

**‘A new life in the countryside awaits’<sup>1</sup>: interactive lessons in the rural  
utopia in ‘farming’ simulation games.**

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**Abstract**

This paper critically analyses the legitimization of exploitative human-nonhuman animal relations in online ‘farming’ simulation games, with special reference to the game Hay Day. The analysis therefore contributes to a wider project of critical analyses of popular culture representations of nonhuman animals. The paper argues that legitimization is effected in Hay Day and cognate games through: the construction of idyllic rural utopias in gameplay, imagery and soundscape; the depiction of anthropomorphized nonhumans who are complicit in their own subjection; the suppression of references to suffering, death and sexual reproduction among ‘farmed’ animals; and the colonialist transmission of Western norms of nonhuman animal use and food practices among the global audience of players. Hay Day and its ilk thereby resonate with the wider cultural

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<sup>1</sup> This quotation is taken from the introduction video that plays automatically once a player downloads the mobile app game Hay Day. The player is invited to take over the running of their recently retired uncle’s ‘farm’.

legitimation of nonhuman animal exploitation through establishing emotional connections with idealised representations of nonhuman animals at the same time as they inhibit the development of awareness and empathy about the exploitation of real nonhuman animals. By capitalizing on the ubiquitous representation of the rural utopia in Western culture, Hay Day normalizes and thereby perpetuates the oppression of nonhuman animals and facilitates the deferment of a critical consciousness about oppression among game players. This has important implications for educational research, highlighting the role of affectivity in maintaining the exploitative status quo.

Keywords: animals; online games; farming; Hay Day; social media; utopia

Subject classification codes: Sociology

## **Introduction**

Western cultures are notoriously coy about educating children about the exploitative and violent practices that are intrinsic to the ‘farming’ of nonhuman animals (for instance forcible insemination, the separation of offspring from mothers, diverse forms of confinement, bodily mutilations and slaughter; see Marcus, 2005; Masson, 2009). Indeed, analysis of mainstream socialization processes suggests that cultural representations of ‘farming’ (and other forms of nonhuman animal use) targeted at children go to great lengths to obfuscate those practices, including the formal education system (Cole & Stewart, 2014; Stewart & Cole, 2009). Mainstream socialization therefore prepares children to inhabit and reproduce a speciesist culture within which nonhuman animal exploitation is legitimated (see for instance Cudworth, 2011; Nibert, 2013; Potts, 2016; Taylor & Twine, 2014). This paper documents how online ‘farming’ simulation games contribute to this process of speciesist cultural reproduction, and thereby tacitly inhibit education about the exploitation of nonhuman animals.

Cultural obfuscation is partly achieved through the deployment of a distinctive ‘cute style’ of anthropomorphic nonhuman animal representations that position nonhuman animals as willingly complicit in their own subjection on ‘farms’, notably within the popular genre of ‘farming’ simulations games (such as FarmVille, Family Farm and Hay Day), played via downloadable applications for mobile devices and/or on social media platforms such as Facebook. These games do not emerge in a cultural vacuum – their cute stylizations of nonhuman animals ‘work’ because they recall myriad similar cultural stylizations. As we discuss in detail in earlier work (Cole & Stewart, 2014; Stewart & Cole, 2009), these ways of representing other animals are promoted throughout the childhood socialization process, from stuffed toy animals for infants, through the mass media output of Disney et al., to the promotion of ‘cute’ toy animals alongside nonhuman animal body parts in fast food children’s meals (see also Baker, 2001). ‘Farming’ simulation games then, despite their novelty in relation to their exploitation of social media platforms, are comfortably familiar insofar as that cute style has successfully colonized the socialization experiences of players. We argue that they therefore provide an opportunity to revisit comforting childhood experience of close affective relations with ‘cute’ representations of nonhuman animals that typify the Western socialization process. As such they are also colonialist in the broader sense of normalizing Western norms of affective relations with nonhuman animal representations.

