Farming a Cosy Utopia:
A Regenerative Escape to Simpler Times

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ABSTRACT

This paper scrutinises the genre of farming games and its connection to forms of Utopias by exploring three games at hand: *Story of Seasons: Pioneers of Olive Town* (Marvelous 2021), *My Time at Portia* (Pathea Games 2019), and *Animal Crossing: New Horizon* (Nintendo 2020). It gives focus to the relationship between farming games and utopian narratives, their themes as well as their aesthetics of play and how they entice players towards ecological thought and action. This form of regenerative play and its utopian quality will be investigated in its different dimensions.

Keywords

Farming games, Utopia, regenerative play, player response theory, cultural ecology, ecocriticism

INTRODUCTION

Farming games represent an enduring genre that has experienced a revitalisation since the Covid 19 pandemic, offering players a means of escapism from the world that surrounds them and an avenue to connection in isolated times (Fiducci 2022; Zhu 2021). Their fascinating conjuring of serene worlds, devoid of any major global issues, green landscapes and intimate communities players feel comfortable and welcome in, contributes to their commercial success. Given the hectic nature of modern times, a resounding lack of transparency surrounding social and political systems (where no one can grasp these systems in their entirety), and a form of capitalism whose conditions suffocate its workers, farming games offer a calm Utopia[1] to be escaped to and, maybe, strived towards.

This paper will take a closer at the genre of farming games (not in its entirety, but rather as a pars pro toto by analysing three games) and explore its connection to the utopian narrative. Utopia is understood in this context as a philosophy of hope in desperate times that strives towards a continual betterment of empirical reality (Vieira 2020). The manifestation of the utopian in literature, film, or games helps explore and map out trajectories towards potential futures that might be considered better than our current social surroundings and realities (Farca 2019; Sargent). By doing so, utopian narratives open up an imaginative space that is ripe with possibilities. However, these futures are not necessarily perfect and are still ridden with issues; at times creating a conflict between 'what is' and 'what can be' and, therefore, a radical openness for readers, spectators, players to negotiate with. This imaginative experimentation with different forms of societies and ways of life reveals a significant potential for video games,

where players are directly involved through interactivity, ergodicity, and with agency to shape the gameworld and its plot in certain ways.

Farming games formulate a unique kind of Utopia, generally emphasising the value of tranquillity and living within a small community somewhere that holds reverence to Mother Nature; a form of life that we might otherwise forget about without access to farming games and the sense of Utopia they establish. The purpose of this paper, then, is to delve into different questions surrounding the farming game utopias, and my research question is thus two-fold:

1) The first question revolves around the status of farming games *as a form of the utopian narrative* and how they negotiate the current societal system. Do they break away from capitalist logic and offer radical alternatives or do we encounter utopian enclaves (instances of hope) within the system of capitalism itself? Or, if none of these are true, are they, in fact, anti-utopian enchantments that reinforce the status quo by blindsiding players through portrayals of simplicity, cosiness, and serenity and a Disneyfied version of reality?

2) Secondly, if we are dealing with fictional thought experiments and utopian playgrounds for players to toy around with, then, the *aesthetics of play* should fall under scrutiny. This is important to investigate because farming games enchant players in such an all-encompassing manner that the utopian quality of gameplay itself as well as its alleviating effects on the human psyche become of importance to analysis.

The potential of ecogames to make players care and think about the environment in sustainable ways is a highly topical issue in game studies—and this paper will explore the niche of farming games and their radical potential to affect players in *regenerative* ways. My methodology is, as such, inspired from player response theories, ecocriticism, cultural ecology, and utopian studies and builds on my previous deliberations on *regenerative play* (Farca, 2018, 2019, Farca, Lehner, Navarro-Remesal 2020).

Regenerative play can be a soothing experience for the human psyche and foregrounds the potential of digital games (and ecogames, specifically) to have a therapeutic effect, allowing players to recover from stress, frustration, and negative feelings. Play, in this manner, can help players refresh their minds, reconnect with their passions and desires, and regain a sense of balance and well-being. At the same time (and because of these intriguing effects), regenerative play breaks open linear philosophies and ideologically induced trains of thought and, instead, promotes environmental awareness and sustainability. Ecogames, in other words, can be a powerful tool for engaging players in ecological issues, fostering a deeper, affectively intimate connection to the natural world, and encouraging regard for one's own social surroundings from a radically different point of view (specifically, from the standpoint of a serene Utopia). These ideas of regeneration—including the strong urge to resist and promote social change— are inspired by Hubert Zapf's deliberations on the issue and the potential of literature (or art) to regenerate itself and function as catalyst for transformation in a continuous process of cultural and artistic renewal (2012, 256).

Regenerative play thus formulates *a phenomenology of play for digital games* (and specifically for ecogames and farming games, in this case) and functions on different interconnecting levels: the *affective*, *aesthetic*, *reflective*, *communal*, *ethical*, and *cyclical*. To answer my questions and prove my claims, I will first lay the groundwork by investigating farming games and their relations to the utopian narrative, exploring important tropes and themes. This scrutiny will both reveal and situate some of the aesthetics of play and regenerative potential involved in farming games and, therefore,

pave the way towards the concept of regenerative play and its several dimensions. Here, I will briefly discuss the potential of art to affect recipients in various ways, more specifically drawing inspiration from Hubert Zapf's theory of regeneration. Finally, I will put my claims to the test with analyses of three farming games: *Story of Seasons: Pioneers of Olive Town* (Marvelous 2021), *My Time at Portia* (Pathea Games 2019), and *Animal Crossing: New Horizon* (Nintendo 2020). These differ from one another in certain aspects and each shed different light on the aesthetics of regenerative play while certainly revealing commonalities as well.

FARMING GAMES AND UTOPIA

Science fiction narratives and other fantastical genres often employ the plot device of a journey to faraway and marvellous places. In these instances, the protagonists of the story assume a similar role to that of the reader, viewers, or players, since they have no specific knowledge about the place they will discover—and it can generally be taken for granted that these destinations will usually be very different from what they know back home. The inception of this traveller trope can be traced to Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), which has the protagonist and narrator, Raphael Hythloday, recount his journey to the mysterious island of Utopia, where he discovers an astonishing society. It is not easy to get there yet Hythloday manages to find the island unbeknownst to anyone else and only by sheer coincidence. Once there, he discovers a fantastical world in which many of the issues of English society (back home) have been overcome. A guide shows Hythloday around and explains to him the customs, rites, politics, and philosophy of the place: a land where private property has been abolished and a quasi-socialist society has done away with capitalist greed and hierarchical structures (Booker, 53-54).


Figure 1. Although farming games do usually not take place in such fantastic worlds as we encounter in Jonathan Swift's Laputa (*Gulliver's Travels*), they nonetheless show protagonists leave behind their usual surroundings to travel to remote places surrounded by nature, as in *Story of Seasons: Pioneers of Olive Town*.

Readers come to know the island of Utopia in a similar manner to that of the protagonist, Hythloday (that is, step by step), and implicitly compare what they discover to their own social surroundings, which fall short in comparison to the utopian splendours. More's *Utopia* is thus credited with first establishing the utopian narrative, describing a place that is both "desirable, yet unattainable" (Ferns 39), "more perfect than the real world, yet non-existent" (3). This "duality of meaning" (Vieira, 5) and its inherent ambiguity are also discernible in the word itself: with the morpheme *u* meaning *not* or *no* and the lexeme *topos* meaning *place*. This *place that does not exist* was later complemented in meaning by More's creation of a further neologism—and

with *eutopia*, the good place, he slightly yet decisively changed the meaning of the previous term to the *non-existent good place*.

