandable.[41] In other words, 'there are no purely mimetic or fantastic works of fiction.'[42] No matter how strange the new, fantastical world may be, there needs to be recognisable elements – even if the form it takes might be slightly different. One of these key elements I will particularly highlight is the core focus on human desires. The 'vast, unformed realm of the fantastic is limited not only by convention but also by a desire for iconic significance. The freedom it offers is offset by the need to be understood, and that means channelling the fantastic imagination through the psychological and social codes revealed in individual dreams and in collective mythology.'[43]

By the very premise of the *isekai* story – an ordinary person from Earth summoned to/reincarnated into another world – it would be difficult to argue that it does *not* contain aspects of escapist fantasy. Whether it is a misunderstood teenager who feels out of place in their own world, or a world-weary salaryman or woman, the *isekai* protagonist usually holds some desire – conscious or subconscious – for a different, more utopian realm. Price directly notes that a 'common motivation' in *isekai* is to 'fulfil personal desires that the protagonists bring with them from their lives in the real world', be it 'living an easy life […] or achieving a personal

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[38] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London and New York: Methuen), p. 8.
[39] Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 21, Taylor & Francis eBooks <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315759227>
[40] Attebery (1992), p. 3-4.
[41] Attebery (1992), p. 3-4.
[42] Attebery (1992), p. 3-4.
[43] Attebery (1992), p. 9.

goal.'[44] The new world that the protagonist enters through the portal of death bears some resemblance to what Kathryn Hume terms 'the pastoral landscape', which is

> the special world where the hero tests himself and his ideas. He then returns
>
> to his own world, to take an active part in its affairs. In Arcadia, he – or she
>
> in the case of Rosalind in *As You Like It* – remains an outsider on vacation,
>
> constantly aware of the gulf separating this paradise from the real world, so
>
> we likewise remain conscious of the contrast.[45]

As fitting for the theme of 'vacation', '[i]n this paradisal world, as in infancy, the principals are fed, clothed, and sheltered without exertion on their part. Economy, wars, ambition, and want are not much understood or worried about. Leisure is abundant. […] Readers are not exhorted to overthrow the city-world. Rather, they take a vacation, a sensorily rich rest."[46] While this pastoral escapist literature, with its paradisal, utopic abundance, is often presented as the ultimate goal of the protagonist (Rimuru in particular explicitly states that such a world is his ideal), some level of action and conflict is usually still present. [47] In *Slime*, food, clothes and shelter are directly identified by Rimuru as the goblin village's first goal.[48] This later expands to nation-building issues around economy, wars and ambition – all things that are rejected from the pastoral fantasy.

Of my three case studies, *I've Been Killing Slimes For 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level* most closely matches this category. Due to the more relaxed, rural slice-of-life setting, as well as Azusa's passionate determination to live a peaceful life of sheer leisure after her stressful years as a businesswoman, any 'problems' that arise are mostly comedic, without risk

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[44] Price, p. 79.
[45] Hume, p. 60.
[46] Hume, p. 61.
[47] Fuse, *Slime Vol 3*, p. 81.
[48] *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime Episode 3 – Battle at the Goblin Village*, dir. by Yasuhito Kikuchi (Kodansha, 2018) in *Crunchyroll* <https://www.crunchyroll.com/that-time-i-got-reincarnated-as-a-slime/episode-3-battle-at-the-goblin-village-777521> [accessed 16 November 2021]

of any serious consequence. However, the important distinction of the protagonist as an 'outsider on vacation' does not apply to most of the *isekai* stories.[49] As I have already discussed, the protagonist usually integrates into an immersive experience within their new world. As Hume acknowledges, '[f]ew pastoral novels are true pastorals, though some come close', as '[i]n order to remain restful, the pastoral must eschew significant plot, for plots involve tension.'[50] Works based around pure leisure that avoids any serious plot is rather rare to come across and may not guarantee the interest of its audience.

The second category Hume identifies is the adventure escape, which primarily targets readers who crave:

> […] ego inflation, excitement, the illusion of strenuous activity, violence, and intense emotions. The only shared feature is the protagonist's freedom from unpleasant responsibilities. Tending a flock of sheep and ruling a kingdom are similarly glamorised. Marriages are passionate for ever after. Of such stuff are daydreams made; or conversely, from daydreams are such stories spun.[51]

This form of escapism fits the *isekai* more closely, as it matches one of *isekai's* biggest appeals and critiques as being a "power fantasy". As Rosemary Jackson writes, 'fantasy characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss.'[52] The "clichéd" plotline of the mundane protagonist drawn into a fantastical world, where they are granted extraordinary powers due to their status as an otherworlder, is emphasised through the anime medium.[53]

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[49] Hume, p. 60.
[50] Hume, p. 61.
[51] Hume, p. 64
[52] Jackson, p. 3.
[53] "Otherworlder" is a term particularly commonly used in *That Time I got Reincarnated as a Slime,* as well as other *isekai* works, by the residents of the new world, and broadly encompasses all of those who came from other worlds (i.e. Earth). Throughout this thesis I will also be adopting this term.

As Price has noted, the *isekai* adventure escape also shares many similarities to Farah Mendlesohn's categories of fantasy, particularly of the portal-quest fantasy narrative.[54] Portals, Mendlesohn writes, 'litter the world of the fantastic, marking the transition between this world and another; from our time to another time; from youth to adulthood.'[55] This element of portals and transitions play a vital part of the *isekai* fantasy. Particularly in recent years, the means of reaching the world itself – the portal – has achieved a tongue-in-cheek sense of symbolism. Just as "wardrobe" has become an instantly recognisable portal in Western fantasy, instantly evoking C. S. Lewis and Narnia, almost any anime fan will be familiar with the concept of "Truck-*kun*". Neither travelling through a magical wardrobe, or getting hit by a truck, serves as a recurring portal present in all portal-quest fantasies. But the recognisability of the portal itself, particularly with *isekai*, plays a crucial role in the portal-quest narrative. As previously discussed, a distinctive feature of *isekai* is that the portal is often either opened by a summoner or, increasingly, is the result of death.

Another requirement that Mendlesohn identifies for her portal-quest category is the shift from the mundane to the 'distant and unknown'.[56] The protagonist's story must begin with a sense of stability, as they live their everyday life.[57] Only once the reader has familiarised themselves with the protagonist's "mundane" can we be introduced to the fantastic. Once they enter the portal to the unknown, they begin 'exploring the world until she or those around her are knowledgeable enough to negotiate with the world via the personal manipulation of the fantastic realm.'[58] In some ways, the 'primary character' of portal-quest fantasies can be defined as the land itself – the characters are there to showcase the fantastical new world.[59] Mendlesohn refers to the more extreme versions of this as the 'bracelet fantasy', where the

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[54] Price, p. 62.
[55] Mendlesohn, p. 1.
[56] Mendlesohn, p. 2.
[57] Mendlesohn, p. 3.
[58] Mendlesohn, p. 2.
[59] Mendlesohn, p. 28.

landscape and its effects are the core focus, as opposed to the adventure itself.[60] Aspects of manipulation and exploration of the land often plays a significant part in *isekai* stories. For example, *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime* follows Rimuru's growth as he crafts a place for himself, using the abilities he learns to his advantage.

Despite these similarities, there are also several aspects of *isekai* that do not fit into Mendlesohn's model of the portal-quest fantasy. The main difference of these can be identified in the category name itself. Noticeably, Mendlesohn terms this category the portal-*quest*. As she puts it, it is rare to have portal fantasies without a journey, whether this is physical or internal.[61] While it is true that the majority of narratives can be broken down to some form of a physical or internal "quest" or "journey", I argue that there are many aspects of *isekai* that do not fit into traditional quest tropes. Though there are an abundance of *isekai* that fully embraces the quest narrative, the variation of genres under the *isekai* umbrella potentially challenges the interpretation of "quest". As I have discussed above, the escapist tone of the *isekai* genre combines elements of pastoral, adventure pastoral, and adventure escapes. The pastoral, specifically, emphasises the escape to a paradisal vacation. Though there is commonly still an overarching goal – nation building, business endeavours, desire fulfilment – it remains debatable, especially in the case of *By The Grace of the Gods* and *300 Years*, how much the "quest" aspect still applies beyond the broadest, slice-of-life/utopic definition of "doing your best to live a happy life." Even within these fantastical new worlds, there is a core focus on the mundane and the realistic, such as trade deals, economic concerns and day-to-day character conversations. While I am not suggesting that these can/are not present in more traditional portal-quest fantasies, it *is* a particularly notable trait in *isekai*, and differs from 'the narrative

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[60] Mendlesohn, p. 29.
[61] Mendlesohn, p. 12.

structure of the portal-quest fantasy, in which we move through the map', and 'posits many characters as mere signposts' without the chance to really learn about them.[62]

While the *isekai* genre shares many close ties to the portal-quest category, it also bears resemblance to immersion fantasy. This becomes increasingly evident as the story further unfolds. Unlike the portal-quest, which often marks its conclusion via a "return" through the portal (such as the *Narnia* series), *isekai* narratives (more recent ones in particular) are noticeably less concerned with the return to the original world, and more focused around the protagonist's place in the new one. Furthermore, while a portal-quest narrative relies on the 'awe and amazement demanded of the reader', in which the reader shares the protagonist's surprise and excitement as they explore the fantastic in their new world, the fantastic in an immersive fantasy is taken for granted.[63] While *isekai* protagonists begin as strangers to the fantastical realm as a portal-quest 'tourist', the extended length of their stay, as well as the general lack of interest – or method – in returning to their former world, gradually transforms them into fully immersed citizens.[64]

Portal-quests are generally focused on the characters' movement throughout their adventure, while immersive fantasies emphasise the act of crafting a world to live in.[65] *Isekai* stories, as discussed previously, match many elements of the portal-quest adventure. However, the increased focus on worldbuilding within *isekai* narratives, such as *Slime, By the Grace of the Gods,* and *I Killed Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level,* introduces many immersive elements. Whereas the portal-quest tends to focus on rural landscapes as the protagonist travels throughout the land, immersive fantasies are often set in urban cities.[66] As Mendlesohn discusses, '[t]he inward-facing gaze of the urban resident, combined with the

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[62] Mendlesohn, p. 11.
[63] Mendlesohn, p. 73-4.
[64] Mendlesohn, p. 13.
[65] Mendlesohn, p. 71.
[66] Mendlesohn, p. 89.

belief that there is *so much there* that there is no reason to search outward, and the constant belief that there is more and more to discover within the environs of the city, helps to create an emotional trajectory that spirals inward, toward a core.'[67] This inward focus is particularly emphasised in *Slime*, where the entirety of the story is focused around the protagonist Rimuru's goal of building a city and, by extension, an ideal environment where one can live in comfort. While the city itself is not a pre-existing urban location for Rimuru to discover, the act of creation, expansion and forging connections aligns with Mendlesohn's definition of an immersive, worldbuilding fantasy. As Rimuru becomes rapidly accustomed to his new world, less and less of the fantastic genuinely surprises him. The convenience of magic becomes a natural given – largely to do with his own "cheat-like" ability of the Great Sage – and any reaction he has to it becomes more comedic than displaying real shock and awe. Magic in these worlds is matter-of-fact. *Slime,* as with other immersive fantasies, features a world that is coherent and logical, with its own set of rules; and it is such a world that the characters can engage with.[68] The portal-quest protagonist might explore the world until they become knowledgeable enough to manipulate the fantastic, but the immersive protagonist becomes a true denizen *of* the world.[69]

One aspect that ultimately sets *isekai* apart from pure immersive fantasy is the prerequisite of the immersive being set in a complete world that is impervious to external influence.[70] While portal, intrusion and liminal fantasies require an existing "reality" to contrast the fantastic, immersion does not.[71] The core element of the *isekai* story lies in the shift from one world to another. These two requirements directly influence each other. Though I have argued that the tourist has become the citizen, it is impossible to create a self-contained

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[67] Mendlesohn, p. 89.
[68] Mendlesohn, p. 63.
[69] Mendlesohn, p. 2.
[70] Mendlesohn, p. 59.
[71] Mendlesohn, o, 61.

world when the protagonists themselves come from a separate one. This applies both to the physical arrival of the protagonist, as well as the way their knowledge of another, external world is applied. Rimuru, for example, uses his knowledge to bring modern conveniences such as flush toilets and trains to reality in a medieval setting. Due to his former life on Earth, he will always look at things through the eyes of an 'otherworlder', even as he becomes completely familiar with this new world of magic and monsters. Furthermore, much of the series' comedy derives from Rimuru's ignorance of and/or drastic disregard for the new world's common sense. Of course, that depends on how 'external influence' is interpreted in this context.[72] In some *isekai*, such as the classic feudal-Japan adventure *Inuyasha* (2000), or the more recent fantasy world of *Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-*, the main character is the unexpected intrusion to a previously self-contained world. [73] But as discussed previously, the ever-growing abundance of *isekai* works has led to great self-awareness, parody and subversion within the genre. In the case of *Slime*, Rimuru is merely one otherworlder amongst many, though he is noted to be the only one who transferred over through reincarnation. In *By the Grace of the Gods*, otherworldly transfers are much less common (generally occurring once every 200 years) and are kept hidden from the denizens of that world, but the event is still a regulated occurrence, overseen by their gods. In these cases, the breaches of reality are seen as a natural part of the fantastical world. This then raises the question of to what extent Mendlesohn's 'external influence' applies in this situation.

Another major aspect of immersive fantasies that Mendlesohn identifies is that of 'thinning'.[74] The deliberate casualness of the fantastic creates a sense of magical realism, which often leads to narratives about a decline in magic, and fading belief.[75] Despite the immersive

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[72] Mendlesohn, p. 59.
[73] *Inuyasha,* dir. by Masashi Ikeda and Yasunao Aoki (VIZ Media, 2000), in *Funimation* <https://www.funimation.com/shows/inuyasha/> [accessed 15 November 2021]
[74] Mendlesohn, p. 112.
[75] Mendlesohn, p. 110.

fantasy's focus on worldbuilding, immersive fantasies 'rarely tell of building, because building is a venture into the unknown. Instead they start with what is and watch it crumble.'[76] This stands in complete contrast to what I argue is a crucial element of the *isekai* fantasy – the protagonist's utopian drive to create a place for themselves. By combining their knowledge from Earth with the magic from the new world, many *isekai* protagonists seek to live out a happier, more comfortable life for not just themselves, but for the "found family" they have discovered.

Fantasy and Culture

Helen Young writes that 'Fantasy has the potential to make us look at our world in new ways, to reconsider attitudes and assumptions.'[77] As I have argued above, the *isekai* – while containing many elements of portal-quest and immersive fantasies – possesses enough unique tropes to be a distinctive genre within anime and manga. A 2013 article, 'Consuming Anime', highlights that, 'Anime is able to weave together images from Japanese culture, from other cultures, of fantasy, and of concerns relevant to our globalising world,' sometimes to the extent of the readers focusing on the 'fantasy face' and not fully perceiving it as 'Japanese'.[78] However, I would argue that it is necessary to consider the *isekai* fantasy's position through the lens of culture and race, and how it affects the context of its worldbuilding. Being both set in the familiar realm of Western-style magic and dragons, yet also constantly linking back to

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[76] Mendlesohn, 113.

[77] Helen Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (Milton: Routledge, 2015), p. 2, Taylor & Francis eBooks <https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.4324/9781315724843> [accessed 16 September 2021]

[78] Dana Fennell and others, 'Consuming Anime', *Television & New Media*, 14. 5 (2013), 440–456 <https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.1177/1527476412436986> (p. 441).

Japanese-specific aspects of daily life and reality, the *isekai* world proposes utopic ideals of cultural harmony.

Literature itself, as well as the way certain genres are represented and understood within it, is inevitably shaped by the cultures of both writers and readers. In the context of fantasy, Young states that:

> […] genre culture in popular fantasy places textual practices within a wider set of social processes that include not only Fantasy conventions, but the behaviours of authors and audiences, the ideological arguments that circulate around the texts, and the meaning and location of Fantasy within a political economy. By hyphenating genre-culture, I wish to draw attention to how firmly texts and "discursive agents" are tied to each other; neither would exist without the other.[79]

Fantasy, Young points out, 'has a reputation for being a Eurocentric genre, that is, one which is by, for, and about White people.' [80] Perhaps inevitably, fantasy as a genre, almost automatically conjures a particular, and fairly limited, cast of characters. As Attebery writes, races within fantasy worlds 'are usually presented as originary, ordained by whatever Powers-That-Be may preside in the fantasy world. There were always Elves, Dwarves, and Men […] Witches, Pixies, and Demons.'[81] While the equivalent of elves, dwarves, witches and such may take drastically different forms – or have no counterparts altogether – within other cultures, the widespread influence of Western European genre-culture remains pervasive. That is to say, whether in books, films, or games, it would come as little surprise if any of these characters inhabited the depicted fantastical worlds. While fantastic literature can be traced far back in

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[79] Young, p. 5.
[80] Young, p. 1.
[81] Brian Attebery, 'Introduction: Race and the Fantastic' in *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 21.3 (2010), 334-337
<http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=38752019-4a16-48a3-a07b-1eb1f8209ad7%40sessionmgr4007> [accessed 18 September 2021] (p. 335).

history, 'Fantasy as a popular fiction genre is a product of the twentieth century with its roots firmly in the US and UK. The social and cultural mores of those places and time established the habits of Whiteness which still remain influential.'[82] This links directly to its treatment of genre, as

> a complex network which encompasses more than just creative works requires an expanded understanding of genre conventions. Conventions are invariably textual – characters, events, settings and the like – which in the case of Fantasy […] traditionally are inspired in European culture and history, particularly that of the Middle Ages.[83]

This link to the Middle Ages ties in to both Attebery's 'fantasy formula' and Mendlesohn's 'basic backdrop' of the portal-quest stage set, both of which I have discussed above. While the fantasy genre has significantly expanded to include many other variations (such as intrusion fantasy, in which the fantastic enters our – often modern – world),[84] at its core, fantasy is still closely linked to a return to the medieval.

Significantly, this preoccupation with the Middle Ages and recurring figures such as elves and dwarves also seems to recur within *isekai* narratives. While older *isekai* such as *Inuyasha* are set in feudal Japan, the majority of newer *isekai* protagonists find themselves sent to distinctively medieval worlds. While Western settings are not rare within anime by any means, this tendency towards the medieval-fantasy is intriguing. Tze-Yue G. Hu discusses the complex relationship between Japanese anime and the West, stating that:

> For the subject of anime, the crux of the issue is a deeper dialectic concerning a distant Far East ethnic-territorial community's quest to project its identity onto the West. Geo-politically, the dialect not only pertains to East-West

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[82] Young, p. 15.
[83] Young, p. 5.
[84] Mendlesohn, p. 144.

dialetic in general. Specifically in the Japanese case, it also bears upon

Japan's position in Asia - her given geographical roots versus her

phantasmagorical relocation dreams, and her other occasionally higher

aspirational status-intentions in Asia. Disney may have appropriated other

stories to suit its global American agenda; that of the anime's *other* turns out

to be mostly Western and Japanese in content.[85]

Though many magical creatures originated from Western fantasy, they are frequently included

in anime, including *Slime* and *300 Years*. Between these series, a significant number of Western

fantasy species can be identified, including elves, dwarves, goblins, dryads, dragons, vampires

and ghosts. Also present are the roles of kings, knights, guilds and churches. Everything about

the environment and people strongly reflects a Western-based world. Analysing this from

Young's argument, it is possible to see the way in which many tropes of Western fantasy have

impacted the broader genre. However, what I will point out here is that these *isekai* worlds are

specifically crafted in order to use this to its advantage, juxtaposing its Western setting with

Japanese elements to create unique worlds of cultural fusion. Hu writes:

We have often heard this statement being made about Japan, "the Japanese

are good at imitating." Derogatorily, it implies a centreless self which simply

exists to absorb and metamorphose others' inventions. However, one can also

argue that even though that self is centreless, its subjective presence is more

than enough to denote its sense of survival and existential source.[86]

The *isekai* can perhaps be seen as a reflection of this. With its flexible combination of various

Western tropes and genres, it has undergone a process of adaptation that began as the traditional

portal-quest, often with a traditional Japanese (or other Asian) setting (*Inuyasha* (2000)*,

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[85] Tze-Yue G. Hu, *Frames of Anime: Culture and Image-Building* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), p. 4, ProQuest eBook Central <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/reader.action?docID=677415&ppg=16>
[86] Hu, p. 45.

Fushigi Yugi (1992)*, etc.*) and has evolved into a unique genre full of distinctive features, such as its self-aware emphasis and subversion of its own tropes and formulas. [87] While contemporary *isekai* seem to favour a Western setting, it also introduces many Japanese elements, particularly cuisine. These aspects of the *isekai* allow for many layers of hybridity, including between cultures, old and new worlds, and literary genres.

Another influence of fundamental significance to *isekai* is video games. As I have mentioned above, more so than most other fantasy genres, the immersive nature of the *isekai* – with the protagonist directly hailing from our modern world – makes the genre keenly aware of its own game-like system, such as levelling up and acquiring new skill sets. Particularly with the additional factor of reincarnation from a less-than-ideal life, this new world grants the utopic chance of a second "playthrough", in which the "player" is blessed with both advanced technological knowledge to make use of as well as a fantastical skill set (which, in the case of *Slime* and *300 Years*, includes (near-)immortality). While the species and characters within the new world might be born from Western fantasy tropes, these same tropes have also reached popularity through none other than the widespread appeal of the Japanese video game industry. The titular 'slime' monsters, for example, became well known from the JRPG *Dragon Quest* series, through which they have become familiar as the weakest, most commonly encountered of monsters.[88] In *Slime,* the familiar fantasy/video game species of 'ogres' is also reimagined in the form of Benimaru's group, with the Western tropes adapted and combined with the *kijin/oni* of Japanese folklore – a change that is explained both by Rimuru's naming, as well as a historical influence by previous Japanese otherworlders teaching the ogres their culture. This creates a fascinating additional dynamic around cultural exchange, particularly around clothing,

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[87] Yuu Watase, *Fushigi Yugi Volume 1,* trans. by Yuji Oniki (San Francisco: Viz Media, 2009)

[88] Brandon Murakami, 'Utopian Yearnings and "Real Life" in the *Shōnen Isekai Tensei Shitara Slime Datta Ken* ("Slime Isekai"): Community, Progress, and Nation Building', in *Comics in Community, GCO Conference Blog 2021* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 2021), (para. 2) <https://imagetextjournal.com/utopian-yearnings-and-real-life-in-the-shonen-isekai-tensei-shitara-slime-datta-ken-slime-isekai-community-progress-and-nation-building/> [accessed 16 June 2022]

martial arts, and cuisine, all of which seem to have been passed down to the *oni*. Overall, the video game genre pairs well with *isekai*. The familiar game-style abilities and levels add to the basic *isekai* element of being a "power fantasy", through which the viewers/readers can live out their own desires of escapism and discovering a world of magic. While similar storylines are certainly not unique to anime/manga/light novels, the famously exaggerated anime visuals and aesthetics, and the unique traits that come with it, emphasises and adds to its appeal.

Utopia and Dystopia

Throughout these three *isekai* texts, the common narrative/theme of reincarnating into a new world – a world that the protagonists find more fulfilling and enjoyable than Earth – emphasises the potential connection between the *isekai* genre and utopian/dystopian discourse. Brandon Murakami states that

> isekai with their tendency to fantasy worlds, are apt vessels to represent utopian yearnings of hopefulness, progress, and peace as a possible alternative in our increasingly intolerant, xenophobic, and insular world while also being consciously aware that utopia is a work in progress rather than an clear endpoint.[89]

Here, it becomes necessary to consider the literal and implied meanings of the term "utopia". Even within the "slice-of-life" narrative of *I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level*, the existence of strange magic and powerful monsters automatically introduces the sense of a looming threat. Furthermore, the video game-esque system of levels and rankings, while a foundation of these *isekai* worlds themselves, poses – often intentionally so – critical

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[89] Murakami, para. 6.

questions around social hierarchy and class structures. Neither of these seem to fit with the general understanding of a "utopian" world. And if the new world *is* utopian, then is it the natural response to frame the modern Earth – despite its technological conveniences and relative safety – as dystopic?

The term 'utopia' was coined by Thomas More, and contains 'the perennial duality of meaning of utopia as the place that is simultaneously a non-place (utopia) and a good place (eutopia).'[90] This then leads to the question – how does one define "good"? One of the most comprehensive and lucid analyses of utopia comes from Vieira, and this discussion draws extensively on Vieira's overview of the genre. Utopianism, according to Vieira, 'has at its core the desire for a better life'.[91] Furthermore, the concept of 'utopia' has, in Western historical tradition, 'been defined with regard to one of four characteristics' – each of which Vieira analyses.[92] First, 'the content of the imagined society', or 'the identification of that society with the idea of "good place".'[93] This is a notion that Vieira states should be discarded, as it is too based on subjective views of desirability, and 'envisages utopia as being essentially in opposition to the prevailing ideology'.[94] Second is 'the literary form into which the utopian imagination has been crystallised' – a definition that Vieira argues to be too limiting, and excludes utopian texts that do not fall under More's structure.[95] The third is 'the function of utopia' and its effects on the readers, which Vieira also rejects as only applying to political utopia.[96] Lastly is 'the desire for a better life, caused by a feeling of discontentment towards the society one lives in', linking utopia to 'a matter of attitude', as well as 'an aspiration to

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[90] Fátima Vieira, 'The Concept of Utopia', in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. by Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 3-27 (p. 5), CambridgeCore eBooks <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521886659.001> [accessed 24 October 2021]
[91] Vieira, p. 6.
[92] Vieira, p. 6.
[93] Vieira, p. 6.
[94] Vieira, p. 6.
[95] Vieira, p. 6.
[96] Vieira, p. 6.

overcome all difficulties by the imagination of possible alternatives.'[97] It is this characteristic that Vieira highlights as the most important, as it offers an inclusive framework that is centred around what Ernst Bloch identifies as the crucial, utopian 'principal energy' of 'hope'.[98]

This sense of "desire", "overcoming" and "hope" are very significant themes within all three of my case studies, and is one of the aspects that – through its unique application – sets particular *isekai* apart from the more classic portal-quest formula. In an afterword discussion about the creative inspiration for *300 Years*, Kisetsu Morita reveals that the core idea for the series was born from personal ideals, stating:

> I think the happiest situation is an environment where everyone can work in
> moderation, and if they can see that their work is helping others, then it's
> even better. […] Azusa makes a living killing [slimes] in moderation, making
> and selling medicines in moderation, and I think – in moderation – that a life
> like that is just about right.[99]

This statement, I will argue, captures the core element of utopianism – the pursuit of happiness. For example, despite Azusa's blunt request for immortality, the world of *300 Years* creates the image of a modest utopian life built around moderate and simple desires, with an overall tone particularly reminiscent of Hume's category of pastoral escapism.[100]

However, many utopias carry the potential for dystopias. As Gregory Claeys points out, in the wrong situation, 'Utopia's peace and plenitude now seem to rest upon war, empire, and the ruthless suppression of others, or in other words, their dystopia.'[101] The term 'dystopia' was coined by John Stuart Mill in 1868, in order to define the opposite perspective to utopia.[102]

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[97] Vieira, pp. 6-7.
[98] Vieira, pp. 6-7.
[99] Morita, *300 Years Vol 1*, pp. 212-3.
[100] Hume, p. 60.
[101] Gregory Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 4, Oxford Scholarship Online <DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198785682.003.0001>
[102] Vieira, p. 16.

