

The Rise of the Cottagecore Game: The Modernity of Digital Gaming and Content Consumption

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ABSTRACT:

The main aim of this article is to demonstrate that contemporary gamers commit to a political nature of consuming digital game contents to facilitate cultural renewal. In illuminating how the rise of the cottagecore game at the turn of the 2020s has not only been driven by this cultural renewal but also intensified its major trajectories, the study contradicts critical assertions about the inimical relationship between gaming and real life which still remains in mainstream culture. This study aims to continue advancing the practice of game theorists who have shifted academic interest to the relevance of the digital game as a medium by conceptualizing the practice of enjoying a digital game as 'consumption' in the fashion defined by K. Marx. Building upon what might be termed an open-world game suggested a contradicting concept of playing a digital game, this study takes *Harvest Moon* as one of the early examples which inspires the swarming number of cottagecore games in the late 2010s and *Stardew Valley* and *Animal Crossing* as representatives of the rise of the cottagecore game, the study will illustrate how the rise of the cottagecore game reveals modernity of contemporary gamers who share a vision of digital game as a uniquely positioned medium for imagining a better world and themselves and, subsequently, facilitating a shift in cultural attitudes in a politically progressive manner.

KEY WORDS:

consumption, cottagecore, digital games, game studies, Marxism, modernity.

Introduction

Whether players are enjoying the agricultural life in *Stardew Valley*¹, settling in their island in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*², or crafting their own worlds in *Minecraft*³, the sprawling cottagecore aesthetic is a common feature of many digital games from the 2010s onwards. While some of these projects do invite players into the imagined virtues of simplified and romanticized agricultural life in their own logic by thematically retreating from the trappings of urban life, some of the cottagecore games endeavour to be a space for players in the digital era to embody the modernity stemmed from the Marxist sensibilities, which is a continuous orientation of the Modernist injunction to "Make it new".⁴ In the case of *Stardew Valley*, although the game does provide subsidiary quests and milestones that guide players to make certain achievements – such as shipping every crop, earning a specific amount of money, crafting items, and completing the museum collection – it ultimately does not provide a specific objective to finish the game but invites players to roam around Pelican Town that was marketed in such a way that players' expectations were geared toward an experience grounded in the pastoral lifestyle and narratives. Inspired by *Harvest Moon*⁵, which contributed to a departure from

1 Remark by the author: The game was developed solely by the individual.; CONCERNEDAPE: *Stardew Valley*. [digital game]. Seattle, WA : E. Barone, 2016.

2 NINTENDO EPD: *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. [digital game]. Kyoto : Nintendo, 2020.

3 MOJANG: *Minecraft*. [digital game]. Stockholm : Mojang Studio, 2009.

4 See also: BLEDSOE, E. M.: 'Make It New'. In ROSS, S. et al. (eds.): *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*. London : Routledge, 2016. [online]. [2022-07-29]. Available at: <<https://www.rem.routledge.com/articles/make-it-new>>.

5 AMCCUS: *Harvest Moon*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Pack-In-Video, 1996.

the traditional gaming experience that provided specific objectives to players – such as clearing multiple stages and beating the final boss – one element that *Stardew Valley* shares with other cottagecore games is having players encounter no objective to finish the game but a virtual world in which they can interact. While such cottagecore games approach players' interactions with the agricultural lifestyles and narratives differently, it is not uncommon for players to do whatever they want in that virtual world without worrying about their real life or otherwise come across non-player characters (NPCs) who live with them in the pastoral settings.

This essay takes up the rise of the cottagecore game to understand the cultural and normative influences that drive gamers and developers in the networked world to facilitate cultural renewal of *consuming* a game and how they are exemplified by an equivalence of the ways in which players enjoy cottagecore lifestyles in games to modernity and Marxist sensibilities. This understanding of cottagecore games has two stakes. First, it calls into question the traditional consensus among the conservatives which very often dismisses digital games as a waste of time distracting from social progress or real life. Although game theorists in the last two decades – such as E. Aarseth, J. Murray, T. Apperley, G. Frasca, E. Vossen, J. Juul, O. Leino, and J. Stenros – have successfully made visible some important limitations of the conservative perception dominated by the traditional 'do-games-induce-violent-behaviours studies', the perception still remains strong in the mainstream culture in which digital games are very often seen as the interests of the vain and out of touch.⁶ Second, it allows us to continue advancing the textual analysis of a game to the relationship between gamers and digital games which has made the digital gaming culturally prominent in the twenty-first century. There was an incredible development of academic digital game studies over the last two decades that shifted the academic interest to the relevance of the digital game as a new medium and the presence of gamers has been significant. The cottagecore games that this study explores exemplify the ways in which contemporary gamers orient themselves to the position of consumer and digital games as resources; players of these games do not so much renounce the pastoral tradition and the idealized virtues of the simple lifestyles as put the spirit of modernity to new use in exploring how they could diversify the ways in which they could enjoy the games both within and outside the game world.