Besides a sense of awe in the discovery of a new world and its otherness (and because of it), the utopian narrative produces a distinctly critical view of empirical society. Such critiques are mostly represented as an attack on capitalism at the same that they suggest alternative trajectories towards a better future. The element of the fantastic and the fictional quality of the narratives thereby affect recipients emotionally (they feel for and alongside the characters) while they are aesthetically sensitised to the world and its events (Seeber, 9). Since Hythloday's sea voyage, this journey to Utopia has adopted many forms; parallel universes, travels to faraway planets, a sleeper awakes in a distant future, or ventures through time (Kumar, 23; Ferns, 99). Yet, there is also a version of this trajectory that involves a young girl or boy (most often from the city) who changes her/his life by making the move to live among a rural community. There, they most often take over a family business (the inheritance of a farm, a workshop, and so on) and steadily come to know this world and make it their home.

Farming games are a diverse and multifaceted genre that share elements with community games, cosy games, or life simulations. They often follow on the trajectory of the utopian narrative and picture protagonists who move to small rural communities where they meet friendly people, find love, upkeep a farm or a similar enterprise, work, craft, and savour moments of serenity and calmness. A strong focus is thus laid on community experiences—similar to how one might imagine life in the countryside in the real world, where people know each other and help one another out. In farming games, players need to get to know the community (this is often directly in the gameplay loop), embark on missions for them, but also partake in social activities, go on dates, and so on. This simulates a cosy way of life that is reduced in terms of complexity, but which still uphold the benefit of demonstrating how one's action still make a difference. Such a focus on *communal* interactions and agency fosters a juxtaposition between the social reality of these games and the lives of city dwellers, where it is less likely to know or even encounter neighbours and more likely to feel overburdened by daily tasks and the complexity of urban life.
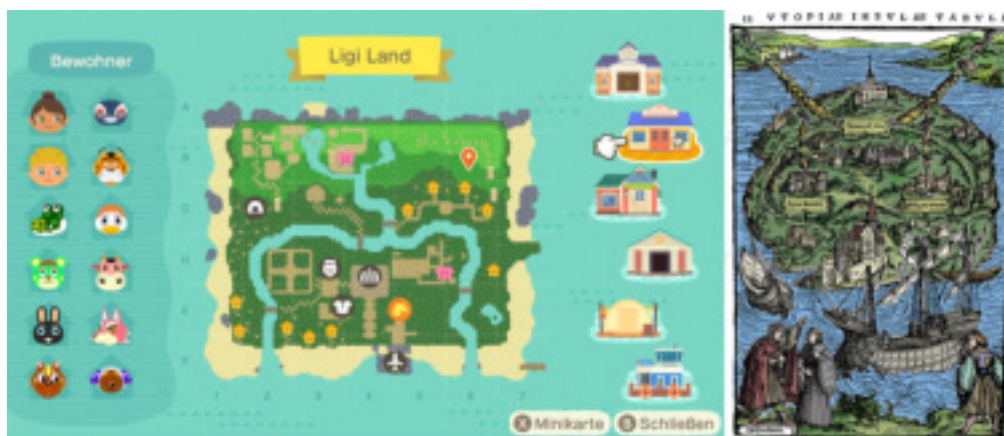
Figure 2. Farming games take place in isolated places, sometimes islands (as in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*), where a fictional community awaits. They are thus reminiscent of Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and offer creative spaces and playgrounds for utopian and dystopian experimentations, where players may shape these worlds to their liking and are free of the constraints of their usual social surroundings.

Complementing the sense of privacy established is the fact that the gameworld is often confined to the small microcosm of a village with surrounding lands, an island, or, at most, a network of villages or towns (whether in realistic surroundings or visions of the

fantastic, such as in the case of the post-apocalypse, Japanese mythology, or anime style). In fact, one could argue, as has been suggested by Nyman and Teten, that all gameworlds bear resemblance to an island or a separated, artificial space. They position both gameworlds and island as similar in structure since they "are by their very nature isolated and bounded," and because of this isolation and artificiality, they serve well "to mimic the unnaturalness of their society," a necessary feature of utopian games (6; cf. 1-6). Farming games take this idea and virtualise confined but open spaces where they foreground certain aspects of rural life (such as character stereotypes and relationships, wild and domesticated nature spaces, town communities, their cultures and development, working processes, and so on) and implicitly juxtapose it to more hectic versions of life in cities (sometimes this juxtaposition is made explicit within the game). This act of condensing the totality of the social world—which we can never truly grasp in its entirety or complexity—to such a "small-scall model[s]" has benefits; "the fundamental tendencies and the lines of flight can more clearly be read" (Jameson, 12) and this might reveal troublesome tendencies that are only too real and plague our own empirical society (12-16).

Of course, any century or decade has their own issues. There might even be a different form of Utopia for respective epochs, and in this regard, farming games leave behind a substantial ecological imprint. By involving players in green worlds, they suggest that we have lost a sense of our natural surroundings, the calmness of rural communities, and living in harmony with nature. Humankind, in other words, has long since sacrificed its intimate bond with mother nature as society has increasingly lost control of itself (Stableford, 128 ff.). Our dependence on machines and the digital, on the one hand, and the detrimental effects of contemporary megacities and forms of pollution, on the other, are causes of the planet's steady decline and signs of a dysfunctional order (Ibid; Robinson, 10). Farming games, so it seems, bring back players to these roots, reminding them of the benefits of ecological awareness and emotions, and re-sensitise them through a fictional thought experiment to the wonders of the natural world and a life without the frenzy of modernity, stress, and the polluted environment of the city.

This aspect will be expanded upon throughout the text, however, it already gestures towards the significance of Utopia's future orientation; to change empirical society, one needs progressive, not regressive visions of a better life. "Utopia is forward-looking, yes. Always just around the corner, always on the other side of the horizon," and this "wave of utopian impulse" should lead us "toward a new now (Levitas and Sargisson, 20). The philosophy of Utopia is generally progressive and so are its manifestation in fictional narrative form. The question now arises whether farming games embark on this route, or whether they are stuck in some romanticised past.

Visions of the Garden Eden and Arcadia are quite common in fiction (the lush paradises where humankind lives together in harmony with nature) and can be found in many games such as *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dogs 2013), *Enslaved: Odyssey to the West* (Ninja Theory 2010), *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games 2017). The same is true for farming games. With their reverie for the natural world and dislike for technology, they engulf players in a nostalgia most powerful, where green lands and a diversity of flora and fauna abound. Eden myths, as Lisa Garforth argues, are "powerfully nostalgic" and

> tell a backward-looking story of innocence lost, of unalienated and liberated existence before a fall, of better times in the past when humans were part of nature. Even when they look forward with hope to a better world to come, the goal … is restoration and return rather than the desire for something genuinely radical or new (15).