However, as Keith Booker discusses, 'dystopian and utopian visions' may be seen 'not as fundamentally opposed but as very much part of the same project.'[103] Literary dystopias are closely linked to its utopian counterparts, as it 'utilises the narrative devices of literary utopia', imagining the same place utopists have created but 'predicts that things will turn out badly' and is 'essentially pessimistic in its presentation of projective images.'[104] As a 'descendant' of satirical and anti-utopia, dystopia focuses on the reality of ever-present human flaws, rejects the possibility of reaching perfection, and highlights social rather than individual improvement as the 'one way to ensure social and political happiness'.[105] It is commonly 'identified with the "failed utopia" of twentieth-century totalitarianism" […] a regime defined by extreme coercion, inequality, imprisonment, and slavery.'[106] Though they are opposites, dystopia does not seek to promote hopeless despair. Despite the negative, pessimistic future it describes, it is written to generate 'positive reaction' from readers – for it is only through awareness and understanding of these possible bleak, menacing futures that readers can learn to avoid them.[107] Just like utopias, dystopias (unlike apocalyptic fiction) hold the core theme of hope. As Vieira states: 'Dystopias that leave no room for hope do in fact fail in their mission.'[108] Ultimately, through different means, utopias and dystopias both seek to guide people towards happiness and hope. In this sense, 'they might be twins, the progeny of the same parents.'[109]

In the chapter '"Non-western" utopian traditions' in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature,* Jacqueline Dutton points out that:

> Utopia and utopianism are often perceived to be primarily western constructs
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> – western dreams of a better world, an ideal existence or a fantastic future.

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[103] M. Keith Booker, *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism* (London: Greenwood Press, 1994), p. 15.
[104] Vieira, p. 17.
[105] Vieira, p. 17.
[106] Claeys, p. 3.
[107] Vieira, p. 17.
[108] Vieira, p. 17.
[109] Claeys, p. 5.

This is undoubtedly due to the fact that the definition, design and development of utopian literatures and theories have emerged from western examples of the genre and practice.[110]

Terms such as 'western' and 'non-western' utopian representations are both inadequate and problematic, as it forces the definition to be filtered through Western interpretations.[111] Once this filter is removed, there is substantial evidence that most cultures generate 'at least some representations of an imaginary ideal place or time that do reflect similar preoccupations to those observed in western utopian writings and practices.'[112] In Japanese Shinto beliefs, for example, there exists the *Tokoyo no Kuni* – 'a utopian land whose denizens neither age nor die'.[113] Just as the Western utopia is defined by its very name of "good place" and "no place", the *Tokoyo no Kuni* 'existed nowhere in real terms therefore it could exist anywhere in imaginary terms.' [114] Furthermore, Japanese utopian concepts cannot be separated from Western influences. As Yoriko Moichi identifies, due to the popularity and influence of Western principles and ideals between 1869-1912, 'Japanese literature after the Meiji period – from around 1870 to the present day – cannot be considered in isolation from literatures of the West, and this literary background poses us the question, among others, of how Japan has perceived Western concepts of utopia in creating its own utopian literature.'[115] There was a deliberate drive to understand Western utopian texts. An example of this Western, utopian influence on Japanese literature is Kōbō Abe's *Dai-yon Kampyōki* [*Inter Ice Age 4*] (1959), a 'dystopian novel mixed with detective fiction' that Moichi compares to E. M. Forster's 'The

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[110] Jacqueline Dutton, '"Non-western" utopian traditions', in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. by Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 223-258 (p. 223), Cambridge Core eBooks <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521886659.010>[accessed 24 October 2021]

[111] Dutton, p. 224.

[112] Dutton, p. 226.

[113] Dutton, p. 244.

[114] Dutton, p. 224.

[115] Yoriko Moichi, 'Japanese Utopian Literature from the 1870s to the Present and the Influence of Western Utopianism', *Utopian Studies*, 10.2 (1999), 89-97 <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,sso&db=hlh&AN=4799188&site=ehost-live> [accessed 28 October 2021], p. 89-90.

Machine Stops' (1909), and 'poses a "universally relevant" issue in the history of utopian literature.'[116] Now, in the contemporary *isekai*, Western tropes have been combined with unique, "anime" storytelling to create a distinctive genre that offers new insights into both utopian and dystopian discourse and a fusion of Western and Japanese cultural influences.

Throughout this thesis, I will be focusing on the *isekai* worldbuilding, its relationship to the real world, and its potential as both utopia and dystopia. Chapter One of this thesis will focus on *That Time I Got Reincarnated As a Slime,* a *shōnen*, action-orientated series that exemplifies many aspects of the contemporary *isekai*. I will specifically discuss the formation of Rimuru's nation, Tempest, as well as the ways in which desire plays a crucial role for Rimuru, as well as specific supporting characters. I also propose that in the world of *Slime,* several of the existing major kingdoms and empires serve as "incomplete utopias" that are set up to parallel Rimuru's own budding, utopian nation. In Chapter Two, I move on to discussing *By the Grace of the Gods* and *I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level* to discuss the 'slow life' *isekai*, where both the characters and audience are invited to 'take life at a slower pace and enjoy what is around them in their new world.'[117] Character relationships and "found families" become the highlighted focus, as well as some reflection on the lurking dystopia, even in a pastoral, escapist atmosphere.

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[116] Moichi, pp. 93-4.
[117] Lu, p. 12.

Chapter 1: Building Utopia

> I would just have to accept it, though. Accept the fact that my "soul," or whatever you want to call it, had been reborn inside a monster from another world. […] I'd been reborn. As a slime.[1]

This is the conclusion that Satoru Mikami, '[j]ust another thirty-seven-year-old in a suit', quickly reaches in *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime.*[2] As the title itself states, the series begins as a portal-quest style fantasy, where the portal to the new world is death and, subsequently, reincarnation. As I have outlined in the Introduction, one of the main appeals (and critiques) of the combined portal/immersive elements of the *isekai* genre is its sense of escapism into a potentially more fulfilling, desirable world. One of the aspects that I would like to highlight in relation to this is the *isekai'*s emphasis on the reincarnation portal to the new world, with death marking a new start within utopia. While not a requirement for *isekai* (the other most notable portal being some kind of magical summoning), it has become a commonly accepted trope for the protagonist to find themselves waking up in another world after dying on Earth. Notably, while the act of entering a new world can already be seen as a second chance or new opportunity, the theme of reincarnation specifically involves casting aside the previous body through the process of death and gaining a new one. This can perhaps be linked to a cultural aspect, with Miguel Cesar pointing out that: 'Ghosts, resurrections, afterlife specialists, collective rituals of the death show the deep interest, if not obsession, of the Japanese on the

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[1] Fuse, *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime Volume 1,* trans. by Kevin Gifford (New York: Yen On, 2017), pp. 13-4.

[2] Fuse, *Slime Vol 1*, p. 9.

phenomenon of death.'[3] Once reincarnated, Satoru Mikami, given the new name 'Rimuru Tempest', decides to use this second chance at life to create a place he can comfortably live in. From his starting point of assisting a weak goblin village, Rimuru forms the 'Jura-Tempest Federation' (shortened to 'Tempest'), which steadily expands into a grand, utopic metropolis. As he learns to navigate political and economic terrains, Rimuru encounters the existing superpower nations and empires of the new world. Each of these forces are centred around themes and ideologies that contain utopian potential, but still with notable flaws. As Rimuru learns and grows as a ruler, these contrasting "incomplete utopias" ultimately help Tempest, which in itself is also not perfect, become closer to Rimuru's ideal utopia.

In the first section of this chapter, Tempestian Utopia, I will highlight the key, utopian elements of Tempest such as immortality and leisure, and the way that Rimuru applies modern knowledge in his building of his ideal nation. This will be followed by a discussion of the "incomplete utopias" that are present in the new world through three of its major kingdoms and nations, Dwargon, Lubelius and the Eastern Empire. Despite the new word's utopian potential, I also identify some of its problematic elements around power, colonisation, and morality, demonstrated through Rimuru's actions as he evolves into a demon lord. Finally, I return to an analysis of Tempest, as well as *isekai* in general, focusing on its cultural aspects, particularly the positive depiction of Japanese cuisine, pop culture, and soft power.

Tempestian Utopia

In his book *Transgressing Death in Japanese Popular Culture,* Cesar specifically discusses 'the recurrent theme of the transgression of the boundaries between life and death, what [he]

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[3] Miguel Cesar, *Transgressing Death in Japanese Popular Culture* (Cham: Palgrave Pivot, 2020), p. 2, SpringerLink <https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.1007/978-3-030-50880-7> [accessed 29 November 2021]

call[s] Essential Boundary Transgression (EBT)', defining EBT as 'narratives that deal with journeys to the netherworld', whether it is 'physical, an attempt to resurrect a deceased individual, or an abstract manifestation of the non-acceptance of death.'[4] Critics such as Krishan Kumar have stated that the concept of utopia is 'different from anything we find in the non-Western world', and that there is 'no tradition of utopia and utopian thought outside the Western world.'[5] Although 'varieties of the ideal society or the perfect condition of humanity are to be found in abundance in non-Western societies', usually imbedded into religion, the practice of writing, criticising, developing and transforming these utopias to explore new possibilities is distinctively Western – in short, 'there is no utopian tradition of thought.'[6] More recent utopian studies, however, have argued that, despite the fact that 'the definition, design and development of utopian literatures and theories have emerged from western examples of the genre and practice', the rules of determining utopia, and the parameters of the theory, have evolved beyond a literary genre to 'encompass a broader range of utopian expressions'.[7] Utopian theory should therefore 'now be applied to all cultures to ascertain where, when, how and why "non-western" utopian traditions appear and whether they manifest particular forms of intercultural imaginaries of the ideal.'[8] One of the latest forms that Japanese utopias have come to take, I propose, is the *isekai* genre.

While the *isekai* genre does not directly fall under the same category as Essential Boundary Transgression, there are parallels that can be drawn between the two. As a form of escapism*, isekai*, and its recent recurring theme of exploring new worlds *after death*, can be interpreted as a longing for a utopian world after death. This also potentially can be connected

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[4] Cesar, p. 2.
[5] Krishan Kumar, *Utopianism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 33.
[6] Kumar (1991), p. 33.
[7] Jacqueline Dutton, '"Non-western" utopian traditions', in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. by Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 223-258 (p. 223), Cambridge Core eBooks <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521886659.010> [accessed 24 October 2021]
[8] Dutton, p. 224.

to the Japanese Shinto belief of *Tokoyo no Kuni*, a 'utopian land whose denizens neither age nor die' that exists somewhere across the sea, resembling a 'golden age of coexistence and harmony'.[9] According to Jacqueline Dutton:

> As the home of the gods, a place of holy spirits and divine powers, *Tokoyo no Kuni* represented the dynamic of the life cycle, combining revival and eternity. However, the geographical location of *Tokoyo no Kuni* had not been suggested at this stage. It existed nowhere in real terms therefore it could exist anywhere in imaginary terms.[10]

The *Tokoyo no Kuni* is also linked to the idea of the *ukiyo* (floating world), a Japanese utopian vision centred around acceptance of the fundamental sadness and suffering of the human world, viewing the 'transitory, impermanent and worthless nature of human existence as a dream', and nevertheless pursuing happiness through 'fleeting pleasures and ephemeral beauty to be enjoyed in the moment.'[11] This makes the *ukiyo* 'both an elusive realm that exists nowhere in geographical terms, and yet is apparently identified within the walled areas filled with teahouses and geisha quarters of Tokyo's *Yoshiwara*, or red-light district.'[12] Between these two utopian visions, however, the Jura-Tempest Federation that Rimuru builds throughout the series, which expands from a small goblin village to an officially recognised nation, does lean towards *Tokoyo no Kuni.*[13]

In *Slime*, the core group of Tempest citizens that make up Rimuru's closest "found family" are non-human species. Beginning with the goblins, Rimuru is soon joined by dwarves, ogres, and demons. The latter two groups are particularly close to Rimuru, notably his right-hand man Benimaru (ogre/kijin/oni), secretary Shion (ogre/kijin/oni), and second secretary

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[9] Dutton, p. 244.
[10] Dutton, p. 244.
[11] Dutton, pp. 245-6.
[12] Dutton, p. 246.
[13] The Jura-Tempest Federation is shortened to 'Tempest' within the series.

Diablo (demon). They fall into the category of "magic-born" or *majin*, which is 'the catchall term for those who came into being from magic itself, monsters who experienced sudden mutation, and sentient beings evolved from animals or magical beasts.'[14] High-level magic-born are long-lived and nigh-immortal due to their extraordinary magicule levels, to the extent of some being worshipped as "gods".[15] Having been reborn as a slime, Rimuru himself is no longer human. And while slimes are usually the weakest of all monsters, due to his unique abilities as an otherworlder, as well as his later growth into a demon lord, Rimuru is expected to also have a remarkably long lifespan. With the monster's power, naturally long life spans, as well as the existing ability to revive those who fall in battle, Rimuru and his closest "found family" members do come close to the immortality described by Dutton. While this differs somewhat from the 'fleeting' aspect of the *ukiyo*, exchanging the dream-like transience for a more concrete, long-term vision, Tempest does still embrace the idea of enjoying the luxuries of life in the moment, with good food, entertainment, and festivals.

As Fátima Vieira points out, utopianism 'has at its core the desire for a better life'.[16] In the manga medium of *Slime*, the first creature Rimuru meets, the Storm Dragon Veldora, explains that 'those who cross into this world gain powers according to their desires.'[17] From early in the narrative, Rimuru demonstrates the desire to create his own utopian vision in the new world. As for what that ideal utopia is, this is directly explained in Rimuru's own words. When asked by a representative of another powerful kingdom what he intends to do with his remarkable powers, Rimuru responds, 'Oh. That? Simple. I wanted to create a world that's

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[14] Fuse, *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime Volume 1,* trans. by Kevin Gifford (New York: Yen On, 2017), pp. 26-7

[15] Fuse, *Slime Vol 1*, pp. 26-7.
'Magicules' are magical energy in the world of *Slime*, essentially similar/equivalent to the more familiar term "mana".

[16] Fátima Vieira, 'The Concept of Utopia', in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. by Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 3-27 (p. 6), CambridgeCore eBooks <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521886659.001> [accessed 24 October 2021]

[17] Fuse and Taiki Kawakami, *That Time I Got Reincarnated As a Slime, Vol 1* (manga) (New York: Kodansha Comics, 2017) Crunchyroll <https://www.crunchyroll.com/manga/that-time-i-got-reincarnated-as-a-slime/read/1> [accessed 18 June 2022], p. 37.

easy to live in, the way I picture it. A bountiful world where people could be as content as possible. No bluffing, no dodging it; that's what I really thought. So that's what I told him.'[18] As Murakami highlights, Rimuru's 'intentions for peace and a multicultural, open world are translatable to [*Slime*'s] audience.'[19] When accused of being too idealistic in his visions of this "fantasy" world, Rimuru states:

> Well, you know, that's what my power is for. Ideals are just a bunch of raving without power to back them up, and power is just kind of a vacant void without ideals to back it up, isn't it? And I know I'm pretty greedy, but I'm not into seeking pure power for power's sake with no other particular goals in mind.[20]

While the basis of Rimuru's vision may seem too casual and simplistic for a traditional literary utopia, these ideals – accused by many as being too dreamlike and fantastical – would fall under Ernst Bloch's broad definition of utopia, which 'includes daydreams, myths, and fairy-tales as well as travellers' tales and literary utopias.'[21] Furthermore, highlighting the theme of greed, Bloch has also insisted that 'hunger is the most fundamental human drive' which 'qualifies the priority assigned to art.'[22] Despite Rimuru's ultimately utopian goals, neither he nor the series itself places him in a "heroic" light. Though chosen "heroes" actually exist in this world, Rimuru becomes a demon lord – a role that leaves him free to pursue his own interests and whims, as well as the influence to be able to form business connections.

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[18] Fuse, *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime Volume 6,* trans. by Kevin Gifford (New York: Yen On, 2019), p. 81.

[19] Brandon Murakami, 'Utopian Yearnings and "Real Life" in the *Shōnen Isekai Tensei Shitara Slime Datta Ken* ("Slime Isekai"): Community, Progress, and Nation Building', in *Comics in Community, GCO Conference Blog 2021* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 2021), (para. 6) <https://imagetextjournal.com/utopian-yearnings-and-real-life-in-the-shonen-isekai-tensei-shitara-slime-datta-ken-slime-isekai-community-progress-and-nation-building/> [accessed 16 June 2022]

[20] Fuse, *Slime Vol 6*, p. 82.

[21] Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Hertfordshire: Syracuse University Press, 1990), p. 84.

[22] Levitas, p. 111.

These ideas around immortality, and a utopian land where one can indulge in one's desires, also forms a parallel with the Western Land of Cockaigne. Unlike many other utopias, Cockaigne is seen as a 'paradise on earth' – it can be found, and even accessible, though with difficulty (although the punchline of the poem, in itself a satire of the medieval church, ultimately reinforces that Cockaigne does not really exist).[23] As a vision crafted through material longing and desires, 'Cockaigne is first and foremost about eating'.[24] This in fact matches with Rimuru's symbolic main skill, which, through all its evolutions, is themed around the "sin" of gluttony – eventually evolving into the ultimate skill "Belzebuth, Lord of Gluttony". Furthermore, as Tempest revolves solely around Rimuru's desire for leisure and fun in a comfortable life, both for himself and for others, there is a certain sense of hedonism at its very core. The main thing that sets Tempest apart from Cockaigne, however, is its approach to work and leisure. In the Land of Cockaigne,

> Work was forbidden, for one thing, and food and drink appeared spontaneously in the form of grilled fish, roast geese, and rivers of wine. […] The weather was stable and mild—it was always spring—and there was the added bonus of a whole range of amenities: communal possessions, lots of holidays, no arguing or animosity, free sex with ever-willing partners, a fountain of youth, beautiful clothes for everyone, and the possibility of earning money while one slept.[25]

This idea of no work and easy money does not exist in Tempest at all. Rimuru follows the belief: 'You work at something because you want to accomplish something.'[26] While there are

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[23] Herman Pleij, *Dreaming of Cockaigne: Medieval Fantasies of the Perfect Life*, trans. by Diane Webb (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 165, JSTOR eBooks, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.7312/plei11702> [accessed 24 October 2021]

[24] Pleij, p. 89.

[25] Pleij, p. 3.

[26] Fuse, *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime Volume 3,* trans. by Kevin Gifford (New York: Yen On, 2018), p. 82.

plenty of festivals and entertainment, these luxuries come from the hard work of building a nation from scratch, transforming it from a goblin village to a booming metropolis. Neither money, relationships, nor immortality is a given. From paving highways to forming business connections, Tempest is presented as a budding utopia that is set on solid foundations of hard work and effort.

Throughout *Slime,* as Tempest develops, several other characters are introduced with rival ideologies to Rimuru's. Significantly, the most crucial of these characters are not from the new world, but Rimuru's fellow otherworlders. The traditional utopian narrative structure

> pictures the journey (by sea, land or air) of a man or woman to an unknown
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> place (an island, a country or a continent); once there, the utopian traveller is
>
> usually offered a guided tour of the society, and given an explanation of its
>
> social, political, economic and religious organisation; this journey typically
>
> implies the return of the utopian traveller to his or her own country, in order
>
> to be able to take back the message that there are alternative and better ways
>
> of organising society.[27]

The *isekai* shares this introduction to new, utopian societies; but at the same time, it can also emphasise the traveller's own ideals, granting them the ability to create their own utopia. The new world has its own utopian societies for the characters to learn from. At the same time, it is also a receptive playground for the traveller themselves. While the positive aspects of hunger and greed are represented through Rimuru, the negative elements are explored through Maribel Rozzo – another otherworlder who is described as being 'resurrected' and having 'memories of being a ruler in Europe', where she had 'all the finances she wanted'.[28] As with the

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[27] Vieira, p. 7.

[28] Fuse, *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime Volume 10,* trans. by Kevin Gifford (New York: Yen On, 2021), p. 142.

otherworlders, her unique skill Avarice originates from her personal desires and past on Earth – a past in which

> [h]er glory was built on misfortune. A battlefield, bullets flying. Kill or be
> killed; a vivid hellscape bathed in blood. Burnt homes, lost families, wailing
> people. And she never held any remorse about it. Maribel's life was a happy
> one, all the way to the end of her natural life span. [29]

Maribel's theme of greed directs attention to the monetary system in the new world. In the experienced eyes of Maribel, she considers the standard of civilisation in the new world to be 'pretty low' – something that she intends to take advantage of in due time, after her new body grows older.[30] As stated in Volume 10:

> The advance of civilisation would have been impossible without the
> existence of money. People advanced from using crops like rice and wheat
> as currency to a money-based economy, pushing society forward by leaps
> and bounds thanks to the scale money allows.[31]

Furthermore, Maribel identifies the key advantages of the current economy of the new world – that there was still a single currency circulated throughout the nations, as well as a lack of language barriers. To her, 'the whole world seemed like a sandbox, ready for her to play in.'[32] The use of the term 'sandbox', suited for 'play', further enforces the idea of this world being a utopian playground – a playground where otherworlders have a distinct advantage.

While Rimuru actively uses his otherworlder knowledge to grow Tempest's reputation within the economy, always seizing new business opportunities, his behaviour is framed as a positive. Though his ideas start off as somewhat selfish, wealth is not monopolised for his personal use, and becomes beneficial improvements to his community. Particularly notably,

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[29] Fuse, *Slime Vol 10*, p. 142.
[30] Fuse, *Slime Vol 10*, p. 143.
[31] Fuse, *Slime Vol 10*, p. 142.
[32] Fuse, *Slime Vol 10*, p. 143.

hot springs and cuisine development expands to become Tempest's tourism sector, as well as his desire for fast-food expanding into this world's first restaurant chains. Furthermore, while making sure to keep certain trade secrets, he is very open to trade and cultural exchange, such as his agreement to agricultural trade with Eurazania, or his artistic exchanges with the previously anti-monster Lubelius. While both Rimuru and Maribel understand the importance of money, Rimuru believes in using it to fuel the economy, instead of hoarding it for personal greed. Worthy of note here is that both gluttony and greed traditionally fall into the concept of "sins" on Earth. However, Rimuru's gluttony is presented as a positive – most directly, the way he 'eats' the Orc Lord's sins and agreeing to look after his people, in the Volume 2 chapter 'The Devourer of All' – and symbolises both his own desire for luxurious food and housing, as well as his ability to "consume" everything around him in this new world and use it to his advantage.[33] Maribel's greed, meanwhile, is presented in a negative light. Even without the attack on Tempest, Maribel's numerous schemes for the future implies that she intends to take control of the economy as she did in her first life, bringing misfortune to others. While their skills and status as reincarnated otherworlders share similar themes, Maribel's choices for her second life in this new world led to her death, serving only as another foil for Rimuru.

With this budding utopia being centred around his own desire to live an easy life, Rimuru takes advantage of his Earth knowledge, merging it with the magical features of this new world to build a comfortable, "modern" city in record time. This pursuit of science and knowledge has also long had a role in traditional utopias. Although 'there has historically been a great deal of suspicion of science and technology in utopian literature', the pursuit of 'natural science' had been identified by Thomas More as bringing 'moral and cultural improvement to the citizens of his ideal society.'[34] Francis Bacon also highlights in his *New Atlantis* a society

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[33] Fuse, *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime Volume 2*, trans. by Kevin Gifford (New York: Yen On, 2018), p. p. 252.

[34] M. Keith Booker, *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism* (London: Greenwood Press, 1994), p. 5.

that 'reaps numerous practical benefits from the application of advanced technologies', and 'revels in the joy of scientific discovery.'[35] As King Gazel identifies, Rimuru brings

> knowledge of other planets and the drive to bring it to life with his vast litany of skills. The fact that he was pushing all this development forward mainly to satisfy his own self-centred cravings for luxury was nothing short of fascinating.[36]

This presents an outsider ruler's perspective on Rimuru's personal utopian ideals, acknowledging his selfishness as well as endorsing the beneficial changes it brings. Significantly, Rimuru is far from the first otherworlder to arrive in this new world. Besides the well-established otherworlders such as Hinata Sakaguchi and Shizue Izawa, the achievements of others transmigrated from Earth are occasionally mentioned, such as someone who made high-quality alcohol using distillation – a process the new world is unfamiliar with. However, none of them has made as much of an impact on this new world in so short a time, particularly in terms of technological advancement for the sake of modern comforts.

More often, the otherworlders' unique skills are directed towards national defences and war. It is rare and difficult for modern luxuries to be replicated in this medieval-esque era, due to issues of resources, money, and monopolisation of the market. The high-quality alcohol made from the distillation process mentioned above, as an example, is intentionally kept very rare and sold at 'exorbitant prices'.[37] Rimuru, however, displays keen interest in opening trade routes and forging connections, upgrading Tempest facilities to create a luxury tourist hotspot. Most issues that other otherworlders would face are solved simply by the fact that Rimuru is the leader of a "land of monsters". When it comes to building a water and sewer system, for

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[35] Booker, p. 5.

[36] Fuse, *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime Volume 8,* trans. by Kevin Gifford (New York: Yen On, 2020), p. 87.

[37] Fuse, *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime Volume 4,* trans. by Kevin Gifford (New York: Yen On, 2018), p. 79.

example – a costly task that Rimuru originally expected to be gradually implemented over decades – the job is completed within months. As Rimuru states, 'my common sense didn't apply to this town. We started with bare land, after all, and I was the leader. I could develop this city any way I wanted to.'[38] Monsters possess power and skills (such as Stomach and Spatial Storage, both transport/storage skills used to solve their water problems) that allow them to give Rimuru's ideas shape faster and more efficiently than humans could. Alcohol distillation is also made simple through Rimuru's Analyse and Assess, and aged in barrels from the treant village. The only issue of fruit supply – for apple brandy – is resolved through connections forged with the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania. Overall, '[t]hings that otherworlders of the past abandoned as being too costly or labor-intensive were no obstacle to Rimuru. He had the core strength needed to brute-force it all to life.'[39] Every move Rimuru makes further streamlines his goal of making his ideal utopia.

While these technological advancements originate from Rimuru's own interests and ideals, his self-centeredness is not seen as problematic by his citizens or allies. Rather, it is seen as a positive aspect of his personality. His monsters are fiercely loyal, fully willing to commit to Rimuru's ideas, as strange as they might seem. As Gazel muses:

> his followers always carried out his orders with a smile, no matter how outlandish. Tempest and the Dwarven Kingdom were already connected with a highway, winding its way over mountains and through valleys and providing safe passage for anyone who used it. Rimuru's monsters blazed that trail, and all it took was an idea and a simple word or two from him.

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[38] Fuse, *Slime Vol 3*, p. 37.
[39] Fuse, *Slime Vol 8*, p. 87.

Even Gazel himself, the grounding, realistic supporter who constantly reminds Rimuru of the practicalities of being a ruler, expresses interest in Rimuru's vision of "utopia" despite knowing the chaos that might result:

> If Rimuru was pursuing the kind of world he saw as ideal, what would result from that? Gazel was keenly interested in finding out. He wanted to see it. It'd trigger a Temma War, a struggle between mortals and angels, and Rimuru knew that. But he'd probably just fight back. Tempest had a terrifying military force backing it up—perhaps terrifying enough to fend off a horde of angels. And Gazel was willing to cheer him on.[40]

This observation raises the question of what exactly counts as a utopia, as well as *who* is able to decide and define what it is. Rimuru's monsters serve both as his labour force, as well as his military strength to back his ideals.

One of the biggest problems that stand in the way of the new world's technological advancement is the Temma War: a catastrophic event that occurs every 500 years, in which "angels" descend from above, targeting large, developed cities in their attack. Thus, amongst these major locations, only nations and cities with powerful defences and/or military force, such as the Armed Kingdom of Dwargon, the Holy Empire of Lubelius, and the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion, can develop and expand with relative freedom. Tempest, despite being a brand-new nation, already has the means to overcome this hurdle when the time comes with its monster-based military force. While Rimuru already has many other battles to tackle, this looming threat of a Temma War provides an overarching justification/explanation for the requirement of strength of this new world. As Ruth Levitas points out, according to Bloch, the 'utopian function of art' is an active one, as a 'necessary inspiration to social transformation.'[41]

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[40] Fuse, *Slime Vol 8*, pp. 87-8.
[41] Levitas, p. 111.