The following two chapters discuss how the rise of the cottagecore game derived from the so-called open-world genre and exemplify the complex modes of consumption and production of digital game contents in the 2020s. The significance of the open-world genre that formally foregrounds the political nature of playing a digital game is presented first, followed by analysis of *Harvest Moon*, *Stardew Valley*, and *Animal Crossing*. Through research on *Harvest Moon*, one of the early examples of digital games that present the pastoral narrative and romanticized agricultural life, and the ways in which contemporary gamers consume *Stardew Valley* and *Animal Crossing* in the 2020s, the following chapters illustrate how the cottagecore – aesthetic borne out of the World Wide Web and among teenagers to young adults in the late 2010s while being inspired by the pastoral tradition and romanticized agricultural themes – has evolved into a genre in the digital game industry which reveals the modernity and Marxist sensibilities of gamers in the 2020s.

6 FRASCA, G.: Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology. In PERRON, B., WOLF, M. J. P. (eds.): *The Video Game Theory Reader*. New York, NY : Routledge, 2003, p. 243.

Ultima and Harvest Moon: The Open-World and the Cottagecore Game

To discuss the significance of the open-world game, the first task involves exploring how it challenges the traditional conception of gaming that remains dominant in mainstream culture. In classical terms, gaming is the art of demonstrating a competition to satisfy a specific objective. Either against another player or the artificial intelligence (AI) previously programmed in a specific algorithm, players compete to satisfy the objective. Many digital games developed before the 1980s, such as *Pong*⁷ and *Space Invaders*⁸, have stages that guide players to compete against more elaborately-designed AIs while supporting the player versus player (PvP). This conception of gaming meshed comfortably with the domestication of digital games as a commodity that had an objective for its consumers to fully enjoy the content – every stage was a small, virtual world for game developers to squeeze their imagined objects into traps, puzzles, enemies, and bosses so that every game therefore had a finale, so-called *game-over*, that had no more contents available for players. Implied here is a critical assumption that the game is and ought to be considered as an organic whole, with no undigested elements; moreover, there should be specific ways for players to perform better either than the AI or the others; and they must find those ways to perform better. E. Aarseth's description of games is apropos: "Any game consists of three aspects: (1) rules, (2) a material/semiotic system (a gameworld), and (3) gameplay (the events resulting from application of the rules to the gameworld). [...] In addition to these three components, there is the player's active knowledge of the game, in the form of strategies and performance techniques, and mental topographies, as well as written guides and other paratextual information about the games".⁹

E. Aarseth's ontology was especially influential on the early game theorists in the 2000s, and we have inherited this set of assumptions from him that allow us to conceptualize the ontology of every digital game. Players make unilateral changes in so-called gameworld by their gameplays and the most primitive rule for them in the early digital games was that competition in a small gameworld consists of multiple stages.

Although players and game theorists have never demarcated cottagecore game with any canonized definition, the 1980s and 90s saw the emergence of what foregrounds the rise of the cottagecore game, which might properly be termed an open-world game – that is, a game that takes place in a world that not only has its own culture and history, but also lets players 'explore another life' as R. Garriott put it.¹⁰ Much of the work of modern game developers as diverse as S. Miyamoto, V. Megler, and J. Le Fay can be placed in the tradition of this game development that aims to let players explore another life. As S. Addams remarks in *The Official Book of Ultima*, the hallmark of R. Garriott's *Ultima*¹¹ is the sense of reality that suggested a new model for the three aspects of the game. R. Garriott wanted "every item in the world – every ring, every knife, every fork, every spoon, every plate,

7 ATARI: *Pong*. [digital game]. Sunnyvale, CA : Atari, 1972.

8 TAITO: *Space Invaders*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Taito, 1978.

9 AARSETH, E.: Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation. In WARDRIP-FRUIIN, N., HARRIGAN, P. (eds.): *First Person: New Media as Story*. Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, 2004, p. 47-48.; Remark by the author: Hereafter, we apply E. Aarseth's terminology of the three aspects: rules, gameworld, and gameplay.