A wide array of ‘farming’ simulation games exists, and include hugely popular titles such as FarmVille 1, FarmVille 2, Family Farm and Gourmet Ranch, as well as Hay Day which is the primary focus of this paper. Many are hosted on or linked to social media platforms, facilitating both the sharing of gameplay within existing social networks and the participation in new gaming communities joined through and within

gameplay. In 2014 it was estimated that 375 million users per month played Facebook connected games, including large numbers of women comparative to more traditional gaming formats (Willson, 2015). These games cannot be ‘won’ in a conventional endgame sense, but continue perpetually, with potentially endless profit for both the real-life game producers, and the fictional ‘farmers’ within the games, and potentially endless objectification and exploitation for the nonhuman animals represented. The games are run through with explicit capitalist messages – the making of profit is the key to successful gameplay, and the forging of social links merely serve to facilitate this. Linked players do not compete with each other, but collaborate to maximise their individual virtual profits. Players pursue virtual profits from others through selling goods to them, but there is no gameplay advantage in harming or limiting the productivity or sales successes of other ‘farmers’. The games therefore suppress the metaphorical cut-throat character of ‘real’ capitalism at the same time as they suppress the genuine slaughterhouse throat-cutting that ‘real’ ‘animal farming’ depends on for its continued existence.

The makers of these games maximise their real-world profits by charging for aspects of play that speed up or enhance features that are available for free, but which without payment take longer to achieve (“micro-transaction purchases”). Games attached to social media platforms share a percentage of this profit with the social media platform. To illustrate the extent of this, in 2011, 12% of Facebook’s profits came from micro-transaction purchases within games produced by Zynga, the makers of FarmVille 1 and FarmVille 2 (Willson & Leaver, 2015). Gameplay revenue is further maximised by the data mining of personal information about players (consented to through the games’ terms and conditions) and their behaviour patterns within the game which are then used to tailor game options in a way to maximise micro-transaction purchases.

Beyond this, this mined information is sold on to third parties (Willson & Leaver, 2015). Critics have argued that these games are not games as such (being mundane, requiring little or no skill, and there being no end goal), but data gathering exercises for the financial gain of the makers, front ended by a 'game' interface (Willson, 2015). Such is the importance of these areas of sales that Zynga have been referred to as an "analytics company masquerading as a games company" (Rudin, 2010, cited by Willson & Leaver, 2015, p. 149).

Several qualitative studies of these games have explored the social aspects of participation in social gaming. For example, Burroughs (2014) conducted an ethnography of FarmVille, using participant observation and interviews with other players, and argues that these games "enable ritual performances that help construct and co-configure new possibilities of social order" (Burroughs, 2014, p. 155). Willson's (2015) study of FarmVille argues that these games provide a platform for identity co-creation, or impression management in Goffmanesque terms, through the options for customised play options, from choosing one's play identity to manipulation of the gameplay space. She draws on Apperley's (2010, cited by Willson, 2015, p. 20) notion of 'counterplay': how players personalise and customise the game experience in ways unintended by the makers in order to establish their individuality within the game linked network. These studies have focussed on the social aspects of the participation of players, rather than the representations within the game, which we have sought to explore across a range of media previously (Cole & Stewart, 2014), and the specifics of one social media connected game here. We will argue that this veneer of non-conformity and individuality that appeals to the gaming community is in fact laid over the reproduction of some very rigid norms about the oppression of nonhuman animals, which is not to say that those norms cannot be subverted, for instance by vegan games

players (of which more below). Social aspects of these games are not limited to how players interact with the game and each other, but also involve the culturally loaded representations of the scenarios the games are based on. As in our previous work (Cole & Stewart 2014, Stewart & Cole 2009, Stewart & Cole 2016) we seek to emphasise the importance of the interconnectedness of practices and representations concerning nonhuman animals, in this case through a detailed exploration of how ‘farming’ simulation representations simultaneously reflect and obscure dominant oppressive practices.