Ultimately, while his initial reasons are selfish, Rimuru's assumed role as a bringer of change – potentially placing him in a position to overthrow the previous restrictions on this world – aligns him with the broader themes of utopian discourse.

"Incomplete" Utopias

Within this new world, there are several powerful kingdoms and nations. Each of them are unique, and follow their own systems and morals. In my utopian/dystopian reading of this series, I would like to propose that these lands can be read as what I would describe as "incomplete" utopias – societies that already existed in the new world that strive for utopian ideals in their own way, with long-standing, successful histories which prove their success, but ultimately fall short of being utopian – which Rimuru learns from through economical trade and cultural exchange to further his own nation. In their article 'Utopia, Sort of: A Case Study in Metamodernism', Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker suggest that in recent years, after the 'postmodern years of relative peace and plenty', where

> To our mind, artists today are once more taking to reimagining utopia primarily because they are faced with a radically unstable and uncertain world, where political systems and power relations are diffuse and unpredictable, financial security a rare privilege and ecological problems […] clog the horizon.[42]

In this environment, Vermeulen and Akker argue, the 'impossible possibility' of utopia 'should not be perceived as a new ideological blueprint', and instead 'should be understood as a tool,

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[42] Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, 'Utopia, Sort of: A Case Study in Metamodernism', *Studia Neophilologica*, 87.1 (2015), 55-67 <https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.1080/00393274.2014.981964> (p. 65).

say, a looking glass, for scanning this world and others for alternative possibilities.'[43] In the context of *Slime,* none of these existing kingdoms and societies are completely utopian, but are all used by Rimuru as tools for furthering Tempest. In doing so, though Tempest itself is also not a "complete" utopia, the gradual building of Rimuru's nation – and by extension, perhaps the *isekai* genre as a whole – becomes a useful tool or thought experiment that furthers utopian and dystopian discourse.

Dwargon

One of the first nations that Rimuru forges relations with is the Armed Kingdom of Dwargon, a kingdom ruled by the dwarven Hero King Gazel as a neutral ground for all species. As the name of the kingdom suggests, Dwargon maintains this neutral peace through its military might, their armies remaining undefeated for a thousand years. It is through Dwargon and Gazel that Rimuru learns the basics of becoming a ruler, and the realistic practicalities the support utopian ideals with necessary foundations. The social structure of Dwargon also introduces racial representations in this new world, prompting Rimuru to view this kingdom as a base for building his own, more refined nation completely free of discrimination – something that Dwargon is unable to achieve.

As described in Volume 1 of *Slime*:

This was a realm where people intermingled freely with monsters. A land that began with the surface city and extended down, down, down. A kingdom armed to the hilt that walked the path of peace. No place in the world boasted

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[43] Vermeulen and Akker, p. 65.

as many weaponsmiths and merchants, and yet it sounded like the farthest

point in the universe from any conflict. A bit ironic, maybe.[44]

This "irony" becomes something that Rimuru himself will embrace, as he begins to create his

own nation of powerful monsters.

Being his first encounter with civilisation in this new world, Dwargon appears to leave

a strong impression on Rimuru as a positive example of neutral harmony. During his first

official visit as the ruler of Tempest, Rimuru makes an introductory speech to the citizens, and

directly cites Dwargon as an ideal place:

'Here, in this wonderful land called the Armed Kingdom of Dwargon, man

and monster work together to create what is truly an ideal and prosperous

coexistence. It is an ideal I wish to pursue for ourselves, as we attempt to

build a nation in the Forest of Jura that serves as a bridge between the human

and monster races.'[45]

Besides serving as an inspiration, Dwargon and its people also have a direct, crucial impact on

the creation of Tempest – specifically, the support of Dwargon's hero-king, Gazel. Having

gained interest in Rimuru after seeing his remarkable ability to craft full potions, and witnessing

the rapid growth of Tempest, Gazel offered to forge formal connections – acknowledging

Tempest as an official nation in the process. As a powerful and experienced leader of a land

that Rimuru has deemed 'ideal', Gazel also acts as an advisor who gives advice when Rimuru's

plans get too out of hand. Though Dwargon holds many utopian attributes, it understands its

limits. In response to Rimuru's speech above, Gazel scores it a 'near perfect zero' – too short,

too self-effacing, and too much of an emotional appeal.[46] Furthermore, and most importantly:

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[44] Fuse, *Slime Vol 1*, pp. 128
[45] Fuse, *Slime Vol 4*, p. 86
[46] Fuse, *Slime Vol 4*, p. 87.

[…] ruling a nation under the concept of "Wouldn't it be nice if…?" was strictly prohibited. As Gazel put it: "I won't ask you not to expect great things from your people. But if you speak like that, could you blame them if they betray you later? A leader is treated as a leader because he leads. He'd be wholly unsuited for government if he can't even believe what he's thinking. Truly wonderful happenings won't simply come running up to you. You need to grab them for yourself."[47]

It is through these interactions with Gazel that Rimuru learns the basics of being a good ruler, and the foundations of building a nation. Rimuru is consistently portrayed as whimsical, a believer of his own ideals, and capable of making the impossible possible. Gazel, while both amused and fascinated by this, being more than happy to take advantage of the opportunities this creates for Dwargon, is also the grounding voice of reason that reminds Rimuru that ideals must be backed up by practicality.

Despite its potential as an ideal utopia, Dwargon is not perfect. While well-established as a neutral land between human and monster, discrimination still exists. It is common, for example, for monsters to be harassed by humans just outside the city walls while waiting in line for entry, something that Rimuru and his goblin companions experience first-hand. While this is played as comedic, it is still notable that, despite only acting in self-defence, it is Rimuru and his guide Gobta – the monsters – who are arrested after causing a scene. Later at the bar, the minister Vester also displays open disgust, calling Rimuru a 'vulgar monster'.[48] In the dialogue that follows, it is also stated that monsters are not usually allowed in 'high-class establishments.'[49]

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[47] Fuse, *Slime Vol 4*, p. 87
[48] Fuse, *Slime Vol 1*, p. 158.
[49] Fuse, *Slime Vol 1*, p. 158.

These ideas about race, and the underlying prejudice they reveal, demonstrates the way in which utopian dreams can be undermined by human flaws and societal structures. The differentiation of races and species in fantasy writing is by no means uncommon. As Helen Young states:

> Fantasy is a useful sub-set through which to explore popular culture not only because of its prominent position at the present historical moment, but because its inherently non-mimetic nature creates a space which is at least nominally not "the real world" and is therefore safer for cultural work around fraught issues such as – although by no means limited to – race. This is not to suggest that the imagined worlds of Fantasy are separate from reality, but rather that the inclusion of an impossible element – magic, dragons, and the like – constructs rhetorical distance between one and the other.[50]

While Dwargon has a reputation for being a neutral land, Tempest is still the first to fully embrace the idea of a land where humans and monsters can thrive in equal harmony. As their ally Fuze states in Volume 3: 'I can understand demi-humans building settlements well enough, but a town where multiple races live together? I've never heard of such a thing.'[51] This reveals the depth of the discrimination against monsters, as well as the discrepancy between species, to the extent of such co-existence being unheard of. While Dwargon may serve as an ideal land for dwarves and other 'demi-human' species, the species divide that still exists within ultimately makes it an incomplete utopia.

As Jun Okada states, anime has become well-known for its 'curiously nonraced animated characters in fantasy landscapes.'[52] Rimuru himself has light blue hair and golden

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[50] Helen Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (Milton: Routledge, 2015), p. 2,Taylor & Francis eBooks <https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.4324/9781315724843> [accessed 16 September 2021]

[51] Fuse, *Slime Vol 3*, p. 186.

[52] Jun Okada, 'Cultural Odor in the Global Order: Globalization and the Raced Japanese Body', in *Transnational Asian Identities in Pan-Pacific Cinemas*, ed. by Philippa Gates and Lisa Funnell (New York:

eyes. However, that is not to say that the series does not explore racial representations altogether, and one thing that it shares with Western fantasy is the tendency to symbolically portray monsters as some form of "other". As Young identifies, 'Vampires, werewolves, zombies, and aliens are mutable, embodying fears around gender, sexuality, class, and politics to name just a few'.[53] Elves and dwarves in Western media, meanwhile, are often portrayed as allies of humanity, and are 'coded as "White"'.[54] *Slime*, like the vast majority of *isekai*, is set in a medieval Western landscape. The species present within this series also follows these tropes, with dwarves and elves, the most humanoid of all the non-humans, being considered as superior and distinct from "monsters" – both with grand, established cities of their own. In contrast, one of the most racialised species that Young identifies is orcs, who are 'commonly Othered by the following: their skin colour, be it green, brown, or black; extreme aggressiveness and irrationality; primitive, disorganised cultures; and homelands which are outside the borders of civilisation.'[55] Furthermore, orcs are visually represented through 'dehumanising animal imagery which is reminiscent of colonialist discourses that construct Whites as more evolved than any other people' – pigs in particular.[56] In *Slime*, orcs resemble pigs even more than common Western representations, driven out of their wasteland homeland because of desperate starvation. After battling and understanding their circumstances, Rimuru arranges new food sources and homes for each of the orcs. In order to repay the debt, a large group chose to remain, becoming Tempest's core construction labour force. While this is not altogether unproblematic in itself, potentially carrying colonial/slavery subtexts (something I discuss further down), the orcs are shown to be extremely willing. Overall, it is significant that

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Routledge, 2011), pp. 46-58 (p. 47), Taylor & Francis eBooks <https://www-taylorfrancis-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203181393-10/cultural-odor-global-order-globalization-raced-japanese-body-jun-okada?context=ubx&refId=5ba51385-bba1-47ce-ba8d-52cff818f4cc> [accessed 4 Jan 2022]

[53] Young, p. 89.
[54] Young, p. 89.
[55] Young, p. 89.
[56] Young, p. 95.

Rimuru was the one who made the arrangements and showed his support, welcoming the orcs to Tempest, a land of monsters that will fully accept them. This acceptance is something that Dwargon, despite its ancient history, has been unable to achieve.

Lubelius

One of the other major nations that Rimuru eventually forges an alliance with is the Holy Empire of Lubelius, a religious land ruled by the god Luminus. Similar to Dwargon, I would argue that Lubelius can be seen as another "incomplete" utopia: a harmonious land where humans – and only humans – live under the protection of their magic-born "god". As a self-contained, communist society, Lubelius bears strong similarities to Thomas More's island of Utopia. The text highlights the benefits of this key utopia, particularly its sense of communal harmony, while also raising problematic issues of uniformity and hegemony. Furthermore, it also holds the potential to be read as a critique of certain aspects of Western religion, addressing the role of Christianity in traditional utopias, as well as discussing the potential for cultural exchange between Western and non-Western utopianism.

In terms of appearance, Lubelius is described as 'a city enveloped in a calming light, a holy metropolis protected by a divine barrier.'[57] While Dwargon has been addressed multiple times as an "ideal" nation, Lubelius is directly referred to as

> a utopia, one whose residents never had to worry about starvation. Each child
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> received a level of compulsory education, and every adult provided with a

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[57] Fuse, *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime Volume 7,* trans. by Kevin Gifford (New York: Yen On, 2019), p. 118

job. Its society had achieved complete harmony, its paradise monitored by

the law and order that ruled over it.[58]

The land is extremely bountiful, and everything is consistent and carefully maintained. Even

the atmosphere within the city is made adjustable by the complex barrier, to the extent of

controlling both light (day/night) and temperature, made optimal for comfort and plant growth.

The people are similarly well-organised, where all the citizens 'awoke to the same bells and

slept at the same time. The more capable of the laborers assisted the less able. And all was

managed in perfect harmony, guaranteeing the happiness of every citizen that lived and

breathed inside.'[59]

This kind of perfectly organised, self-sufficient city seems to draw from Western

visions of utopia, especially that of Thomas More's *Utopia* and Plato's *Republic*. The organised,

uniform society of Lubelius parallels the 'puritanical uniformity' of the Utopians.[60] While there

are several cities in Utopia, 'If you know one of their cities, you know them all, so similar are

they in all respects.'[61] Every Utopian wears the same clothes, which are 'uniform throughout

the island for all age groups and varies only to indicate sex or marital status', and follows the

same work schedule – 'devote only six to work, three before noon, when they go to lunch.

After lunch they take two hours of rest in the afternoon, then three more given over to work,

after which they have dinner'.[62] During dinner and supper, following the call of a trumpet, they

eat together.[63] Every citizen 'is taught some trade of his own', and has a role to play within

Utopia.[64] While leisure time is given 'to spend however they like' – and in great abundance,

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[58] Fuse, *Slime, Vol 7,* p. 118

[59] Fuse, *Slime, Vol 7,* p. 119

[60] Jiri Zuzanek, 'Work and leisure in Thomas More's Utopia', *Leisure Studies*, 36.3 (2017), 305-314
    <https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.1080/02614367.2016.1182200> (p. 309).

[61] Thomas More, *Utopia: Second Edition*, trans. by Clarence H. Miller (Yale University Press, 2014), p 56,
    ProQuest eBook Central <https://ebookcentral-proquest-
    com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/detail.action?docID=3421375> [accessed 30 January 2022]

[62] More, pp. 60-1.

[63] Zuzanek, p. 309.

[64] More, p. 60.

given there is only six hours assigned to work – this is only 'provided that the time they have free from work is not wasted in debauchery and idleness but spent well in some other pursuit, according to their preference', with a heavy preference placed on 'intellectual activities'.[65] Due to the 'trained' nature of this citizens in this self-regulated society, there are 'very few laws' that need be maintained.[66]

While this kind of organised society is one form of a harmonious utopia, as Paul Bloomfield challenges: 'How happy in fact can we believe the Utopians are?'[67] There is no doubt that '[t]heir economy was reasonable, their family life patriarchal. Their religion is not oppressive.'[68] They despised war and fighting, and 'saw life as a whole much better than most of our contemporaries do.'[69] At the same time, Bloomfield proposes,

> we may doubt whether [the Utopians] were as happy as they looked. For a while, on the one hand, they had been deprived of the occasions for expressing and asserting themselves that go with making and spending money, accumulating property and taking every sort of individual risk […] Well, we know what people are like. They all want their little place in the sun. They all have their sense of identity which needs to expressed somehow.
>
> And the fundamental part of themselves is the emotional part.[70]

These concerns are reflected in *Slime*'s narrative. Most significantly, despite the benefits of this kind of society, Hinata Sakaguchi, an otherworlder completely dedicated to Lubelius, critiques certain aspects of it. While she is fully dedicated to this image of her ideal city, she also recognises the disadvantages of a homogenous society. The aspect that makes the biggest impact on her is the difference in the children's behaviour. In cities such as Englesia, the

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[65] More, p. 61.
[66] More, p. 101.
[67] Paul Bloomfield, *Imaginary Worlds: Or, the Evolution of Utopia* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1932), p. 65.
[68] Bloomfield, p. 65.
[69] Bloomfield, p. 71.
[70] Bloomfield, p. 73.

children laugh, play, and make mischief, while in Lubelius, '[a]ll the children running to class wore the same expression. That calm, serene smile of satisfaction, just like the grown-ups. That total disinterest in competition or personal expression; all the same face.'[71] While an organised land without conflict has utopian potential, '[a] fully managed society can provide happiness, but it cannot provide freedom.'[72] Hinata's description of the children paints a somewhat eerie picture, highlighting the uncomfortable side of such regulated uniformity.

It is perhaps telling that the ruler of Lubelius' greatest interest in Tempest lies in their arts and entertainment. Art, as Bloch argues, is an active utopian function, and 'nourishes the sense that "something's missing", and is a necessary inspiration to social transformation. Without art to embody the dream of a matter, we will not be able to possess it in reality.'[73] As the ruling god of Lubelius herself states in Volume 9: 'The people under our protection in Lubelius lack a great deal in the way of artistic talent. Meanwhile, although I expected little, your musical presentation earlier was impressive.'[74] It is this orchestra performance during Tempest's Founders Festival that prompts Lubelius to deepen their connection with Tempest, upgrading their previous nonaggression treaty to one of cultural interaction and exchange. The implication during this exchange suggests that, while the citizens of these regulated, uniform utopias may live in contentment, this uniformity may ultimately lead to the decline of personal attributes such as artistic ability and expression.

Another significant use of symbolism is that the god of Lubelius is in fact the vampire demon lord Luminus Valentine. Just as in traditional representations, vampires in the *Slime* world also rely on human blood for survival. As described by Hinata: 'In front of an absolute ruler, all people held equal value. To Luminus, this concept of a fully managed society was

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[71] Fuse, *Slime, Vol 7*, p. 120.
[72] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 7*, p. 120.
[73] Levitas, p. 111.
[74] Fuse, *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime Volume 9,* trans. by Kevin Gifford (New York: Yen On, 2020), p. 138.

akin to a farmer taking care of his livestock. But this was exactly why the whole utopia worked at all.'[75] This idea of vampiric farmers and human livestock then becomes problematic. Though Lubelius is described as essentially communist, the vampiric imagery associated with this hierarchy does bring to mind Karl Marx's 'repeated images of capital as a vampire' that feeds on living labour. [76] In *Slime,* the imagery is presented differently, using the vampiric metaphor to question the hierarchy that the text suggests exists within the communist society of Lubelius, where the citizens become placid and obedient, unaware that the god at the top of their hierarchy consumes their blood in return. As critiqued by Hinata:

> Communism's greatest weakness was the unavoidable presence of a ruling class above everyone else. The government was forced to sing the praises of equality while actually maintaining a hierarchy in practice. If corruption began to rot the upper class, it was difficult for the masses to rectify that. It would lead to unequal distribution of goods, expanding the disparity.[77]

Lubelius' "solution" to this issue is to essentially replace the ruling class with divinity, where the 'Papacy was, by definition, a superior existence from the very beginning, so inequality among the people would theoretically not become an issue. The rulers, of course, handled matters like diplomacy with other states, but other than their god, all were equal.'[78] While no harm comes to the humans, and they are granted peace and protection in what Rimuru himself calls a 'win-win situation', the fact remains that none of the citizens are aware of this arrangement – another reason Hinata remains conflicted by the true nature of this "utopia".[79]

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[75] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 7*, p. 121.
[76] Chris Baldick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Oxford Scholarship Online, p. 128 <DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198122494.001.0001> [accessed 17 February 2022]
[77] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 7*, p. 120.
[78] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 7*, p. 120.
[79] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 8*, p. 63.

She directly calls it a 'con' stating that it was 'a con, yes, but a con that had served as reality for the Holy Empire over a millennium of history.'[80]

Furthermore, if Lubelius *is* intended to parallel real-world Western church religions (as many signs seem to suggest, particularly evoking the Roman Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire), the vampire/livestock relationship could also be seen as a critical parallel of the relationship between a religious organisation and its believers. This is highlighted by the ways that Lubelius is presented in the text, particularly the aforementioned, detailed descriptions of Hinata's underlying discomfort of living in a 'con', as well as the almost eerie uniformity of its citizens. In addition to the parallels I have already drawn to More's *Utopia,* there are also echoes of Marx's critique, who has described religion as an 'illusory sun' that only brings '*illusory* happiness', 'the self-conscious and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself or has already lost himself again.'[81] As I have previously discussed, the concept of "utopia" has often been defined as being unique to the West. Specifically, according to Kumar, '[utopia] appears only in societies with the classical and Christian heritage' – though he is careful to distinguish that 'the Christian and classical components are not themselves utopia'.[82] Claeys and Sargent also state that:

> Christianity is one of the dominating influences in the development of
> utopianism. It contains strong utopian currents that flow like a torrent into
> secular utopianism. The originality and importance of Christianity in the
> utopian tradition is twofold—first, for the way it put the elements of utopia

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[80] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 7*, p.

[81] Karl Marx, 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right (1844)', in *Marx on Religion*, ed. by John Raines (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), pp. 170-181 (p. 171), ProQuest eBook Central <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/detail.action?docID=449829> [accessed 8 July, 2022]

[82] Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 19.

together into a more or less coherent pattern; and second, for the way it

stressed utopian aspects in its eschatology.[83]

While its Christian influences play a crucial role in the shaping of traditional utopias, I suggest that in *Slime,* there is a progression – with this church-based Holy Empire going from initially opposing, to later allying with, the budding utopia of Tempest. This development can be interpreted as both a clash and an ongoing discourse between utopian ideals. Beginning as a critique towards aspects of religion-based Western utopias, through continued interactions, this eventually evolves into a cultural merging of utopian thought. The major plot of Volume 7 covers the battle between the Lubelius knights and Tempest. Due to a series of schemes, misunderstanding, and miscommunications, in which the monsters of Tempest are falsely accused of assaulting humans, Rimuru is officially deemed to be a dangerous force. After destroying the army of Farmus, the original instigators who had slaughtered his citizens, Rimuru attempts to peacefully negotiate with the Church. However, his magically recorded message is manipulated to sound like a declaration of hostility before it can reach Hinata, who, despite previously initiating an attack on Rimuru himself, was reconsidering how the Church should approach Rimuru. Despite these failed negotiations, Tempest and Lubelius ultimately reach mutual understanding, and quickly shifts from a non-aggressive agreement to a relationship of friendly cultural exchange, particularly in the arts, which I have previously discussed. Both Lubelius and Tempest retains their own morals, beliefs, and differences.

In Volume 4, Rimuru had given his own synopsis and thoughts on Luminism:

The thing was, though, this Luminus apparently didn't accept other gods. The

One God Luminus, as the full name went. As a result, practitioners of other

religions were not qualified to receive his salvation. There were several

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[83] Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent, *The Utopia Reader* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1999), p. 6.

Council nations that didn't designate Luminism as their national religion, and

paladins were never deployed over there. I guess I can't blame them—if you

think someone's unworthy of salvation, then of course you aren't gonna risk

your life for them—but that didn't sound too "righteous" to me. Just my take,

though.[84]

The main reason that Hinata originally launches an attack on Rimuru without leaving room for discussion is due to this absoluteness of Luminism, which does not permit any kind of engagement with monsters. The thoughts expressed by Rimuru are emphasised as being his personal opinion, and he does remark that he is not sure if any 'blame' could be assigned. However, at the same time, it does offer a subtle critique of the absoluteness of the religion Luminism.

Significantly, this relates to Rimuru's own character traits and moral beliefs. As discussed above, Rimuru is not written to be a perfect character – he frequently chides himself for being lazy, takes advantage of others, and when provoked, does not hesitate to viciously strike back. It is precisely these self-aware, openly addressed problematic attributes that present these observations he makes as casual, personal thoughts instead of reaching too far into deeper criticism that may in some instances even appear hypocritical. Combined with his other key trait of adaptability, Rimuru is generally positively represented as being flexible and accepting of others, adept at forging various connections, while also learning from them to further his own nation. If Tempest, shaped and influenced by Rimuru, is read as an allegory to Japan, then this can again be seen as part of the 'capacity for absorption and indigenisation of foreign cultures' that has come to be attached to the Japanese – 'the Japanese skill of absorbing the West without losing the definite demarcation between "us" and 'them.'"[85] In *Slime,* however,

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[84] Fuse, *Slime, Vol 4*, pp. 172-3.
[85] Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 58-9, JSTOR eBooks <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv11vc8ft.7>

it is Rimuru who, through Tempest, introduces Japanese culture (cuisine, architecture, hot springs/*ryokan*) into the new world, where it is rapidly and eagerly absorbed. As I will further discuss throughout this thesis, this positioning of cultural power and influence is complex in the context of worldbuilding-focused *isekai* such as *Slime*, which seem to re-establish a new "Japan" in a predominantly medieval, Western setting, creating a new, utopian, hybrid world that is both contemporary and traditional, a fusion of cultural influences and practices.

As I have mentioned above, most of the critiques the text offers about Lubelius, and the influence of religion, are represented through the otherworlder Hinata. Similar to Mirabel, who I have previously discussed, Hinata is another otherworlder who carries her own set of utopian ideals that contrast Rimuru's. Unlike Rimuru, who reincarnated into the *isekai* as an adult, 15-year-old Hinata abruptly finds herself in the new world after 'a sudden gale slashed across her body' on her way back from school.[86] Her immediate reaction to this foreign landscape was that she 'liked it', followed by the thought that she would finally be 'free of her mother, who had gotten into religion and never gave a second thought to her family since', having 'escaped into her faith' after her father's 'violent episodes', and eventual disappearance to escape debt.[87] In Hinata's case, the "portal" to the new world was not her death, but her own deep desire to escape from her family situation, and the despair of Earth. This desire leads her to a path that seems to parallel her mother's – just as her mother escapes into religious faith, Hinata found solace in '[t]he one god she was truly qualified to serve', and mercilessly 'eliminated her god's enemies'.[88] While Rimuru gains abilities based on his final thoughts at the moment of his death, Hinata's unique skills originates from this cool-headed determination during her first battle in the new world. "Usurper" was born from her experiences on Earth, declaring to herself that, here in this new world, '*I will take from them. I will let them take nothing from me',* and

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[86] Fuse, *Slime, Vol 4*, p. 3.
[87] Fuse, *Slime, Vol 4*, p. 3.
[88] Fuse, *Slime, Vol 4*, p. 5.

"Measurer" from her belief that '*I am in the right. My calculations are flawless, for the world is eternally unchanging.*'[89] Just as with Rimuru, while these skills were formed from a single instant of thought, they are deeply linked to the user's personalities, and serve as powerful tools to fulfilling their deepest desires. Specifically, Hinata's skills centre around a firm belief in herself, leaving no room for others.

Being faced with harassment not long after arriving in the new world, Hinata comes to the conclusion:

> *Oh… So it's the same thing here.* To her, the world was filled with nothing
>
> but despair. A world filled with the ugly, the repulsive. A world that should
>
> just be destroyed already.[90]

While this is a sentiment carried over from her experiences on Earth, the *isekai* world grants her the utopian opportunity to shape her desired path with her own strength, while also carrying the dystopian dangers of giving in to darker desires. In doing so, Hinata kills countless people, both good and bad – first acting on her own views of justice, attempting to carve her own will into the new world, and then for her god, Luminus, describing herself as a 'machine'.[91] This single-minded abandonment into faith is later shown to be another deliberate act of escapism on her part, a coping mechanism born from a desperate fear that her mother might have hated her.[92] This fear – that while she had done her utmost to make her mother happy, it had only driven her deeper into despair – brought on her realisation that 'there was no eradicating unhappiness from the world. […] She wailed at the unfairness of reality, dreaming of a world where everyone could live in peace.'[93] Hence, when offered a place in the "incomplete" utopia of Lubelius, where such an idealistic world is already well on the way to becoming reality,

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[89] Fuse, *Slime, Vol 4*, p. 4.
[90] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 4*, p. 4.
[91] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 7*, p. 254.
[92] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 7*, p. 254.
[93] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 7*, p. 254.

Hinata seizes the opportunity. While it still means walking a path of bloodshed, the existence of this holy city in the new world – while, as discussed above, is essentially based on a "con" – gives Hinata a concrete goal to strive for.