The future orientation of such narratives might be debatable—with their juxtaposition of ancient, technological worlds that have failed and natural environments arising out of their ashes. Yet they lay a strong focus on the *cyclical* path of regeneration (natural and utopian) and exert a powerful influence on us, *affectively* and *aesthetically*. This begins to unfold with the experience of roaming a natural-cultural environment, savouring its beauty and architecture, the events players encounter and enact, embedded ecological stories, and so on. Players are engulfed by a world that reminds them of the planet's beauty and potential diversity. Sounds of the natural world, music and its lyrics contribute to this sense of alleviating the psyche that has been contaminated by contemporary pollutions. It is an experience that is *regenerative* to our senses and that brings players in touch with the natural world, has them experience its cyclical structures, the details of how things look like, sound like, feel like, and how ecosystems work.
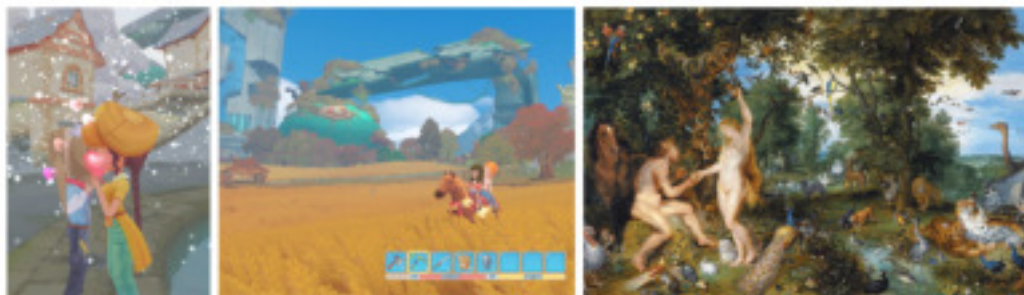
Figure 3. Farming games often employ a didactic concept of nature, with a strong reverence for pastoral, romanticised landscapes, akin to the Garden Eden, where humankind lived in balance with their natural surroundings. *My Time at Portia*, thereby, shows a modern, non-judgmental stance and depicts relationships between every sex as normal.

Given this distinct nature of utopian beauty and its strategic effects on players, it is not surprising that the opposite of this ideal is seldom present or lacking entirely in farming games (or it is only apparent in small details such as in the wasteland of *My Time at Portia*). The "Land of the Flies," a landscape akin to a rotten, contaminated wasteland, reminds us that Arcadia is often simply a myth and that reality in the countryside has often been linked to "a reversal of progress and an unhappy return to the nightmare of history: floods, wars, famine, disease, superstition, rape, murder, death" (Canavan, 1).

Farming games seem to reject this negative vision of nature as a means to sustain their players in a positive experience. A similar dismissal can be applied to the image of the technological super city or, New Jerusalem, with its immaculate clean surfaces and a scientific agenda that can solve all of this society's issues (Canavan 1)—as illustrated in *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013) or *Mirror's Edge* (Electronic Arts 2008). As such, farming games do not adhere to an all-encompassing conceptualisation of nature, which would determine the natural world as composed of a variety of elements in the universe, and where environmental consciousness can be found in technological innovation, smart and eco cities, terraforming of worlds, etc. (Garforth, 4; Stableford, 140). Instead, they offer an escape to simpler times and favour a didactic opposition between nature and culture, between living in harmony with the environment and the negativity of the city, "where fascist bureaucrats have crushed the souls of the human, machines have replaced work and love, and smog blocks out the stars" (Canavan 1).

It remains to be determined whether this sense of regression can be understood in utopian terms. However, a return to simpler times does imply a rejection of capitalism in its current and most perverse form; that is, a rejection of the *alienation* one is supposed to endure through our position and role within the broader social totality but also in the working process, where one is seldom thought to be able to make a difference

by virtue of one's own actions. Such logic follows a Marxist train of thought, which aims to "bring about a classless society, based on the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange" (Barry, 150) and that works against "exploitation of one social class by another" (151). This facet is yet to be examined in the games I will discuss (with specific reference to *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*). However, a significant indicator will be the emancipation of the worker-player from the above-mentioned alienation: "when the worker is 'deskilled' and made to perform fragmented, repetitive tasks in a sequence of whose nature and purpose he or she has no overall grasp" (Ibid.). This facet of capitalism as well as its critique can be located in games such as *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe 2012), where both Stanley and the player engage in repetitive button pressing without anything of notable value occurring. At first glimpse, farming games seem similar in how one executes repetitive chores, does daily work on the farm, talks regularly to people, and so on. Yet a specific aspect of rural communities lies in the transparency of labour processes and how they are carried out. As Barry remarks: "in the older 'pre-industrial' or 'cottage industry' system of manufacture, home and workplace were one, the worker completed the whole production process in all its variety, and was in direct contact with those who might buy the product" (151). This aspect is fundamentally apparent in farming games, where players are part of and privy to interlinking moments of the production process: building farms and developing village amenities, crafting goods, planting crops or farming livestock, and selling manufactured products within the community.

Figure 4. *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* offers players a plethora of possibilities to play in a slow, relaxed, and tranquil manner. You may stroll alongside the beach and watch the sunset, relax in your garden, go on romantic dates with fellow players, or play a game of chess with your NPC friends.

I will examine these dimensions in my analyses of the three games to better understand whether these farming game utopias articulate direct confrontations to capitalism and capitalist logics or, conversely, whether they represent a glorification of its procedures, presented in a cosy, Disneyfied format. Perhaps the truth lies somewhere in between both standpoints, indicating our dealing with a *decelerated* version of capitalist logic. Such a position is reminiscent of the logic of gameplay in consideration of how farming games usually employ a decelerated, slow manner of play in which relaxation, tranquillity, and *reflectivity* (or contemplation) are key elements. Victor Navarro-Remesal talks in this instance about *slow gameplay*,

a tone and a pace that favours contemplation, slowness, and a reduced focus on 'doing.' Slow gaming implies doing little or nothing at all and letting the gameworld reveal itself, playing in a way as to relate to the environment without haste, without too many plans or objectives (Navarro-Remesal, 23).

Utopia, if we recall More's visions, often experiments with different forms of organising and experiencing society, and this might also be true for farming games, particularly with regard to players' relationships with their natural environment. Whether or not farming games entirely fulfil Utopia's function "as *disruption* (*Beunruhigung*) of the present, and as a radical and systematic break with even that predicted and colonized future which is simply a prolongation of our capitalist present" (Jameson, 228), remains to be determined.

Such an enterprise, then, will also be a venture into the genre of the critical utopia, which shows a *radical openness* of imaginative, ergodic, and regenerative experiences and possibilities. The critical utopia generally begins with a positive premise, a world better or with greater promises than empirical reality but with arising problems. These endanger the utopian experiments and lay the focus on the fragility of such utopian dreams and on the necessity of a continuous struggle to keep those alive (Sargent). In video games, this form of utopia is of specific interest as it engages players *ethically* within the plot and gameworld. More often than not they are responsible for the future of the gameworld and whether this future resembles a Utopia or Anti-Utopia (for example, *Mass Effect: Andromeda* from Bioware 2014). The imaginative openness of literary utopias is thus translated to games but, additionally, expanded by way of ergodicity, interactivity, and player agency. Players, in other words, may not only reflect on the utopian possibilities inherent in a narrative but also act on those imaginations in certain ways (Farca 2019, 124-129).