In this paper, we present an overview of how the genre of ‘farming’ simulation games deal with key areas relating to the use of other animals, together with a more detailed exploration of how this is articulated in one specific example: Hay Day by the games maker Supercell. Supercell is a Finnish games company founded in 2010, with four games on the market at the time of writing: Hay Day, Clash of Clans, Boom Beach and Clash Royale (<http://supercell.com/en/games/>). Hay Day was launched as a beta version in 2012 in Canada and according to the Supercell website was immediately massively popular compared with previous games they had trialled (<http://supercell.com/en/our-story/>). Their games are designed for tablets and smartphones on iOS and Android operating systems. The company now have offices in Helsinki, San Francisco, Tokyo, Seoul and Beijing, and in 2013 the Japanese technology firm Soft Bank bought a 51% stake in the company (<http://supercell.com/en/our-story/>). The financial success of Supercell is reflected in their investment in the expensive world of television advertising, and we also consider television advertisements for Hay Day in our analysis below. Our research is not ethnographic in the same sense as those previously discussed, although it is informed by our experience as Hay Day players (albeit players who declined to spend any ‘real’

money on the game and confined ourselves to an experience limited by playing for free). Instead it provides a critical content analysis of the representations of ‘farming’ and other practices that involve nonhuman animals in the game, informed by our playing experiences for the purpose of this critique. Existing popular cultural materials, including games, are a valuable source of data across the social sciences. They are produced in specific social, cultural and historical contexts, and can therefore provide insight into society at a particular place and time (Brennan, 2013). In this specific case, they provide a useful resource for understanding dominant discourses that shape and reflect human-nonhuman animal relations.<sup>2</sup> That is not to say that counter-discourses are not present, or that consumers of these materials are passive recipients of these messages, but it allows identification and critical analysis of dominant discourses (see Cole & Morgan, 2011). That critical analysis is a necessary step towards forging counter-discourses that can disrupt the oppression of other animals.

### **Constructing a rural idyllic utopia**

As a genre ‘farming’ simulation games present an image of a rural idyll that bears little resemblance to modern ‘farming’ practices. ‘Livestock’ in the games are either penned in small groups (for example Hay Day), roam ‘freely’ within the confines of the on-screen ‘ranch’ (as in FarmVille for instance) or remain static (as is the case on Family

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<sup>2</sup> The method used to analyse the games consisted of both authors playing them separately and taking written notes and screenshots to document text, imagery and in-game events. The gameplay process was complemented by a close reading of related Supercell webpages, as cited in the text of this paper. A thematic analysis of the resultant data was developed through discussions between the authors. This analysis was informed by prior analyses conducted in earlier work (Cole & Stewart, 2014; Stewart & Cole, 2009).

Farm) on mixed 'produce' 'farms' that are all situated in lush green spaces, sometimes with additional geographical features such as a river, or wooded areas. Players are encouraged to customise the layout and decoration of the 'farming' game space with features such as fences, hedges, ornaments, flowers, ponds as well as 'pets' and free-living animals. Human characters within the games conform to familiar rural stereotypes within the idyllic trope – genial, relaxed and content with life: The Supercell website describes Hay Day as representing “the laid-back country life” (<http://supercell.com/en/games/hayday/>)

Supercell sum up the rural idyll trope neatly in their website blurb about Hay Day: “You don’t have to be from a ‘farm’ to be a great ‘farmer’. Hay Day lets you get back to nature and experience the simple life of working the land.” Hay Day in particular and ‘farming’ simulation games in general trade on their success at constructing ‘farming’ as the stress-free utopian other of the pressured urban complexity of their imagined games players’ lives. The Hay Day blurb also links ‘farming’ and ‘nature’ – this is a crucial claim in that it misrepresents an artificial cultural practice – ‘farming’ – as something exemplarily ‘natural’ that can stand as an alternative to the ‘unnatural’ experience of players’ imagined urban lives. The utopian claim is therefore inherently false, though culturally familiar given the ubiquity of the nostalgic evocation of the rural. Moreover, it is ‘utopian’ only in the everyday pejorative sense of a fantastical and escapist impossibility, rather than in a more critical utopian sense of a vision of a possible better future towards which we might orient our ethical and political activity (see Levitas, 1990). We contend that this is especially important for this specific genre of games, because it elides the genuinely critically utopian efforts of the vegan movement in the non-game world to transition towards food production systems that do not depend on the exploitation of nonhuman animals (for instance see



