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The Pastoral in the Anthropocene

Pastoral Videogames: Industry, Entropy, Elegy

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by Laura op de Beke

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Abstract

Pastoral videogames are popular and numerous. While existing scholarship on pastoral videogames tends to emphasize their complicity in the misrepresentation of agricultural labor and ecological processes, this article explores a range of more ambiguous, critical pastoralisms in videogames, including the counter-pastoral, the complex pastoral, and pastoral elegy. In particular, this article is interested in analyzing the progressivist temporal paradigm prevalent in the genre, a paradigm that incorporates an industrious, capitalist ethos glorifying work, expansion, and wealth accumulation. Through brief analyses of the videogames Stardew Valley, Graveyard Keeper, The Stillness of the Wind, and Everybody's Gone to the Rapture, this paper concludes that the most critically interesting engagement with the pastoral genre in videogames rests in pastoral elegy, especially the dark ecological kind elaborated by Timothy Morton, which overturns the progressivist paradigm by dwelling melancholically in decline, death, and dissolution.

Keywords: videogames, farm games, pastoral, temporality, elegy, entropy

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About the Author

Laura op de Beke (www.lauraopdebeke.com) is a Ph.D. fellow at the University of Oslo, Norway. Her work is part of an interdisciplinary project called "Lifetimes: A Natural History of the Present." Her contribution looks at Anthropocene temporalities in videogames that manifest as temporal affects, for instance: anxiety over the future, petro-melancholia, a preoccupation with death and extinction, and technofuturistic hope. Her other interests include science fiction, green media studies, veganism, LARP, and the environmental humanities more broadly. Laura is also the founder of the online reading group Un-Earthed (www.un-earthed.group.com).

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Pastoral Videogames: Industry, Entropy, Elegy

Laura op de Beke

In what may be a nod to Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), the pastoral game-world of *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe 2016) has a railroad running through it. On some days the train's whistle can be heard, interrupting the soundtrack while a notification pops up that reads "A train is passing through *Stardew Valley*." For Marx the interruption of the train into the pastoral space—the machine in the garden—signals a dynamic that distinguishes the complex pastoral from more naïve expressions of the genre. Complex pastorals "manage to qualify, or call into question, or bring irony to bear against the illusion of peace and harmony in a green pasture" (Marx 1964, 25). Whereas existing scholarship on pastoral videogames (Martin 2011, Chang 2012, Chang 2019), tends to emphasize their complicity in the misrepresentation of agricultural labor and their escapist appeal, this article locates a range of more ambiguous pastoralisms in videogames like *Stardew Valley*, *Graveyard Keeper* (Lazy Bear Videogames 2018), *The Stillness of the Wind* (Memory of God / Lambic Studios 2019) and *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (The Chinese Room 2016). These more critical pastoralisms include the counter-pastoral, the complex pastoral, and finally pastoral elegy.

To start with, this paper responds to Alenda Chang's two-pronged criticism of pastoral videogames, making explicit how it sits within criticism of the pastoral genre more generally and how it might apply to *Stardew Valley*. Afterwards, I present my own reading of the pastoral impulse in the aforementioned videogames. Unlike Chang, I am less interested in their social or ecological realism; rather, my paper attends more closely to the way they evoke temporalities of progress, decline, or extinction. In particular, I want to highlight a temporal paradigm that has become common in pastoral videogames, which is one of progress through labor. This paper concludes by offering some examples of videogames that disrupt this progressivist temporality.

Social and Ecological Realism in Pastoral Videogames

In her book *Playing Nature* (2019), Alenda Chang describes videogames as "mesocosms" or "experimental enclosures" that mirror in stylized and sometimes provocative ways the properties of ecological processes in the world. In doing so, they can aid science communication and stimulate environmental awareness (17). But they do not always succeed. For Chang particularly themes of entropy—which point to a system's externalities, its waste products, or its chaotic behavior—often go overlooked in videogame ecologies. Pastoral videogames especially have a tendency to idealize and oversimplify ecological processes, while whitewashing and obfuscating agricultural labor (2019, 163). They often follow a typical narrative: they introduce the player to an ostensibly virgin plot of land that they are encouraged to develop to accumulate wealth. In their emphasis on the accumulation of wealth through technological development and territorial expansion, pastoral videogames reproduce a capitalist ethos. Moreover, despite the fact that the majority of agricultural labor in the U.S. is performed by migrant laborers, pastoral videogames rarely feature non-white protagonists. Finally, they often neglect to treat resources like water and soil as scarcities, even though in the wake of industrial agriculture that is what they have increasingly become.