Before moving further, I present here an interim conclusion. The discussion thus far has revealed insight into farming game utopias and has also structured the focus on the utopian quality of gameplay and its regenerative powers. The political context and ecological circumstances have been identified as of importance for analysis, however, I similarly underline the significance of the *affective* and *aesthetic* experience of living in these worlds, roaming their natural landscapes, and becoming involved in *communal* activities. Moreover, players witness nature's *cyclical* structures of destruction and rebirth (a fresh start in a rural village), become involved in a form of slow gameplay that grants players time for *reflection* while also granting them the *ethical* agency to choose the future of these worlds (to some degree). Consequently, the following section will formulate an introduction to such *ecological* and *regenerative play,* and further elaborate on these criteria for analysis.

REGENERATIVE PLAY
The concept of *re-generation* will be broadly defined as a potential of play residing in any games' implied player (Farca 2016). It shows similarities to other deliberations on the potential of art, demonstrating how our interaction with fiction holds the possibility "to reveal and perhaps balance … deficiencies resulting from prevailing systems" (Iser 1978, 13) and to "propose ... trial runs for approaches to what is" (Iser 1993, 143). The interaction with games thus oscillates between the poles of players, the games at hand, and the cultural contexts within which the players find themselves (Farca 2018, 2019).

Farming games, for example, allow players to travel to an idealised version of rural life, letting them explore serene and sometimes fantastic worlds, discover hidden secrets, go on adventures in dark caves, have dates and, maybe, find love and start a family. As with other narratives, such as *Moby Dick* (Melville 1851), where readers embark on a hunt for a white whale, fictions let us explore alternative ways of life and

different perspectives on it (which is rendered quite literal in interactive games). Through the implicit comparison or measuring of such experiences to their real lives, players might "see everyday norms and conventions, social habits of thinking and feeling, in a different light ... [and] … explore in a kind of trial action in a virtual environment, the consequences of breaking and transgressing norms without having to fear sanctions in real life" (Berensmeyer 11).

Such a fictional venture (whether it is living on rural farm or hunting a white whale) has a *regenerative* effect on the psyche on both an affective and intellectual level by virtue of how it bridges connections between the gameworld and the players' empirical surroundings. In other words, not only do players learn something through this experience (as with more passive forms such as documentaries or news articles) but they are also obliged to work for the learning, deciphering the meanings and metaphors of the games in the act of play. Play, in this sense, is a *creative force* "that affords players different degrees of expression" (Sicart 2014, 17) and lets us "understand the world and, through that understanding, challenging the establishment, leading for knowledge, and creating new ties or breaking old ones" (Ibid.,18). In addition, the sensitising powers of the fictional involve players affectively within the plot. Who hasn't grown fond of the characters in *Animal Crossings: New Horizons*, listened to their stories, helped them out in difficult times, and felt at home in this world of one's own co-creation? Given the magnitude of make-believe investigated here and to further clarify the concept of regeneration from an ecological perspective, tracing the roots of this creative nexus is an important step and leads us to the realms of biology.

In biology, re-generation is described as "the process by which some organisms replace or restore lost or amputated body parts" (Goss). This "general process of growth is a primary attribute of all living systems. Without it there could be no life, for the very maintenance of an organism depends upon the incessant turnover by which all tissues and organs constantly renew themselves" (Ibid.). Regeneration, in this sense, makes reference to the *generative process* of the body, which creates new tissues, cells, organisms, etc. based on old information but with a view towards that which will *emerge out of the old*. Of course, the regenerative function of art operates on a different level yet there are certain foundational similarities that can be derived from these processes, respectively.

Hubert Zapf introduced the theory of regeneration to the aesthetics of fiction and speaks on how literature is able to not only re-generate itself in cyclical ways but can also create counter-discourses to all sorts of "petrifications, coercive structures, and traumatizing implications of dominant civilizational reality systems" (2012, 256). Literature, in this sense, offers a discourse of constant *cultural renewal* and affects readers on a very private level; the experience of fiction changes us gradually, our views on the world, habits, and modes of thinking. Fictions, then, can be seen as

> sites of radical strangeness, alienation, and alterity, both in terms of aesthetic procedures of defamiliarization and of existential experiences of alienation and radical difference; and they are also simultaneously sites of reconnection, reintegration, and, at least potentially, of regeneration on psychic, social, and aesthetic levels (2016, 12).

Transformation here seems to work on both personal and societal levels—with fiction taking on the form of an "ecological *force*" (28) "as a medium of transmitting and conveying certain ethical and political environmental agendas" (20-21) but also having its participants ponder about them in affective and reflective ways—leading to a gradual *restructuring of the own self*.

It is here that regenerative play comes into action and formulates a vital part of the utopian endeavour to affect social change by *overcoming the lack of agency* postulated by our modern world; that is, our "incapacity for the imagination of alternatives" (Canavan 4). This is perhaps owing to how the games we play allow us to explore trajectories of agency and weigh their *ethical* implications (like following a utopian route in *Animal Crossing: NH*, which favours community and environment versus a more self-centred concept such as players creating islands as turnip plantations in exchange for pure profit). The rejection of *egotistical* points of view while embracing movements towards *communal* forms of ecological sustainability, diversity, and a post-modern fluidity of boundaries is a key point of consideration.

The *reflective*, *ethical*, and *communal* nature of the regenerative is complemented by an *affective* dimension (as mentioned above in the relationships between characters and players' involvement in plot) but also with *aesthetic* and *cyclical* dimensions. Roaming a natural-cultural environment in a gameworld, savouring the beauty, architecture, embedded stories, and so on, contributes to the sense of regeneration in vital ways. Imagine here *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013) (to somewhat extend the scope of analysis beyond farming games), which sends players on a journey through devastated city spaces that are infested with ugly remnants of the past. These spaces are contrasted by lush forest regions which function as a safe space for regeneration and dialogue between the two characters. The natural world majestically takes back what our capitalist desires have claimed and not only reminds players of the planet's beauty and potential diversity but also of its pitfalls and dangers. The four seasons (winter, spring, summer, autumn) accompany this journey and lay contextual meaning over the enacted events; the abyss of the winter events around David's cannibals and spring as a fresh start for Ellie and Joel (Farca and Ladevèze 2016). Regenerative play, in this sense, brings us *affectively* and *aesthetically* in touch with the natural world (in both good and bad ways) and through these modes, players are made privy to its *cyclical* structures by experiencing the details of how things look, sound, feel, and how ecosystems work.

Dimensions of the Regenerative in Farming Games as a Method of Analysis

The regenerative weight of such an experience can similarity be applied to farming games and their modes of interactions with players (as my analysis will show). The method I use is influenced by player response theories, cultural ecology, ecocriticism, and utopian studies, and builds on my previous deliberations on regeneration in video games. As a phenomenology of play, then, (and ecogames and farming games to be specific), regenerative play unfolds in imaginatively and ergodically open and multifaceted video games (Farca 2016; Lehner). It inspires thought, critique, and action while it concomitantly promotes sustainability and highlights the potential of culture and art to drive positive change. The radical openness of the critical utopia as a genre—and its implied player—builds a strong foundation for regenerative play, since such narratives often start off in benign surroundings or those of rebirth, reconstruction (within a post-apocalypse or dystopian context). However, the trajectories then unfold in either utopian or dystopian directions (or something in between), depending on the decisions made by players.