10 ADDAMS, S.: *The Official Book of Ultima*. 2nd Edition. Greensboro, NC : Compute Books, 1992, p. 93.

11 GARRIOTT, R.: *Ultima*. [digital game]. Davis, CA : California Pacific, 1981.

every bottle in Britannia – to exist according to the laws of real-world physics”.¹² In this world built according to the laws of real-world physics, R. Garriot provides players multiple ways to do things. Elaborating on this realist gameplay in *Ultima*, he says: “My philosophy is that once you get people compelled enough to sit down and play the game, the whole way you make a game successful is by giving them enough unique ways to do thing. First let them deal with pulling levers and things like that for awhile. Then after they’ve mastered that, you give them something else to do, like getting through doorways by blasting them down with a cannon. Next you give them a monster-finding quest, followed by logic problems to figure out. You pace it that way. Assorted activities and the diversity of activities are what makes a game rich in my mind”.¹³

The realist worldbuilding in *Ultima* designated to provide a gameworld for exploration and interaction rather than competition suggested a new model for developers to reinvent the gameworld to the ‘open-world’ in which players go wherever they want, do whatever they want, and interact with the imagined objects, items, enemies, and NPCs in whichever way they want. This pursuit of formal realism in R. Garriot’s development of *Ultima* underpins the open-world game that challenges the general trend of understanding gaming as an art form which demonstrates a competition for a specific objective. Looking at the numbers of worldwide eSports viewers, according to C. Gough, “there are expected to be over 318 million eSports enthusiasts worldwide by 2025, a significant increase from the 215.2 million in 2020”,¹⁴ we note that competition still remains popular in the conception of gaming in mainstream culture. Competition is one thing, interaction, quite another; the popularity of eSports in the twenty-first century relies heavily on the former dominant concept of gaming as an art of demonstrating a competition, whereas interacting with NPCs, objects, and monsters in another world is distant from performing better than either the AI or other players to *win* the game but rather makes itself an immense practice of exploring another life. Everyday life is shaped by interaction, an active process, depending on the context of the actions and individual differences – such as gender, nationality, ethnicity, etc.¹⁵ Interactions made within such open-world games, at least when players deal with imagined people, objects, and the world, become a tool for players to voluntarily explore another life while enjoying the feeling of tension and the consciousness that what they do in the game is different from their real life. They discharge internal energies for an essentially denotative surface by interacting with the world within the game, in characters, objects, narrative, balancing the joy of interacting with the imaginative world that provides a different life from the ordinary and the consciousness that they are still physically in the real world. This reveals that gameplay of an open-world game suggests the political nature of interacting with the imagined world. Whatever a player chooses to do, purchase, wear, and interact with is a reimagination of their life and identity. This later becomes true for not only players who particularly enjoy an open-world game like *Ultima* but also everyone who reimagines their life by playing any game with open-world elements.

We can reflect here; diversified modes of interaction become a key to the understanding of what might be termed an open-world game, and the *political gameplay*¹⁶,

12 ADDAMS, S.: *The Official Book of Ultima*. 2nd Edition. Greensboro, NC : Compute Books, 1992, p. 83.

13 Ibidem, p. 97.

14 GOUGH, Ch.: *ESports Audience Size Worldwide from 2020-2025, by Type of Viewers*. Released on 27th July 2022. [online]. [2022-07-27]. Available at: <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/490480/global-esports-audience-size-viewer-type/#statisticContainer>>.

15 For more information, see: GOFFMAN, E.: *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York, NY : Anchor Books, 1959.

16 Remark by the author: How an open-world game unfolds is up to players and they do not need to be top-tier gamers to necessarily reimagine their life and identity by interacting with the imagined world. In this sense, gameplays in the open-world game are the simulation of their political interactions with the imagined world within the game that remains empirically unreal but imaginatively real.