This reliance on the idealistic vision of Lubelius, born from a fear-driven desire to escape her doubts, places her in complete contrast to Rimuru, who uses his abilities in creative ways to fulfill his own whims in the new world. While Rimuru does not carry over a past on Earth as troubled as Hinata's, which perhaps makes the comparison unbalanced, he does experience devastating grief and loss following the attack on Tempest. Like Hinata, this causes him to make chillingly level-headed, cold-hearted choices, leading to the slaughter of an entire army. However, his most oft-stated reason for making Tempest so luxurious is light-hearted and comedically self-centred: that he himself desires a life of luxury. Naturally, he cares deeply for his found family of assorted citizens – a sentiment that only becomes stronger the more he grows as a leader. However, the fact that he is normally represented as laid-back and lazy, as opposed to Hinata's cold single-mindedness, suggests that the true happiness, and by extension the most ideal "utopia", cannot be driven by desperation and fear. Rimuru's ability to sacrifice the lives of others for the sake of his nation is also problematic, but it is something that he addresses and comes to terms with. Although the world of *Slime* is, as I have outlined, centred around idealistic and self-centred desires, the *isekai* presents this as an aspect of the pursuit of happiness. It is a world that sets up otherworlders with the matching ability to create their desired happiness, with little to no restriction on the path they choose to achieve their utopia.

Despite all that I have pointed out about the potential critiques *Slime* offers on Western religions, the resolution and resulting explanations that follow the conflict provide another perspective. The biggest revelation is that the 'laws' of Luminism that forbade discussion with monsters, framed as a form of discrimination, is not in fact endorsed by Luminus Valentine herself. As Luminus states: 'Don't be silly. Those teachings are nothing *I* established. I don't

see why failing to protect them qualifies as betraying me. Those were *meant* to be guiding principles for those lost in their lives. Really, they're only a bunch of rules thought up by the leaders at the time.'[94] Furthermore, the reason that none of the current paladins, including Hinata herself, are aware of this fact is because '[t]he original texts defining the faith are open to anyone who might want to browse, but the first written drafts they're based on have been lost long ago.'[95] As an allegory, this balances the previous criticism of Western church religions by highlighting that it is not necessarily the religion itself, but the way it is (mis)interpreted by its followers that is the issue. The original rules were created on the basis that the blood of content, happy civilians were sweeter to the vampires, and back when the people lived in constant fear of monsters, the declining quality of blood became problematic. Hence, Lubelius, a city where "livestock" humans are protected by vampires, was created. Even the existence of demon lords – one of them being the replacement "Valentine" – is used to balance the consistent peace and optimise the citizen's happiness: 'By "spicing up" their lives with fearsome demon lords, followed by the relief of being protected from them, we ensure they can savour as much happiness as possible. The citizens of Lubelius are kept safe under the name of their god.'[96]

Returning to my discussion of "livestock" in the paragraph above, it is emphasised that, while the idea is uncomfortable, it is also the reason that the utopia works. From a utilitarian perspective, it *is* a utopian setup that creates a safe and comfortable environment for both the vampires and humans involved – even if one of the parties is not aware of the other. As Bentham's utilitarianism defines, 'Pleasure, excepting the "immunity from pain," is "the only good," while pain "without exception, the only evil."'[97] Therefore, '[b]ased on the calculation

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[94] Fuse, *Slime, Vol 8*, p. 62.
[95] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 8*, p, 62.
[96] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 8*, p. 63.
[97] James E. Crimmins,'Bentham and Utilitarianism in the Early Nineteenth Century', in *The Cambridge Companion to Utilitarianism*, ed. by Ben Eggleston & Dale E. Miller (New York : Cambridge University

of interests, the goal of the legislator is to enhance the greatest happiness of the community by formulating laws aimed at maximizing the happiness of the particular individuals who make up the community.'[98] Vampires require only a small amount of blood, doing no harm to the humans, and in return, offers protection, a role to fulfill, and a comfortable life. This relationship between humans and vampires, livestock and rulers, shares certain parallels with H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine,* in which the Eloi, despite 'laughing and dancing in the sunlight as though there was no such thing in nature as the night', are revealed to be 'mere fatted cattle, which the ant-like Morlocks preserved and preyed upon'.[99]

From an outsider's perspective, it can be tempting to dismiss this arrangement as a mere illusion. Hinata's own musings on the discomfort of that almost eerie contentment is enough to create unease in the reader, raising questions around the morality and ethics of a society fundamentally based on a lie. Hinata's initial goal, in fact, was to take down the demon lord Luminus Valentine. In response to her attack, Luminus responds:

> What is justice? Justice is not about crushing evil. Who do you think you are, deciding whether I engage in evil or not? There is no such thing as a justice that can satisfy all forms of free will. It is arrogant to think you can do otherwise. Am I wrong?[100]

This matches, to some extent, with Rimuru's own thoughts on placing judgement on others, promoting the idea that "utopia" is subjective. Depending on one's personal ideology and morals, there is perhaps the possibility for multiple utopias, which may be able to coexist. Kumar comments on the human nature that lies at the core of utopias, stating that:

Press, 2014), pp. 38-60, (p. 40), CambridgeCore, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.1017/CCO9781139096737> [accessed 14 Feb 2022]

[98] Crimmins, pp. 41-2.

[99] Wells, H. G., *World Classics Library: H. G. Wells: The War of the Worlds, The Invisible Man, The First Men in the Moon, The Time Machine* (London: Arcturus, 2020), p. 607.

[100] Fuse, *Slime, Vol 7*, p. 123

> Utopians do not necessarily believe in the natural goodness of man – else why should utopian arrangements be necessary at all – but they do believe in his more or less indefinite malleability. […] But what unites utopians, and gives to utopian theory its distinctive emphasis, is the assumption that there is nothing in man, nature or society that cannot be so ordered as to bring about a more or less permanent state of material plenty, social harmony and individual fulfillment.[101]

Vieira also states that utopia should not be confused with "perfection" – one of its most recognisable traits is the ongoing speculative discourse it provides. Furthermore, it is human-centered, being

> built by human beings and are meant for them. And it is because utopists very often distrust individuals' capacity to live together, that we very frequently find a rigid set of laws at the heart of utopian societies – rules that force the individuals to repress their unreliable and unstable nature and put on a more convenient social cloak.[102]

Isekai texts, with their "overpowered" protagonists, highlights this "malleable" nature of man and the effect they can have on the world. In *Slime* in particular, multiple versions of "utopia", each crafted by the people (though not necessarily human), are compared and contrasted on the stage of this new world.

The Eastern Empire

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[101] Kumar (1991), p. 29.
[102] Vieira, p. 7.

While the Western Nations are allegorical of the West on Earth, the Nasca Namrium Ulmeria United Eastern Empire can be seen as an allegory for the East – with what appears to be a particular emphasis on China. While 'survival of the fittest' is the rule of this new world, the phrase repeatedly applied to the Empire is 'might makes right'.[103] As described in Volume 12:

> In the background of this conquest was the massive, overwhelming military Nasca cultivated—and now, under the name of the United Emperor Ludora Nam-ul-Nasca, the Empire has enjoyed a reign of power for the past two millennia, never allowing its annexed nations to rebel. Every member nation was the full and complete vassal of the Empire, subject to its absolute rule.

The aim of the Empire's leader is said to be 'absolute dominance' and 'absolute power', with an unbroken imperial bloodline.[104] The reason for this is revealed to be because the Emperor would reincarnate over and over again through the sons that he fathers, 'inheriting' his memories and abilities.[105] Besides the imperial bloodline, however, the Empire willingly accepts anyone who can prove their power into their military forces, including otherworlders, 'proving that the Empire doesn't discriminate based on bloodline or birthplace.'[106] It has a particular interest in the knowledge of otherworlders, in order to further their military strength, manipulating the DNA to strengthen magical beasts and building anti-magic devices.

Throughout the series, the Eastern Empire currently shows the most desire for conquest.[107] Though the Emperor's scheme has not yet been fully revealed, the nation as a whole continues to emphasise the craving for power, as well as a notable, materialistic greed, displayed when they are intent on invading Tempest's Labyrinth, known to hold great weapons and treasure. With Tempest's already formattable military force taking advantage of the

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[103] Fuse, *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime Volume 12,* trans. by Kevin Gifford (New York: Yen On, 2021), p. 117.

[104] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 12*, p. 117.

[105] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 12*, p. 325-326.

[106] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 12*, p. 122.

[107] As of *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime Vol 13,* the latest official English translation.

Labyrinth structure, they were able to efficiently overcome the Empire's advantage in numbers. On the verge of defeat, one of the Empire's commanders reflects that

> Power. Power was the one thing Caligulio wished for right now. If you have power, all is forgiven – the iron rule the Empire always stuck to. Only through the overwhelming power they had was it possible for them to subjugate the whole world. But if you didn't have power, you were doomed to face a tragic end – something that was obvious, given Caligulio's current situation.[108]

This craving for power and pursuit of ambition and conquest, while problematic, can perhaps also be viewed as an interpretation of utopia. The monsters who chose to serve Rimuru have already demonstrated that survival of the fittest is a commonly accepted reasoning of this world. Placed next to Tempest, Dwargon, and Lubelius, however, the Empire's focus on offence and invasion places them in a more negative light in comparison, especially with the reader's presumable investment in Rimuru's efforts in nation building. These overt themes of violence and (negatively presented) materialistic greed, associated with these fantasy parallels with the East, and specifically China, is a small but notable detail that I discuss a little more in Chapter Two.

Potential for Dystopia

As I have discussed above, the new world seems designed to benefit otherworlders. From their acquisition of unique skills and new bodies to the existing structure of its civilisations, the new world is presented as a real-life video game where the otherworlders, discontent with their previous lives, is given the ability to shape their own "utopia". However, while this world may

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[108] Fuse, *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime Volume 13,* trans. by Kevin Gifford (New York: Yen On, 2022), p. 365.

seem utopian to the otherworlders, as well as those who possess great power, this world can also be a hellish dystopia. As Claeys writes: 'Like the snake in the Garden of Eden, dystopian elements seem to lurk within Utopia.'[109] The idea of utopia has faced claims that it must lead to 'tyranny and totalitarianism.'[110] Karl Popper describes utopianism as a product of 'the wrong kind of rationalism', an admittedly 'all too attractive theory' that is 'dangerous and pernicious', 'self-defeating', and 'leads to violence.'[111] All actions taken must be based on some kind of detailed descriptions or plans, however, 'ends cannot be determined scientifically; they can only be argued about, among reasonable people, in an attempt to persuade.'[112] Ultimately:

> The utopian method must lead to violence. For since we cannot determine ultimate ends scientifically, the utopian, like all religious believers confronted with other equally uncompromising believers, must attempt to crush all rival visions. He must affirm the absolute rightness of his vision of the ideal state.[113]

This violent, authoritarian aspect of utopia is particularly represented through the character of Yuuki Kagurazaka, the otherworlder who is gradually revealed to be the mastermind behind the attacks on Tempest. Like Hinata, Yuuki immediately recognises this survival of the fittest new world as one he can take advantage of. Similarly to Maribel, he is fully aware of the opportunities that this medieval-esque world has to offer. In Volume 12, it is stated that:

> Now Yuuki found meaning to life in this world. Here, it was eat or be eaten.
>
> The laws governing civilisation were still incomplete, and it'd be a while

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[109] Gregory Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), Oxford Scholarship Online <DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198785682.003.0001> (p. 4).

[110] Kumar (1991), p. 90.

[111] Karl R. Popper, 'Utopia and Violence', *World Affairs,* 149.1 (1986), 3-9 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20672078> [accessed 24 July 2022] (p. 5).

[112] Kumar (1991), p. 90.

[113] Kumar (1991), p. 90.

until they even approached perfection. Therefore, it was left to him to become

this world's leader—and guide it in the right direction.

Yuuki had decided to tackle this unfair world head-on. It was a challenge that

drove him forward. This world was his for the taking.[114]

While his motivations are not currently clear, one of his skills, parallel to Rimuru's, also allows him to do things such as steal another's power – as he did with Maribel's Avarice. During his last conversation with Maribel, where he reveals that – despite her ability to take control of another's greed to manipulate their will – he had never been under her control, Yuuki claims:

Yeah, your greed was something else. Sadly, though, my own desires are

stronger than yours. This world, you know… It's like my sandbox. And it's

by dream to become king of it someday. I didn't even need Anti-Skill to keep

your Avarice from working on me.[115]

In the battle of greed and desires, Yuuki is a figure who is more ruthless than Hinata, and greedier than Maribel. He chillingly echoes Maribel's own philosophy, claiming the new world to be his "sandbox" – boasting both ownership and power. While Rimuru does seek to influence the new world, not hesitating to use his abilities for his own benefit, he never seeks to claim control of it, even after becoming a demon lord.

While Rimuru is able to easily manoeuvre his way through the world, shaping things to his own desire, that is mainly due to his own strength, as well as the support of his citizens and allies. The world itself follows the rules of "survival of the fittest". Having killed the former direwolf leader while defending the goblin village, Rimuru later asks his new follower, Ranga, whether he feels uncomfortable swearing loyalty to his father's killer. Ranga replies that while he does think about it, 'to a monster, victory or defeat in battle is the only absolute in life. No

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[114] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 12*, p. 5.
[115] Fuse, *Slime, Vol 10*, p. 339.

matter how it turns out, we are aware of the fact that might makes right. […] But…not only did my master forgive; he even gave me my once and future name for all time! I am filled with thankfulness, not resentment!'[116] Rimuru himself quickly adopts this attitude. While weighing up the pros and cons of taking in more goblins seeking his protection, he calmly muses that, should they prove to be traitors, he could always just kill them. For '[r]ose-colored glasses would just get in the way when you were leading a pack of monsters.'[117] Reflecting on the abruptness of his own change, he acknowledges: 'It was amazing how I could think about killing people as if I were wondering where to go for lunch, though. It came as a surprise, but— hell—it beat hemming and hawing over every life decision I made. Kept it simple.'[118] This statement can perhaps be linked to Rimuru's previous life as a human, where he has to abide by the strict rules of society. Here, in the new world, Rimuru has the freedom to make life and death decisions, with his own abilities as a demon lord to back up his actions.

In Rimuru's case, this is framed as a positive, and earns him the respect and trust of goblins, direwolves, ogres and orcs alike. It also provides a commentary on the nature of humans – it is not the vicious monsters, but the human species who are more likely to stab you in the back. In some ways, the simplicity of this rule adds to the utopian element – as long as a character possesses power, they are free to use it as they see fit, such as Rimuru or Luminus, to craft their own ideal utopia. However, that utopia only extends to the people belonging to those nations. While this opens up the possibility of multiple, co-existing utopias, the delicate power balance within this world means that, should conflict arise, one party's utopia can quickly transform into another's dystopia. As Murakami phrases it:

> Rimuru's longer utopian vision of acceptance and peace is not a wholly
>
> simple one as it hinges upon the condition of human's recognition of the

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[116] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 1*, p. 125.
[117] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 1*, p. 195.
[118] Fuse, *Slime, Vol 1*, p. 195.

(monster-)other made enforceable by Rimuru's exercise of near-absolute

power to ensure the fulfilment of lasting peace. […] Rimuru is conscious that

peace must sometimes follow destruction, as evidenced by his fondness and

predilection for peace is one he knows must "cost" something if necessitated:

the elimination of humans unwilling or unable to see monsters as equals.[119]

The most vivid example of this would be the war against Farmus. Seeking to take

Tempest for itself, the attackers from Farmus, taking advantage of the existing discrimination

against monsters, accuse the goblins of Tempest of harassment. In the fight that ensues, one

hundred Tempest citizens are killed. As part of the attempt to revive them, Rimuru decides to

become a demon lord – a process which requires the sacrifice of ten thousand humans.

Rimuru's response to this vast number is eerily cool-headed, calmly thinking:

Oh, that's it? Well, easy, then. Demon lord? Oh, I'm *totally* becoming a

demon lord. *Way* simpler process than I thought. Hopefully all those garbage

troops around the outskirts of town number at least ten thousand. But hell, if

there aren't enough, I'll just add some more. If it brings Shion and everyone

else back, I have absolutely no reason to waver.[120]

While he would prefer to avoid killing civilians, his sheer disregard towards the lives of Farmus

soldiers displays his determination to fix the damage that has been done to his own

nation/utopia, even at the cost of destroying others. The two spells/skills that Rimuru uses to

kill these soldiers and claim their souls also specifically highlights the potential for dystopian

violence that the new world carries. The more devastating of the two is the skill 'Merciless', a

skill Rimuru gains during the fight against Farmus, which brings instant death to those whose

spirits had been broken by despair.[121] Merciless is a skill that highlights the dystopic horror of

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[119] Murakami, para. 18.

[120] Fuse, *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime Volume 5,* trans. by Kevin Gifford (New York: Yen On, 2019), p. 140.

[121] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 5*, p. 212.

this fantasy world, as well as issues around the acquisition and application of power. It is also during these events when Rimuru seriously ponders his own morality, and muses over what it means to be a "monster". While the required number of souls for the demon lord's awakening is 10,000, the widespread effect of Merciless effortlessly doubled the death count to 20,000, wiping out the entirety of the Farmus army.

While Merciless was devastating, what I would consider to be arguably more terrifying is the previous spell that unlocked such a deadly skill. Unlike skills and abilities, "Megiddo" is a spell created by Rimuru. Launched from high in the air, the spell works by manipulating thousands of convex lens made out of water droplets made up of transformed water elementals. Carefully adjusted with the help of the Great Sage, these droplets

> gathered the sunlight overhead, honing it into thin rays of light and refracting
> it against the mirrorlike droplets below. This focused all the light upon a
> single point, where it was then further condensed by the convex-lens droplets
> down below me before being channelled towards its target. The temperature
> of these thin rays, no more than a pencil's width in diameter, was several
> thousand degrees—more than enough heat to take a person's life.[122]

Each of the lenses can only be used once, as it vaporises instantly from the heat, but is easily replaceable by summoning another water elemental, costing very little magic – and with thousands in the air, thousands of people fall in a single wave. What is significant about Megiddo is that it takes advantage of Rimuru's Earth knowledge of physics, combining it with the new world's magic to create a spell of mass destruction. Before this point, Earth knowledge has generally been used as a convenient tool for advancing civilization, but the use of Megiddo, essentially a weapon developed for war, highlights the damage that this knowledge can cause. This reinforces the idea that 'utopian and dystopian visions are not necessarily diametrical

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[122] Fuse, *Slime*, Vol 5, p. 196.

opposites' – it exists like two sides of the same coin, where 'one man's utopia another man's dystopia.'[123] Although scientific knowledge can be applied for luxury and development, it can just as easily be used to craft dystopias such as Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), where 'the future was portrayed as a totalitarian hell in which all hope was extinguished and all exits closed.'[124]

Another uncomfortable question raised during the war is the question of colonial exploitation. In his essay 'The Japanese settler unconscious: *Goblin Slayer* on the 'Isekai' frontier', Zachary Samuel Gottesman discusses the representation of the 'Japanese settler colonialism' within the context of the series *Goblin Slayer*, arguing that 'what is repressed by Japan's postcolonial, neoliberal economy appears in the most dynamic areas of culture as a political unconscious: anime and otakudom as a 'strategy of containment' for the real contradictions of imperialism, in particular the hegemonic form of 'isekai' as ideology.'[125] While I will not be focusing on his argument on 'otakuised labour', his article does draw parallels between *isekai* and colonisation. With the general acknowledgement of the *isekai* as a power fantasy, many *isekai* follow the formula of an overpowered protagonist who gains special abilities in a new world, defeating all who oppose them. While this can be portrayed as heroic, the rapid spread of the otherworlder's influence can also be perceived as a form of colonisation. As Lyman Tower Sargent writes, issues around colonisation and slavery are also part of More's Utopia, where:

> Utopia's colonies were generally achieved through conquest, and they were
>
> mostly used to offload surplus population. But in the case of Utopia, if the

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[123] Booker, p. 15.

[124] Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Vintage Classics, 2004);
George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Penguin Classics, 2013)
Kumar (1987), p. 225.

[125] Zachary Samuel Gottesman, 'The Japanese settler unconscious: *Goblin Slayer* on the 'Isekai' frontier', Settler Colonial Studies, 10.4 (2020), 529-557 <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2020.1801274> (p. 530).

> population of the home country dropped, the people who had been sent to the
>
> colonies were brought back. It could hardly be made clearer that the colonies
>
> were to serve the interests of the home country. The colonies also provided
>
> cheap labour, with some of the original inhabitants choosing to improve their
>
> lives by becoming slaves in Utopia.[126]

This controlling of the original inhabitants is hinted at through Rimuru's decision to take over Farmus after winning the war, rebuilding it into a new kingdom that would provide human support for Tempest. After the battle with Clayman, Rimuru is also quick to accept those who are willing as labourers. Overall, it is important to not forget that 'spaces chosen for settlement were not empty but inhabited, and the settler utopia was always accompanied by dystopias for the indigenous inhabitants. […] The current inhabitants of settler colonies would not be allowed to stand in the way of the desire or need to relocate.'[127]

As Murakami discusses, 'like all longer-running shōnen series caught between the nexus of a domestic and international audience against the background of Japan's own complex and complicated history as aggressor and "pacifist," [*Slime*], depending on the viewer's context, exemplifies how these popular narratives are enriching sites of inquiry for us to examine.'[128] While it can be difficult to say whether to label Rimuru's actions as colonialism, or results of war, the issue of colonialism is directly addressed by Rimuru in Volume 12:

> Nobody wanted to be a slave to another country. If you were going to be
>
> colonised and taxed to oblivion, you'd feign obedience but constantly seek
>
> out a chance to rise up and take revenge. But unless the invaders truly were
>
> cruel and abusive, you could decide to put up with a few disadvantages in the

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[126] Lyman Tower Sargent, 'Colonial and postcolonial utopias', in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature,* ed. by Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 200-222 (p. 204), CambridgeCore eBooks <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521886659.009>

[127] Sargent, p. 204.

[128] Murakami, para. 19.

meantime. An invader could never ignore the feelings of the people living

there; those people needed to take responsibility for the future they decided

on, and a ruler had to answer to them.

That's why I thought conscription was among the worst things you could do

to people. It's why you never tried to force patriotism down their throats.[129]

While some of his actions are problematic, it is true that Rimuru takes responsibility for the

renamed kingdom of Farminus, arranging new management and helping it to prosper. However,

it is also true that he – along with Gazel and Erald – decides it is best to conceal the fact that it

was he himself who wiped out the Farmus army from the citizens. Having understood what it

truly means to wage war, Rimuru still expresses the desire to build a utopia centred around

understanding.

After suffering deaths during Farmus' first attack, Rimuru holds a meeting in which

they discuss their future attitude towards humans, in which he states:

'[…] it would be a mistake to judge all of mankind as evil. It takes a human

to do something as contradictory as working hard to make things easier for

themselves. I was the same way, really. And I think that as long as you don't

mess up where you're aiming your efforts at, you can make your existence a

lot better for yourself. That's why it's so vital to have an environment you

can learn in—and I want to create that environment. We can educate those

who'll befriend us, and we'll do away with the barriers between people and

monsters. That makes for better neighbours, after all, when you understand

and help out one another. Doesn't it? That's the potential I want to believe

in…'[130]

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[129] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 12*, pp. 105-6.
[130] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 5*, pp. 156-7.

Throughout Slime, there is an emphasis on opportunity, equality, and understanding. At the same time, these ideals are frequently placed into conflict with questions of morality during war, as well as the balance between utopia and dystopia. While Tempest might be utopian at its core, acting mainly in self-defence, Rimuru's desire to not lose people close to him can also prompt him to make decisions such as wiping out an army of 20,000 without batting an eye, and take over the opposing kingdom. Furthermore, in the later confrontation against the Empire, Rimuru has the sudden idea: 'Why not team up with Veldora (plus whoever else wanted to join us), declare war on the Empire, and immediately assault them? […] If they were preparing to strike us and not even trying to hide it, I couldn't help but think—who could complain if we just did 'em in?'[131] Unlike Farmus, who caused casualties in Tempest first, there is only the *threat* of the Empire launching an attack. While it is a strategy to go on the offense first, lowering the risk of damage to their side, the ease with which Rimuru wields his growing military force leaves room for thought. Yet at the same time, it must be remembered that Rimuru is not represented as a hero, but a demon lord – and as far as demon lords go, he is already considered a whimsical, but fairly benevolent one. While *Slime* does contain the potential for dystopia, particularly its themes of power, survival of the fittest, and direct mention of colonialism, it does not attempt to hide it. Through Rimuru's actions as a demon lord, the text acknowledges the interconnection between utopia and dystopia.

Introducing the Japanese

Another crucial part of looking at *Slime* via a utopia/dystopian reading is the Japanese cultural background from which it originates. Something that is often addressed by anime scholars is

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[131] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 12*, pp. 84-5.

the concept of 'cultural odourlessness', and its related term, *mukokuseki* (statelessness).[132] As Koichi Iwabuchi identifies:

> The term *mukokuseki* is widely used in Japan in two different, though not mutually exclusive, ways: to suggest the mixing of elements of multiple cultural origins, and to imply the erasure of visible ethnic and cultural characteristics.[133]

This is the result of various factors. As Iwabuchi describes, Japan is a 'vociferously assimilating cultural entity', with a particular ability for 'appropriation, domestication, and indigenisation of the foreign', which has become 'a key feature of Japanese national identity itself'.[134] However, this has not always been viewed as a positive by the Japanese, and 'has also precipitated relatively negative, self-defensive, or ironical discourses on cultural borrowing', especially in relation to the 'threat of colonisation by the West'.[135] Furthermore, Jun Okada suggests that, in the aftermath of World War II, 'cultural odourlessness has become a strategy, not only for dealing with the embargoes placed on Japanese exports in Asia after World War II (1939–45), but also for dealing with Japanese feelings about their own racial identity', eventually helping Japan to regain its cultural influence.[136] The reasons for 'erasing national identity from cultural products sold outside Japan' is directly stated by Anne Allison to intentionally 'diminish or "deodorise" unsavoury associations with Japan.'[137] Anime, one of Japan's largest and most popular exports, is described by Okada as 'persistently odorless'.[138] As Dana Fennell writes:

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[132] Okada, p. 47.
[133] Iwabuchi, p. 71.
[134] Iwabuchi, p. 53.
[135] Iwabuchi, pp. 54-5.
[136] Okada, p. 48.
[137] Anne Allison, 'The Attractions of the J-Wave for American Youth', in *Soft Power Superpowers: Cultural and National Assets of Japan and the United States*, ed. by W. Yasushi & D. L. McConnell (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 99-110 (p. 103), ProQuest eBook Central <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/detail.action?docID=1968817> [accessed 17 December 2021]
[138] Okada, p. 48.

Anime is able to weave together images from Japanese culture, from other cultures, of fantasy, and of concerns relevant to our globalising world. In response, viewers sometimes focus on the fantasy face of anime and do not perceive the content as Japanese. Other times, they ground what they see to real-world cultures. As a result, the potential for anime is great, but overarching claims regarding its ability to generate any particular kind of cultural influence are problematic.[139]

Even though these anime characters speak Japanese, and may live in recognisably Japanese settings, the animation presents them as 'curiously nonraced'.[140] Anime's 'fantastical landscapes and animated characters avoided any indexical reference to national, ethnic, linguistic, or racial difference. Hence, *anime*'s cultural odourlessness reads as racelessness and reflects Japan's anxiety about racial difference and its legacy of identification with whiteness represented by post-war U.S. occupation.'[141]

With this complex history as both coloniser and colonised, the *isekai* genre carries the potential to illuminate Japan's views of the foreign. As I have discussed in the Introduction, many *isekai* can roughly fall into the category of a portal-quest that becomes an immersive fantasy. Once immersed in the new world, modern knowledge can prove useful to varying degrees – but otherwise, there is little to no interaction with Earth – providing the perfect opportunity for a fresh start. Just as the reincarnated protagonists are provided with the chance to live a more fulfilling life according to their personal desires, the *isekai* could perhaps also be read as an opportunity for Japanese culture to present itself anew in another world where "Japan" does not yet exist – as well as its history as both coloniser and colonised. As I have already discussed, in *Slime*, Tempest can be interpreted as a budding utopia. More than that,

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[139] Dana Fennel and others, 'Consuming Anime', *Television & New Media*, 14. 5 (2013), 440–456 <https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.1177/1527476412436986> (p. 441).