<http://veganorganic.net/>). As an example, Supercell (<http://supercell.com/en/games/hayday/>) describe Hay Day as “the mobile farm where nothing bad ever happens”. This contrasts sharply with the dystopian reality of the places where ‘animal products’ are appropriated from nonhuman animals, where almost only bad things happen to the animals confined there, including the physical and mental distress of incarceration, forcible insemination, separation of mothers from offspring, executions (such as the killing of unprofitable male calves or male chicks) and so on. Emblematic of this suppression of the real violence of ‘animal farming’ is the scarecrow character, ‘Mr. Wicker’, who appears intermittently as a guide through new aspects of gameplay within Hay Day. Mr Wicker is shown with a cute representation of a crow sitting on his shoulder, so that even this example of a relatively minor conflict between ‘farmer’ and nonhuman animals construed as ‘pests’ is effaced, even as it is potentially evoked by the scarecrow character.

In Hay Day’s gameplay, the idyllic rural imagery is established before the player even sees their ‘farm’. After downloading and opening the game, it begins with an automatic sequence including a letter from the player’s ‘uncle’ who is retiring and invites the player to take over the ‘farm’, writing that ‘A new life in the countryside awaits’. The player then sees a van of belongings driving into a verdant countryside sunset as the game finishes loading. The ‘farm’ plot, when it is first encountered, does not look like an ongoing concern. There is a disused barn and rundown ‘farmhouse’ which the player is soon asked to repair, sitting on an empty plot of land containing rocks and trees, with no crops or ‘livestock’. A river boundary is at the top of the plot, and features involving the river become available as a player progresses through the game. This is, unequivocally, a rural, ‘natural’ setting. As noted above, Hay Day, as with other ‘farming’ simulation games, uses music to enhance the bucolic mood, in this

case a faux-country and western instrumental loop featuring banjo, slide guitar and percussion. Added to the soundscape are ‘farmyard’ sounds such as the clucking of hens (once the player purchases them and the coop in which they are placed). The gameplay proceeds with the player looking down on-high at an isometric view, which can be zoomed in and out and moved around by swiping on the players’ touch-screen. Although the sky is not visible from this view, the vivid colour palette gives an impression of unbroken sunshine, enhanced by the occasional drifting shadow of a cloud across the screen or gentle snowfall during ‘real life’ winter.

The unreality of the Hay Day setting, where nothing bad ever happens, is played up for ironic-comic effect in the accompanying television advertising campaign. One ad features an African-American man wandering into a ‘real-life’ version of a Hay Day ‘farm’, bathed in sunshine and populated with CGI animals who closely resemble their counterparts in the game itself (described in more detail in the next section). As he ambles through the ‘farm’, the man, clad in ‘cowboy’ gear (complete with ‘leather’ boots – the only visible presence of a real nonhuman animal) and carrying an acoustic guitar, muses on his surroundings to a CGI pig walking by his side, “You know pig, this is a real special place: It never rains but the crops never die. You can get eggs whenever you want. And the pig just gave me bacon. [Looks down the camera lens with raised eyebrows and repeats]: The pig just gave me bacon.” After which, the camera pulls back as he sings “Haaayyy Daaayyy!”

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wIXPFmBPYfE>). The bacon is proffered to him on a plate by another CGI pig, a variation on the acquiring of bacon in actual gameplay, but reassuring potential games players that there is no risk of uncomfortable encounters with the bloody business of slaughter in the game. The rural idyll, although escapist in the sense of its suppression of violence, conflict and domination, remains firmly realist

in the way that 'farming' simulation games construe the exploitation of nonhuman animals as essential to their construction of appealing representations of 'nature'. But for that exploitation to be bloodless, the nonhuman animals have to be represented as willing participants.

### **Happy machines**

Periodically in *Hay Day*, an avatar 'guide' – the scarecrow called Mr Wicker – leads the player through new gameplay elements. For instance, early on, having planted wheat and corn in plots of cultivated soil that the player places, and repainted the barn, Mr Wicker invites the player to 'buy' some chickens with the words 'Great! Now let's invite some feathered friends to the party', and shortly afterwards when introducing the feed mill, explains that 'Happy animals make a happy farm.' As players progress through the game's levels, more 'livestock' animals become available for purchase: chickens are followed successively by cows, pigs, sheep and goats, and the crops required to make their 'feed' become available at the same time. In addition, fishes can be 'lured' in a separate part of the game, where lobsters and ducks can also be trapped (see the next section for a detailed discussion of the 'harvesting' of animal products). All of these animals share a common 'cute style' of representation (detailed below). The only discontent or discomfort they ever display is when their 'products' need collecting, and immediately after that when they request feeding. They are represented as willing participants in the cycle of their use for the production of commodities, and moreover as wanting to be fed and 'harvested'.