therefore, complicates the concept of gaming. This at least seems to be the case in a time when certain types of open-world games are already in use for purposes other than entertainment. For example, there were college courses in 2021 which included *Assassin's Creed: Origins*¹⁷ and *Red Dead Redemption 2*¹⁸ as part of their course material and Microsoft also introduces *Minecraft* as a game that “prepares students for the future, building future-ready skills like creativity, problem solving, and systems thinking, and nurturing a passion for play”¹⁹ particularly by providing the open learning environment that gives “the freedom to experiment, encouraging self-expression and problem-solving”.²⁰ Over the last decade, a handful of scholars have attempted to theoretically distinguish such educational aspects of digital gaming – such as T. Apperley and C. Walsh who claimed that a player’s subjectivity makes gameplays accumulated into so-called ‘gaming capital’ in a classroom and adolescent life.²¹ The critical accounts of such scholars contribute to our understanding of the popularity of open-world games in the contemporary gaming community and the ways in which the emergence of the open-world game as a genre complicated the concept of digital gaming. Things are easier for open-world games nowadays than in the 1980s; the open-world impulse in the game development has become widespread and it is easy to find open-world elements in many triple-A games released in the 2010s – such as *Grand Theft Auto V*²² and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*²³. While it is remarkable that the prominence of such open-world games inspired by R. Garriot’s Ultima appeal to contemporary gamers who prefer exploring another life and wandering around the gameworld and doing whatever in whichever ways they want rather than strategically playing in specific ways to either compete or digest every content of the game, it is important to note that the cottagecore game – one that provides us in the digital era an opportunity to explore the cottagecore lifestyles in the gameworld – extends this concept of open-world gaming by making politics and aesthetics fit into the everyday lives in it.

Cottagecore games, it should be said, have no founder, no contested inception, no signature spokespersons claiming their cultural capital; their origin is not limited to the commercial success of either *Stardew Valley* or *Animal Crossing*. Although cottagecore itself was coined and started to be popularized online in the late 2010s, what might be termed a cottagecore game has a long history. To tap into the discussion of how the cottagecore aesthetic has evolved into a specific subgenre of the digital game, we may refer to *Harvest Moon*, which is one of the earliest games that invite players to explore the life of a farmer in the pastoral narrative. Inspired by his childhood in the countryside of Japan

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- 17 UBISOFT: *Assassin's Creed: Origins*. [digital game]. Montreal : Ubisoft, 2017.; See: CRAIG, J.: *Egyptologists Use Assassin's Creed: Origins To Teach History*. Released on 11th March 2021. [online]. [2022-07-29]. Available at: <<https://www.thegamer.com/egyptologists-assassins-creed-origins-teach-history/>>.
 - 18 ROCKSTAR STUDIOS: *Red Dead Redemption 2*. [digital game]. New York, NY : Rockstar Games, 2018.; See also: MURRAY, S.: *American University to Offer History Course Based on Red Dead Redemption and RDR2*. Released on 15th February 2021. [online]. [2022-07-29]. Available at: <<https://www.thegamer.com/american-university-to-offer-history-course-based-on-red-dead-redemption-and-rdr2/>>.
 - 19 *Game-Based Learning with Minecraft*. [online]. [2022-11-26]. Available at: <<https://education.minecraft.net/en-us/discover/impact>>.
 - 20 HÉBERT, C., JENSON, J.: Teaching with Sandbox Games: Minecraft, Game-Based Learning, and 21st Century Competencies. In *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology*, 2020, Vol. 46, No. 3, p. 3-4. [online]. [2022-11-26]. Available at: <<https://cjl.t.ca/index.php/cjlt/article/view/27990/20516>>; *Welcome to Minecraft: Education Edition!*. [online]. [2022-07-29]. Available at: <<https://education.minecraft.net/how-it-works/why-minecraft#21st-century-skills>>.
 - 21 For more information, see: APPERLEY, T., WALSH, C.: Researching Digital Game Players: Gameplay and Gaming Capital. In XIAO, Y., TEN THIJ, E. (eds.): *IADIS International Conference Gaming 2008*. Lisbon : IADIS, 2008, p. 99-102.; APPERLEY, T., WALSH, C.: Gaming Capital: Rethinking Literacy. In JEFFERY, P. L. (ed.): *AARE 2008 International Education Research Conference: Changing Climates: Education for Sustainable Futures*. Brisbane : AARE, 2008, p. 1-11. [online]. [2022-07-27]. Available at: <<https://www.aare.edu.au/data/publications/2008/wal08101.pdf>>.
 - 22 ROCKSTAR NORTH: *Grand Theft Auto V*. [digital game]. New York, NY : Rockstar Games, 2013.
 - 23 NINTENDO EPD: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. [digital game]. Kyoto : Nintendo, 2017.