[140] Okada, p. 47.

[141] Okada, p.p. 48-9.

however, it is a utopia, within a medieval-Western world, that is centred firmly around a Japanese aesthetic. It is debatable how much of this can be considered an intentional allegory. As a former Japanese man, it is natural for Rimuru to seek to recreate the comforts that he is used to. As a wider allegory, however, this can be read as a broader statement about the position of Japan in a global perspective, as well as its utopian potential.

From as early as Volume 3, when Tempest was just beginning to build its identity from scratch, it is mentioned that the homes in Tempest are 'Japanese-style wooden affairs made from natural materials'.[142] While this is not overly illustrated in the anime, there are notably Japanese buildings – such as Rimuru's own house, with *tatami* mats and a Japanese courtyard, as well as strings of lanterns strung across the city – which implies that visually, Tempest already resembles Japan. More than that, the monsters have also grown accustomed to Japanese food and culture, with the large, public hot springs emphasising its appeal as a tourist destination, along with traditional Japanese inns. As Rimuru muses to himself: '*Food one can look forward to is one of the first steps toward an advanced culture.*'[143] The food Rimuru places the most effort into recreating in this new world is Japanese food, including ramen, sushi, gyoza and yakisoba, going as far as using magical skills to alter crops in order to harvest familiar, Earth-style rice. Though he also recreates some Western cuisine, opening fast food chain stores that include burgers, hot dogs and fries, the majority of Tempest cuisine leans towards the Japanese.[144] Through a combination of physical effort and magical skill, Rimuru's diet soon became 'no different from when I lived in Japan'.[145] When it comes to weaponry, Rimuru reflects: 'Swords, of course, came in a wide array of shapes and sizes. I, of course, pictured a Japanese-style katana as the strongest one out there—but even katanas came in all kinds of

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[142] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 3*, p. 38.
[143] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 1,* p. 175.
[144] Fuse, *Slime Vol 9,* p. 118.
[145] Fuse, *Slime*, *Vol 7*, p. 43.

shapes.'[146] Japanese katanas are well-known for being excellent – perhaps indeed the best – amongst swords, which would make Rimuru's statement a fact. When combined with the other Japanese elements, however, it becomes part of the larger theme of recreating Japanese culture within this fantasy, Western-based world. The growing "Japanese" influence within the new world, represented by the growth of Tempest, hints at a desire to move beyond *mukokuseki* and reintroduce Japanese culture.

Despite the application of *mukokuseki* in exported products such as anime, there is a second argument within anime scholarship which states that 'anime does contain Japanese cultural odour, at least before any cultural editing or mistranslation', and that it is in fact impossible to 'disguise' its 'Japaneseness'. [147] This can potentially be interpreted as an application of soft power. Soft power, first coined by Professor Joseph S. Nye, Jr., is defined as 'a country's ability to achieve its goals by attracting rather than coercing others', using 'cultural and political values and foreign policies that other countries see as legitimate and having moral authority' in order to gain international support.[148] In an assertion that can also be linked back to *mukokuseki*, Allison notes that 'the globalisation of Japanese pop culture does not equate to Japanese soft power, failing, as it does, to become anchored in something in the culture or country itself—social policies and practices, for example, that could fuel a yearning or attraction for the so-called real Japan.'[149] Tsutomu Sugiura, in contrast, argues that 'Japan is steadily becoming a soft power middleweight, owing mainly to the recent world popularity of Japanese pop culture.'[150] Japan, Sugiura writes, 'has long been known by a narrow group of

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[146] Fuse, Slime, *Vol 1*, p. 154

[147] Fennell, p. 441-2.

[148] Yasushi Watanabe and David L McConnel, *Soft Power Superpowers: Cultural and National Assets of Japan and the United States* (Armonk: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), ProQuest eBook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/detail.action?docID=1968817> [accessed 27 November, 2021], p. xvii.

[149] Allison, p. 105.

[150] Tsutomu Sugiura, 'Japan's Creative Industries: Culture as a Source of Soft Power in the Industrial Sector', in *Soft Power Superpowers: Cultural and National Assets of Japan and the United States*, ed. by W. Yasushi & D. L. McConnell (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 128-153 (p. 147), ProQuest eBook

intellectuals and Japanophiles in other countries for its traditional culture, such as pottery, lacquerware, tea ceremony, flower arrangement, bonsai, haiku and tanka poetry, calligraphy, martial arts, and kimonos.'[151] And with the popularity of media such as anime, 'it is through the personalities and lifestyles of the characters featured in these media that young people around the world are exposed to, and may come to know, the soul and culture of Japanese people'.[152]

<div align="center">***</div>

In this Chapter, I have analysed the worldbuilding and desire fulfilment within *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*, one of the currently most popular *isekai*. Although *isekai* narratives are, on occasion, dismissed as escapist 'power fantasies', the complexity of the worldbuilding and politics within the series demonstrates great potential for more in-depth analysis of utopian and dystopian discourse within the genre.[153] Kingdoms and nations within the new world bear similarities to various traditional utopias, including More's island of Utopia, the Land of Cockaigne, and the Japanese *Tokoyo no Kuni*. Although there are other powerful forces, each with their own rules and values (such as the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion, and the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania), I have interrogated the three most developed within the text: Dwargon, Lubelius, and the Eastern Empire. Each of these nations/empires draws on different values, maintaining their lands through defensive neutrality, self-contained economy, and military might, respectively. Throughout the narrative, their advantages and flaws are revealed. None of the three are completely acknowledged as utopic, or judged as fully dystopic. These "incomplete utopias", explored in this hybrid world, demonstrates the complexity and entanglement of utopias and dystopias. Through learning, fighting, and forging new

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Central <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/detail.action?docID=1968817> [accessed 17 December 2021]

[151] Sugiura, p. 133.

[152] Sugiura, p. 134.

[153] For an example of a fan conversation of the genre as a power fantasy, see: u/Lumvia, 'Power Fantasy and Isekais', *Reddit* (2021) [accessed 17 July 2022]

relationships with these powerful forces, Rimuru builds his own ideal utopia of Tempest, which grows into a metropolis that combines Western and Eastern utopian ideals. This chapter has also highlighted a key quality of the *isekai* genre: its self-awareness. Part of both the appeal and complexity of the genre is the way in which it takes full advantage of its own tropes and setting to pose complex questions around society, morality, and culture.

Chapter 2: The Pursuit of Happiness

As an extension of the portal-quest category, the *isekai* fantasy adventure has a long history, even if the term itself has only been internationally popularised in recent years. Even more recently, however, there has been a notable growth of a different sub-genre within the *isekai* genre, intentionally adding more mundane elements to the otherworldly narratives. In the article 'Facet Analysis of Anime Genres: The Challenges of Defining Genre Information for Popular Cultural Objects', Hyerim Cho and others identify several of the key genres of anime.[1] Besides placing *isekai* in the 'setting-place' category, along with the brief definition of 'anime that take place in an alternate reality', Cho and others specify the '*iyashikei*' genre, labelling it under 'mood'.[2] They directly translate this term from Japanese as 'healing', and as this suggests, it is a genre that generates a feeling of 'healing and soothing', with a 'calm and slow-paced atmosphere, depicting small delights in daily life'.[3] This is a genre that frequently overlaps with the 'plot/narrative' genre 'slice of life': 'A story that shows the everyday life of the characters.'[4] Combined with the *isekai* genre, series of this kind focus on the mundane, everyday lives of the characters, as they navigate the new world.

Unlike more mainstream action/adventure *isekai* narratives such as *That Time I Got Reincarnated as Slime, Re:Zero: Starting Life in Another World* (2014)*, and *The Rising of the Shield Hero* (2013)*, slice-of-life *isekai* places greater emphasis on this general theme of healing, providing a warm, relaxing atmosphere where the audience can take a step back from reality.[5]

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[1] Hyerim Cho and others, 'Facet Analysis of Anime Genres: The Challenges of Defining Genre Information for Popular Cultural Objects', *Knowledge Organisation*, 47.1 (2020), 13-30 <https://doi.org/10.5771/0943-7444-2020-1-13>

[2] Cho and others, pp. 21-22

[3] Cho and others, p. 22.

[4] Cho and others, p. 23.

[5] Tappei Nagatsuki, *Re:ZERO -Starting Life In Another World-, Volume 1*, trans. by ZephyrRz (New York: Yen On, 2016),

Though it may seem strange to focus on the mundane within a fantasy world, authors take advantage of familiar tropes around reincarnation and magical convenience to create relaxing, freeing worlds, that is often contrasted with Earth. In this sense, this subgenre bears many similarities to Kathryn Hume's escapism category of the pastoral fantasy. This in turn creates a slightly different type of utopia than what is presented in *Slime,* still centred around desire fulfilment, but with a clear, specific focus on "happiness" and "family". Two texts that exemplify this, which I will be discussing in conjunction throughout this second chapter, are *By the Grace of the Gods* by Roy and *I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level* by Kisetsu Morita. In this chapter, I will be focusing on the ways in which these two series, which both fall under the *iyashikei*, slice-of-life umbrella, present the new world as a more utopian environment through a contrast with the more dystopian aspects of Earth: in particular, the damaging stress of toxic work environments. At the same time, they also point to a harmonious combination of new-world possibilities and applied Earth knowledge, particularly explored in *Grace*, with its primary plotline being driven by protagonist Ryoma's business endeavours. In comparison, *300 Years* explores more of the 'rural' element of pastoral escapism.

Slice of Life and Healing in Isekai

As I discussed in the Introduction, contemporary *isekai* have begun to show a trend of featuring older protagonists, worn and discontent by their everyday lives. The very first line of *Grace* focuses on Ryoma's exhaustion, describing him as having a 'bone-tired face and the streaks of white visible in his hair' that 'made his age seem to be in his late forties or fifties' – at least a whole decade older than his real age.[6] Dying from hitting his head in his sleep after a difficult,

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[6] Roy, *By the Grace of the Gods Volume 1*, trans. by Mana Z. (San Antonio: J Novel Club, 2020), p. 11.

weary life, he is summoned by the gods of the *isekai* world of Seilfall. Before them, Ryoma is given the opportunity to start life anew in a world of fantasy and magic. While it is technically a transmigration, as his soul will be placed into a new body created by the gods instead of a literal rebirth, the youth of his new body – as well as his death in the previous world – essentially places him in the same category of reincarnation as *Slime's* Rimuru.[7] Similarly, *300 Years* begins with a strong emphasis on weariness and exhaustion. Both the light novels and the anime adaptation open with the main character's self-introduction as 'Azusa Aizawa, twenty-seven, female, single. Corporate wage slave. I lived for my job and only for my job.'[8] This is also followed by a meeting with a goddess, where Azusa calmly accepts that she has died after blacking out from overwork. A crucial difference is that unlike Rimuru, who received his skills in an automated process corresponding to his desires and sporadic final thoughts before death, Ryoma and Azusa come into direct contact with the gods of their respective, new worlds. Their "character creation" process is much more of a negotiation, where they are able to choose some of their own skills and abilities. Both processes can be considered to be a part of the *isekai* desire-fulfillment motif, but set up very different tones. Rimuru is plunged headfirst into the new world as a slime, without any explanation, setting the stage for action and adventure. Ryoma, meanwhile, chats with the gods over tea and snacks, and even signs a contract confirming his skill choices before being sent to Seilfall. Upon arriving, he even finds a guidebook explaining the new world in more detail. Azusa is given even more choice, where she is 'free to choose [to be] nearly anything' in her new life.[9] Though these details almost seem to take away some of the thrill of entering a new world, the extra elements of choice and control during the "character creation" stage effectively sets up the narrative as a relaxed, slice-of-life story where the main character finds solace and healing in a new world.

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[7] Roy, *Grace, Vol 1*, p, 16.

[8] Morita, Kisetsu, *I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level Vol 1*, trans. by Taylor Engel (New York: Yen Press, 2018), p. 1.

[9] Morita, *300 Years, Vol 1,* p. 1.

These elements of *Grace* and *300 Years* reflect, to some extent, certain aspects of pastoral escapism. As Hume identifies, pastoral simplicity, focusing on a retreat from society, emphasises two concerns: 'sensory experience and escape from responsibility'.[10] This is further categorised into two forms. There is the 'Insider-pastoral', which is rooted in utopian myths of paradise, and 'stresses sensory experience', offering readers 'the passive pleasures of bucolic perfection', and the opportunity to 'enjoy sensations without trying to analyse the contrast.'[11] This kind of Arcadia and its equivalents 'give man independence', while having minimal responsibility, such as family to look after or political obligations.[12] Free from the 'strains of city life', readers enter a world where

> [n]ature is benign. In this paradisal world, as in infancy, the principals are fed, clothed, and sheltered without exertion on their part. Economy, wars, ambition, and want are not much understood or worried about. Leisure is abundant. The chief gratifications are sensory: taste, smell, and sight predominate, and enjoyment of such pleasures takes one back to a childlike state. Readers […] take a vacation, a sensorily rich rest.[13]

This return to a more rural lifestyle, surrounded by nature, is most evident in *300 Years.* After the goddess's offer, Azusa, reflecting on her harried life in metropolitan Tokyo, requests for a 'carefree existence in a house in the mountains', where she can 'be self-sufficient for the basics.'[14] In response, the goddess arranges for a house in 'peaceful highlands', a short distance from the small village of Flatta, described as 'peaceful, tranquil, and serene. Even on a casual stroll you could sense the clearly pastoral atmosphere.'[15] Besides her routine of killing twenty

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[10] Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 60, Taylor & Francis eBooks <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315759227>

[11] Hume, p. 60.

[12] Hume, p. 61.

[13] Hume, p. 61.

[14] Morita, *300 Years Vol 1*, p. 2.

[15] Morita, *300 Years Vol 1*, p. 7.

slimes – the weakest monsters – per day, making a small income by exchanging their magic crystals for money in the village, and tending to her fields, Azusa begins her 'laid-back life' where she 'did virtually nothing, day in and day out.'[16]

While *Grace* is not directly focused on the sensory experience in the context of the natural world, the medieval-esque world of Seilfall is considerably simpler than the modern metropolis of Tokyo. Furthermore, the slice-of-life genre offers an in-depth exploration of the day-to-day sensations of living in a simpler, fantasy world. As Ryoma explores his magical abilities in the new world, the audience is able to experience his renewed joy in the small pleasures in life, such as crafting and slime caretaking. The reincarnation element of *isekai* also means the literal, physical regression back to a younger, more childlike state. In the context of *Grace*, where this is not just a narrative phase (that he grows out of) but the form Ryoma remains in, this becomes a symbolic discarding of the exhausted, adult form and the return to a happier, more carefree state. The three years that he spends alone in the Forest of Gana, without any responsibility, also plays a significant part in his healing from societal, urban pressures. However, this is only a temporary escape. As someone who becomes fully immersed in the new world, Ryoma eventually re-enters the urban city, and becomes involved in the economy and society of Seilfall. However, the significant difference is that, whether in *Grace* or in *Slime*, these new responsibilities are willingly taken up by the protagonist. Both Ryoma and Azusa are equipped with the knowledge and skill to live alone, free of responsibility, yet *choose* to take on new roles and leadership responsibilities.

The second form of pastoral is the outsider pastoral, where '[c]haracters from city, court, or any complex sector of society, enter the green and pleasant land, but self-consciously and temporarily.'[17] This kind of narrative 'usually takes the romance form', where the pastoral

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[16] Morita, *300 Years Vol 1,* p. 9.
[17] Hume, p. 63.

landscape becomes a 'special world where the hero tests himself and his ideas', before 'return[ing] to his own world, to take an active part in its affairs.'[18] To connect these two pastoral forms to Mendlesohn's categories of fantasy narratives, the insider-pastoral may be considered to fall under the umbrella of the immersive, whereas the outside-pastoral bears more similarities to the portal-quest and/or intrusive, though pastoral escapism does not necessarily equal fantasy. In fact, Hume describes fantasy pastoral as 'relatively rare', as the 'triggering of sensory memories', which the pastoral relies on, 'is best done with verisimilitude' – however, it does occur when 'freedom from responsibility rather than sensory pleasure is the author's main interest.'[19] This is particularly the case with *300 Years,* which, despite being set in a fantasy world, is humorous, light-hearted, and has little semblance of any real 'plot' beyond slice-of-life glimpses into the growing cast of characters' misadventures and daily interactions. The *isekai*, as a mixture of the portal-quest and immersive set in another world, also contains elements of the outsider-pastoral. As I have discussed, the desire-fulfilment basis of many *isekai* means that the new world is literally a playground for the protagonist (as well as others from Earth) to test their ideas. While there is no return to the old world within the narrative itself, the recollections of characters throughout of their time and experiences on Earth links their experiences in the new world to the old, especially in the context of *Grace*, where Ryoma often reflects on his previous life. This then acts as a commentary and critique of the real world.

As an avid light-novel reader, Ryoma displays keen knowledge of existing *isekai* tropes. When asking the gods whether he would, like many protagonists of those stories, have 'some kind of mission', the gods casually reply that his 'mission' is simply to go to the other world; the process of selecting people to become otherworlders in Seilfall is to bring over some of the unused, abundant magical energy on Earth during the transfer.[20] They then assure him, 'Don't

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[18] Hume, p. 60.
[19] Hume, p. 62.
[20] Roy, *Grace Vol 1*, p. 17.

worry about it. It's your life, live it how you please.'[21] Knowing the miserable life Ryoma lived on Earth, they actively encourage him to have fun, reminding him that:

> 'You've died once already, you know? This will really be a rebirth for you, completely different to your previous life. You should live how you want to. Especially since you'll be a child on the other side, you know? You don't have to think about anything other than staying safe and having fun. The powers we bestowed upon you will be your strength, so enjoy your magic practice, too.'[22]

In my discussion of otherworlders in *Slime* in Chapter One, I emphasised this element of desire-fulfilment, suggesting that this is something that the protagonists do without prompting, seemingly embracing their desires by instinct. The fact that Ryoma needs to be explicitly told to do so several times, particularly in the first volume, repeatedly draws attention back to the element of healing. The importance of having fun and enjoying one's life is repeatedly stressed.

When Ryoma is able to meet the gods again after three years in the forest, they express some minor concern at the length of his isolation, but otherwise endorse all his decisions, reminding him that

> 'There's no need to think too deeply. Even if you lived your previous life being swept along by others, that doesn't mean it's still happening here. And going with the flow isn't always a bad thing anyway.'
>
> 'As long as life is fun, that should be enough, don't you think?'[23]

This is often placed in contrast to his memories of his past life as an exhausted corporate slave on Earth, which still weighs on part of his mind, and is ingrained in his personality. However, through his experiences and encounters in Seilfall, Ryoma gradually learns to open up and fully

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[21] Roy, *Grace Vol 1*, p. 21.
[22] Roy, *Grace, Vol 1*, p. 22.
[23] Roy, *Grace, Vol 1,* p. 155.

embrace his new life. This growth is most directly seen in Volume 4, when Fernobelia asks him what he thinks about this new world.[24] Ryoma's honest thoughts are that it was a 'good world', where

> just about everyone I met was a good person and a friend. Magic, slimes, and other unique aspects of this world also interested me enough to provide a fulfilling life, so there was nothing to complain about. I was sincerely glad I came to this world.[25]

The fact that Ryoma gradually begins to accept more jobs and responsibility in Seilfall shows that he is not averse to work itself: in fact, he quickly becomes bored and fidgety when he is forced to take a holiday by his staff. What is important is the comfortable work environment he is in, and being able to find fulfilment and enjoyment in his new life.

This concept of being granted a second opportunity to live a life of happiness is also strongly reflected in *300 Years.* Like Ryoma, Azusa does not show any real surprise or disappointment at her own death. She also meets with a deity and is given the chance for "character creation" with even less restrictions than Ryoma. Just as the Seilfall gods prompt Ryoma to have fun and enjoy life, the goddess promises that, though it would be impossible to 'make up' for her experiences in her previous life, 'I will ensure that your next life has the potential to bring you sheer happiness.'[26] Having set aside everything for the sake of her job, ending in a life 'empty of everything except punching the clock', the request that Azusa had of the goddess was to make her 'completely immortal.'[27] As Azusa states: 'Work had run me ragged until the end of a short life, so for this round, I wanted to take my time. […] What I want is a long, slow, laid-back life.'[28] In response, the goddess made her a witch, forever

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[24] Fernobelia: the god of magic and academics.

[25] Roy, *By the Grace of the Gods Volume 4*, trans. by Noah Rozenberg (San Antonio: J Novel Club, 2021), p. 220.

[26] Morita, *300 Years, Vol 1*, p. 1.

[27] Morita, *300 Years, Vol 1*, pp. 1-2.

[28] Morita, *300 Years, Vol 1*, p. 2.

immortal at the younger age of seventeen. This theme of immortality is not shared with *Grace*, but does link back to my discussion of an immortal found family in the previous chapter. Like Rimuru, Azusa ultimately finds herself surrounded by a close group that she repeatedly refers to as her family, such as similarly aged dragon "younger sisters" Laika and Flatorte, fifty-year-old spirit "daughters" Falfa and Shalsha, and the three millennia old demon "older sister" Beelzebub. It is notable that this becomes an all-female household; a detail which I will discuss later in the chapter. While Azusa does admit that it was 'hard to watch people I knew die when I first experienced it', she firmly denies immortality being a burden.[29] When asked if she 'grew tired of it or felt like dying from boredom sometimes', she would point out the 'practically limitless' potential of a long life, where she could master many different fields that would be impossible for an average human lifespan.[30] Like *Slime,* this highlights the positive aspects of immortality in utopias, being able to enjoy a life that is not only long-lived, but surrounded by people who shared this immortality as a found family.

The overall tone of *300 Years* is more light-hearted and comedic than *Grace*, and Azusa does not experience the same flashbacks that Ryoma is troubled by, but there are small, constant links back to Azusa's life on Earth. For example, when learning that this world's adventurers are occasionally confronted with monster mobs, Azusa parallels this with 'how fifteen jobs that each take an hour to complete are no joke when you have a day to complete them', which was frequently forced on her and caused her to work overtime at the office.[31] When her family meets a minstrel who – unable to reach popularity – was considering giving up her dream in a musical career, Azusa encourages her while recalling the people she saw in Tokyo with 'shattered dreams who went back home', wearing 'bitter smiles to try and trick

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[29] Kisetsu Morita, *I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level Vol 3,* trans. by Jasmine Bernhardt (New York: Yen On, 2018), p. 167.
[30] Kisetsu Morita, *I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level Vol 8,* trans. by Jasmine Bernhardt (New York: Yen On, 2020), p. 152.
[31] Morita, *300 Years, Vol 3*, p. 83.

themselves into believing they didn't mind.'[32] This reinforces the theme of *isekai* serving as both an expression and outlet for desire fulfilment, a form of escapism that strongly ties back to the real world.

Hume argues that escapist literature 'point[s] to the lack of fulfilling and satisfying values in everyday life. The democratic and bourgeois ideal leaves many desires unfulfilled, and, as Rosemary Jackson has argued, fantasy is, among other things, a form of subversion and protest.'[33] Through continuous comparisons of Ryoma and Azusa's two lives, the *isekai* narrative becomes a form of critique of our world, in particular, workplace values and societal pressures. Despite the gods urging him to relax and have fun after reincarnating in Seilfall, Ryoma is held back by his experiences on Earth. Though eager to enter a new world, after living a life weighed down by societal pressure, he has grown weary of human interaction, stating:

> 'I lived for 39 years, but I wasn't very good at socialising. Even if I go to
>
> another world, I'm still me. I don't think going to another world will change
>
> that. Honestly, I'm so tired of socialising, I considered living as a recluse…'[34]

This social element plays a large role in Japanese culture. As Farid Elashmawi writes, 'the importance of group harmony, achievement, and group consensus' is taught to Japanese children from a young age and is reinforced in social institutions such as schools.[35] These 'values of harmony, group togetherness and cohesion, and adherence to rules of etiquette all show themselves in the study of the salaryman', just like Ryoma.[36]

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[32] Kisetsu Morita, *I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level Vol 4,* trans. by Jasmine Bernhardt (New York: Yen On, 2019), p. 65.

[33] Hume, p. 81.

[34] Roy, *Grace Vol 1,* p. 22.

[35] Farid Elashmawi, *Competing Globally: Mastering Multicultural Management and Negotiations* (London: Routledge, 2001), Taylor & Francis eBooks <https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.4324/9780080494241> [accessed 4 April 2022], p. 56.

[36] Elashmawi, p. 56.

While these are all positive attributes in themselves, the pressures of constantly maintaining these values, as well as the existence of systems such as workplace performance evaluations – 'based on how he works within his group, his group's contributions to the department, and how his department contributes to his company's profits' – can also become (as seen in Ryoma) a source of enormous stress.[37] This adds to the highlighting and critique of dystopic elements on Earth, which I will discuss in the next section of this chapter. Recognising this, the gods do not push Ryoma to immediately delve into the new world, displaying understanding and sympathy to his dilemma. When he reveals that he would still consider it 'a waste' to not explore Seilfall, the gods suggest that he 'live in isolation for a while, then set off on a journey once [he] feel[s] like it'.[38] Ryoma acts on this advice, peacefully living alone in the forest for three years. During this time, he amasses an extraordinary number of slime familiars, which he begins to earnestly study after seeing the endless potential of their evolution lines. While taking care of slimes – the weakest of monsters – is generally viewed as boring and repetitive, it is precisely this kind of simple, relaxing lifestyle that 'healed Ryoma's tired heart and gave him vitality.'[39] In this way, Ryoma is content to find joy in the small things in life, gradually recovering from his exhausting life on Earth.

Ryoma eventually leaves the forest after meeting Duke Reinhart Jamil's family by chance while out hunting and assists in healing one of their injured group members. In the original light novel, his decision to leave the forest was a small, natural scene, with Ryoma's own internal debate on his self-isolated life cumulating into a natural decision to accept the offer to join them on their trip to the city. In the anime, however, this scene is highlighted as a turning point in Ryoma's life. In the light novel, Duke Reinhart returns with his family to thank Ryoma for his aid, bringing with them a variety of gifts, among them, a clock. In the anime

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[37] Elashmawi, p. 56.
[38] Roy, *Grace Vol 1*, p. 22.
[39] Roy, *Grace Vol 1*, pp. 41-2.

adaptation, this small, golden clock is the only gift that the Jamil family offers, and plays a more significant, symbolic role. In contrast to the novel, Ryoma's decision is mainly prompted by Reinhart's daughter, Eliaria, whose earnest words echo that of his own desires, that, while there will also be much hardship and sadness, there is also much fun and joy to be found in the outside world.[40] Immediately following her appeal, the scene cuts to a close-up of the hands moving on the clock, along with the sound of ticking fading in, resounding loudly, and fading out again. This becomes symbolic of Ryoma's frozen time, during his seclusion in the forest, beginning to start again, finally allowing for a true, fresh start on his life.

Throughout *Grace*, Ryoma mentions his discomfort with too much socialisation, and occasionally prefers to avoid it when possible. Though he steadily forms many connections, with a growing number of friends, acquaintances, and business partners, he still finds himself drawn back to his time alone, wondering if his current life is truly better than life in the forest.[41] While happy to form temporary parties with other adventurers for work, having to be around people all the time gives Ryoma a sense of 'indescribable discomfort'.[42] At the same time, however, Ryoma frequently delights in being around those he cares about, such as during the party with the Jamil family, when he reflects that, unlike parties he had to attend on Earth, he truly enjoyed himself:

> I drank around large groups before, but it was never this much fun. I knew
> the food in my world tasted better than this too, but today, I liked their food
> more. The drinks, too.

