



THE COALITION OF MASTER'S
SCHOLARS ON MATERIAL CULTURE

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Published by: The Coalition of Master's Scholars on Material Culture

URL: <https://cmsmc.org/publications/an-honest-days-work>

Date Published: July 16, 2021

Citation: Bidmead, Isabella, and Mindrebø, Markus. "An Honest Day's Work: Pastoral Romanticism in Open-World Role-Playing Games." The Coalition of Master's Scholars on Material Culture, 1, July 16, 2021.

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An Honest Day's Work: Pastoral Romanticism in Open-World Role-Playing Games: Part 1

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Abstract: This paper serves as an exploration of the reliance of open world fantasy role-playing games on evoking emotions of pastoral romanticism in the player. Such games tend to be dominated by rural landscapes, and farming locations and objects often play a central role in the player's interaction with the world. In particular, the paper will investigate mechanics where the player receives a personal stake in a pastoral setting, such as when a player-controlled hero spends significant game time engaging in farmhouse construction, food production, or other central aspects of rural life. It is in this aspect, the paper argues, that pastoral romanticism creates a significant player appeal entirely separate from the allure of heroic adventuring. Players of fantasy games take on the trappings of the aristocrats of ages past in their idealized engagement with otherwise taxing rural life, and similar to the early modern bourgeoisie, fantasize about escaping from the pressures of a modern industrialist lifestyle just as much as they fantasize about killing dragons. In absence of meaningful control over physical productivity in the real world, this progression towards a "perfect" rural landscape that one creates through shaping the land according to one's wishes, is an appealing simulation of an activity not available to the average urban or suburban player. However, it simultaneously renders the same player a pseudo-aristocratic interloper into a fairytale version of working-class realities.

Keywords: *Video games, pastoral, open-world, fantasy, romanticism, estate, role-playing games, digital media, rural life, farming*

Open-world video games are often visually defined by an image of a rural landscape. A player character emerges from a cave, or relative darkness, climbs the nearest rock and stands with their back to the camera as it pans out. The shot is reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, but the fog has been blown away, and presented before the player is instead the landscape they get to explore, and make their mark on. To the modern urban dweller, this is "the countryside".¹ This trope has been used across genres, for a multitude of games, from the wastelands of post-apocalypse Massachusetts in *Fallout 4* and war-torn Velen in *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt*, to the lush green plains of Hyrule in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* and the tundra around Whiterun in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. It welcomes the player to the world in one breathtaking panoramic shot and reveals the open world available for exploration. The shot serves to intrigue and excite the player about the landscape, and often doubles as a promotional cover shot. It makes the point of these games clear; while there are plot lines to follow and characters to meet, interaction with an untouched landscape is the clear draw.

While there certainly are open-world games set in urban landscapes (a majority of the *Assassin's Creed* games and *Cyberpunk 2077* come to mind), the fantasy subgenre is dominated by rural settings. This, of course, has a simple explanation, in that the backbone of western fantasy is built upon medieval pastoral conceptions of pre-industrial society. This paper serves as an exploration of the reliance of open-world fantasy role-playing games on creating opportunities for idealized personalization of rural life. Such games tend to be dominated by rural landscapes, and farming locations and objects often play a central role in the player's interaction with the world. Settlements, while important, often end up as breakpoints in between journeys through the rural landscape; game play generally happens outside

settlement space. While the games themselves have pre-defined and relatively structured narratives for the player to follow, the specific gameplay features occurring in these rural areas are often examples of what Henry Jenkins' influential article *Game Design as Narrative Architecture* refers to as environmental storytelling, where the players' interaction with the narrative environment is what brings them into the narrative itself, enabled to intervene in the landscape, and thus, in the story.ⁱⁱ

This paper will investigate mechanics where the player receives a personal stake in a pastoral setting, such as when a player-controlled hero spends significant game time engaging in farmhouse construction, food production, or other central aspects of rural life. It is in this aspect, this paper argues, that pastoral romanticism creates a significant player appeal entirely separate from the allure of heroic adventuring. Players of fantasy games fantasize about escaping from the pressures of a modern industrialist lifestyle just as much as they fantasize about killing dragons. Some of the most prominent games in the open-world fantasy genre, namely *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim - Hearthfire* (2012), *Fallout 4* (2015), *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt - Blood and Wine* (2016), and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017), all feature player-controlled development of rural landscapes, which plays into the romanticism of the rural town. In absence of meaningful control over physical productivity in the real world, this progression towards the creation of a “perfect” rural town through safeguarding the area from monsters, and resourcing from the abundant land around them, is an appealing simulation of an activity not available to the average urban or suburban player. This pastoral romanticism is a continuous thread throughout the fantasy genre, and can be found in a variety of media, not just in video games.