Regenerative play is thus a broad concept as well as an aesthetic of play and can be applied to any narrative driven game but is particularly applicable within the context of ecogames. As a possibility of play, regenerative play includes any form of interaction with the game (ergodic, imaginative, psychological, aesthetic, etc.), its world, plot, characters, and underlying system that confronts players explicitly or implicitly with ecological themes and tropes in a more or less critical manner. These experiences trigger both affective and aesthetic responses in players, which formulates a basis for them to bear witness to natural-cultural relations from a different perspective. At the

very least, there is potential for re-sensitising players towards an awareness of the beauty of a life in balance with nature, while also making them aware of the forms and consequences of pollution. In this mode of play, then, an ecological utopian impulse expresses itself in the players' psyche, imaginings, and actions (within and without the diegesis).

Six different, but naturally intertwining, categories and levels of the regenerative are thereby noteworthy and will help with a classification and analysis of the games. They are here laid out with specific reference to farming games and include:

Affective: regenerative play begins on a basic emotional level with players' relationship to other characters they meet and empathise with in dramatic plot lines, while they engage with the community, overcome problems, and find love, etc. The affective dimension also impacts the relationship of players with the natural world and city spaces, how they experience them through affects and their juxtaposition.

Aesthetic: describes sensorial interactions (audio-visual, haptic, spatial) with the gameworld that may result in aesthetically pleasing experiences. Romanticised, almost divine nature spaces, old towns, and a pastoral, rural life in the countryside are juxtaposed to modern, often polluted city spaces that are laden with capitalist desires for expansion and excess.

Reflective: refers to how these games make us think about our world, specifically in ecological terms (whether we live in cities or the countryside), what new perspectives on life are gleaned throughout play, whether they affect us on a private level (personal thoughts, preferences about nature) or on a global level (thoughts about nature-culture relations, our influence on the planet, etc.). Slow gameplay supports the grounding for such subversive thought by granting players space for relaxation and reflectivity.

Cyclical: natural cycles such as day and night, the four seasons and their different weather phenomena. Players come to better understand how the seasons function and how to utilise the four elements. The cyclical may as well refer to cycles of production in a Marxist fashion (revealing different aspects of labour while overcoming the alienation caused by most modern jobs), but also suggests potentials for overcoming our dystopian present and charting ways into a better future.

Ethical: treats the question of how to act ethically; that is, to help people or not, to treat the environment with respect instead of exploitation, and to reject a capitalist attitude towards maximising profit before anything else. Respect for Otherness: cultures and their traditions, moral action in the face of conflict between people and, generally, the totality of both the human and nonhuman alike e.g., the treatment of farm animals and the environment itself as friend or object of production or extraction.

Communal (from ego to eco): the communal is a fundamental dimension of farming games and makes it apparent why these games could also be called community games. The focus of scrutiny will be placed on the relation with the community itself, discarding individual thoughts for personal gain and helping the community evolve. The communal as phenomenon often describes growth and shifts which aid the overcoming of individualism and linearity while moving towards openness, multi-perspectivity, and negotiation amid differing perspectives. The fluidity of boundaries between many things is highlighted: e.g., gender, concepts of nature and culture, the dissolving of hierarchies, and so on.

Of course, not all farming games can, or even want to, achieve everything at once, and often take excursions into utopian and dystopian directions throughout the various

dimensions of the regenerative. How these excursions eventually play out will therefore be important to the analysis. For the purpose of clarity, I will mark the dimensions of the regenerative in paratheses after my descriptions.

STORY OF SEASONS: PIONEERS OF OLIVE TOWN

The plot of *Olive Town* (Marvelous 2021) begins with the main protagonist (a girl or boy) moving away from the hustle and bustle of the city into a picturesque natural environment along the frontier. Having inherited a farm from their grandfather, they wish to follow in his footsteps and make a return to their ancestral home. Time has taken its toll, however, and nature is reclaiming what remains of the farm's glory. The challenge that lies ahead of the players is a rebuilding of the farm and cultivation of the lands and wilderness that surround it. A picturesque port town, named Olive Town, lies close by, with a host of diverse and interesting characters awaiting. On our first visit, the Major, Victor, welcomes us and asks whether the player is willing to help the community attract more tourists to boost the town's image.

In this vision of Utopia there is no sense of ugliness, in both moral and aesthetic understandings of the descriptor. All things appear to flourish, and no grave problems are encountered. Players discover a highly romanticised version of rural, Mediterranean life, inspired by Japanese mythology and ways of life (*aesthetic*). Besides running the farm, emotional plotlines occur in *Olive Town*, where players can help out, befriend people, and go on dates. The feeling of inclusion within this society is there from the get-go and a heart system indicates how close you are to folks. Going on dates is, however, not necessarily always a relaxing experience and can be tedious, though interesting, work. To impress a character, one must find out (through research, trial and error) what they like and dislike. Then, heart events can be triggered, where you go on romantic dates with the chosen one. Dating the same sex or multiple people simultaneously is of no issue or restriction, and shows a modern, non-judgemental sensibility. In the end, players will choose whom to marry and raise children with (*affective*, *communal*).

Figure 5. In *Story of Seasons: Pioneers of Olive Town* players may build up relationships with humans and animals alike. The feeling of being at home is established through these interactions, and players may feel included into a society which needs them and that gives them a purpose within a small community.

Besides these private and affective ways to engage with the community, there are also general festivals that players can participate in, or they may promote the agenda of the Major to transform the place into a resort for families and recreation for city dwellers by attracting more tourists. To help here, players can provide materials (such as lumber, logs, cloth, iron ores, glass, clay, and so on), which they find and produce on their farm or encounter in mines. The result of these projects are prettier pavements and streets, souvenir shops, a beauty salon, a new clock for the town hall, and eventually an animal parade (*communal*).

More tourism is, decidedly, never ecological—and *Olive Town* shows a double-edged ecological critique here. On the one hand, the experience involves players residing in a serene gameworld where the troubles of the city and mass consumption are unknown. However, the main plot moves in the opposite direction. Instead of maintaining small-scale production for subsistence that remains within the limits of the natural resource capacity, and without mass exploitation (which is the case during the game), the end of the game features a luxury cruise liner docking at the port of Olive Town. The Major has achieved his goal of attracting a large number of tourists and players have been complicit in his dubious success. This capitalist ideal represented through the image of the luxury cruise liner stands in sharp contrast to the green aesthetics and small-town community in the game and reflective players will be aware of the mistakes they have committed (*ethical*, *reflective*).

Slow Capitalism and the Regenerative Appeal of the Production Process

The fragility of the line that separates the utopian from the dystopian in terms of conduct and modes of thinking is apparent in another aspect of *Pioneers of Olive Town*. Renovating a farm and building a successful enterprise is difficult and tedious work, carried out day by day. Weeds are constantly regrowing, puddles of water must be drained after rainfall, crops need water and care, and livestock need considerable daily attention, etc. The time scheduling to get everything done is tight, so the concept and practice of slow gameplay is called into question here. Of course, players are free to reduce their tasks per day and slow down the development and profitability of the farm; however, the game rather caters to an achiever attitude and the capitalist logic of investing time in order to make profit.

Figure 6. Building and maintaining a farm in *Olive Town* is a tedious pleasure and sensitises players to a meticulous working process but also to the beauty of hard, honest work, natural cycles of regeneration, and to a farm life with animals.

All this considered, there is nonetheless a strange beauty inherent in the practice of such meticulous work, and players might feel content (even proud) after having completed a day's labour. The results of such hard work are clearly visible, and players become familiar with *how things work*—not only with the farm, but also the ecosystem, seasonal peculiarities, and rural life alongside animals. The amount of detail to craft items is immense, and there are several maker machines which allow players to produce their own goods out of the gathered materials. From lumber and brick makers, jam,

honey, and cheese makers, to yarn, cloth, textile or seedling makers, a wide array of possibilities awaits, and players become familiarised with the steps of the production process. The meticulously produced goods can then be sold in the town, which effectively lays the entire production process and its earnings into the hands of the players (*cyclical*).