Chang's denunciation of the lack of social or ecological realism in pastoral videogames takes after Raymond Williams' criticism of seventeenth-century British country house poems in his book *The Country and the City* (1973). The beautiful manors represented in these poems seem to be run by ghosts as there is hardly any mention of the peasants whose lives were irrevocably tied to the land and whose labor fueled their masters' decadence. In response, Williams sought to uncover a more social-realist mode of writing about rural life—the counter-pastoral, which does not shy away from issues of poverty, illness, and abuse, and from which the lives of poor people have not been expunged.

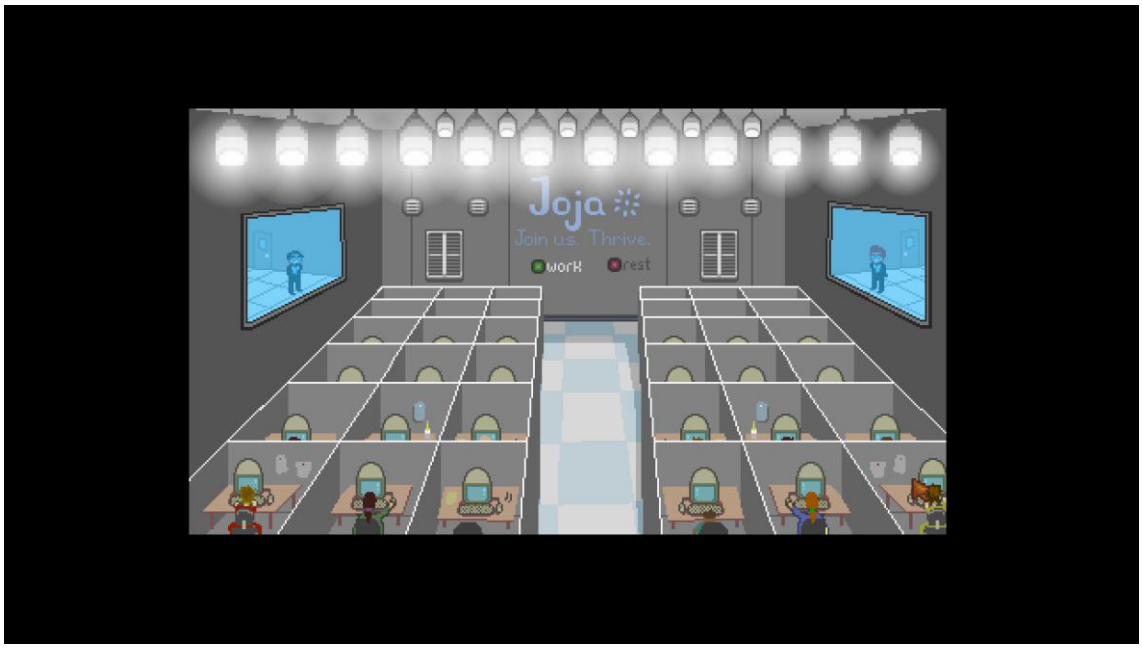
My first example may be considered such a counter-pastoral; *Stardew Valley* (2016) is an independent game created by Eric Barone. Plot-wise, the game follows the conventional farm game narrative, although it features a more diverse cast of characters. The story starts after an opening cut-scene introducing the fictional Joja Corporation, a food distribution company where the player character has a soul-crushingly tedious desk job. The cut-scenes speak volumes: each employee looks imprisoned in a separate cubicle, working under camera-supervision behind a disproportionately large computer (figures 1 and 2). The slow panning shot across a set of cubicles shows a number of co-workers in various states of misery. As a player, however, you can escape this fate by inheriting

your grandfather's farm in the eponymous Stardew Valley, exchanging a horrible job for rural life in a tightly-knit community, cultivating the soil, and building up the farm. Gameplay consists of harvesting resources from the surrounding hills and forests, while exploiting the different opportunities each season has to offer in terms of fishing, gathering, farming, and social events.