To better frame this argument about contemporary video game players, a brief examination into the history of pastoral romanticism is necessary. This phenomenon

did not arise recently, and can be identified in several different time periods, and social spheres. The most notable example of the concept lies with pre-industrial aristocrats such as Marie Antoinette, who famously built a “peasant” house on palace grounds and popularized the *robe en chemise*, a simplified new style of dress, made of muslin rather than silk, which was a departure from the heavy French court stylings of her time. Her hameau, finished in 1783, loosely imitated a farm and did have functioning agricultural elements to it. It is emblematic of French aristocrats’ “desire to restore in the midst of luxury the rustic life of [their] virtuous ancestors by copying at least their dwellings”ⁱⁱⁱ. While the hameau did have practical functions, namely kitchen gardens, and two dairies, it was not primarily built to feed the rest of Versailles. The official narrative on the Versailles website pushes back against the idea that Marie Antoinette and her followers would “play milkmaid” yet highlight the intentionally rural architectural choices made in the construction^{iv}. While she may not have had any desire to perform the physical labor of running the farm, it is still obvious that the hameau was built as a visual and physical respite from court life.^v The practical functions of farming, milking cows, or tending to flowers would be on the whole provided by servants, adding to the image of a “self-functioning” rural escape. Most buildings were furnished to fulfill social functions, such as balls and tea ceremonies, as opposed to storing grain, furthering the idea that this was an aesthetic to exist within rather than playing at poverty.

However, at the heart of this performance lies a willful misunderstanding of the lifestyle and aesthetics of an impoverished rural land, and the misconception that a certain amount of happiness lies outside the ‘trappings’ of wealth and society. The pride of a day of work in the field, filling a grain silo, or milking a cow: here lie the true ‘simple pleasures’ of life that the rich supposedly long for. However, this

thinking, of course, requires one to ignore the realities of bad harvest, generational poverty, the toll that manual labor takes on a body after years and years of nothing else. While the historicity of Marie Antoinette actually performing manual labor in her hameau is debatable, other courtiers are recorded as pretending to be milkmaids, so we can see Marie Antoinette's behavior as part of a larger trend,^{vi} also including concepts such as the hermitages found on 19th century British estates.^{vii}

In each of the games we discuss here, the player is able to enact similar fantasies of a somewhat rural life. Central to all open world games is not just excitement, but engagement with the landscape. Depending on the game, this can manifest in various ways, further than just the aesthetics of the landscape. Simple details, such as respawn rate of the resources of wood and mining, play into the feeling that the player has a lasting impact on the direction that the world they are in takes. It makes a large difference whether a player encounters a wild, overgrown area with monsters running around, or one where all the monsters have been killed, and the trees have been cut down for their drop items.

All the games that this article focuses on have an additional component that fits into the romanticization of the pastoral lifestyle, namely that key to the player's completion of a quest is the physical erecting of structures, often built in an intentionally rural aesthetic. For the first category of case study, these manifest in estates that need to be constructed or restored and are handed down to the player. In the second, we will examine games that encourage the player to build larger settlements or towns in a largely rural setting, further cementing their connection to the land they play in. The connections are made not only through the erection of buildings, but through the establishment of relationships with various potential villagers, and a more active partaking in the upkeep of the village.

However, the unifying thread in all of these games, and in the genre overall, is the emphasis on glorifying manual labor without actually having the player perform it. Each section of rebuilding is split in quest lines, so the player can see the obvious progression due to their “hard work” of retrieving material, and in many cases the player is tasked as being the sole originator of the materials needed for the rebuilding or building of the towns. By presenting it in this way, we argue that the player is the modern version of the aristocrat dreaming of the inherently unachievable bucolic ideal.