and the game series *Derby Stallion*²⁴, the developer of *Harvest Moon*, Y. Wada, says that he wanted to make “a non-competitive and non-combative game [when] a lot of games... involve competition or combat”.²⁵ Although *Ultima* and other early open-world games had suggested diversified modes of interaction by the time Wada began to develop *Harvest Moon*, combat even now still remains dominant in the modes of interaction. We can reflect here; by aiming at abolishing competition and combat, Wada extends the experimental, political gameplay of the open-world game to exploration without any combat. As a result, *Harvest Moon* combines a farm simulator and an adventure-RPG with mini-games. In the game, the player becomes a young man who maintains the farm he inherits from his grandfather. While doing so, the player interacts with villagers, builds relationships with them, attends festivals, and gathers with other NPCs in the bar at night to drink and talk. The pastoral narrative elements – such as talking to villagers, maintaining relationships with them, eventually marrying a townswoman, and attending the local events – correspond to cottagecore aesthetics when such non-competitive modes of interaction allow the player to explore the romanticized rural life in the countryside. In addition, there are other non-combative modes of interaction – such as clearing land, planting and harvesting crops, raising livestock, foraging, hand-crafting materials, and selling harvests – that provide him an opportunity to reimagine his life and invoke an idealized pastoral fantasy. The point here is not simply to say that such elements imply that *Harvest Moon* romanticizes the rural life of a farmer but rather to suggest that given the freedom to creatively allocate time between tasks, the pool of possibly interesting and novel derivative playthroughs multiplies. Although the primary objective is to maintain a farm, it becomes subsidiary when the player is allowed to decide whether he would be the busiest man in the village. Even if the player does not make any achievement as a farmer, he still has an additional ending for his playthrough and narrative. By claiming the player’s agency in satisfying the non-competitive and non-combative objective – exploring agricultural life – *Harvest Moon* acquired a rapid following for its innovative gameplay. Here, we do not, of course, declare that *Harvest Moon* has been therefore one of the first sandbox games. Tracing the history of sandbox games is out of the point. What is important is that *Harvest Moon* demonstrated a different set of values than those espoused by the former reductive assumption that the digital game has limited rules and objectives which bind the player’s creativity in his gameplays.

Here, the player’s agency and creativity that the gameplay of *Harvest Moon* highlights become the penumbra of cottagecore aesthetic presented in the open-world game. If we compare this achievement of *Harvest Moon* to a student who takes an exam: the traditional competitive games consist of multiple-choice questions that require singular answers from players to avoid traps and slay monsters; the open-world games suggest that there could be multiple-choice questions that have answers more than one; while the cottagecore elements of *Harvest Moon* ask players to write the question on their own and its answer in an essay format. That is, it exemplifies how politics and aesthetics could fit into everyday lives in a gameplay. In this sense, we can claim that *Harvest Moon* could be regarded as the forefather of cottagecore games and the fusion of cottagecore aesthetic and the political gameplay of open-world genre suggests that gameworlds are also political as they become a space for players to creatively write their own questions and answers.

24 ASCII, PARITYBIT, LAND HO!: *Derby Stallion (series)*. [digital game]. Tokyo: ASCII et al., 1991-2020.

25 WADA, Y.: *Classic Game Postmortem: Harvest Moon*. Paper presented at Game Developers Conference (GDC) 2012 with subtitle Game Design. San Francisco, CA, presented on 5th March 2012. [online]. [2022-07-29]. Available at: <<https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1016368/Classic-Game-Postmortem-Harvest>>.

Appropriation and Convergence Culture: Modernity of Stardew Valley and Animal Crossing: New Horizons

However, we encounter a problem here, one which every gamer and developer always faces. No gameworld could ever be a perfect imagining of a new world. Every context of a digital game is noncategorical and it is important to note that contexts may create conditions of experience regardless of the game developer's purpose. The player's exploration of the gameworld must be separated from reality by abandoning claims to it and rather taking the world as it seems; yet, experience and appreciation are inseparable and the latter always entails subjective judgments. For example, as cottagecore romanticizes the agricultural life by idealizing the pastoral fantasy, it valorizes the look of a traditional wife. The traditional wife here – thin, well-dressed, and always willing to please her husband – is both an aesthetic and a set of cultural norms. The look of female NPCs in Harvest Moon is not so different from this, and this is not the pastoral impulse to imagine a simple lifestyle, but nostalgic acquiescence which flattens the complexities of the past. In light of how this kind of inevitable problem entailed by the experience of exploring another life that is empirically unreal, but imaginatively real has been dealt with, it is important to notice that there have been two specific divergent trajectories which consumption and production of a digital game have followed since the 1990s and the rise of the cottagecore game in the late 2010s has specifically intensified: (i) digital game appropriation, and (ii) convergence culture.