The counter-pastoral impulse in *Stardew Valley* becomes apparent the more you meet the valley's misfits. For example, to the north of the village, up in the mountains there is a tent. In the tent lives Linus. He is a kind of wild man, dressed in a coat made of leaves. He sustains himself by scavenging from bins and living off seasonal grub. During the village festivals, he keeps a fearful distance. Like the mention of the train, Linus is another self-aware reference to pastoral genre conventions. Virgil's first Eclogue—a foundational pastoral text—stages a juxtaposition between the shepherd Tityrus, at home and in peace, and the exiled Meliboeus, his foil, who is banished from his homeland, and forced to wander the wilderness with his flock. This fate flags a host of issues, ecological injustice and the precarity of place and happiness among others. Linus is the Meliboeus of *Stardew Valley* and in his poverty and social exile he also provides a poignant foil to your achievements as a player who can easily integrate in the town and earn money as a property owner.

Linus is not the only outsider in the village. To the right of the square, beyond the elegant saloon and the mayor's villa, lies a sandy stretch of barren ground with open sewers and Pam's trailer that she shares with her daughter Penny. Although the locals never mention it, Pam is an alcoholic. She can be found in the saloon every evening badgering bystanders for a drink. Another regular at the saloon is Shane. He works at the local Jojamart, a gloomy supermarket where the other staff are all nameless and unresponsive. He is rude and unhelpful, but in talking to him you discover he struggles with depression and has long ago learned to expect the very least of life, always teetering on the edge of self-hatred, stuck in a dead-end job. In one particular cut-scene, Shane has drunk himself into a stupor, so you step in and, using the same watering can you use to grow and nurture crops, you wake him up by splashing him with water—a powerful metaphor that likens the cultivation of relationships to the growing of crops. As Terry Gifford explains in his discussion of the pastoral, "the link between pastoralists as shepherds and pastoral concerns for well-being, as in the term 'pastor,' is not accidental. Pastoral concern might be for human life or the life of the environment of retreat, or both" (2013, 18). *Stardew Valley*'s engagement with themes of social exile, poverty, mental illness, addiction, and also the encroachment of agribusiness (the Joja Corporation) on local communities is evidence of a counter-pastoral impulse that seeks to incorporate an element of social realism, exposing the privilege of the narrative of rural escape.

Although it features elements of social realism, it may be argued that *Stardew Valley* is not a sophisticated enough ecological simulation. On the one hand, the game does present seasonal variation, variation across different biomes, and not all foods are available throughout the year. As Kate Galloway argues, this variation is enhanced by the game's soundtrack, which features a list of unique compositions for each season and most locations (2020). Moreover, during lulls in the soundtrack, diegetic sounds of the game-world can be heard including bird song, the crash of the ocean, and even the hum of the refrigerators at the JojaMart, intensifying the vividness of these places (2020, 172). However, *Stardew Valley* features none of the attributes that Chang argues might help redeem pastoral videogames, principally a more serious engagement with entropy (2019, 176). While I grant that verisimilitude is an important aspect of environmental criticism, videogames should not be judged by the authenticity of their simulation alone. In the next section, I explain how *Stardew Valley* establishes a concrete sense of place through other means besides fidelity to ecological processes, while also attending to the second leg of Chang's critique of farm videogames, which rests in their reproduction of what Scott Hess calls the "postmodern pastoral" of consumer culture (2004).



Figures 1 and 2. *Stardew Valley* (2016).

The Postmodern Pastoral

According to Hess, the postmodern pastoral is an expression of the pastoral that has fully incorporated—and obfuscated—the technology that supports it (2004). In other words, the postmodern pastoral naturalizes the consumption of nature through technology. The concept requires that we return to the interruption of Marx's offending train. Whereas for Marx, the machine in the garden represents an element that is unassimilable in the pastoral, generating critically interesting ambiguity or friction, for Hess's postmodern pastoral this is no longer the case. He explains that the colonization of America and the cultivation of its expansive prairie was enabled by technological progress in transport and agriculture, making it possible for the majority of Americans to live lives of leisure. Therefore, rather than threaten or complicate pastoral bliss, technology facilitates it, and rather than having perished, "the pastoral in this new technologized version has developed into one of the primary myths underlying our capitalist consumer society" (2004, 78). In other words, the postmodern pastoral glosses over the friction that the complex pastoral attempts to raise; it claims, on the contrary, that the pastoral is perfectly compatible with technologized consumer culture.