In *Hay Day*, 'livestock' are penned in standard fenced enclosures, placed where the player chooses on their 'farm', and in which they are fed by the player. This is not for their subsistence per se, but is linked to their productivity and capacity to generate

in-game profits for the player-‘farmer’ that can be reinvested in the purchase of more animals, decorations, machines or other paraphernalia. The animals are only ever either ‘hungry’, in the process of eating, or ‘full’, and can only be fed after their ‘products’ are ‘harvested’, like recharging a battery. Yet their animated behaviours express contentment and acquiescence to the player-‘farmer’. They do not display any social behaviour with each other, only minimally with the player-‘farmer’ when fed or ‘harvested’. The only behaviours they are capable of confirm their status as units of production for the benefit of the game player, leaving it unthinkable that they might have other modes of living.

Underpinning the behavioural displays of contentment in Hay Day’s ‘livestock’ is their ‘cute’ anthropomorphic style. This enables players to retain faith in Hay Day as the place where nothing bad happens, because the animals’ cartoon-like appearance asserts their happiness with their circumscribed existences. Key ‘cute style’ features include outsized eyes, smiles, and sometimes clothing – at the time of writing Hay Day’s ‘livestock’ are clothed for summer, which includes orange shirts with a floral yellow print, plus sunglasses, for the pigs. These anthropomorphic elements are augmented by human-like gestures. For example, when pigs ‘need’ feeding, they sit back on their haunches, gaze through the fourth wall of the player’s device, point towards their mouths with one trotter and nod their heads (nevertheless while still smiling despite being hungry). If the player touches a pig in this state, an identifying tag appears on screen, reading ‘PIG HUNGRY’ (all capitals are used in these tags). The game therefore reproduces a ‘real world’ conceit that underpins the ‘livestock’ industry, namely the rhetorical notion that ‘farmed’ animals cannot exist outside their confinement by humans in facilities designed to expropriate their flesh and/or exploit their reproductive systems. For example, Farmland, an educational website about

‘livestock production’ produced by the European Commission, states that, “Pigs rely on humans to provide them with the housing conditions and materials necessary to develop properly.” ([http://farmland-thegame.eu/tech\\_sheet\\_02\\_pigs\\_en.html](http://farmland-thegame.eu/tech_sheet_02_pigs_en.html)). As an example of the intertextual web of legitimation for the industry, the website hosts a game also called Farmland: “an interactive and informative **online computer game** targeting children aged between **9 and 12**”

([http://ec.europa.eu/food/animals/welfare/farmland\\_game/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/food/animals/welfare/farmland_game/index_en.htm) – emphases in original), which bears some stylistic and gameplay similarities to Hay Day et al. (for a more detailed discussion of the Farmland website, see Cole & Stewart, 2014). A testament to the contrary is evident in the existence of sanctuaries that provide homes for ‘livestock’ and other animals rescued from human oppression (for example see: <http://www.hillside.org.uk/>).

Notwithstanding such counter-examples, Hay Day allows confinement to be presented as care rather than captivity, to reassert that nothing bad is happening down on the ‘farm’. Hay Day’s ‘livestock’ are incapable as basic a demonstration of autonomy as feeding themselves. Ironically, in the game this is emphasized by anthropomorphic partial subjectivity, such as the capacity to communicate with players using human gestures and facial expressions. The fact that this is a consequence of their confinement and alienation from environments for which their progenitors were biologically adapted, is elided both within and outside the game environment. This is a key element of how game genre uses representations to recall and reinforce existing oppressive practices, while legitimizing them. We do not claim a deliberate conspiracy between Supercell and agribusiness, but that the designers and programmers of Hay Day are drawing on, tweaking and reproducing familiar cultural scripts, which already legitimize the oppression of nonhuman animals. Another key element of that

legitimation is the denial that ‘farmed’ animals suffer, especially in the course of ‘harvesting’ their ‘products’.