First, given the low-key reception of the digital game appropriation as a characteristic of fandom, it is worth pointing out that, the transformation of appropriation into a new paradigm for consumption of a digital game has been crucial for the rise of the cottagecore game. Consider how the ways in which gamers enjoy a digital game have varied over the last two decades – such as watching how other gamers play by streaming live on Twitch, creating user-created-contents, including fanarts, modifications, and guides. Such variations of consuming a digital game imply that gameworlds have evolved into a space for players not only to either compete or explore another life but also to appropriate and reproduce. That is, gamers consume digital games by appropriating and reproducing their individual experiences in various ways – such as engaging in cosplays, purchasing goods, and sharing creative and transformative plays online. This indicates that contemporary gamers consume digital games within both gameworlds and the real world. At the same time, we also need to consider the enormous cultural changes for the gaming community brought by the new mode of consumption. By treating appropriation as a mode of consumption, we can suggest that the term 'convergence' could be used to describe the set of practices by which consumers actively engage in production and recreation of content. Although the definition of the term has a dynamic history over the last thirty years, a handful of scholars have deployed it to argue that media content could be made both by producers and by the scores of fans and consumers inhabiting digital networks.²⁶

26 For more information, see: HARTLEY, J.: *Facilitating the Creative Citizen*. Released on 23rd October 2006. [online]. [2022-07-29]. Available at: <<https://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=5036>>. JENKINS, H.: *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York, NY : New York University Press, 2006.

The digital game is an important site for the study of this convergence culture because fans and modders have been significant to the production of novel material. Historically, as D. Kushner observes in *Masters of Doom*,²⁷ there has been a long history of fan involvement in modding and fans have been making their own creative modifications at least since the days of *Doom*²⁸. Whereas the technical accuracy in the 1990s was not always suitable for fans and modders to creatively work, the convergence culture of contemporary gamers who are accustomed to the digital game appropriation which encompasses a set of participatory practices makes the game industry a powerful force for the post-production process. To this end, many contemporary games are designed to incorporate this new mode of consumption as the creative and compositional energies of gamers have become more culturally prominent.

In light of all this, we can suggest that contemporary gamers iterate the spirit of modernity and Marxist sensibilities through the set of practices which the digital game appropriation and convergence culture encompass. To amend K. Marx's dictum, "[a]ll that is solid melts into air" modernity is an orientation of recognizing that everything can melt into air so that it is being a part of the material world in which the making of the new is practical, theoretical, and even ideological.²⁹ The "ever-expanding, drastically fluctuating" capitalist market hosted socio-political and cultural processes of innovating the old during the early twentieth century, processes that led artists and writers to radically alter tradition if not to break with it completely – industrialization, urbanization, mass movements, demographic changes – and those processes ultimately gave Modernists self-conscious power to experiment and change the world by their own.³⁰ Contemporary gamers situate the digital game appropriation and convergence culture in the 2020s within this context of modernity. Digital games become the context, and they experiment with forms along with cultural processes of innovating the old conceptions – such as reimagining life, recreating gameworlds, and appropriating their personal experiences. Here, the spirit of modernity makes the new modes of consumption and production of the digital game as political as the gameplay. Dreaming of different and ideal digital worlds, fans and modders of digital games help the gaming community to imagine how they might make the real world a better place. What they choose to modify in the gameworld is a reimagination of the world around them and themselves. Over the last two decades, this political nature of participatory culture which pushed the boundaries of consuming digital game content by making the traditional creative barrier between players and game developers – in other words, consumers and producers-porous was crucial for the ascending visibility of the creative cultural production from all sectors of society.

As a result, we have entered a new age of digital game consumption and production. Gamers do not simply either compete or explore another life within a gameworld but reconstruct it into where they can possibly reimagine the ways in which they could make the real world better. The rise of the cottagecore game in the late 2010s not only exemplifies this new age but also intensifies its cultural trajectories. Although there are numerous cottagecore games released in the late 2010s and the early 2020s resulting from the rise of the cottagecore game – such as *Cozy Grove*³¹, and *Littlewood*³² – the achievements of *Stardew Valley* and *Animal Crossing* are remarkable for the rise of the genre, and

27 See also: KUSHNER, D.: *Masters of Doom: How Two Guys Created an Empire and Transformed Pop Culture*. New York, NY : Random House, 2003.

28 ID SOFTWARE: *Doom*. [digital game]. New York, NY : GT Interactive, 1993.

29 MARX, K: The Communist Manifesto. In BEER, S. H. (ed.): *Marx and Engels the Communist Manifesto*. Norwalk, CT : Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955, p. 13.