> In postmodern pastoral, the machine is no longer a potential interruption but the central site of the pastoral order, since it is the machine which promises to reduce the complexities and frustration of contemporary life, allowing the consumer to 'get away from it all' and return to the peace and simplicity of the lost natural world. (2004, 77)

This idea is most prevalent in advertisements. Sustainable clothes companies claim that you can have both—you can have hip, affordable, fairly produced clothes and reduce textile waste. Meat advertisements say that you can continue to consume pork, beef, and chicken while bettering the lives of farm animals; and travel agencies argue that it is possible to go on holiday to faraway destinations, while traveling sustainably. No ambiguities there!

Hess's biggest concern is that the postmodern pastoral functions like a "pastoral masque of technology [blocking] our awareness of the deteriorating environmental conditions that support our current prosperity" (2004, 72). But he also argues that the postmodern pastoral reproduces a set of virtues that differ dangerously from those espoused in the pastoral of antiquity—with speed and movement replacing the virtue of being rooted in place, exemplified by Hess in the car commercial. "The SUVs don't just sit in the wilderness, they roar through it" (2004, 79). Additionally, whereas in the classical pastoral solitude is often portrayed as suffering, in the postmodern pastoral it becomes a source of happiness and freedom from responsibility or care.

How does this critique apply to *Stardew Valley*? One could argue that the opening cut-scene, which frames the game as an escape from a life of desktop-bound, digital labor, playfully introduces an element of irony, because the game of course exists by the grace of those hulking computers. This expression of irony identifies *Stardew Valley* as a complex pastoral. Moreover, the game does not value the postmodern pastoral's virtues of individuality, speed, and transience over community, slowness, and sense of place. For example, one of the main objectives in the game is restoring the community center, which is inhabited by the Junimo: forest spirits whose residence in the community center, and whose commitment to its restoration, suggest we recognize the environment as part of the community. Additionally, the postmodern pastoral's celebration of speed and transience finds little traction in *Stardew Valley*. The game's pace is slow, and gameplay involves moving down paths you have travelled a hundred times before, to locations you have come to know intimately. The importance of place-sense for environmental criticism can hardly be overstated. According to Lawrence Buell, studies of environmental literature "indicate that an awakened sense of physical location and of belonging to some sort of place-based community have a great deal to do with activating environmental concern" (2001, 56). Elsewhere in his discussion of place, he extends that statement to include "fictive or virtual places" (2001, 71).

One way of achieving a strong sense of place according to Buell is through a careful use of tone, an overused term that immediately calls for an example. Buell provides one from Thoreau's *Walden*, where Thoreau describes muskrat holes as "dwellings" and the

animals themselves as "settlers." In doing so, Thoreau transforms "inert data" and imbues it with place-sense (Buell 1996, 262). A similar transformation can be found in *Stardew Valley*'s item descriptions. Sometimes these short descriptions are used to share interesting biological facts, such as the longevity of the sturgeon or the hybrid origins of the tiger trout, but other times the wording is more deliberately subjective. The description of a clam, for example, reads: "Someone lived here once." The phrase is marked by a sense of wonder, and the words "someone" and "lived" animate the mollusc, generating intimacy across species.

In *Stardew Valley* this intimacy does not just extend to places, but also to the NPCs (non-player characters). Talking to them every day quickly exhausts all the dialogue options and soon their answers become repetitive. To the game's credit however, the result is not boredom but rather a compelling sense of depth, of something being withheld that suggests a roundness of character. Rather than give up all information at once, in long paragraphs that players only mine for instruction rather than interest, the NPC's in *Stardew Valley* only disclose details of their lives slowly and gradually. Nor are they always at your beck and call. They have routines, schedules, and oddly secret lives that unfold independently of the player's whims. It is these details that give the game-world of *Stardew Valley* a vibrant sense of existing independently from the player.

Thus rounding off my response to the most salient criticism of pastoral videogames and my discussion of *Stardew Valley*, I want to pivot to the next section in this paper, which mounts a different reading of pastoral videogames—focused on their construction of a temporal paradigm of progress through labor.