In addition, players are familiarised with the four seasons and their impact upon the natural environment. Of course, everyone knows that winter is colder than summer, but with *Pioneers of Olive Town*, we learn which crops or plants grow in which season, that livestock must stay indoors in winter, and when to expect heavy rain and storms, and so on. The acquisition of such fundamental knowledge represents a departure from the transient temporalities inherent to globalisation and the immediate gratification of needs we are all so familiar with, giving focus, instead, to the life-giving wonders of nature and the preciousness of availability of materials and resources (*cyclical*). Moments of natural harmony can also be discerned in the relationship with farm animals. Players witness their birth, see them grow, they can name them, and experience their friendship daily. Again, there is a heart system in place, and the better the relationship with players, the better quality of products such as milk, eggs etc. (*affective, ethical*).

The question remains whether *Pioneers of Olive Town* is truly progressive if there is open acknowledgement of the several instances which favour a capitalist, tempting, and exploitative nature of play. All of this, however, is situated withing the context of a calm environment, profound experiences with nature and labour and an opportunity for players to become re-sensitised to honest, detailed processes; where they come to experience communal spirit and a keen sense of belonging that is often lacking in the modern world. A mythological perspective rounds up the ecological purview, with follower spirits and the harvest goddess coming to your aid in a relationship beneficial to both sides. The possibility that such a Utopia can develop in the wrong direction (as implied by the game's ending) recalls the precariousness of such utopian dreams—and player attitudes and playing styles can be the final straw (an achiever focussed on making money in a hectic lifestyle, whereas an ecological player would slow things down to savour the process at hand, the environment and its inhabitants even more).

MY TIME AT PORTIA

The same aspects are generally true for *My Time at Portia* (Pathea Games 2019), but with a different focus and against a different backdrop. The game is set in a distant future and post-apocalyptic world where people have been granted a second chance to live in harmony with the planet. In the Age of Corruption, where human technology had reached its brink, we had become complacent, having AIs and robots carry out our labour. A war of mass destruction had then wiped out most of humankind, engulfing the planet in darkness. People fled underground, where they had to remain until the Day of the Bright Sun (and year zero) when a scientist discovered a way to break open the cloudy sky. Throughout this time, religious cults, such as The Church of Light, had formed, who blamed technology for mankind's misfortune, also apportioning culpability to the so-called ruin divers and builders. The latter sought out the whereabouts of ancient technology and had begun to reassemble some machines.

Sometime later, players arrive at Portia via boat from a place called Barnarock. They inherit a workshop from their father and begin a new life as a workshop builder (male or female) with the goal being to help the town of Portia and its society to improve (*communal*). The focus here is not placed on farming (although you still can do so to a degree) but on taking on commissions from people (helping them out with issues and tasks), going on scavenger hunts for relics, building items and machines for the community, and steadily enhancing your workshop and the town of Portia.

What differs from *Pioneers of Olive Town* is the fact that rather than maximising your labour efforts (although this can certainly be the case), players are confronted with ethical deliberations. In the world of *Portia*, science, technology, and their uses put forward an ambiguous notion—they are both used for destruction and rebirth—and players engage in this debate and place it under scrutiny (*reflective*, *ethical*). There are basically two positions: The Church of Light maintains a technophobic attitude and is focussed on preserving the natural environment and sustainable ways of farming, in comparison to the Research Centre who believe in the benign use and potential of technology to improve society and enhance farming. Re-creation and regeneration are thus closely linked, and a romantic notion of nature and life in a small community is juxtaposed to a likely return of civilisation as this world once knew it or, even possibly, a better one (*cyclical*).

Figure 7. *My Time at Portia* juxtaposes the ruins of a bygone age (and capitalist failure) to a fresh start in a small, old town community with surrounding lands. A pastoral image and the beauty of nature's return are foregrounded, as well as the struggle to make things better this time.

Ruins of a Bygone Age and the Calmness of Rebirth

This facet is also reflected in the visual rendering of the gameworld and its regions (*aesthetic*). *My Time at Portia* can be described as a sublimely beautiful game. The town itself is composed of meticulously adorned buildings, giving off a romantic old-town vibe with its central square and fountain area that are used as a place for social gatherings (*communal*). The surroundings areas are similarly rich in their aesthetic value. Lush grass lands and fields shine in vibrant colours, especially when the sun rises or sets, while a river flows from a waterfall alongside the town to the port and seaside. This idyllic natural paradise is backdropped by the ruins of a bygone civilisation and an abandoned downtown area with dilapidated buildings that remind us of humankind's arms race before Armageddon (*reflective*, *cyclical*). These seemingly abandoned and hazardous ruins host a space for mining but also dungeons— and, together with the collapsed wasteland, they formulate an area that reminds players of why this world had failed and of a land of the flies with notions of the sublime (*cyclical*, *aesthetic*).

This conflict between a cautious use of technology and utter mistrust or fear of it is also found in the community of Portia and has direct ramifications on gameplay. Many of Portia's citizens are, indeed, followers of the Church of Light. They regularly go to masses, are afraid of technology, and some demonstrate a fundamental sense of reverie

towards a pure and natural world. The Research Centre holds a different perspective, however, and wishes to employ technology for good, to excavate and therefore better understand world history and, hopefully, to learn from it. Gameplay now has players decide which of these routes to follow and whether to bring a disc of gathered data (with blueprints of old tech) to the scientists or, alternatively, donate them to the Church. In return, players receive different items which cater to each ideology, respectively. Although this doesn't bear any decisive impact on the main plot, it does matter to the players themselves and how their lives evolve within this community (*ethical*)—these instances are probably constituting the game's strongest aspect of regeneration.

Figure 8. A central square in Portia is used as a meeting ground for folks and as a space for community events. People meet to celebrate, discuss political matters, or simply hang out.

Community life in *Portia* is highly dynamic, filled with emotions, and interactive. There are a host of contrasted characters with different dilemmas and problems, friends to be found and loved ones, but also adversaries (such as Higgins, another workshop builder). A social system of hearts is in place, and you may go on play dates or participate in town festivals. Other than in *Story of Seasons* (where such events mostly take place in the form of a cut scene), they are highly interactive—and players might, for example, experience the personable touch of choosing from a menu on behalf of their partner. The interactive nature of *My Time at Portia* produces a highly dynamic and affective communal feeling. Small details, such as the potential flirtation of Nora (a Church of the Light member) with a research centre fellow, afford this world a sense of utter credibility through the foregrounding of these personal circumstances (*affective*, *communal*).

In a broader sense, *My Time at Portia* is inspired by the *Story of Seasons* games, however, it veers in a different direction by juxtaposing the failures of a bygone age to that of a picturesque restart within a natural world, involving players in an ethical struggle about the future of the land. A research-focussed or more spiritual route are a possibility, and the game places even more emphasis on community life, where people are friendly towards one another and together chart ways into a better future.

ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW HORIZONS

The last farming game I wish to explore is *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo 2020)[2] because of how it illustrates a unique departure from the latter two games and confronts players with a newfound and multifaceted sense of agency which they can enact to shape its world, plot, and activities. As such, *New Horizons* exemplifies the potential of the critical utopia in games and its radical openness in terms of self-expression and utopian experimentation. When the game begins, players essentially start with a blank slate; a deserted island and playground which they can shape to their liking and where they can experiment with different ways of life and organising society. Such a Utopia-in-the-making is highly interesting in consideration of the concept of regeneration, mostly depending on player preferences and playing type, which alter the island along a utopian, dystopian, or even anti-utopian direction. Of course, there are certain design elements and frameworks that limit these playing styles and which I will further underline.

Figure 9. *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* offers players a multitude of ways to express themselves creatively, from going on fishing trips with friends, farming crops and buying turnips, interior decoration, to taking a time out in nature.

Utopian Spaces and Island Playgrounds

The gameworld of *New Horizons* is under the total control of players and can be used for different purposes. Players may, for example, adhere to an ultra-capitalist logic and create an empire catering to the accumulation of profit and subjugation of in-game characters. In such a playthrough, the island is transformed into plantation spaces for fruit and money trees or turnips to sell them for profit; the latter resembling a real-world stock exchange market. Players can buy turnips for a fixed price from a merchant on Sundays and have one week to sell them before they wither. Prices fluctuate twice a day, and so the risk involved in this mini game is like that of a lottery. Radical players might even compare turnip prices on other player islands to then travel there and sell for the highest profit. Or they may consult external websites that predict turnip prices through algorithms (although Nintendo is continuously removing access to these and taking them down). The degree of stress and the hectic manner involved in some of the game's functions is driven to its extreme with a form of human trafficking that sees players trying to get the most desired characters to inhabit their island. In this regard, external websites, such as Nookazoon.com, offer the possibility to buy in-game items

(clothing or furniture) and grant players the opportunity to sell their inhabitants to one another for a large sum of bells (*New Horizon's* currency).

There are more dimensions and ways of play, however, than those that could be considered anti-utopian (*unethical*). Players may build intricate city spaces reminiscent of Japanese traditions, arcade and toy spaces, wrestling sites, messy islands (where items lay scattered or organised on the surface of the island), fairy tale castles, dinosaur parks, labyrinths, and so on. Every *aesthetic* seems imaginable and so too are more ecological ways to play the game and build the islands. Lush forest spaces or rainbow fields are a possibility, and the same is true for water worlds we may roam and calmly explore, farming grounds or fully fledged communities (*aesthetic*). Of course, these creations are limited to the game design framework (the implied player) and the objects at one's disposal and, as such, it is of benefit to take a closer look at the main plot.

Tom Nook and the Disneyfication of Capitalist Logic

"Procedures are sometimes related to ideology" (Bogost 2007, 3), and *New Horizons'* rule system is closely linked to ideological systems of the empirical world. As Althusser puts it: "Ideology is a system (possessing its logic and proper rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts according to the case) endowed with an existence and an historical role at the heart of a given society" (Goldstein, 23). In *New Horizons* this role falls to Tom Nook and his apprentices Timmy and Tommy, who endow the gameworld with ideological values. This begins right at the start, where players are charmed into a state of financial dependence: the Deserted Island Getaway Package needs to be paid as a prerequisite for living on the island.

Players can make this payment in a variety of ways, beginning with cleaning the island, attracting characters, and clearing properties for their settlement. Everything will be paid out of the players' pocket, and this includes buying furniture for interior decoration. Tom Nook essentially has players pay for the island they are building, but he also rewards them with miles for completing tasks. These can be exchanged for DIY recipes, floors, wallpapers, and other decorative objects, but also for bell coupons.

To attain the game's goal of a five-star rating, one needs infrastructure as well. To finance important buildings (the town hall, Nook's cranny, the tailor's shop, and the museum), players must collect resources—and once the buildings have been erected, players can spend their hard-earned bells in them (on clothes, furniture, etc.). They may also sell almost everything else they encounter on the island including fossils, resources, fruit, etc. The Nook empire profits from this *cyclical* structure of production and consumption—and to pay one's mortgage, one not only builds and develops the island for the Tanuki but also spends one's wage in his shops.

This final dream of capitalism (that the working class spends their money in the company they are working) is the game's central logic and gameplay loop and simulates the class struggle Karl Marx had discerned among empirical society. The exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie is thereby foregrounded by *New Horizons* (Barry, 2009). This class struggle is, of course, to be found in a much-weakened form here, but it nonetheless has the potential to emerge in the players' imaginations, leading to circumstances on some islands where players revolt against Tom Nook within their means (*cyclical*, *ethical*).

In this regard, the tanuki (Tom Nook) upholds an almost godlike role, as Ian Bogost puts it: "the supernatural industriousness of Tom Nook, who can divine manufactured goods from thin air in the game" (2020, np). Taking a closer look at Japanese mythology reveals further facets. Here, the animal tanuki is often regarded as a "trickster" and stands as a "symbol of wealth" with giant testicles (Ibid.), a shapeshifter

with a hypnotising influence on people (Wikipedia, *Japanese Raccoon Dog*). His apprentices are similarly persuasive and remind one of intrusive salesmen and women, who follow you around the shop and politely convince clients to buy things they do not necessarily need. The tanukis do this in an such a cute fashion that one cannot deny their will or even be mad at them. Consequently, players fall victim to what Darko Suvin calls the strategy of Disneyfication: a "misuse of eutopian images" to be found in "the edulcorated fables and fairy tales of Disneyland" (194). These resemble "a privileged pars pro toto of the capitalist and especially U.S. admass brainwash" (Ibid.) and can be regarded as "a shaping of affective investment into commodifying which reduces the mind to infantilism." (Ibid., cf. 195).
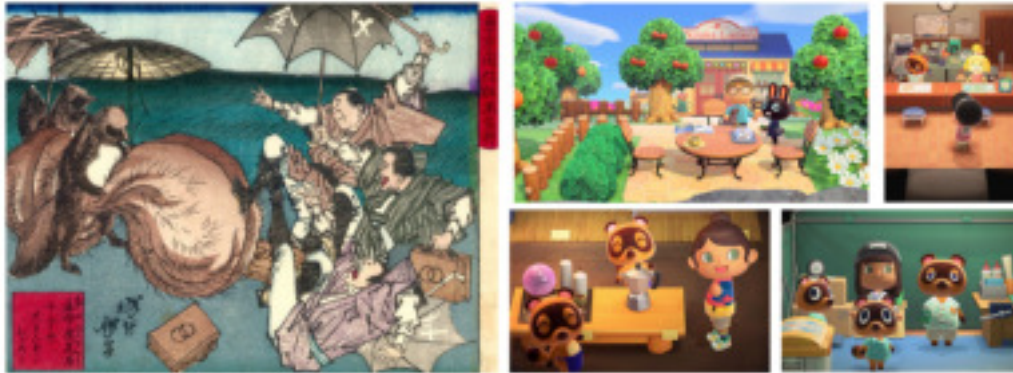
Figure 10. In Japanese mythology the tanuki is depicted as a trickster with giant testicles and as a symbol of wealth and power. This fascinating role can also be discerned in *New Horizons*, where the Nook family enchant players in such a way that we do (almost) everything they wish for, without questioning their motives.