Part I: The Player As Manor Lord

In this first type of rural romanticism in role-playing games, the player character receives a built or unbuilt countryside estate as reward for successful adventuring. The player can subsequently embrace the rural ideal by shaping the landscape according to their own wishes, crafting their own vision of the romantic pastoral dream as a place to retire after the manual labor of monster slaying. As such, the idea of the player as the lord of a manor can be compared to the romanticized ideal vision of life in the country, as done in aristocratic terms.^{viii}

Often the reception of such property and the construction of an estate functions mechanically as a quest or mission no different from earlier objectives focused around collecting bear hearts or killing necromancers. As such, the player’s establishment of their perfect countryside estate is presented as an idealized task and as a vicarious participation in something fantastical on the same level as realistically impossible endeavors such as the battling of mythical creatures or particularly dangerous treks up a treacherous mountainside in mid-blizzard. A misstep, such as the placement of an undesired extension to the estate when one has decided one wants

another, is easily remedied by loading a previous save-file, the same as fixing an equally unfortunate misstep that causes falling down a cliff and killing one's character. However, while other quests involve the completion of a particular task in order to obtain a reward and potentially progress the storyline, the construction of a countryside provides its own reward and its own modifiable storyline, as players are let loose by the game to craft their own individualized rural vision and make their mark upon the landscape, no different from real-life endeavors of aristocratic grandeur.^{ix}



Figure 1: Promotional Image for *The Witcher III: Blood & Wine* © CD Projekt Red

The Witcher III: Wild Hunt is among the most successful video games of the past decade. Set predominantly in various forms of rural landscapes, it provides a striking glimpse into game studios' portrayal of the pastoral. While the player spends considerable amounts of hours traversing fields and farmlands with little to no interaction with the daily lives of the farmers themselves, the final expansion for *The Witcher III*, *Blood & Wine*, practically serves as a virtual vacation into an idealised rural world for players who have completed the main storyline. Intended to be the final chapter in the story of Geralt of Rivia, the game's hero, the expansion has a storyline of its own, but in this article we will focus on one specific gameplay aspect,

namely the player as the lord of a manor. In *Blood & Wine* the player/Geralt inherits a grand rustic vineyard in a fairytale version of southern France, simultaneously receiving the objective of bringing it back to its former glory. This involves hiring a steward to rebuild sections, making home decorations, and constructing practical improvements such as a stable for the player character's horse.

The vineyard, Corvo Bianco, is intended as a player retirement home to digitally relax after a life of adventuring. The player as Geralt, having killed monsters in dirty swamps, dealt with criminal gangs in the side alleys of a metropolis, and conspired to assassinate kings along with the high and mighty, achieves the simple dream of stepping back and leaving it all behind, residing in a rural paradise surrounded by laborers toiling amongst the grapevines. Perhaps most telling of all, players themselves are not expected to do any work beyond the architectural organization of the property, whereas the hired steward insists on hiring workers to take charge of any actual manual labor, which the player then gets to reap the fruits of after a few days of waiting, without having lifted a finger.

Further supporting the aesthetics of this is the process of interior decoration. As part of the vineyard's refurbishment, the player can decorate the inner rooms of Corvo Bianco with paintings that are in themselves romantic idealizations of rural life without any of the negative aspects. Consider, for instance, the easily accessible painting [Harvest Time in White Orchard](#). The painting is a depiction of the starting area the player can visit in the main game of *Wild Hunt*, a monster-infested village under foreign military occupation, which in base game is presented as a relatively bleak and realistic image of the war-torn rural countryside. The painting, however, is instead an idyllic presentation of open fields in the beautiful autumn sun, using warm colors and a carefully chosen scene to present a perfect vision of the rural ideal, not

unlike Corvo Bianco itself. It is far more evocative of Thomas Cole's [untouched landscapes](#) than of Realist Jean-Francois Millet's [The Gleaners](#), a well-known portrayal of workers toiling in the fields. The paintings, as well as the vineyard as a whole, add to the idea of the player building the perfect rural estate, maximizing aesthetic appeal and rustic beauty to perform the same exaggeration and falsification of realistic rural life as Marie Antoinette's hameau.