Videogames as Gardens

Videogames are gardens, argues Paul Martin (2011). Although they may initially evoke vast, limitless landscapes, through exploration players tend to discover that they are bounded and secured, just like a garden, designed for player enjoyment. Game designer Will Wright has also been known to compare gameplay to gardening, especially in less goal-oriented, simulation videogames that require patience and careful planning before initial actions and strategies come to fruition (Moggridge 2007, 378). More recently, Lewis Gordon has commented on the increased number of popular gardening videogames available that he explains might point to a strategy for stress relief in order to cope with the neoliberal working culture of optimization (2019). Following Aubrey Anable's understanding that videogames serve as "a mediating force between individuals and their working conditions" (2018, 73), in my reading, gardening videogames provide

less a relief *from* work, than an environment from which to develop a more amenable relationship *to* work. After all, gardening videogames are hardly devoid of labor, but they imbue that labor with a sense of care.

In his book of essays on the function of gardens in the imagination, Robert Pogue Harrison explains that gardens are spaces in which we can indulge the essentially human "vocation of care" (2008, 1). This vocation is associated with an attitude of "worldliness" (2008, 5). Worldly cares lay claim on us, ask us to do things, sometimes for long periods of time before gratifying our desires. Videogames also make demands on players; many videogames require a considerable investment of time. In doing so, they indulge the vocation of care, in much the same way that Harrison's gardens do, by putting us to work. Harrison explains that cares were lacking in mythological gardens like Eden and Elysium, which were essentially careless, and this is what makes them ultimately undesirable.

> Everything was there for [Adam] (including his wife). After his exile, he was there for all things, for it was only by dedicating himself that he could render humanly inhabitable an environment that did not exist for his pleasure and that exacted from him his daily labor. Out of this extension of self into the world was born the love of some-thing other than oneself. (2008, 8–9)

In other words, through careful labor we extend ourselves into the world, even fictional or virtual worlds; and only when we are immersed like this can we develop relationships of care. In Richard White's well-known text "Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?" he argues that work, especially outdoor physical labor and environmentalism have become opposed in the American imagination; but this opposition is only superficial (1996). By working, White argues, we extend ourselves into the world in an embodied manner. Although not quite the same, White concedes that play "can be as sensuous as work," and that outdoor leisure often resembles work. Pastoral gameplay also, increasingly, resembles work in the sense that it can be time-intensive and boring, requiring repetitive labor, which in the lingo is called grinding, or farming.

The conception of the pastoral garden as one of work is particularly American, according to Marx. He explains that in their histories of Virginia both Thomas Jefferson and Robert Beverly conceived of the state as a garden. However, both authors were "groping for the distinction between two garden metaphors: a wild, primitive, or prelapsarian Eden in which [Beverly] thought to have found the Indians, and a cultivated garden embracing values not unlike those represented by the classic Virgillian pasture" (1964, 87). The first garden is conceived as one of careless pleasure, frozen in time, whereas the latter garden makes room for the American values of work and progress. The

distinction between the garden of indolence, where the fruit is on the bough all year long, and the garden of industry, is echoed in Harrison's distinction between the prelapsarian Garden of Eden and the garden of care that has also embraced industry, understood not as mechanized production, but as diligent and care-ful labor. Marx's notion of the complex pastoral identifies the coexistence of these two distinct temporal logics—timelessness and timeliness—in much American pastoral writing. In his example, drawn from Nathanial Hawthorne's notes, he describes the author caught in a moment of contemplation within a green pasture when he is suddenly awakened from his reverie by the whistle of the train that "tells a story of busy men [and] brings the noisy world into the midst of our slumbrous peace" (Hawthorne qtd. in Marx 1964, 13). To Marx, the train symbolizes the intrusion of the industrial into the pastoral space, and, by extension, the forces of history and the passage of time into a space where time stood still.

Stardew Valley, too, is a complex pastoral, where busy men and the noisy world have made their entry. In the game, two urges meet: the urge to indulge leisurely and without aim and the urge to work tirelessly and efficiently in order to make money, cultivate relationships, and extend oneself into the game-world. The valley's unrelenting demands are legion: people to meet, crops to nurture, building projects to finish, requests to fulfil. This is part of the game's appeal. As Michelle Shir-Wise observes, the values of productivity and efficient time-management increasingly encroach on "free" leisure time, resulting in the performance of conspicuous business, a performance that is pleasurable because it alleviates feelings of guilt for doing nothing (2018).