Slow Gameplay as a Radical Break and Utopian Endeavour

Despite these aspects, it would be a mistake to refuse *New Horizons* its fundamental utopian nature and regenerative potential to relax in a fictional gameworld despite the influence of consumerist logic. With its experimentation in utopian or dystopian ways of living, *New Horizons* holds a mirror up to the players and has them compare the experience and their actions in the game to real world behaviours (*reflective*). In fact, even though the game simulates large parts of our capitalist system, it grants utopian enclaves and trajectories to follow within the system. It does so by laying focus on a slow, meditative play (Quirk, 2021) and envisions a safe, cosy world which *decelerates* certain capitalist logics. There is, for example, no pressure to follow certain play styles and no existential fear involved when one doesn't pay their mortgage. Instead, the game's focus is centred on social togetherness and a meditative experience within a natural world; facilitating our getting to know and understanding of ecosystems, their biomes, and inhabitants.

The game works in real time, so that players can hop in an out several times a day, can adapt their routine to the game, or play whenever they have some free time. Days in *New Horizon* begin with Isabelle welcoming us and announcing the most important events of the day. Afterwards, players are free to do as they please: construct the island further, grow different trees or bushes to cultivate your island, do gardening, water flowers, or stroll around the beach while collecting shells and enjoying the sunrise (*affective*, *aesthetic*). The sense of slowness applied to these activities can prove to be a truly meditative experience and sensitises us to natural cycles. The four seasons (spring, summer, autumn, winter) and their different events and experiences complement this image as do the routines of characters and players (*cyclical, reflective*).

Slowness also plays an important factor in community life and in befriending people. Players may attract people from other islands or convince them into staying. Once they have settled, it will take some time to get to know them. Players can chat with them from day to day, listen to their stories or help them with different things and their dream of staying on the island. Players, as such, engage in long-term relationships with these characters as they grow close and accompany us throughout the entire year. Community events—such as fishing tournaments, Halloween, Easter, or simple workouts at the town hall square—contribute to this sense of togetherness (*affective*, *communal*).

This steady creation of the island of your desires and a feeling of home, happening step by step, can, of course, only be experienced if players are willing to engage in meditative and creative tasks. But it is also engrained within the game's design framework and rule system and encourages players towards slow forms of play in certain ways. To begin with, there is no time pressure in the game to complete any of the tasks or to pay your mortgage. Such a stressless payment system differs significantly from its real counterpart in the empirical world, where people often fall prey to increasing interest rates and levels of debt (Bogost 2020, np.). Nonetheless, there are also other aspects to consider. Dialogues, for example, run slowly, are often repetitive (if you talk to a character often), and cannot be skipped. In addition, the resources that players need for the composition of the island regenerate only in a slow manner. Trees, ores, or stones take one to three days, which sensitises players to the flow of the natural order of things. Hectic playthroughs and button-mashing to skip dialogue are, as such, made difficult (*cyclical*).

Figure 11. Taking pictures of your adventures in *New Horizons* is another pleasure that shows a regenerative, slow appeal. Taking your time to capture moments of beauty, community, friendship, and so on, is a vital pleasure of slow gameplay.

New Horizons thus represents a dream and flight into a simpler world, teaching players *attentiveness*, which we are generally denied by contemporary capitalism and a hectic way of life. These aspects suggest how *New Horizons* moves in accordance with a Marxist-utopian logic, however, without entirely rejecting the contemporary world system. There is no sense of alienation within the production process and, indeed, players might feel proud of their creations. The game, as Ian Bogost rightfully claims, creates a utopian imagery in which the pastoral (a way of life in balance with nature) coalesces with a decelerated form of modern capitalism (2020).

CONCLUSION

This thorough investigation into farming games (with a focus on three games) is of great value with regard to two principal aspects. First, it has contributed to a further detailing of the critical utopia as a genre in video games (specifically ecogames), wonderfully illustrating its radical openness in terms of imaginative explorations and ponderings, interactivity, ergodicity, and agential powers to shape these worlds in ecological, utopian directions. *Story of Seasons: Pioneers of Olive Town, My Time at Portia*, and *Animal Crossings: New Horizons* all begin on a positive premise and with a journey to a romanticised, idyllic setting that is surrounded by a natural world. While not all these Utopias share in the severity of issues that players might encounter, there is nonetheless a possibility of steering into an anti-ecological/utopian direction (as with the main plot of *Olive Town* or in accordance with achiever playing styles that adhere to the principles of immediate gratification and being motivated by making money). This reminds us of the fragility of utopian dreams and the constant need to renegotiate our social surroundings, ruling ideologies, and prevailing systems of thought in our interactions with fiction as well as in the real world.

In the games I have analysed, capitalism, as a system of globalised rule, has been placed under close scrutiny. While all games adhere to capitalist logics of monetisation, consumption, and gratification of needs (*Animal Crossing* in particular), they partially break away from it by involving players in the entire production process and in a form of slow play. Here, players learn how things work, not only in terms of labour but also with regard the natural world they live in, providing them the opportunity to explore sustainable ways of living without mass production. Further to these aspects, the trade of goods and focus on more intimate-sized communities set the games within a liminal space between socialism and capitalism, allowing for the juxtaposition of potential playstyles, such as a persistent achiever playstyle versus that of a more romantic and ecological persuasion.

The potential for ethical agency and a break away from dystopia, therefore, is not only determined by issues of plot, characters, and world, but also by the aesthetics of play and its regenerative powers. The second major result of this analysis is a comprehensive overview of the different dimensions of regenerative play. These complement each other and sometimes clash to great effect; for example, an aesthetically pleasing natural world that is contrasted with unethical playthroughs of greediness and mass consumption. As an effect, regenerative play encourages our reflection upon the interconnection between empirical society and the fictional trial actions within these gameworlds in different and radically open ways to achieve cultural transformation and renewal.

Regenerative play begins with an *affective* experience of natural-cultural surroundings, diverse landscapes and nature gardens, characters, their dilemmas, and players' relations to them, but also involves developments of plot. It is complemented by the *aesthetic* experience of green gameworlds, how these negotiate concepts of nature and culture, and how they involve players in different forms of beauty but also destruction. Such experiences (as with all fiction) are naturally *reflective,* but the potential for reflection is further facilitated by a slow style of gameplay that gives players space to think about their experience and to compare it with their empirical surroundings. *Cyclical* structures add to this sense of reflectivity and sensitise players to the order and behaviours of the natural world and its ecosystems as well as to processes of production and their details. Alienation from processes of labour is lacking in these worlds, and players are conversely involved in most or every step of carrying out work. How to act *ethically* (and find ecological agency) given the circumstances was a further line of question and depends on player attitudes and playstyles that favour a slow, stress-free way of life. Specifically, *Animal Crossing* affords its players a high degree of agency

in this regard with which they may shape society to their pleasing (from totalitarian rules of mass production to serene nature communities in the woods). This *communal* involvement is also probably the strongest aspect of all three games, revealing how players foster a sense of belonging and home in relation to a utopian community: learning its culture, and discarding more individualistic and egotistical trains of thought in favour of the community and the struggle to achieve an ecological Utopia.

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ENDNOTES

[1] I use capitalisation to refer to the philosophy of Utopia (utopianism) and Anti-Utopia / Dystopia and to specific Utopias—a certain imaginary, virtual, or real place such as Columbia in *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013). Lowercase will be used for Utopia's manifestations, such as fictional narratives: the literary utopia/dystopia, those of film/theatre, and the video game utopia/dystopia.

[2] I played *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* mostly in the year 2020, so my analysis is not taking in account some of the major updates the game had in 2021 and 2022.