Figure 2: Screenshot of a house in *The Elder Scrolls V: Hearthfire*, © Bethesda

In *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, the now-iconic Bethesda role-playing game set in a fictionalized version of Viking Age Scandinavia, the *Hearthfire* expansion plays a similar role, although open to considerably more personal customization. Plots of open land can be purchased after having performed services to the local population, after which the player can build grand estate houses on them. *Hearthfire* involves more personal effort from the player than the simple planning of *Blood & Wine*, but remains solidly in the realm of country estate romanticism, the player an architect of a rural dream. Of the variety of rooms that the player can invest in, estates can contain gardens, stables, trophy rooms, and alchemy and enchanting laboratories.

To construct the manor, the player must secure resources, most prominently, a supply of timber and stone. However, as opposed to the other times the player is required to acquire resources for a quest, there is no actual physical labor involved. While there is the option for mining some materials oneself, the lumber must be purchased from the owner of a sawmill, and delivered to the estate. This further removes the player from active participation in the construction he is building; he is not the builder, but rather the commissioner. As soon as the player possesses the necessary resources for constructing a particular house part, the construction itself occurs instantly, at the click of a button.

Much like the historical duties of “running an estate” this responsibility again falls squarely on a hired steward’s shoulders. One can essentially hire a full staff, from a carriage driver to a bard, but after accepting their services, the player is not required to interact with them again. The steward is hired to perform the actual day-to-day duties required in the running of a countryside estate, so that the player is free to ignore the tedium of rural life and estate running, and instead, enjoy the countryside landscape in whatever way they choose.

Ultimately, the *Hearthfire DLC* is a fantasy estate construction simulator, where the player is allowed considerable freedom in building a rural home. Whereas *Blood & Wine’s* Corvo Bianco is more restrictively defined, the potential estates of *Skyrim’s* *Hearthfire* can go in whichever direction the player chooses within the confines of the location space.

Both these examples revolve around the player, an adventuring hero, getting to craft their own ideal of rural life as a retirement home after having accomplished the main objectives of the adventuring part of the games. Primarily this involves something along the lines of standing behind an architectural board planning

extensions and decorations, and everything involving actual manual labor tends to either be done by someone else, or just instantly happen at the click of a button. Simultaneously, these processes involve the player as a pseudo-aristocratic intruder in a working-class rural context. This fits more into our classic understanding of pastoral romanticism, as the only individuals who would be able to do this from a historical perspective would be those sufficiently removed from the actual realities of countryside hardship, while pretending to engage in its struggles.^x This is the rural ideal conveyed in both *Blood & Wine* and *Hearthfire*; player-characters in their post-adventuring retirement phase have functionally ascended into pseudo-aristocratic rural behavior and entitlement.

It is further worthy of note that nothing can go wrong with these estates. There are no setbacks, no possible damage done to the estate or its denizens. *Skyrim*'s *Hearthfire* estates can admittedly be attacked by bandits or giant rats, but these do not have the potential to do any physical harm, and rather simply exist to be repelled by the player in the occasional act of fantasized heroism. The perfect countryside estates exist only to be ideal visions, customizable to the player's desire, and nothing can interfere with the player's rural dream. Unlike the realities of peasant life, where there is a constant threat of degradation, injury, and natural disaster, the estates of players of *The Witcher III* and *Skyrim* are nearly indestructible. In the games, this is explained with workers hired, but is more likely a developer choice to avoid player boredom, similar to how the aristocrats playing at rural life accomplished the same through money and class exploitation.

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Endnotes

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Translation by Jill Casid in "Queer(y)ing Georgic: Utility, Pleasure, and Marie-Antoinette's Ornamented Farm" *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30, no. 3 (1997): 305.
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- ^v Gordon Campbell, *The Hermit in the Garden: From Imperial Rome to Ornamental Gnome*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 15-16.
- ^{vi} Meredith Martin, *Dairy Queens: The Politics of Pastoral Architecture from Catherine de' Medici to Marie-Antoinette*, 2011 .163
- ^{vii} Campbell, *The Hermit in the Garden*, 96.
- ^{viii} A good example, again from the French aristocracy, is Marie- Adélaïde, of Louis XIV's court. See Martin, *Dairy Queens*, 70-71.
- ^{ix} See for instance Sharon Farmer "Aristocratic Power and the Natural Landscape: The Garden Park as Hesdin ca.1291 -1302" *Speculum* 88, no. 3 (July 2013): 644-80.
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