Bracketing for the moment a discussion of the political implications of this dissolving work/play boundary—which has already been analyzed by other authors (Nick Yee 2006, Pedercini 2014, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009, Scully-Blaker 2019)—I want to return to Chang's demand for entropy in videogames. Entropy can be understood as excess energy, or, that which escapes being put to work. As I've explained, pastoral videogames often play like productivity engines, channeling playful energy into actionable feedback, expansion, and progression. This standard narrative leaves little room for entropy. The prefix in eco-videogames refers ambiguously to ecology as well as economy. Benjamin Abraham puts his finger on this ambivalence in his discussion of survival and crafting mechanics in videogames where he writes that "these sometimes distractingly pastoral videogames . . . are much more about economic activity than ecologic activity" (2018, n.p.). The problem with pastoral videogames, therefore, is that they reproduce, and naturalize, narratives of accumulative progress. In the next section, I argue how, by engaging with pastoral elegy, especially the dark ecological kind, videogames can create a space to feel out the more entropic themes of decline, death, and dissolution.

Pastoral Elegy

Graveyard Keeper (2018) is a tongue-in-cheek, gothic version of *Stardew Valley*. Instead of a farm you manage a graveyard, and your daily chores include performing autopsies and cremations, embalming, digging graves, and a whole range of more occult practices. The emphasis on death, decomposition, and the gothic in *Graveyard Keeper* is reminiscent of Timothy Morton's notion of dark ecology, which is a call to strip ecological discourse of its fetishization of "Nature" as life-affirming, stable, bounteous, delicate, beautiful, and all manner of qualities easy to love and celebrate in lyrical poetry. Rather, ecology is about "radical intimacy with radical strangers," which is just as often uncomfortable, gross, and disturbing (Morton 2010, 269). The aesthetics of dark ecology embrace artificiality and otherness, without trying to excise "Nature" as a thing over yonder to be admired, or indeed, in the age of the Anthropocene, mourned. "Pastoral is about the past," writes Morton, but contemporary pastoral elegies are also about the future (2010, 251). They often mourn a lost "Nature" that either never was, or, is not yet gone. Morton questions the "unseemly rhetorical rush" to mourn that which is still in the process of falling apart (2010, 255), and advocates instead an ethics of lingering and choking on the indigestibility of grief and death rather than attempting to move beyond it. This is something pastoral videogames can participate in.

Case in point: *The Stillness of the Wind* (2016). This game tells the story of a cataclysm that unfolds off-screen and elsewhere, and in doing so, it captures a striking and unsettling truth about environmental destruction—namely that it is felt in terms of absence, not presence. These absences are hardly eye-catching, and addressing them requires a register undeveloped in climate change discourse that Zadie Smith laments in her essay "Elegy for a Country's Seasons" (2014). She argues that "what's missing from the account [of global warming] is how much of our reaction is emotional"; we have the scientific jargon to describe what is happening around us, but "there are hardly any intimate terms" (2014, n.p.). *The Stillness of the Wind* develops this important register by telling a story of collapse and dwelling, focusing in particular on the ways that rituals of productivity, like those encouraged by farm videogames, fail to postpone the coming of the end.

The game opens on a run-down farm in the desert, and the player character of an old woman called Talma whose glacial pace severely limits how much you can do each day. There is barely enough time to milk the goats, curdle the milk, shape the cheese, and perhaps do a little gardening before the evening rolls around again and you put your weary bones to rest. You can also trade goods with the postman who stops by every day for a chat, but there is no money in it, and no way of expanding the farm, suggesting that

The Stillness of the Wind is no ordinary pastoral videogame. Every day Talma receives mail from her family in the city. One day, her family reports that during a recent festival people suddenly started collapsing, even vanishing. There seems to be an illness going around, and Talma's estranged daughter Sola, who is on her way back to the farm explains that she has "started losing pieces of [her] day. The memory of it" (2016). Then Talma's sister vanishes. For days there is no mail. The postman stops coming. Gradually and almost imperceptibly your chickens disappear. The days grow shorter and darker. At night, the farm is harassed by wolves, and when you run out of shotgun shells your goats inevitably get picked off one by one. Then the earth rots and your flowers die, while an apocalyptic black rain falls from the sky. Waking up now, you find that there is nothing to do; no milking, no gardening, no tasks to occupy yourself with. Boredom and dread set in. Finally, flickering embers are visible on the horizon, as if the earth is on fire. The next morning the farm is blanketed with a layer of snow, or ash, and then, without warning you collapse, dead on the ground.