30 BERMAN, M.: *All that is Solid Melts into Air*. New York, NY : Penguin Books, 1988, p. 15.

31 SPRY FOX: *Cozy Grove*. [digital game]. Seattle, WA : Spry Fox, 2021.

32 YOUNG, S.: *Littlewood*. [digital game]. Orlando, FL : SmashGames, 2019.

this research features both here as exemplary of this new age. Inspired by Harvest Moon and other predecessors, Stardew Valley has provided more than fifteen million players a chance to build a farm, own a home, raise livestock, wear peasant costumes, fall in love, slay monsters in the local mines, and ultimately reimagine their lives and identities by exploring the romanticized agricultural life in Pelican Town.³³ By combining a farm simulator and an action-adventure RPG into one cute, pixelated package, the game extends the gameplay suggested by Harvest Moon. The player explores the life of a farmer in an idealized countryside; he could either be the busiest man in the town and run a big business to help restoring the local community centre or work with a mega-corporation to turn it into a warehouse. Because of such aesthetic and narrative elements, R. Watts evaluates the game as “the quintessential cottagecore game”.³⁴ R. Watts’ remarks are valid; however, similar to Harvest Moon, Stardew Valley is not a perfect imagining of a new world. Like cottagecore, Pelican Town, the gameworld of Stardew Valley, is built upon traditions that are unknowingly harmful to certain players. For example, the characters of the game are overwhelmingly white – there are only two black characters in the whole town – and there are no people from other ethnic or racial groups. Encouraging diversity and thoughtful appreciations of politics in gameworlds are not just an escape from capitalism but a way of cultivating a gentler and more egalitarian world for everyone. In this sense, Stardew Valley, as a cottagecore game, faces the same problem which one of its predecessors, Harvest Moon, had two decades before. Here, it is important to notice that Stardew Valley was designed to be a different game from Harvest Moon, when the developer of the game, E. Barone, who is more well-known by his nickname ConcernedApe, developed the game with XNA – which does not use any language but C#. By developing the game with XNA, E. Barone accommodates and encourages the post-production participatory practices of fans and modders who seek to make the gameworld fit their own vision of a better world. As a result, compared to many other games, modding is overwhelmingly common practice among the players of Stardew Valley because it is easy for players who were not used to such participatory practices to get involved in the process of reimagining an ideal digital world. Mods such as *Diverse Stardew Valley* remedy the diversity issue by adding more racial, ethnic, and gender diversity to Pelican Town.³⁵ Such mods imply that players enjoy the game by not only exploring the romantic fantasy of living off the land and being harmonious with nature but also recreating it into a better world they imaginatively seek.

Similar to Stardew Valley, Animal Crossing: New Horizons has made remarkable achievements which played a significant role in the rise of the cottagecore game. According to the financial data available on Nintendo’s official website, despite its exclusive availability for the Nintendo Switch, Animal Crossing had 38 million copies sold as of March 2022.³⁶ The game is a life simulator; the player explores the life of a settler who moves into a deserted island which provides not only open space for placing items and decorating but also natural resources that they could collect for the DIY (do it yourself) crafting. By catching bugs, fish, and plants, swimming in the ocean, raising trees and flowers, and communicating with other animal villagers, the player explores the cottagecore fantasy as a settler who lives off the land. Because the game is exclusive to Nintendo Switch,

33 NUNNELEY-JACKSON, S.: *Stardew Valley Crosses 15 Million Sold as Creator Focuses on New Game*. Released on 7th September 2021. [online]. [2022-07-29]. Available at: <<https://www.vg247.com/stardew-valley-15-million-sold>>.

34 WATTS, R.: *How to Turn Your Stardew Valley Farm into a Cottagecore Fantasy*. Released on 9th November 2022. [online]. [2022-11-29]. Available at: <<https://www.pcgamer.com/how-to-turn-your-stardew-valley-farm-into-a-cottagecore-fantasy/>>.

35 *Diverse Stardew Valley (DSV) – Seasonal*. Released on 2nd July 2019. [online]. [2022-07-29]. Available at: <<https://www.moddrop.com/stardew-valley/mods/580603-diverse-stardew-valley-dsv-seasonal>>.