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[40] *By The Grace of the Gods Episode 2 – Departure, With the Slimes),* dir. by Takeyuki Yanase (Funimation, 2020), in *Funimation* <https://www.funimation.com/v/by-the-grace-of-the-gods/departure-with-the-slimes> [accessed March 2, 2022]

[41] Roy, *By the Grace of the Gods Volume 5*, trans. by Noah Rozenberg (San Antonio: J Novel Club, 2021)*,* p. 124.

[42] Roy, *By the Grace of the Gods Volume 6*, trans. by Noah Rozenberg (San Antonio: J Novel Club, 2021)*,* p. 72.

That reminded me of how Tekun said I never had any enjoyable drinks in my world. This was probably what he meant.[43]

This hints at the routine of a Japanese salaryman, where two or three times a week, 'employees will get together after work to eat, drink, smoke, and talk.'[44] As seen through Ryoma, these social norms are not enjoyed by everyone. These seemingly contrary desires represent his longing for connection, held back by his trauma from his workplaces on Earth. Once he enters the new world, however, his own hidden desires to re-enter society is reflected in his familiar aptitude. In Seilfall, all tamers have an affinity towards particular kinds of monsters, which they find easiest to form contracts with. When taking the aptitude test at the tamers guild, it is revealed that Ryoma has an aptitude for "social monsters" – monsters that tend to form groups, like Ryoma's slimes and limour birds. When he questions the gods about whether this monster aptitude was something inherent to him from the start, they agree that, presumably, his desires should be reflected in his skill set.[45] Kufo elaborates, pointing out:

'It's hard to explain, but I mean, you lived a pretty lonely life on Earth, right? You were part of a company, so you had coworkers and subordinates, but I feel like you weren't that close with many people. […] You didn't go out of your way to join groups, and you were okay on your own, but it's not like you were uninterested in joining any group. Those desires can sometimes be unconscious, and that may have affected your monster aptitude.'[46]

Though Ryoma himself never seemed to think about this too deeply, through the time he spends in Seilfall and the people he encounters, he becomes more comfortable being himself, and begins directly confronting problems in a way he would not have on Earth.

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[43] Tekun: The Seilfall God of Wine and Craft.
Roy, *By the Grace of the Gods Volume 3*, trans. by Noah Rozenberg (San Antonio: J Novel Club, 2021)*, p. 175.
[44] Elashmawi, p. 56.
[45] Roy, *Grace, Vol 6,* p. 132.
[46] Roy, *Grace, Vol 6*, p. 133.

> Eventually, even when issues arise, Ryoma comes to the conclusion that
>
> > Whether people were going to avoid me after this or not, I didn't plan on
> >
> > hiding away in the forest again. It would be impossible for every single
> >
> > person I met to like me, anyway. I'd been lucky enough to meet some great
> >
> > people during my time in this world, but now that I had more opportunities
> >
> > to mingle with a greater breadth of people, this was going to happen
> >
> > eventually.[47]

This is a crucial change in Ryoma's mindset, where he changes from *avoidance* to *acceptance*, and demonstrates great progress in his journey of healing. While he originally only wants to focus on his own life, avoiding human contact altogether, he eventually begins desiring to bring more positive changes to society. This change in his thought process is perhaps most clearly laid out in Volume 7, when Ryoma reveals his idea (drawn from policies on Earth – specifically, Japan) of hiring and rehabilitating former felons to benefit the economy. When this is met with scepticism, Ryoma concedes that, rationally, it is perhaps a hopeless venture that will not make a great difference, like 'a drop in the ocean', because Seilfall does not have the policies and resources as Earth.[48] However:

> I could not change how I felt. It was tough to fully comprehend my own
>
> feelings [...] but reflecting on my life since coming to this world, this seemed
>
> like the natural course of action.[49]

Spending an extended period of time living by himself, gradually reintegrating into society, opening and running an expanding business, branching out into various side ventures and meeting a variety of people, Ryoma never forgets that

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[47] Roy, *Grace, Vol 6*, p. 92.

[48] Roy, *By the Grace of the Gods Volume 7*, trans. by Adam Seacord (San Antonio: J Novel Club, 2022), p. 64.

[49] Roy, *Grace, Vol 7*, p. 64.

[t]he gods told me to live freely, so I took an easygoing attitude and did

whatever I felt like doing. This was how I'd lived my life ever since coming

to this world; it was the only thing I felt I could confidently say.[50]

Thus, when the merchant Pioro and Reinhart asks the reasons behind his decision, Ryoma replies, '[…] I just want to.'[51] While not as whimsical as Rimuru, who frequently acts on passing ideas he found intriguing at the time, this can be interpreted as Ryoma's version of further acting on his desires. He is aware of how unrealistic it sounds, yet at the same time keeps it grounded in reality, explaining:

'[…] when I decided I wanted to do that, I thought about how I could do it.

That's pretty much it. Oh, but I'm not saying I'll do this at any cost and rush

to make it happen right away. I'd just like to see things improve at least a

little before I die. Is that childish of me?'[52]

Though the almost morbidly rational note at the end startled the adults, this gradual shift in Ryoma's journey demonstrates an upward, aspirational trajectory that aims for a more utopian world. Through his experiences in this pastoral world, Ryoma is able to experience a process of healing. From a chosen life of isolation in the forest to a willing return to society, Ryoma does not fully abandon his corporate background, and instead finds happiness in being able to work in a new, almost "semi-pastoral" environment that combines the healing aspect of the pastoral with the benefits of modern business culture and scientific advancements.

While Ryoma is often shown to struggle with balancing his old mindset from Earth, Azusa more readily accepts the idea of forming relationships in a new society and finds comfort in forming a found family. Although she also requests a new, self-sufficient life in the mountains, she still makes frequent visits to the village, where she will trade in magic crystals

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[50] Roy, *Grace, Vol 7*, p. 65.
[51] Roy, *Grace, Vol 7*, p. 64.
[52] Roy, *Grace, Vol 7*, p. 65.

for money, purchase any necessities she cannot make or forage, and assist anyone in need using her herbalist skills. However, in another sense, it also takes her much longer to come across the trigger that leads to her full immersion in the new world, which, for Ryoma, was the meeting with the Duke's family. Compared to Ryoma's three years of isolation, Azusa's immortal status allows her to spend three hundred years living alone in her highlands cottage. The series directly addresses that she does not mind this, having chosen immortality of her own will. This is born from her 'desire to be recognised' in her previous life, where she died from overwork before receiving any recognition, and she is fulfilled in the new world simply by helping and selling potions to the people of Flatta. [53] At the same time, I would still describe these three centuries as the time of recovery that Azusa found necessary to heal from her experiences on Earth.

After accidentally reaching the maximum level 99 and being challenged in a duel by Laika, however, a non-blood related "family" naturally start to gather around her. Almost symbolically, her original house is accidentally destroyed during their fight, and is rebuilt with larger extensions that quickly fills up with new members. When reflecting on her time alone compared to her current life, Azusa decides that

> […] if I was to compare my three hundred years of the past and these (almost) two years, I could easily say with confidence that the latter had been much more delightful and fun.
>
> I didn't mind my laid-back life on my own, but spending it with so many others was special. [54]

By Volume 8 of the light novel, Azusa decides that 'I'd lived alone for much, much longer, but I could never go back to that life. Living with everyone was way more fun.' [55] Like Ryoma, this

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[53] Morita, *300 Years, Vol 3*, p. 131, 122.

[54] Kisetsu Morita, *I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level Vol 5,* trans. by Jasmine Bernhardt (New York: Yen On, 2019), pp. 179-80.

[55] Morita, *300 Years Volume 8*, pp. 116.

continuously recurring emphasis on family being linked with fun and happiness is a notable theme that *300 Years* explores in a way that *Grace* and *Slime* does not. Both Rimuru and Ryoma greatly care about their found family, but not to the same extent.

Given *300 Years'* female-focused cast, perhaps there is an indirect commentary about traditional expectations of a "successful" family, and specifically for women. As Lynne Nakano points out in the book chapter 'Happiness and unconventional life choices': 'It used to be commonly stated that marriage and family were the primary sources of happiness for women in Japan. Multiple indicators, however, reveal considerable scepticism on this point.'[56] Yet at the same time, 'marriage remains a life goal for most women in Japan.'[57] Single women 'face challenges in obtaining happiness', as they live an 'unconventional life' in a society where 'marriage comes with expectations of heterosexual reproduction, and the sacrifice of their careers and interests for the family.'[58] Singlehood, while allowing 'freedom from the rigid expectations of marriage,' also 'brings financial problems as women earn less than men, are disadvantaged in promotion, and face difficulties of obtaining intimacy and challenges in defining a place for themselves in a family and in society.'[59] Nakano also points to media representation, where women who remain single into their thirties have been described as 'social and economic "losers"', while married women 'are described as "winners"'.[60] At the same time, while Nakano discusses these existing trends as a whole, individual women interviewed during research 'commonly explained their happiness in terms of self-development, freedom, and independence', stating that 'remaining single allows them to develop themselves

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[56] Lynne Nakano, 'Happiness and unconventional life choices,' in *Happiness and the Good Life in Japan,* ed. by Wolfram Manzenreiter & Barbara Holthus (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 53-66 (p. 53), Taylor & Francis eBooks <https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.4324/9781315665641> [accessed 27 April, 2022]
[57] Nakano, p. 53.
[58] Nakano, p, 54.
[59] Nakano, p. 54.
[60] Nakano, p. 54. Mention of (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012: 203–207).

as individuals', giving them 'the freedom to enjoy their lives', 'contribute to society by earning their own living', and 'become polished in the ways of the world.'[61]

Nakano's chapter is from Wolfram and Manzenreiter's *Happiness and the Good Life in Japan*, published in 2017. The various cited sources, including Nakano's own previous research, are mostly centred around the time frame of 2010-2015. The first light novel edition of *300 Years* was released in Japan in 2017 (the original web novel beginning in 2016). Though the series does not directly discuss these marital issues, the time frame it is written in means that it is imbedded in the context of both traditional views as well as recent changes, and some of this can be seen in the narrative. Azusa is described as a female 'corporate wage slave' who 'set aside romance and leisure' for the sake of her work, with a record of fifty consecutive days.[62] This places Azusa in a very similar "salaryman" category as Ryoma, which I will discuss in the following section. After she is reincarnated into the *isekai*, where she spends three hundred years alone, Azusa does *not* show any interest in romance, and instead chooses to pursue leisure. Already, in the context of Nakano's argument, this would place her closer to the category of "unconventional". Beyond her extended life expectancy, Azusa's single, peaceful life in the new world comments on the possibility of finding ideal happiness after stepping outside of social restraints. As author Kisetsu Morita comments in the afterword of Volume 3, 'Azusa is living a laid-back life her own way, but I think a hundred people would have many different ways to take it easy. I'm hoping to represent all those different kinds of relaxing lifestyles through different characters.'[63] This points to a utopian world of freedom and independence, where characters can shape their own lives at their own pace.

Although there is a strong emphasis on family, with imagined roles such as "daughters," "mothers" and "sisters", compared to traditional families, Azusa's household remains

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[61] Nakano, p. 58.
[62] Morita, *300 Years, Vol 1*, p. 1.
[63] Morita, *300 Years, Vol 3*, p. 203.

unconventional. Their close friends and family of dragons, elves, ghosts, spirits, gods, and demons is described as unusual even in the new world, and can be read as a symbolic coming together of different personalities, races, and beliefs, creating an inclusive, utopian sense of belonging. Although Azusa considers it a 'real hassle' when Laika suddenly appears to challenge the max level 99 "strongest witch", she reflects that '[h]ad I never met her, I don't think I ever would've thought of creating a family like we have now', something through which she has 'received so much happiness.'[64] Most importantly, it is a found family that naturally comes together. In Volume 6, Azusa also comments on the existence of 'family obligations' on Earth, stating that she planned on making sure that the time spent with her growing, extended family would always be a fun event, as '*[o]bligation* meant that it was some kind of externally enforced requirement. I didn't think that was meant to be at all used for family.'[65] Laura Dales analyses this importance of friendships and happiness in the chapter 'Friendships, marriage and happiness in contemporary Japan'*,* highlighting that '[w]hile marriage and kin relationships may retain discursive centrality for their function (and dysfunction) in contemporary Japan, friendship suggests possibilities for happiness and belonging built on ideals and practices of affinity.'[66] Furthermore:

> The formation and maintenance of friendships may represent both cause and
>
> effect of happiness. As individuals reach out, forming connections with
>
> similarly positioned others, they establish new possibilities for intimacy, fun,
>
> self-knowledge, and contentment. Through relationships they experience the
>
> positive affect of connection and belonging. These relationships in turn

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[64] Morita, *300 Years, Vol 4*, p. 109.

[65] Kisetsu Morita, *I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level Vol 6,* trans. by Jasmine Bernhardt and Taylor Engel (New York: Yen On, 2019), pp. 117-8.

[66] Laura Dales, 'Friendships, marriage and happiness in contemporary Japan' in *Happiness and the Good Life in Japan,* ed. by Wolfram Manzenreiter & Barbara Holthus (London: Routledge, 2017), pp 67-85 (p. 67), Taylor & Francis eBooks <https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.4324/9781315665641> [accessed 27 April, 2022]

enable growth, the leap to new capacities for social engagement, new community, and belonging. The relationships may begin with joy, and will likely generate joy, and it is this affect that supports and fuels the maintenance of friendship through practice.[67]

While a similar group is formed in *Slime*, the *iyashikei* slice-of-life genre allows a much more in-depth exploration of these relationships in a domestic setting. It is a trip to the beach that leads to Azusa's musing on the troubles of arranging large family events, which eventually leads to the brief commentary on family obligations above. In Volume 4, the family comes together to help a struggling minstrel gain popularity, and their encouragement reminds Azusa of the difficulty of job-seeking in modern Tokyo.[68] Through her friendships and newfound family, Azusa leaves behind the restraints of her past and embraces her own pursuit of happiness.

Dystopian Earth

An aspect of *By the Grace of the Gods* that I consider particularly significant is its ongoing relationship with Earth. In most fantasy *isekai* narratives, while the protagonist may occasionally reflect on their personal life on Earth, the old world that they leave behind is not often addressed. In *Grace*, however, an extra chapter at the end of every novel explores the lives of Ryoma's co-workers following his death. From his landlord and work colleague reminiscing about Ryoma over drinks, to the eventual collapse of the exploitive company they work for, these chapters – told in a different perspective to Ryoma's own narrative – further highlight the societal pressures that workers are placed under on Earth. Positioned in stark

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[67] Dales, p. 80.

[68] Morita, *300 Years, Vol 4*, p. 65.

contrast to the cheerful life Ryoma is now able to lead, where he is busy yet fulfilled, these small snippets emphasise the potential framing of modern Earth – despite its technological advancement and conveniences that Ryoma carries over to Seilfall – as a dystopian world. This is not done as explicitly in *300 Years*, but the small mentions back to Azusa's experiences on Earth still firmly connects the fantasy world to the old, and positions that old world as predominantly dystopian.

As I have discussed in the previous section, the core theme that connects both of these texts is the pursuit of a happier, desire-driven lifestyle; specifically, in a Japanese context. This links with and leads to the much wider discourse on the academic research of happiness. Barbara Holthus and Wolfram Manzenreiter specifically use this term of 'happiness', discussing its distinction and relation to 'similar key terms of the academic debate' such as 'life satisfaction, well-being, and quality of life'.[69] 'Happiness' is 'more catchy and thus more popular within public and (most importantly) commercial discourse', and 'even though academic and public discourse might partially use different terminology, we also see an increase in academic output in the areas of "happiness research."'[70] This growing public and academic interest in happiness may also be a major reason for the recent increase in *iyashikei,* slice-of-life *isekai.* 'Japan of the early 21st century,' Manzenreiter and Holthus writes, 'may not be seen as a prime example of a happy people.'[71] Reasons that are stated include the 'rapid aging of society, shrinking household incomes and savings, rural depopulation and economic decline […] plus an increasingly nationalist stance of Japan's foreign policy threatening peace at its borders and its harmonious relationships with neighbours abroad and minorities at

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[69] Barbara Holthus and Wolfram Manzenreiter, *Life Course, Happiness and Well-being in Japan* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 6, Taylor & Francis eBooks <https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.4324/9781315266114> [accessed 27 April, 2022]

[70] Holthus and Wolfram, p. 4.

[71] Wolfram Manzenreiter and Barbara Holthus, *Happiness and the Good Life in Japan* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 1, Taylor & Francis eBooks <https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.4324/9781315665641> [accessed 27 April, 2022]

home'.[72] These developments in policy and economy lead to worries and fears around a worsening Japan, with topics such as 'increasing cases of workplace-induced depression, numbers of suicides and death through overwork (*karōshi*), the mounting fear of solitary death (*kodokushi*), and people to withdraw from society (*hikikomori*).'[73] These stories 'speak of a society hampered by maladaptation at such a great scale that increasing proportions of its members, across all age groups, are threatened by dissatisfaction, deprivation, alienation, depression, fear, and hopelessness.'[74]

At the same time, other research also indicates that this common portrayal of Japan does not reflect reality. In *Quality of Life in Japan: Contemporary Perspectives on Happiness*, Ming-Chang Tsai and Noriko Iwai agree that 'stories of misery as well as psychopathologies reported in popular media indicate that Japan is not a promising research site for studies on happiness', supported by 'the official statistics of Japan' which 'report some similar trends about *karoshi, kodokushi, or hikikomori.'*[75] However, they also emphasise that despite these statistics,

> anthropologists of happiness in Japan have argued we should avoid a one-dimensional understanding as such, and suggest a panoptical perspective to look at the society in its entirety. They particularly propose examination of mundane, ordinary practical expression of happiness, and distinctive structural or institutional contexts in which (un)favourable emotions originate or are embedded.[76]

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[72] Manzenreiter and Holthus, p. 1.
[73] Manzenreiter and Holthus, p. 1.
[74] Manzenreiter and Holthus, p. 1.
[75] Ming-Chang Tsai and Noriko Iwai, *Quality of Life in Japan: Contemporary Perspectives on Happiness* (Singapore: Springer Singapore Pte. Limited, 2020), p. 5, SpringerLink Books <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8910-8_1> [accessed 26 April, 2022]
[76] Tsai and Iwai, p. 5.

While national records do play a factor, this also needs to be balanced with different categories of happiness, which differ across cultures, that are not reflected in statistics. Tsai and Iwai argue that 'Japan does not perform less well in terms of the individual level of well-being from a cross-national comparative perspective, despite frustrating observations from mass media.'[77] From their empirical findings, they state that '[l]ife does not seem to have fared worse over time in [Japan]. Longitudinal observation of how people perceived and rated their life conditions seems to suggest that Japanese on average are able to enjoy a desirable level of life satisfaction.'[78] Manzenreiter and Holthus also seems to agree with this by the end of *Happiness and the Good Life in Japan*, summarising that

> Despite the rather gloomy outlook extracted from mass media reports on the larger political and socioeconomic environment that enforced changes in Japanese society at many institutional levels, and despite the low values of life satisfaction and subjective well-being that most international surveys attest to the Japanese, the micro-perspective reveals a quite different impression.[79]

Though Japan might fare poorly in 'cross-cultural comparison of overall life satisfaction', the contributors ultimately conclude that 'in certain domain-specific satisfaction Japan seems to be doing quite well.'[80] These two portrayals seem to reach a kind of balance, where the impression of Japan as an "unhappy country" is neither baseless nor completely accurate. Yet, despite Tsai and Iwai's critique of the "frustrating mass media", I will argue that it is still crucial to consider the portrayal of Japanese society – and happiness – within popular works such as *Grace* and *300 Years*. With literature being reflective of the environment it is written in, both of these

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[77] Tsai and Iwai, p. 7.
[78] Tsai and Iwai, p. 12.
[79] Manzenreiter and Holthus, p. 243.
[80] Manzenreiter and Holthus, p. 244.

works find ways of pointing out the negatives while highlighting the positives of Japanese society.

Though Ryoma is described as having worked various jobs in his previous life, the one that is most frequently addressed, and left the most significant mark in his memories, is his time as a salaryman. This focus is significant, for as Farid Elashmawi describes: '[t]he phenomenon of the Japanese salaryman is indicative of many of the cultural norms of Japan.'[81] The salaryman is not a new figure in anime and manga: in the article 'Men Under Pressure: Representations of the `Salaryman' and his Organisation in Japanese Manga', Peter Mantale, Leo McCann, and Darren Ashmore analyse the salaryman-based manga series *Sarariiman Kintarō* and *Shima Kōsaku.* They argue that salaryman manga

> cleverly critiques salarymen and their corporations. In doing so, it reflects
> onto Japanese society the sharp ambiguity of two conflicting wants—the
> wish to preserve the stability and cultural integrity of Japanese-style
> organisational management, while appreciating the desire to engage in
> substantive reforms to that system. Indeed, we argue that salaryman manga
> is a reflection of the feelings of trauma and change that Japanese salaryman
> experience in their working lives and which they often associate with
> globalisation, financialisaton and Americanisation. However, this genre also
> depicts the strength and resilience of the local, domestic features of the
> successful Japanese organisation.[82]

Elements of this critique can be seen in *Grace* in its representation of salarymen, and its dual goal to both frame the modern Japanese influence on Seilfall in a positive light, while also using the setting of the new world to criticise more troubling aspects of modern (specifically,

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[81] Elashmawi, p. 56.

[82] Peter Matanle, Leo McCann and Darren Ashmore, 'Men Under Pressure: Representations of the `Salaryman' and his Organisation in Japanese Manga', *Organisation,* 15.5 (2005), 639-664 <https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.1177/1350508408093646> (p. 641).

Japanese) work environments. Ryoma's flashbacks particularly emphasise this sense of trauma.

In the book *Mental Health Challenges Facing Contemporary Japanese Society: The 'Lonely People'*, Yuko Kawanishi states that

> Hidden behind material abundance and organised manners and behaviours are the traumas experienced everywhere, but they are seldom expressed openly. Like the characters in Ozu Yasushiro's classic film, *Tokyo Story*, made more than fifty years ago, the Japanese still appear to accept and quietly resign themselves to a number of small daily conflicts and stressful circumstances that people from other cultures would be likely to face up to. The Japanese are taught from childhood to avoid openly making a fuss about life's small conflicts and inconveniences, despite also being brought up to be extremely sensitive to the potential conflicts arising from interpersonal relationships. […] A mature individual in Japanese society is someone who has the ability to keep his or her frustrations and negative feelings to him or herself. Easily expressing them means disrupting apparently harmonious relationships, a cardinal sin in Japanese daily life.[83]

This focus on harmony, and the placing of others before the self – even if it means the suppression of one's own feelings – for the benefit of society can theoretically strengthen organisations and the nation as a whole, but can also become a source of stress. The constant questioning of "what do others think of me?" and "how would they criticise my behaviour?" leads to a 'heightened self-consciousness' that 'oppresses inner object-self, which results in a

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[83] Yuko Kawanishi, *Mental Health Challenges Facing Contemporary Japanese Society: The 'Lonely People'* (Kent: Global Oriental Ltd, 2009) ProQuest eBook Central <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/detail.action?docID=772012> [accessed 4 April 2022], pp. xviii-xix.
I draw extensively on Yuko Kawanishi's book, which provides an insightful analysis of mental health in contemporary Japan, and makes available many otherwise untranslated Japanese source material that is invaluable for a non-Japanese speaking scholar such as myself, who can only access it via her work.

negative sense of oneself'.[84] This in turn leads to 'anticipatory anxiety, weak will, timidity, and indecisiveness.'[85] Many of these anxieties can be seen in Ryoma, both in the past – where he had to constantly practice self-restraint – and in the new world.

After becoming the owner of his own laundromat business (centred around cleaning slimes that only eat dirt and grime, leaving clothes pristine), as well as successfully establishing himself as a reliable business partner in other ventures, Ryoma is still haunted by memories of his past as an abused, overworked employee, which often manifests in both his hyperconsciousness of the way he treats his own employees, and his wariness and self-doubt towards openly stating his own ideas and opinions. When Ryoma first opens Bamboo Forest, he makes sure to establish employee perks, going so far as to provide housing. He apologises profusely when – taken off guard by the crowds of customers from opening day – his two initial employees are unable to take breaks, immediately going to hire more people. He also panics when he realises that he forgot to discuss set holidays, shocking his employees, who had not expected any in the first place. Seilfall is far from a perfect world: some working conditions are no better than that of Earth, employee benefits are rare, and those in lower social classes struggle to find work. Ryoma also learns about the 'slime laboratory' from fellow slime researchers, 'a department for getting rid of [researcher] employees the bosses didn't like', where mistreated, underpaid employees are treated worse than the slaves in this world. In a moment of explicit social critique, Ryoma makes a direct comparison to the 'abusive companies in Japan.'[86] As a result, Ryoma forms an instant camaraderie with Caulkin from the laboratory from their experience in difficult work environments and passion for slimes; a moment that is presented as comedic, with a shared moment of silent understanding before an abrupt clasping of hands, exclaiming, 'My comrade!' and 'My brethren!'[87] Having been

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[84] Kawanishi, pp. 9-10.
[85] Kawanishi, p. 10.
[86] Roy, *Grace Vol 4*, p. 61-2.
[87] Roy, *Grace Vol 3*, p. 135.

reincarnated in this new world and granted an excess of magical power, as well as his experiences and knowledge from Earth, Ryoma makes the decision to do what he can to improve working conditions. For Ryoma, as an otherworlder capable of drastically changing Seilfall, the new world is utopian in the sense of holding endless potential and opportunities.

On a more personal level, Ryoma's Earth workplace is repeatedly portrayed as an inescapable, restrictive dystopia that not only exhausted his body, but undermined his spirit and negatively shaped his personality. When Ryoma accepts the task of acting as a teacher during a training camp, the way his students avoid him, daunted by his abilities, reminds him of his time training new recruits at the office. The trainees accuse him of not teaching them properly, supposedly to the extent of developing PTSD, and his employers blame him for not teaching them correctly. The problem is that Ryoma never did anything wrong:

> I tried to walk them through everything, but it just made them hate me. In the end, most of them quit. I never threatened them. I was even careful never to yell at them. I was always calm with them, and if they didn't know something or did something wrong, I would teach them as many times as it took. […] I tried many different approaches, but the end result was always the same. I didn't know what I was doing wrong then, and I didn't know what I was doing wrong in my new life, either.[88]

While he was physically intimidating in his old life, even in his new body his skill and wisdom sometimes causes others to be uncomfortable. Especially in his old life, where he did not have the freedom of choice, he felt trapped and desperate, constantly critiqued for things he could not help.

Furthermore, despite his frequent sharing of new product ideas, another flashback in Volume 8 highlights Ryoma's hesitation in suggesting them. His staff and business partners

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[88] Roy, *Grace Vol 6*, pp. 87-88.

are always cheerfully receptive, '[b]ut I couldn't help remembering how, at my old office job, many of my suggestions to improve workflow had been brushed off with the response that "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." Even if it actually *was* broken.'[89] It is these experiences that drove Ryoma away from interacting with other people, weary of social interaction. These examples highlight 'the overwhelming importance of human relationships and personality factors in the typical Japanese workplace, which may not be easily applied to Western working environments.'[90] Though Ryoma is capable and efficient in his work,

> [a] person who is good at getting things done and who shows real results is not necessarily evaluated higher unless he or she shows these human qualities [of having a "good cooperative attitude", how considerate/sincere they are, how willing they are to take on extra work], and in fact can be evaluated lower if he or she behaves in a self-centred, uncooperative way.[91]

This also relates to the concept of needing to be able to "read the air" (*kuki wo yomu*), in order to '[sense] the unspoken rules of what behaviours are appropriate and not appropriate in any situation' – a skill that is 'regarded as highly important' in society, and also 'requires self-restraint when communicating feelings, behaviours and thoughts'.[92] One is expected to blend in and become invisible, contributing without standing out. In Ryoma's case, however, he becomes the target of critique even when he is fully cooperative, completing more than his share of the work. As is later revealed, much of his misfortunes is the result of outsider interference.