The Stillness of the Wind encourages players to set up routines of care-ful labor, before gradually, and relentlessly dismantling them. It tricks you into committing to a kind of growth-oriented business model that, as I explained, is typical of pastoral videogames that reward labor with the expansion of one's presence in the world. On the contrary, in *The Stillness of the Wind*, one's capacity to engage with the world shrinks with time. Ultimately, all there is left to do, is pick up the stick leaning against the house—neglected until now in favor of more useful items like the milk pail or the watering can—and start drawing lines in the sand. This strikes me as a perfect example of entropy, that is, energy that escapes being put to work. Drawing lines in the sand is not like building a farm. It is not productive labor. With time, the lines in the sand will be wiped away, as, in the fullness of time, will most of the legacy of our species.

Figure 3. Farm videogames are about building routines and the pleasure of ticking off daily chores.

Figure 4. Drawing lines in the sand.

Another videogame that engages with death and dissolution is *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (2016), in which you explore the fictional British village of Yaughton after a strange event has emptied out the town, leaving only ghostly imprints of the people who used to live there and their petty dramas. Like *The Stillness of the Wind*, this game subverts pastoral genre conventions by showing a pastoral space eerily devoid of human life, and by addressing themes of death and extinction. *Everybody's Gone to the Rap*ture is a walking

simulator, a formerly deprecatory, but now proudly reclaimed term for a game where one's interaction with the environment is limited to movement and observation. Players wander the beautifully rendered, highly detailed virtual environment, reconstructing the story by following an orb of light and triggering ghostly impressions of former events. Through these dialogues, gradually, a cast of characters is introduced who are as flawed as they are human. The game's narrative scope is both minute—even mundane—and cosmic. As it turns out, the village of Yaughton is desolate because the entire human race has gone extinct due to some kind of alien epidemic. Despite attempts to stop the spread of the disease that originated at the local observatory, the alien force—or "the pattern," as it is called—finds a way out, consuming everybody on the entire planet.

One of the last to witness this event is Kate Collins, through whose recordings we can learn about the final few minutes before the end. In her recordings, Kate muses on the meaning of the pattern that left a butterfly-shaped mark on her face after she first encountered it: "I understand it better now. It is a collector of time, of butterflies" (2016). She continues,

> We had held time to ourselves in this place, held the light to the ground because we were afraid of the coming dark but now we understand that to cling to the light is not living. I have spent my life watching the illumination from a million dead stars reaching for me without grasping this meaning. . . . Everything is light now, everything has come to rest. The world is scored by the traces we carved into it. Our presence is everywhere; the bridge joining our stories. This world existed before we came to it and it will continue without us. In the empty fields and houses our traces radiate, and others will come to dance in the light we cast. We can slip away unafraid knowing that everything will continue. (2016)

What to make of this ambiguous soliloquy? If we understand the light to be a metaphor for life, then this passage is an admonishment that we should take better care of how we live it. The passage acknowledges the naïve desire to fix things in time and to ward off change ("holding time to oneself"). The pattern seems to have accomplished just this ("everything has come to rest"). It has fixed Yaughton like a butterfly in a collector's display case. Moreover, as the passage suggests, some of the light we cast in our lives is toxic ("our traces radiate"). Indeed, the town of Yaughton is haunted by stories of human weakness: strife, alcoholism, infidelity, xenophobia, racism, and child abuse. The "others" who may come to dance in the light we leave behind may do so out of jubilation at our being no longer there. The disappearance of the human species would vacate niches for other creatures to exploit. The passage's final statement, then, locates the pastoral garden in a wilder, more changeable wilderness from which it cannot be extricated, and which will outlive it.

What is the future of the pastoral genre in videogames? As I have argued here, using *Stardew Valley* as one of my primary examples, videogames can and do feature counter-pastoral elements, strengthening the genre with socially and ecologically insightful representations of rural life. However, following Chang, I concede that they do so rarely. More often, pastoral videogames function as complex pastorals whose ambivalent relationship to technology and industry remains unresolved. In the postmodern pastoral, the tension that inheres in this relationship is smoothed over—but it does not need to be. Videogames as self-aware as *Stardew Valley* knowingly acknowledge the technological as their site of operation. Nevertheless, as complex pastorals in the American tradition, pastoral videogames—and *Stardew Valley* is no exception—often incorporate an industrious, capitalist ethos that glorifies work and wealth accumulation. In my view, therefore, the most critically interesting engagement with the pastoral in videogames lies in their engagement with pastoral elegy, especially the dark ecological kind elaborated by Morton that dwells melancholically in decline, death, and dissolution.

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