36 *Top Selling Title Sales Units*. Released on 30th September 2022. [online]. [2022-03-31]. Available at: <<https://www.nintendo.co.jp/ir/en/finance/software/index.html>>.

compared to *Stardew Valley* or *Minecraft* which fans and modders have been running rampant with the aesthetic, the game does not have such an easy system for the beginners in modding and other participatory practices. Instead, the game is designed to focus on customization and co-op play that could alter the participatory practice. According to H. Nogami, producer of *Animal Crossing*, fashion, for example, is designed for a specific reason: “it’s completely natural for people to want to dress up, or want to buy new clothing items” to “show off for their friends”.³⁷ There is a wealth of customization options available for the player – not only fashion and other appearance options of the player’s character, but also terrains and partitioning of the island – and as R. Frushtick lauds this unrestricted creativity that allows for the player to design the island, it makes the gameworld as a “true representation of the player who created it”.³⁸ As the co-op mode enables to interact with other players, the interaction between different players in the co-op mode substitutes for the social interactions in the real world – such as meetings, trips, as well as talk shows, protests – and the player’s vision of a better world and themselves, to this end, could be not only personal but also interpersonal. For this reason, we can reflect that *Animal Crossing* as a cottagecore game extends the political nature of enjoying the cottagecore game into an interpersonal practice which provided an ‘escape’ for players from the COVID-19 pandemic to the idealized world that allows international social interactions.³⁹

Conclusion: The Rise of the Cottagecore Game

As this new age witnesses the modernity of the ways in which gamers consume cottagecore games, the creative practices once present only in fan communities in the past will expand to gamers as a whole. It is not hyperbole to say that enjoying a digital game in this age, therefore, has the potential to be called ‘consumption’ in the fashion defined by K. Marx. In today’s digital world, which is filled with online media services, DIY movements, and other user-based content production initiatives, neither competition nor exploration, originated from either the personal value of a player or that of the players’ practices in their communities, could solely define gaming. Consuming digital game content encompasses personal, political, and interpersonal practices. Given new technologies, gamers are all potential creators, appropriators, and modern consumers who imagine how they might make the real world a better place. The textual productivity from such consumers who are technologically empowered allows them to transcend the traditional distinctions associated with access to creative practices. *Stardew Valley*, *Animal Crossing*, and other cottagecore games have intensified this textual productivity of consumers who are important meaning-makers. One might still ask how a player’s imagination could fully represent a better world. However, the process of making a better world is through the imagination

37 WEBSTER, A.: *Animal Crossing: New Horizons’ Deserted Island Was Designed to Shake Up the Series*. Released on 20th March 2020. [online]. [2022-03-20]. Available at: <<https://www.theverge.com/2020/3/20/21188006/animal-crossing-new-horizons-design-interview-aya-kyogoku-hisashi-nogami>>.

38 FRUSHTICK, R.: *Animal Crossing: New Horizons Is a Much-Needed Escape from Everything*. Released on 26th March 2020. [online]. [2022-07-29]. Available at: <<https://www.polygon.com/reviews/2020/3/16/21178911/animal-crossing-new-horizons-review-nintendo-switch>>.

39 WEBSTER, A.: *Animal Crossing: New Horizons’ Deserted Island Was Designed to Shake Up the Series*. Released on 20th March 2020. [online]. [2022-03-20]. Available at: <<https://www.theverge.com/2020/3/20/21188006/animal-crossing-new-horizons-design-interview-aya-kyogoku-hisashi-nogami>>.

of a world that we can think of as better for us all. In this sense, what originated the rise of the cottagecore game is not contemporary gamers' dreams of self-sustainability outside of capitalism. The origin of the rise of the cottagecore game is the revolutionary potential of what people imagine with their modernity and Marxist sensibilities.

U. K. Le Guin argued that "[t]he imagination is an essential tool of the mind, a fundamental way of thinking an indispensable means of becoming and remaining human".⁴⁰ Contemporary gamers seek epic meaning in the imagined world and their imagination is a process of becoming and remaining human in the world. The rise of the cottagecore game, and its rationale, formalizes such assumptions about the cultural goods and political value of reimagining a life by exploring another in the gameworld. In this sense, the rise of the cottagecore game is particularly powerful because it exemplifies the modernity of contemporary gamers who are in that process and how they are coming together with the potential to clash against the reductive views of digital games as mere commodities. Fan culture is converging with mass culture and the role of gamers, in other words, consumers, is also converging with creative roles. The intersecting energies here – the cultural and normative influences which have driven the rise of the cottagecore game, modernity and the Marxist sensibilities of contemporary gamers, and gaming as exploring another life – which subsequently contest the traditional cultural attitudes toward gaming in a politically progressive manner, provide an apt context for a quote from S. Miyamoto which exemplifies the nature of consuming a digital game within and outside the gameworld: "players are artists who create their own reality within the game".⁴¹

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