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[89] Roy, *By the Grace of the Gods Volume 8*, Apple Books Edition, trans. by Adam Seacord (San Antonio: J Novel Club, 2021), pp. 180

[90] Kawanishi, p. 44.

[91] Kawanishi, p. 44.

[92] Noboru Komiya and Keith Tudor, ''Reading the air', finding common ground: reconsidering Rogers' therapeutic conditions as a framework for understanding therapy in Japan', *Asia Pacific Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy* 7.1-2 (2016), 26-38 < DOI: 10.1080/21507686.2016.1157088> (p. 29).

While not as power-driven as *Slime*, Seilfall also contains some element of "survival of the fittest", with both magic and physical force being accepted in adventuring work and self-defence. With his background in martial arts, Ryoma is capable of defending himself even without magic and does not falter if violence is necessary, able to take on jobs that involve killing bandits. It is uncomfortable social interactions which bother him more, such as dealing with drunks, which remind him of when he was self-conscious of his intimidating appearance and the self-restraint of controlling his strength. After restraining the drunks, Ryoma reflects that he

> […] was so overly cautious that it took longer to deal with them than it usually would. I'd lived a mostly stress-free life since I came to this world, but this was exhausting in a way I hadn't felt in quite some time. […] I was reminded of how I felt back in my days as an office worker, and it was definitely reaffirmation for me that I didn't want to end up there again.

This reinforces the way that the past is framed as a site of pain, a dystopia that spills over into his present in the new world. All of this brings to attention the unfortunate reality of these abusive, exploitive workplaces, particularly highlighting their existence in Japan. As Helen Young writes, fantasy, like other speculative fictions genres such as science fiction and horror, 'constructs rhetorical distance' between its own world and reality, and contains 'the potential to make us look at our world in new ways, to reconsider attitudes and assumptions.'[93] The *isekai* setting takes advantage of this role of fantasy by both emphasising and subverting genre tropes and expectations to explore different aspects of reality. The looming presence of real-life stresses and anxieties, even in these fantastical, slice-of-life, escapist *isekai* worlds, set in

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[93] Helen Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (Milton: Routledge, 2015), p. 2, Taylor & Francis eBooks <https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.4324/9781315724843> [accessed 16 September 2021]

completely different realms and times to our own where the protagonist's "mission" is to "have fun", serves as an ongoing reminder of reality and social critique.

The real world is further portrayed as a dystopia in a more literal sense, where the god of Earth appears to be flippantly '[i]nterfering with the fates of the living for no reason', and stealing Ryoma's happiness.[94] Not only does the main god in charge of Earth continually abuse his use of divine trials to inflict hardship, the power that Ryoma should have rightfully received in return for overcoming the trials 'was useless for his work and fortune', instead only unnecessarily strengthening his body, resulting in the intimidating figure that further distanced him from his co-workers.[95] Each occurrence 'was continuously suppressed at the level of everyday misfortune or bad luck, and for an awfully long time'. As the Seilfall gods identify, 'enough dust can make a mountain', with the small inconveniences and social problems Ryoma must face on an everyday basis eventually becoming a crushing burden.[96] This divine interference is looked into by the Seilfall gods, whose investigations reveal 'a number of other people with misfortune deliberately thrust upon them', with the happiness that gets stolen as a result not being used for any purpose.[97] They also critique the Earth gods for not fulfilling their divine duties, stating:

> That world has also been poorly managed. The people there have such advanced technology that maybe there's little left for gods to do, but keeping other gods from interfering in your world is one of the basic rules. We were always careful about sneaking in, but it's been almost disappointingly easy to do. I worried about that for nothing.[98]

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[94] Roy, *Grace Vol 1*, pp. 36-7.
[95] Roy, *Grace Vol 1*, pp. 37.
[96] Roy, *Grace Vol 1*, p. 37.
[97] Roy, *Grace Vol 3*, p. 194.
[98] Roy, *Grace Vol 3*, p. 195.

This quote is ambiguous about whether "advanced technology" has a positive or negative impact, and focuses on the scrutiny of these fictional Earth gods themselves. It is brought back in a decidedly dystopian sense, however, in Volume 9, when the god Serelipta directly looks into Ryoma's soul and declares the main Earth god to have been planning what he describes as video game-like life simulations, where he is essentially 'playing a game with human lives'.[99]

This directly links to issues frequently explored in dystopian fiction, such as the question of free will, and the idea of slife simulation. Before Ryoma's death and reincarnation, the goal of the Earth god, Serelipta theorises, was to turn Ryoma into a serial killer. Gradually piling misfortune upon misfortune, '[t]hey wanted him to have a miserable life. Just keep all that frustration bottled up, and then one day, snap! You've got a killer on your hands.'[100] In preparation for the ultimate ending, all the "gifts" Ryoma gained for carrying these misfortunes relate to crime and killing: 'robbery, thievery, or pretty much any major crime you could think of, save for sexual violence. […] But yeah, most of the others were along similar lines—murder, genocide, torture.'[101] In this game of nurture versus nature, the Earth god intentionally avoids using his full power, instead 'beat[ing] around the bush and provid[ing] opportunities for chance, like only giving Ryoma talents and a tough environment, so they couldn't predict the outcome.'[102] This explains Ryoma's powerful mental fortitude displayed on his status board, having 'fought against the temptations planted by the god of Earth' and maintained his humanity.[103] It also explains many aforementioned elements of Ryoma's personality. As Serelipta describes:

> If he's constantly told that he is useless by others, he'll end up believing it;
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> no different from a child getting told the same by parents or other figures of

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[99] Roy, *By the Grace of the Gods Volume 9*, Apple Books Edition, trans. by Adam Seacord (San Antonio: J Novel Club, 2021), p. 132-3.

[100] Roy, *Grace Vol 9*, p. 134.

[101] Roy, *Grace Vol 9*, p. 134.

[102] Roy, *Grace Vol 9*, p. 136.

[103] Roy, *Grace Vol 9*, p. 136.

authority. The god's little game has greatly warped the formation of Ryoma's character. Of course, some children can stay strong even as everyone around them tries to beat them down, but Ryoma would probably fit better into that category… Probably because his self-control was too strong, I guess. It must have been a self-defence mechanism to protect himself from the visceral urge to kill, because he always goes overboard when it comes to reprimanding himself or holding himself back.[104]

This manipulation of humans, apparently as playthings, alludes to the larger discourse on the role of "gods". Serelipta's theory parallels the line from *King Lear*: 'As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport.'[105] This conversation between the gods introduces another contrast between the utopian Seilfall and the more dystopian Earth, through the ways in which their respective gods treat humanity.

While the addition of divine interference adds another layer of complexity, I argue that this still revolves around the core themes of social critique. Kawanishi applies David Riesman's definition of 'maladjustment' ('how a person psychologically fits their society – most people still conform outwardly or do not explicitly violate social norms') to the Japanese, stating that 'without any signs of a drastic event like a revolution or a war for more than six decades, Japan appears on the outside to be one of the most stable places in the world, where people harmoniously conform to norms and social expectations.'[106] However, problems sometimes occur when 'the expression of feelings of maladjustment and accompanying pathological behaviour leak out, as has happened in Japan in the recent past.'[107] In these cases, the 'pent up emotions' can 'become increasingly intense', until they 'pass a certain critical point when the

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[104] Roy, *Grace Vol 9*, p. 140.
[105] William Shakespeare, *King Lear: A Parallel Text Edition*, ed. by René Weis (London and New York: Longman, 1993), Act 4, Scene 1, p. 217.
[106] Kawanishi, p. 5.
[107] Kawanishi, p. 5.

simple state of "not fitting in" develops into overt behaviours such as criminal acts, rebellion, or mental illness.'[108] Kawanishi points out that the more 'shocking' crimes that have been reported, where 'one cannot find a logical explanation for the perpetrator's behaviour', are 'particularly disturbing'; in these instances, it is likely that the perpetrator is amongst 'those least expected to do so', such as when 'a "nice and quiet" person turns into a murderer.'[109] In this context, the Earth god's gradual testing of Ryoma's psyche, hoping to make him "snap" and become a mass murderer, could be read as allegorical to much more realistic social issues. This would also link back to the idea that for these Japanese citizens, by repressing themselves and always placing work and others first, constantly having to 'read the air' and exercise self-restraint, '[a] traditional sense of human connectedness seems to run their lives so powerfully that it sometimes suffocates them.'[110]

In *300 Years*, more of a direct focus is placed on *karoshi,* which I have briefly mentioned earlier in this section. According to the definition by Kawanishi, '*[k]aroshi*, literally translated as "death from overwork", is a phenomenon in which workers suddenly die because accumulated stress induces physical conditions such as heart attacks and strokes.'[111] It has come to be viewed as 'a complex legal, psychological, and sociological issue representing a certain aspect of Japanese work culture.'[112] As suggested by the specialist Masakazu Ōno, this is related to 'the overwhelming importance of human relationships and personality factors in the typical Japanese workplace, which may not be easily applied to Western working environments.'[113] It is associated with long working hours and overtime that are not included

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[108] Kawanishi, p. 5.
[109] Kawanishi, p. 5.
[110] Komiya & Tudor, p. 137.
[111] Kawanishi, p. 38.
[112] Kawanishi, p. 39.
[113] Kawanishi, p. 44.

in official statistics.[114] This is also associated with the aforementioned suppression of one's own needs and emotions for the sake of harmony and the greater society.

Morita, the author of *300 Years,* directly cites his worries and concerns over *karoshi* as the motivation behind his series. In the afterword of Volume 1*,* Morita summarises the underlying theme of *300 Years* into one sentence: 'Working too much isn't a good thing.'[115] He writes:

> Again and again, I've seen people who've run themselves ragged and sort of gone to the dark side because of it. Fortunately, no one close to me has died of overwork, though some of them have gotten sick because they pushed themselves, and it came back to bite them. […] I think the happiest situation is an environment where everyone can work in moderation, and if they can see that their work is helping others, then it's even better. This is the story I wrote as a result.[116]

Azusa's way of living is described as an ideal lifestyle, where she 'makes a living by killing [slimes] in moderation, making and selling medicines in moderation, and I think – in moderation – that a life like that is just about right.'[117] This is established at the very beginning of the story, with Azusa's determination to live a "slow-paced" life to balance out her previous, stressful one. However, the most direct and memorable representation of this might be when she accepts the Red Dragon Laika as her "student", and the first member of her new family. Having accidentally destroyed Azusa's cottage, Laika is determined to make up for it by working through the night. Despite Laika's confidence in her stamina as a dragon, which means that she is able to work at a pace impossible for humans, Azusa scolds her while reflecting on her own, previous beliefs that '*If I make myself do overtime today, things will work out*

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[114] Kawanishi, p. 45.
[115] Morita, *300 Years Vol 1*, p. 212.
[116] Morita, *300 Years Vol 1*, p. 212.
[117] Morita, *300 Years Vol 1*, p. 213.

somehow.'[118] In response to Laika's attitude of pushing through work regardless of the cost, Azusa strongly reaffirms that 'I was through with "no matter what."'[119] Azusa also expresses critique of the "pride" that is often attached to the term 'backbreaking effort', as with a lack of moderation, overworking ultimately does only break yourself.[120]

This primary example, established at the very beginning of the first book and first episode of the anime, is followed by many more, smaller reminders throughout the series that continuously signal back to the key theme. In Volume 5, this is directly linked back to *karoshi* and, specifically, *karojisatsu* – suicide driven by work-related reasons. When the blue dragon Flatorte, much to Laika's embarrassment, proudly declares that she is currently unemployed, she states that 'Being jobless means endless possibilities. It's like being colourless – we can be any colour we want!'[121] Hearing this positive analogy about what is frequently considered in society to be an "undesirable" or "shameful" stage in life, as shown via Laika's reaction, Azusa reflects: 'I heard so much news in my past life of people committing suicide from overworking or from failing to get a job, so maybe it was a relief to see her questioning why people had a problem with her unemployment.'[122] Although such optimistic interpretations may only be possible in these otherworldly pastoral fantasies, it is important that the issues they highlight are addressed and explored not only in news articles and statistics, but in different forms of media, including light novels and anime.

While *isekai* such as *Grace* and *300 Years* draw attention to these crucial societal concerns, however, Curtis Lu warns that, precisely because of these complex social dynamics, the *isekai* can also be dangerous. Characters who are reincarnated into *isekai* are 'usually NEET's, *hikikomori* 引きこもり *(lit. "shut-in"),* suicides or murder victims, and overworked

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[118] Morita, *300 Years Vol 1*, p. 48.
[119] Morita, *300 Years Vol 1*, p. 49.
[120] Morita, *300 Years Vol 1*, p. 70.
[121] Morita, *300 Years Vol 5*, p. 14.
[122] Morita, *300 Years Vol 5*, p. 14.

salarymen suffering at the hands of Japanese business culture' – a group of people who 'can be considered the outcasts of Japanese society, all of whom live a relatively unsatisfied life.'[123] The 'very specific audience being targeted', Lu argues, 'makes the popularity of the genre frightening.'[124] Many protagonists, including Ryoma and Azusa, 'have reached a dead end, either with their life or motivation, and have resigned themselves to suffering for the remainder of their lives,' but are "saved" by the 'perfect escapist model' of the *isekai*, which 'gives them a second lease on life, allowing them to better themselves and also achieve goals that wouldn't have been possible in their previous lives.'[125] The problem that Lu suggests is that 'you and others might become too reliant on this way of thinking', becoming 'fixated on the idea of *isekai* and avoid fixing their current problems', escaping real life responsibilities.[126] Overall, the warning is that '[e]scapism is something that has to be taken in moderation', especially when 'viewing Japan through the lens of *isekai*.'[127]

Whether due to social pressures or divine intervention, Earth is actively portrayed in *Grace* and *300 Years* in a dystopian light. However, as seen in the extra chapters that explore the lives of Ryoma's former acquaintances and co-workers, where his death acts as a trigger that results in the exposure of his workplace's employee exploitation, there is hope and the possibility of positive changes.

Hybrid Worlds

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[123] Curtis Lu, 'The Darker Sides of the Isekai Genre: An Examination of the Power of Anime and Manga' (Masters Thesis, University of San Francisco, 2020), in *University of San Francisco Scholarship Repository, Master's Projects and Capstones* <https://repository.usfca.edu/capstone/1009> [accessed 16 June 2022], p. 21.

[124] Lu, p. 21.

[125] Lu, p. 22.

[126] Lu, p. 22.

[127] Lu, p. 26.

In the previous chapter, I discussed Rimuru's recreation of modern comforts, such as accessible indoor plumbing and cooking techniques, for the creation of a Tempestian utopia. In *Grace*, the slice-of-life genre allows for a greater focus and elaboration on the everyday application of Earth knowledge, from daily conveniences to business ventures. This is often brought into the new world through the slimes that he cares for, such as modern raincoats and umbrellas, easily recreated through fabric treated with the water-repellent properties of sticky slime fluid; or his laundromat service, which uses grime-eating cleaner slimes as washing machines, achieving perfect cleanliness without requiring water. While Earth knowledge plays a crucial role in the shaping of Seilfall, it also comes with great dangers, interrogating the theme of otherworlder desire-fulfilment and knowledge application in a way that the more power-fantasy orientated *Slime* does not.

With a time difference in Seilfall of about 200 years between each transfer, otherworlders are much rarer in the world of *Grace* than in *Slime*, and keep their Earth origins secret. However, this does not mean that they play a smaller role in the shaping of the new world. While their contributions are less frequent, many of their actions drastically impact Seilfall's history. When Ryoma expresses interest in learning about his predecessors, the gods tell him to 'search for their books', as the majority of them 'ended up in fairy tales and legends as heroes' thanks to the high levels or unique skills.[128] However, they also emphasise that there are otherworlders who abuse their divine-granted abilities, such as the Alchemy King, who was 'treated as a demon king and defeated'.[129] As a student on Earth who had knowledge of chemical elements that Seilfall did not possess, the Alchemy King sought to take advantage of this, demanding that the gods grant him the ability to use alchemy. Exasperated, Gain 'threw together the process', resulting in it being a very simple-to-use branch of magic that only

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[128] Roy, *Grace Vol 1*, p. 153.
[129] Roy, *Grace Vol 1*, p. 153.

required basic school knowledge of science and elements.[130] As seen through Ryoma's own use of alchemy to extract poisonous material to create edible rock salts, and extracting iron from the soil of an otherwise abandoned mine, it is a very useful, accessible ability that holds great potential for benefitting the people. However, the Alchemy King 'was especially obsessed with gold and profit, so he never taught anyone else the knowledge and skills up until his death.'[131] Without the full understanding of these otherworldly ideas, '[m]odern alchemists are just the sad remains of the Alchemy King's actions', leading to alchemy being dismissed as a mere fraud, and genuine alchemists like Ryoma being unwilling to reveal their abilities.[132] At the same time as introducing a revolutionary technique to the world, the Alchemy King ruined the possibility of expanding it into its full potential with his greed.

The second notable otherworlder is the unnamed woman who successfully became a Saint, having requested advanced healing abilities from the gods as part of the transfer request. Though she did not have the same greed-driven intent as the Alchemy King, she originally only wanted this skill for her own benefit, desiring to 'be the centre of attention' and 'have people fawn over her.'[133] However, after successfully making a name for herself by doing good deeds and amassing believers, she developed a sense of duty and 'everything led her to become a real saint in every meaning of the word in the end.'[134] After realising that the diseases that only she could heal due to her otherworlder abilities would again run rampant after her inevitable death, she decided to use the power granted to her by the gods – able to achieve miracles that normal healing could not – and the power of her believers' prayers to 'erase all disease from this world.'[135] In doing so, her soul was extinguished, unable to enter the normal cycle of

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[130] Roy, *By the Grace of the Gods Volume 2*, trans. by Mana Z. (San Antonio: J Novel Club, 2021), p. 54.
[131] Roy, *Grace Vol 1*, p. 154.
[132] Roy, *Grace Vol 1*, p. 154.
[133] Roy, *Grace Vol 2*, p. 242.
[134] Roy, *Grace Vol 2*, p. 243.
[135] Roy, *Grace Vol 2*, p. 242.

reincarnation. As Kufo emphasises, this is something that only otherworlders could manage, and she essentially 'cheated the system.'[136]

Despite the undeniably positive influence this Saint had on Seilfall, the full story is told to Ryoma as a warning tale. One of the first jobs that Ryoma takes on as a low-ranking member of the Adventurer's Guild is to clean the communal toilets, a task that is relatively simple with the help of his scavenger slimes, which eat all kinds of waste, along with water magic to wash and fire magic to sanitise. As per the medieval setting, the public toilets require regular cleaning, or else become a breeding ground for disease. In *Slime*, Rimuru works around these everyday issues with magic and brute force manpower (building from the ground up with modern plumbing), declaring it unnecessary to lower his modern expectations just because he is in another world. Ryoma, in comparison, is more subtle in his approach – though he still takes advantage of his high magic capacity and otherworldly knowledge to improve living conditions (such as using ice magic to create a refrigerator), he is content to live a simple, peaceful life, and does not push for drastic changes. Noticing that the "disease resistance" of his scavenger slimes had increased levels in a short amount of time, Ryoma concludes that a significantly dangerous disease must have festered in the toilets. After alerting the authorities, Ryoma finds from the ensuing conversation that medical knowledge is considerably less developed than Earth, causing him to briefly muse over the relationship between magic and medicine in this fantasy world:

> Did the word airborne not exist here? This world did have magic and other
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> medicines impossible on Earth, after all. Based on our conversation up until
>
> now, they seemed to treat diseases superstitiously here. I'd heard that Japan

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[136] Roy, *Grace Vol 2*, p. 242.

treated measles similarly in the past, so it's possible that their knowledge of pathogens was just less developed than Earth.[137]

This is not to say that such knowledge did not exist in the first place. With the long history of otherworlders, it is perhaps unsurprising that, a long time ago, 'there was a medical student who came to this world and spread the knowledge of medicine and disease.'[138] However, due to the otherworlder Saint's actions,

people lived practically disease-free for nearly 400 years in this world. Injuries still happened so healing magic remained, but knowledge about disease and medicines to heal them were lost over time, leading to the current state of things. The effects of her actions are gone now, but the lost knowledge won't return.[139]

Despite her good intentions and noble sacrifice in order to help create a more utopian world, developed over her time spent caring for the people of Seilfall, the result ultimately becomes problematic.

In *Slime*, though otherworlders are openly recognised and play a more constantly active role in the new world, the heads of supernations – King Gazel of Dwargon, Demon Lord Luminus of Lubelius, Empress Elmesia of Thalion, Emperor Ludora of the Eastern Empire – all originate from the new world. Otherworlders such as Hinata play more of a supporting role. Though powerful, most of them still pale in comparison to the centuries, if not millennia of amassed experience and power of these rulers. In *Grace*, while they are summoned much less frequently, it is the otherworlders who directly shape Seilfall's history; as the gods explain to Ryoma, most of them have been recorded in history books or passed down as legends. Though Ryoma is content to live a peaceful life, the otherworlders who came before have taken more

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[137] Roy, *Grace Vol 1,* p. 219.
[138] Roy, *Grace Vol 2,* p, 240.
[139] Roy, *Grace Vol 2,* p, 243.

drastic measures to enforce their desires and beliefs within Seilfall. This often leaves Ryoma, the latest otherworlder, to ponder on his own influences on this new, malleable world.

Another complex relationship between the two worlds is the representation of race. Throughout *300 Years,* the utopian, pastoral, healing atmosphere specifically focuses on the building of family and close friendships. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, fantasy races (elves, orcs, demons) are often interpreted as a reflection of real-world racial discourse. Even when not directly paralleling a specific race, the symbolism of the "other" inevitably reverberates in some form. The peaceful gathering of the different races in *300 Years,* all centred around Azusa, can therefore potentially be read as a utopian step towards harmony. Even demons, frequently represented in fantasy literature in a negative light, are presented in a much milder light. While still occupants of their own lands, separate from human society, Azusa's questioning of Beelzebub reveals that there 'has been no real attempt to invade the human lands' over the past several centuries, so they are 'getting along peacefully.'[140] It is also a carefully governed society, with Beelzebub herself being the Minister of Agriculture. When Azusa still expresses some misgivings, mentioning that she would 'hate to be in a world where you had to be prepared for demons first thing in the morning', Beelzebub assures her that

> 'Just as your country has no intention of occupying the demon lands, we don't think we could control all the territory on this continent. It's far too inconveniently vast. In terms of serving the administration's citizens, too, what we have now is perfect.'[141]

These conversations show that though there appears to have been wars at some point in history, this is a world that has long since reached an era of utopian peace.

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[140] Morita, *300 Years Vol 1*, p. 149.
[141] Kisetsu Morita, *I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level Vol 2,* trans. by Taylor Engel (New York: Yen On, 2018), p. 119.

This is further demonstrated through the newfound relationship between the extremes of gods and demons in Volume 9, when the goddess Nintan requests Azusa's assistance in exterminating a swarm of mosquitos that had settled around the stagnant waters around her temple. Azusa, out of other ideas, makes the decision to enlist the help of Beelzebub, the 'Lord of the Flies', in hopes that she might be able to resolve issues relating to other insects.[142] Despite some initial awkwardness, their mission ends with Beelzebub and Nintan shaking hands, reaching mutual acceptance. Beelzebub declares that this might open the possibility of some demonic worshippers, an offer, symbolic of freedom of religion, that Nintan readily accepts. Azusa describes this gesture as 'a bridge between god and demon.'[143] Beyond this, Azusa directly resolves many small issues that arise: the conflict between the red and blue dragon tribes, through Laika and Flatorte; the haunting of Halkara's factory, introducing Rosalie as a helpful ghost to the rest of Flatta village; the adoption of Sandra, the living mandrake who despised humans and other non-plant species. In each of these cases, conflict is resolved through the welcoming of a new "family member". Like Rimuru's hybrid utopia of Tempest, which seeks to unite the weak and the strong, humans and monsters, Azusa's originally small cottage, rebuilt with extensions by Laika, becomes a safe, utopian gathering place for many different "races".

At the same time, especially when set in an identifiably Western-based fantasy world, it is difficult to miss some of the racial subtexts that are directly based on real life. In my previous discussion of *Slime*, I mentioned the way in which the portrayal of the Eastern Empire evokes parallels with China, and also focuses on the concept of military "might makes right", which is particularly pronounced even for a world of "survival of the fittest". In *Grace*, there is a notable similarity in portrayal, where two of Ryoma's employees, Fay and Lilyn – who

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[142] Kisetsu Morita, *I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level Vol 9,* trans. by Jasmine Bernhardt (New York: Yen On, 2021), p. 15.

[143] Morita, *300 Years Vol 9*, p. 41.

wear identifiably Chinese attire, and use Chinese words in their spells – are introduced as former assassins who fled a country that has been consumed by war and violence, where children are trained up to fight.[144] As Fay describes:

> The border guards from our country are awfully greedy. They'll let any crime slide if you pay up, but if you don't have any money, they'll turn you over to the government and be rewarded for it. I couldn't be stingy about what I paid, unfortunately. If they could've made more for turning us in, we either would've been captured or found it harder to escape.[145]

Of course, just as most of Seilfall resembles medieval Western countries, it is very likely that these representations of China draw on the historical periods of battle and war, but it still serves as a telling contrast next to the comparatively more peaceful and idealistic representations of the West. Furthermore, as the above quote reveals, not only is there a predilection for violence (which is more accepted in Seilfall than on Earth), this is accompanied by a heavy emphasis on other negative attributes such as greed, and a lack of honour or loyalty. As I have previously highlighted, Helen Young emphasises the usefulness of fantasy as a speculative genre that creates a fictional space distanced from the real world which is 'safer for cultural work' around 'fraught issues' such as race.[146] This fictional space becomes even more complex in a self-aware genre like *isekai*, and its themes of starting anew in a world that is separate, yet still linked to Earth by knowledge and cultures passed down through the otherworlders. It is difficult to judge to what extent certain cultures, countries and nations in the new world are influenced by previous otherworlders, and how much originated from the new world itself. However, the real-world parallels that *are* included within the *isekai* can potentially be linked to the wider discourse around racial representations in fantasy fiction.

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[144] In the anime, their names are translated as the notably more "Chinese" Fei and Li Ling, and speak in a "Chinese" accent.

[145] Roy, *Grace Vol 3,* p. 49.

[146] Young, p. 2.

In *Grace,* although otherworlders have caused their share of problems in Seilfall, they have also brought many positive influences, utopian ideals that would not as easily be realised on the more complex world of Earth. One of these is the lack of racial discrimination. Ryoma describes this when considering the figure of the half-animal, half-human beastkin. Similar species of hybrid animal-human characteristics are frequently "othered" in fantasy fiction. A key example of this symbolic othering of "bestial" species in fiction is the figure of the Beast in 'Beauty and the Beast', who reflects 'shifting anxieties about the boundaries between self and other in species and race terms.'[147] At first the Beast's form 'terrifies' Beauty because of his unlikeness to the human, but as she converses and interacts with him, this boundary is gradually lessened until he is 'not nearly so terrible as she had supposed at first'.[148] She has to be reassured about his underlying humanity before she can accept and learn to love him.

In contrast, by the time Ryoma is sent to Seilfall as its latest otherworlder,

[t]his country had virtually no discrimination toward any race […] When someone discriminated against another based on race, it was the racist who was looked down upon. Racism and oppression were supposedly commonplace a long time ago, but travellers from Earth from before my time toiled to put an end to that. There were still some jealousy toward the inherent talents of certain races, however.[149]

In *Slime*, otherworlders have played crucial roles in the shaping of new-world dynamics, particularly in the case of the Empire, which took advantage of Earth knowledge to recreate modern weaponry such as tanks and military airships. In comparison, the emphasis being

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[147] Michelle J Smith and Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario, 'Race, Species, and the Other: "Beauty and the Beast in Victorian Pantomime and Children's Literature'*, Nineteenth-Century Contexts: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 38.1 (2016), 37-53 <https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.1080/08905495.2015.1105774> (p. 38).

[148] Andrew Lang, *The Blue Fairy Book* (Newburyport: Open Book Integrated Media Inc.,2015), p. 75, ProQuest eBook Central <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/detail.action?docID=4876929> [accessed 17 June 2022]

[149] Roy, *Grace Vol 4*, p. 117.

placed on otherworlders in *Grace* leans more towards their positive legal changes and political influence, reflected in Seilfall's attitude towards discrimination. With their awareness of modern knowledge and thought processes, each new otherworlder is able to apply their own ideology and modify more problematic practices. As I have discussed earlier in this section, otherworlders have also left considerable negative impacts on the world, which have resulted in the regression of medical knowledge, as well as the public rejection of alchemy. However, in terms of ideologies, I argue that Seilfall is a world that has been shaped by and embraced the positive, utopian aspects of otherworlder influence.

The second significant change that otherworlders bring is the change to slavery. When Ryoma is recommended to buy a slave as a security personnel for his business, a practice that remains common in Seilfall, he is very troubled by the connotations. However, he does discover that

> In contrast to my first impression, slaves were guaranteed some human rights in this world. They lost their right to choose their occupation, but could request some conditions for their master to abide by. They were also automatically granted the right to food, clothes, and shelter, as well as adequate treatment for any injury or illness and reasonable time off. […] it was basically the same as hiring a normal employee.[150]

This was not always the case, and in Seilfall history, there was an "old form" of slavery. However, despite the calls of many, slavery itself was intentionally not abolished. This was in consideration of the further issues it would cause, where the freed slaves would 'lose even the bare minimum that was guaranteed to them through their enslavement—clothes, food, and shelter', triggering 'widespread confusion and conflict.'[151] Instead, changes were made to

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[150] Roy, *Grace Vol 7,* p. 168.
[151] Roy, *Grace Vol 7,* pp. 171-2.

protect their human rights. Criminals can be sentenced to slavery as a form of punishment, and there are also those who choose to enter slavery to pay off debts. As Ryoma explains, although they still face more restrictions, the current slavery system does allow for much more choice and protection.

The old form of slavery did involve owners ignoring the rights of the enslaved.[152] Due to the implementation of the unemployment tax, which 'standardised and dramatically worsened the treatment of slaves',

> more and more business owners began realising that they could afford to worsen conditions for their workers, further oppressing the lives of the employed workers. Meanwhile, the upper classes bribed the lawmakers, who were nobles and clergymen. With lawmaking monopolised by the aristocracy, conditions never improved for the citizens. Power continued to be consolidated, and any existing checks and balances were lost as more and more laws were enacted to make the rich even richer at the expense of the employed and enslaved. [153]

This was eventually overturned by a rebellion by the workers in a successful coup d'état, said to have been led by 'a man with dark hair and dark eyes, who could take on a battalion on his own and controlled the entirety of the battlefield with his intelligence', and was born from slave parents.[154] From these records, Ryoma reasons that this man was likely an otherworlder like himself, and was struck by 'the incredible life this man had lived, surely filled with struggle and anguish for him to have accomplished so much… Far beyond what I could have imagined, living my cosy little life.'[155]

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[152] Roy, *Grace Vol 7,* p. 169.
[153] Roy, *Grace Vol 7,* p. 170.
[154] Roy, *Grace Vol 7,* p. 170.
[155] Roy, *Grace Vol 7,* p. 172.

While not as noticeable as *Slime*, in which Rimuru builds his ideal utopia according to his own preferences, *Grace* and *300 Years* also places a significant emphasis on Japanese culture. In particular, they both share to some extent *Slime*'s focus around the recreation of Japanese food. In the book chapter 'Cuisine and identity in contemporary Japan', Theodore C. Bestor highlights the link between food and culture, stating that '[c]uisine is a product of cultural imagination. Ideas about food and foodways are combined – by insiders and outsiders alike – to create relatively coherent and integrated images of culinary principles and practices.'[156] Especially in the case of Japan, Bestor identifies that as 'food culture constantly evolves', Japanese cuisine has also adapted to the introduction of Western flavours, which have fundamentally impacted the Japanese diet.[157] However, '[a]lthough the foreign provenance of ingredients and dishes consumed is commonly acknowledged, Japanese cuisine is regarded by many Japanese as quite distinct from that of its neighbours.'[158] It is 'differentiated from other cuisines as an essential element of cultural definition and identity.'[159] A strong emphasis on Japanese cuisine remains, and is also reflected in the language: "*washoku*" (combining "*wa*," a traditional designation for Japan, and "*shoku*," for food or cooking) […] *wagashi* (distinctively Japanese sweets) and *wagyū* (Japanese beef, also known as Kobe beef)'.[160] In all of these terms, '"*wa*" designates a specifically Japanese cultural sphere.'[161] These strong cultural attachments are crucial to Japanese tourism, where 'regional cuisines play a very significant role'; many areas have local "famous products" (*meisan* or *meibutsu)* and culinary specialties that are integrated into the historical, cultural, and environmental particularities of

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[156] Theodore C. Bestor, 'Cuisine and identity in contemporary Japan,' in *Routledge Handbook of Japanese Culture and Society*, ed. by L. B. Victoria, Theodore C. Bestor and Akiko Yamagata (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 273-285 (p. 274-5), Taylor & Francis eBooks <https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.4324/9780203818459> [accessed 27 April, 2022]

[157] Bestor, p. 284.

[158] Bestor, p. 274.

[159] Bestor, p. 279.

[160] Bestor, p. 274.

[161] Bestor, p. 274.

that location.[162] On an international scale, 'Japanese cuisine is part of the enticement of Japan's

"soft power" (the ability to project attractive cultural influence, without international coercion)',

with many foreign tourists stating the leading reason for their visit as being for Japanese

food.[163] Lu also points out that '[h]idden within all this food […] is also a hint of nationalism

since Japanese cuisine is so prominently featured in these various works. The subtle underlying

tone is that Japanese cuisine is superior and that it is up to these Japanese nationals to spread

their culture to societies that have not yet experienced it.'[164] Characters who 'introduce new

recipes or present new ideas to make life more comfortable, they are instantly lauded and

praised for their abilities' (though, Lu notes, these themes are not necessarily intentional),

which is precisely what can be seen in *Slime* and *Grace*.[165]

In *Grace*, although distinct traces of Japan exist in Seilfall, most if not all of the culture

appears to be carried over by otherworlders. As a result, while fragments of general knowledge

– such as kimono, samurai, and sushi – have been integrated into the new world, Seilfall's

"Japan" is far from complete. In the previous chapter, I have discussed the ways in which

Japanese culture (architecture, tourism, and cuisine) is introduced into these *isekai*, as Rimuru

chooses to design Tempest in a way that reflects the environment he is most familiar with,

suggesting potential links to soft power. In *Grace,* Ryoma also makes many changes influenced

by his background; especially when it comes to food. Being Japanese, it is natural that Ryoma

would occasionally crave familiar flavours. He 'yearned for the chance to have more accessible

Japanese food'.[166] Some inhabitants of Seilfall also share his taste for Japanese cuisine, such

as the dragonewts, who are hinted to have been strongly influenced by a previous, non-Japanese

otherworlder who was fascinated by Japan. In Volume 4, the merchant Pioro Saionji, bored of

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[162] Bestor, p. 279.
[163] Bestor, p. 285.
[164] Lu, p. 16.
[165] Lu, p. 16.
[166] Roy, *Grace Vol 4,* p. 135.

miso soup and grilled fish, also requests that Ryoma make some Japanese food using his stock of soy sauce and miso along with the pork they just acquired. Immediately, Ryoma thinks of various dishes such as 'tonjiru, pork shabu, pork bowls, and pork shogayaki.'[167] When offered the task of suggesting a local specialty food, Ryoma also recreates oden, sukiyaki, tempura, kinpira-gobo, and gyoza. All of these foods are highly praised by the citizens of the new world. While it does not directly add to the worldbuilding in the same way that it does in *Slime*, with Rimuru essentially turning Tempest into a Japanese-style tourist spot, these detailed inclusions distinctively emphasise the Japanese influence in Seilfall, and also parallels the international popularity of Japanese cuisine. It simultaneously creates a sense of familiarity for Japanese readers and, given the global reach of anime, becomes a subtle application of soft power.

In the beginning of *Grace*, the gods comment on Ryoma's calm acceptance of his death, to which he replies that he is very familiar with *isekai* light novel tropes. Gain also jokingly remarks that what will follow is "the cliché", through which Ryoma immediately understands that he will be sent to another world. This speaks to the growth of *isekai* tropes in Japan, and serves as a homage to its origins and fan base, who are familiar with tropes such as reincarnation and a video-game style world. Beyond its comedic effect, however, *Grace* also offers some additional reasons for Japanese otherworlders to be chosen, with the gods remarking that, as they try to choose the safest people to bring over, 'a relatively high proportion of those people are Japanese.'[168] Kiriluel, goddess of war, also comments that '[The Japanese] are all about talking things out peacefully and thinking everyone can come to an understanding.'[169] Even Eliaria's distant ancestor, the "stereotypical *otaku*" otherworlder whose wish for vast magical power led to a lot of nervous attention from the gods throughout his life, is comedically explained to have been ultimately too timid to act too drastically in

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[167] Roy, *Grace Vol 4,* p. 134.
[168] Roy, *Grace Vol 6,* p. 205.
[169] Roy, *Grace Vol 6,* p. 204.

Seilfall and be of major concern. The subtext here perhaps holds some implication that, for both convenience and realistic reasons, these Japanese *isekai* protagonists, like Ryoma, are amongst the safest to entrust Seilfall to, and can be trusted to bring some utopian influence to the new world. This potentially leads to more complex questions regarding cultural stereotyping, and whether it is perhaps less troubling if the stereotype being presented – that the Japanese are the "safe", level-headed choice that can better the new world – is a generally positive one. At the same time, there is also the aforementioned, notable links to other countries such as China, which seem to be specifically associated with violence and greed. Furthermore, given the recurring reminders of Ryoma and Azusa's tragic background in the Japanese work force that I have discussed in the utopian and dystopian sections above, it reinforces the idea that this is a society that is continuously being placed under critique, just as much as it is being celebrated.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

In Chapter 2, I have focused on the way that *iyashikei*, slow-paced *isekai*, contain dystopian aspects relating to racial relations and work environments, both carried over from Earth as well as already present in the utopic, pastoral settings of *Grace* and *300 Years.* With its emphasis on the mundane, these "slice-of-life" *isekai* differ from the more "standard", action-orientated *isekai* such as *Slime,* and demonstrates the 'strength and versatility of the genre.'[170] Taking advantage of this versatility, this genre of *isekai* uses its self-awareness, characterisation, and humour to create an engaging pastoral fantasy that, for all its light-heartedness, can also contain important social critiques. As I have identified, despite originating as a portal-quest fantasy, both the protagonist and the audience tends to quickly become immersed in the new world. However, it is the constant, direct links back to Earth as the protagonists reflect on their lives that adds a unique depth to the genre, and sets up the

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[170] Lu, p. 12.

juxtaposing utopic/dystopic complexities between the old and new worlds. Through following the narratives of relatable protagonists such as Ryoma and Azusa, relaxing in the "healing" atmosphere, the audience recovers from the fatigue and pressures of everyday life, as well as being encouraged to be aware about the need for societal improvement, particularly in their own world. At the same time, the *isekai* also highlights the benefits and values of modern society, acknowledging the positive steps towards social change already being taken in Japan.

Conclusion

The Japanese *isekai* genre is one that has received both acclaim and critique from anime and light novel fans. Though initially well received, with an abundance of *isekai* narratives written and adapted into anime, the genre has increasingly gained infamy for being 'repetitive', 'predictable', and 'unoriginal'. Seasonal anime announcements are greeted with groans at what is perceived as the inclusion of "more *isekai* trash".[1] The complaints have grown so loud that even purely fantasy series, for example *Banished From the Hero's Party, I Decided to Live a Quiet Life in the Countryside* (2018), *The Greatest Demon Lord Is Reborn as a Typical Nobody* (2018) and *The Strongest Sage With the Weakest Crest* (2017),[2] that do not fall into the category have been dismissed at first glance as 'yet another *isekai*'.[3] These critiques reflect an aspect of the anime market, which has become oversaturated to the point of reaching *isekai* fatigue. Even with the many different attempts to present new, subversive narratives, there seems to be no escape from the reality that, as a genre, *isekai* has become too formulaic. Just as portal-quests

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[1] A Reddit post example that demonstrates these outlooks: u/ZohMyGods, 'How would you define Trash Isekai?' *Reddit* (2019) <https://www.reddit.com/r/anime/comments/cya04r/how_would_you_define_trash_isekai/> [accessed 18 June 2022]

[2] *Banished From the Hero's Party, I Decided to Live a Quiet Life in the Countryside* is a fantasy slice-of-life with video game elements, but does not feature characters from Earth or other worlds. Although *The Greatest Demon Lord Is Reborn as a Typical Nobody* and *The Strongest Sage With the Weakest Crest* both use reincarnation as a premise, the main characters (who are reincarnated) are original inhabitants of the established world, and are simply powerful enough to plan their own rebirth in the future. Furthermore, the Medieval-esque setting does not change (is not reborn into the "modern", technological future). Therefore, although they are occasionally discussed using the term *isekai*, they do not belong in the genre.
Zappon, *Banished from the Hero's Party, I Decided to Live A Quiet Life in the Countryside, Volume 1*, trans. by Dale DeLucia (New York: Yen On, 2020); Myojin Kato, *The Greatest Demon Lord Is Reborn as a Typical Nobody, Volume 1*, trans. by Jessica Lange (New York: Yen On, 2019); Shinkoshoto, Liver Jam & POPO (Friendly Land), Huuka Kazabana, trans. by Caleb D. Cook (El Segundo: Square Enix Manga, 2020)

[3] The amount of *isekai* narratives, similar to the in-genre trope of Truck-kun, has also become a notable meme within the fan community. A Reddit post example of this: u/pheonix-ix, 'Yet-Another-Isekai? That's horrible! Where can I find it?' *Reddit* (2022) <https://www.reddit.com/r/goodanimemes/comments/u45pfz/yetanotherisekai_thats_horrible_where_can_i_find/> [accessed 17 July 2022]

are most common in children's fantasy, perhaps, now that the novelty has faded, audience interest will only continue to dwindle.[4] The *isekai* has essentially been facing what Western fantasy literature as a whole once faced: being dismissed as 'need[ing] no explications and provid[ing] no opportunity for sophisticated analysis.'[5]

Kathryn Hume argued against these claims in her book *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature*, asserting the value of both fantasy and escapist literature. Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to make a similar argument for the modern *isekai*, identifying tropes and themes to demonstrate its value. Although there are series which appear to cash in on the popularity of the genre, to the extent of making the audience question the narrative purpose of the protagonist's otherworlder status, the core essence of the contemporary *isekai* draws on the relationship between the mundane and fantastical worlds. By combining not only utopia and dystopia, but also, old and new worlds, portal-quest and immersive fantasy elements, and Western and Japanese literary and cultural perspectives, the *isekai* has formed distinctive narratives that bring a particular nuance to utopian and dystopian discourse.

While the genre can be broadly described as belonging to what Farah Mendlesohn categorises as the portal-quest fantasy narrative – especially older works such as *Fushigi Yugi* (1992) and *Spirited Away* (2001) – the style shift in the more contemporary *isekai* has resulted in the growth into its own, unique genre, distinct from other fantasy literature.[6] To phrase it broadly, all *isekai* can fall into the category of the portal-quest, and all portal-quests can

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[4] Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p. 1, ProQuest eBook Central <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/lib/waikato/detail.action?docID=1110030> [accessed 14 August 2022]

[5] Hume, p. 54.

[6] Yuu Watase, *Fushigi Yugi Volume 1,* trans. by Yuji Oniki (San Francisco: Viz Media, 2009); *Spirited Away,* dir. by Hayao Miyazaki (Toho Co., Ltd., 2001) in *Netflix* <https://www.netflix.com/watch/60023642?trackId=255824129&tctx=0%2C0%2CNAPA%40%40%7C27 d47c5c-345e-4744-a037-25abcdda8701- 209431396_titles%2F1%2F%2Fspirited%2F0%2F0%2CNAPA%40%40%7C27d47c5c-345e-4744-a037- 25abcdda8701-209431396_titles%2F1%2F%2Fspirited%2F0%2F0%2Cunknown%2C%2C27d47c5c- 345e-4744-a037-25abcdda8701-209431396%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C> [accessed 17 July 2022]

technically be considered, as the direct translation of "another world" suggests, a form of *isekai*. However, its popularity and expansion in recent years has attached various tropes, narratives, and expectations to the term. Although individual elements might overlap with the broader "fantasy" genre, the fusion of these aspects have made *isekai* distinguishable. While not all of these elements might be included in a single text, most recent series display some combination of these common tropes:

Reincarnations and summonings. Just as the Western portal-quest has its wardrobes and rabbit holes, reincarnations and summonings have become recognisable features of *isekai*. As a genre, *isekai* has steadily grown more self-aware of its own tropes, to the extent where many protagonists, upon finding themselves in another world, now lean towards joy or exasperation instead of alarm. Most frequently, they are either directly summoned into another world (as seen in *The Rising of the Shield Hero* (2013)*, TSUKIMICHI -Moonlit Fantasy-* (2021)*,* and *The Saint's Magic Power is Omnipotent* (2017)) or, perhaps now most common of all, reincarnated after they have passed away on Earth (*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime, Mushoku Tensei* (2014)*, Wise Man's Grandchild* (2019)). [7] As I briefly noted in my Introduction, this latter trope has become iconic enough to create colloquial terms and memes such as "Truck-*kun*" – a reference to the notably high number of reincarnation narratives that began when the protagonist is "*isekai*'d away" after an unfortunate traffic accident.

Video game elements. While this has become a widely common aspect of fantasy light novels, manga and anime in general, it is noticeably prevalent in *isekai*, where characters are given or are able to choose unique skills and abilities, assess strength through numerical "stats",

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[7] Aneko Yusagi, *The Rising of the Shield Hero, Volume 1*, trans. by One Peace Books (New York: One Peace Books, 2015); *Tsukimichi -Moonlit Fantasy-,* dir. by Shinji Ishihira (Crunchyroll, 2021), in *Crunchyroll* <https://www.crunchyroll.com/tsukimichi-moonlit-fantasy-> [accessed 27 July 2022]; Yuka Tachibana, *The Saint's Magic Power Is Omnipotent, Volume 1*, trans. by Julie Goniwich (Los Angeles: Seven Seas Entertainment, 2020); Rifujin na Magonote, *Mushoku Tensei: Jobless Reincarnation*, trans. by Kevin Frane and Paul Cuneo (Los Angeles: Seven Seas Entertainment, 2019); *Wise Man's Grandchild,* dir. by Masafumi Tamura (Crunchyroll, 2019), in *Crunchyroll* <https://www.crunchyroll.com/wise-mans-grandchild> [accessed 27 July 2022]

and "level up". Specifically, in the three series I have discussed, the "character creation" details at the beginning at the narrative can be linked to both reincarnation and escapism, where the protagonists are able to either "inherit" skills based on their past life (such as *Slime*) or have the freedom to actively select attributes of their new form in the new world (as seen in *Grace* and *300 Years*). Whether consciously or subconsciously, in these cases, these choices reflect the characters' personal desires. Combining these unique skills with the experience from their previous life, *isekai* protagonists tend to be "overpowered". Other examples of these video game elements include *Life With an Ordinary Guy Who Reincarnated into a Total Fantasy Knockout* (2022), *Cautious Hero: The Hero is Overpowered But Overly Cautious* (2017), and *The Fruit of Evolution: Before I Knew It, My Life Had it Made* (2021).[8]

Application of knowledge from Earth. This is evident in several ways. The texts that I have discussed in the previous chapters focus on applications of Earth knowledge, such as Rimuru's nation building and Ryoma's inventions. More indirect connection to Earth, such as Azusa's newfound determination to "live a slow life" after her experiences in her previous life, also apply. However, there are also cases of more specialised knowledge, such as the trope of characters reincarnating into the world of a media (e.g. a video game) that they consumed in their previous lives (*My Next Life As A Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom!* (2015), *Trapped in a Dating Sim: The World of Otome Games is Tough for Mobs* (2018), and *In the Land of Leadale* (2019)), where they use their experience with the media on Earth to create a new, more ideal life.[9] Similarly, some *isekai* protagonists make use of specific skills and talents from Earth,

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[8] *Life with an Ordinary Guy Who Reincarnated Into a Total Fantasy Knockout,* dir. by Sayaka Yamai (Crunchyroll, 2022), in *Crunchyroll* <https://www.crunchyroll.com/life-with-an-ordinary-guy-who-reincarnated-into-a-total-fantasy-knockout> [accessed 27 July 2022]; Light Tuchihi, *The Hero is Overpowered But Overly Cautious, Volume 1* (New York: Yen On, 2019); *The Fruit of Evolution: Before I Knew It, My Life Had It Made*, dir. by Yoshiaki Okumura (Crunchyroll, 2021), in *Crunchyroll* <https://www.crunchyroll.com/the-fruit-of-evolution-before-i-knew-it-my-life-had-it-made> [accessed 27 July 2022]

[9] Satoru Yamaguchi, *My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom! Volume 1,* Apple Books Edition, trans. by Shirley Yeung (San Antonio: J Novel Club, 2019); Yomu Mishima, *Trapped in a Dating Sim: The World of Otome Games is Tough For Mobs, Volume 1,* trans. by Alyssa Orton-Niioka (Los Angeles: Seven

as seen in *The World's Finest Assassin Gets Reincarnated in Another World as an Aristocrat* (2019)*, How A Realist Hero Rebuilt the Kingdom* (2016)*,* and *Ascendance of a Bookworm* (2015).[10]

Although these three elements are not applicable to all *isekai* narratives, I have identified them as the most recognisable, key foundations of the contemporary *isekai* genre. The three texts I have selected all demonstrate these core tropes. They also exemplify two main sub-genres: the action orientated, *shōnen* narrative (*Slime*), and the slice-of-life, *iyashikei* comedy (*Grace*, *300 Years*). While these initially may appear to occupy opposite sides of the narrative spectrum, they ultimately share similar themes, in which the "new world" is presented as a utopian land of opportunity. As with portal-quest fantasies, the protagonist enters the new world as a 'tourist'.[11] However, *isekai*'s self-aware development as a genre prompts both the protagonist and audience to bypass the initial stage of disbelief and awe, to the point where the fantastical can be dismissed with "I guess I must have died and reincarnated into an *isekai*." This allows the portal-quest to quickly become an immersive fantasy, while still maintaining a core connection to the "real" world that the characters came from. As I have particularly focused on in Chapter Two, the protagonist's rapid acceptance of death, while often displayed comedically, also contains more serious undertones as a commentary on modern society – especially with *Grace* and *300 Years'* direct addressing of overwork, death, and suicide, *karoshi* and *karojisatsu.* From this perspective, the "old world" of modern Earth is framed as a comparatively more dystopic environment, with social pressures and societal restrictions. At the same time, its modern technological and medical knowledge, as well as positive political

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Seas Entertainment, 2021); Ceez, *In the Land of Leadale, Volume 1,* trans. by Jessica Lange (New York, Yen Press: 2020)

[10] Rui Tsukiyo, *The World's Finest Assassin Gets Reincarnated in Another World as an Aristocrat, Volume 1,* trans. by Luke Hutton (New York, Yen On: 2020); Dojyomaru, *How A Realist Hero Rebuilt the Kingdom, Volume 1,* trans. by Sean McCann (San Antonio: J Novel Club, 2017); Miya Kazuki, *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 1 Daughter of a Soldier Volume 1*, trans. by quof (San Antonio: J Novel Club, 2019)

[11] Mendlesohn, p. 13.

and economical developments, are taken by the protagonist to the medieval setting of the new *isekai.* The new, fantasy worlds, filled with magic and monsters, with an emphasis on "survival of the fittest", is also far from a completely safe and peaceful utopian environment. As Claeys discusses, it is not unreasonable to argue that, instead of viewing them as opposites, 'utopia and dystopia evidently share more in common than is often supposed. Indeed, they might be twins, the progeny of the same parents.'[12] The *isekai* discussed in this thesis demonstrates this, using the connection to both worlds as an opportunity for the protagonist to combine the most positive elements of the two, in pursuit of an ultimately utopian goal. With neither world being presented as completely utopian or dystopian, but containing the potential for both, this continuum is examined through the creation and immersive exploration of these hybrid *isekai* worlds.

Combining magic and experience, *isekai* protagonists are placed into an environment where they are granted the skill and ability to fulfil their desires. Despite the variety of genres that *isekai* has branched into, I have emphasised the core, utopian desire for happiness. With the opportunity to start a new life in a fantasy world, *isekai* protagonists are often determined to live a life free from any regrets they harboured on Earth. This "happiness" can take many forms: general freedom; heroism; strength and power; financial gain; social prestige. As a form of escapist literature, the audience, through the protagonist, is able to indulge in such daydreams.[13] A recurring trend is the rediscovery of happiness through the formation of a "found family", whether through adventuring companions, household families, or extended friendships. These family themes can also carry powerful social commentary, especially with characters like Ryoma and Azusa, who dedicated their lives to their work while leaving little time for family, or Mine from *Ascendance of a Bookworm* who, after vividly recalling her

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[12] Gregory Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 5, Oxford Scholarship Online <DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198785682.003.0001>
[13] Hume, p. 64.

memories of Earth though a magical item, tearfully regrets her attitude towards her mother.[14] The *isekai* makes use of its premise and tropes to maintain a unique level of engagement and commentary on the real world that other forms of fantasy are not able to achieve without breaking immersion, or sounding "clichéd" or "preachy".

As a genre internationally popularised through Japanese light novels and anime, and featuring predominantly Japanese protagonists, *isekai* stories also offer notable cultural insights in relation to Japanese society, including social pressures and family relationships. The self-awareness and flexibility of the genre allow it to extend the boundaries of fantasy, incorporating many Western tropes of medieval knights, fairies, magic and dragons (linking back to a lineage of Western fantasy from Tolkien to *Game of Thrones* (2011)), while also adding Japanese and other non-Western elements. This fusion creates distinctive, hybrid worlds, becoming a new format that allows for unique narratives that stand out from other fantasy. This relationship between the two worlds, portal-quest and immersive fantasy, magic and modern technology, old and new selves, and the blend of Western and Japanese cultures, parallels the complex entanglement of utopias and dystopias.

When I first started my research for this thesis, there were very limited resources available. The term *isekai* had only one or two results in any database I tried. A year later, I am delighted to see that the number of academic articles being written about *isekai* has notably increased. However, it is still a genre that has only recently begun to receive critical attention, especially in the West. In this thesis, I have analysed three texts that I consider useful in thinking critically about the contemporary *isekai*, discussing the genre's potential via its hybrid worlds, and arguing for their importance in a broader fantasy, cultural, and utopian/dystopian

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[14] *Ascendance of A Bookworm Episode 26 – A Dreamlike World,* dir. by Mitsuru Hongo (Crunchyroll, 2020), in *Crunchyroll* <https://www.crunchyroll.com/ascendance-of-a-bookworm/episode-26-dreamlike-world-794562> [accessed 4 June 2020]

discourse. The aspects I have addressed by no means cover the broader *isekai* genre as a whole, but hopefully contributes fresh ideas to the growing academic debate.

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