### **No suffering, no sex**

The representations of ‘farms’ in ‘farming’ simulation games depict a wide assortment of ‘farm’ buildings and machinery – farmhouses, ‘livestock’ pens, storage barns, crop silos, production machinery and various forms of transportation – but no slaughterhouses (an absence shared with the aforementioned Farmland educational game). The ‘harvesting’ of products is typically achieved through waving a cursor over a ‘ready’ (i.e. ‘full’) animal and the immediate, magical appearance of eggs, churns of milk or ready-cured and sliced bacon, accompanied by animations expressing relief, gratitude or happiness by the animals. For example, in Hay Day the player is alerted to ‘harvest’ goat’s milk when the goats sit, immobilised, on their inflated udders. ‘Milking’ the goats comprise the appearance of a bottle of goat’s milk, automatically delivered to the players’ storage barn, accompanied by an animation of the goat’s udders deflating as they display relieved facial expressions (immediately followed by postures of lassitude when they return to ‘hungry’ status). Likewise, ‘full’ cows sit back on their haunches, immobilised by their distended udders, before flopping forward with relief on their deflated udders after being ‘milked’, but now with the ‘COW HUNGRY’ tag and unable to rouse themselves from their torpor until fed by the player.

Such ‘livestock’ animals therefore variously express gratitude, as if unburdened, and then communicate food requests, through body language, expression or gesture, so that they can do it all again. ‘Hungry’ hens lie flat on their backs with quivering stomachs, while hungry shorn sheep shake with hunger until fed. They are all prisoners of their own biology, with the fact that representations of imprisonment are dependent on real-world selective breeding being elided. They are dependent on the player-

‘farmer’ to relieve them from an endless cycle of hunger and uncomfortable fullness. Even the ‘harvesting’ of bacon from pigs never results in the depiction or suggestion of the animals’ deaths. ‘Full’ pigs are depicted as encumbered by their own fatness, laying helplessly on the ground making futile ‘swimming’ motions with their legs while they wait for relief. This comes in the form of an animation in which the ‘harvested’ pig appears in a steam-bath, complete with shower cap, emerging newly slim, but hungry all over again, as the ready-prepared bacon appears on screen and whizzes into the storage barn.

The elimination of death from ‘farming’ simulations has its counterpart in the eradication of birth, maturation, sexual reproduction and nurturing relationships between animals and their offspring. ‘Livestock’ arrive, fully grown, on screen when purchased, and aside from becoming fatter (for example pigs), or hairier (for example sheep), or more immobile to indicate their readiness for their ‘products’ to be ‘harvested’, they do not change. Lack of feeding has no lasting impact; the ‘livestock’ can endure in perpetuity and instantly revive and resume their ‘productive’ cycle once fed. The sexlessness of this cycle suppresses a key feature of the ‘livestock’ industry; the control of female animals’ reproductive capacities. This includes forced insemination, the concomitant denial of natural sexual behaviour, and the severing of maternal-offspring relationships. All forms of ‘dairy’ production depend on a cycle of forced insemination, pregnancy, birth and the abduction of offspring, whether calves, kids or lambs, from their mothers, so that humans can expropriate their milk. Female offspring may be pressed into the same cycle, while males may be slaughtered soon after birth or granted short lives, for instance in ‘veal’ production. Likewise, the male chicks born to the egg industry, from whom profit cannot be extracted, are slaughtered as soon as practicable after hatching. If nothing bad can happen in *Hay Day*, it is these

uncomfortable truths that must be suppressed in the gameplay. But that suppression comes at the price of reproducing a childlike naiveté about the reality of what is being represented, despite the ironic eyebrow raising towards the viewer in the Hay Day television advertisement.

In Hay Day, the lack of a beginning or end to animals' lifespans is juxtaposed with the gameplay life of certain plant products that can be grown. Fruit trees and bushes are bought as small plants, and grow in size, only having a limited productive span before they die off and must be chopped down and replaced, or revived by cooperative other players. Representing the death of plants more 'realistically' can be integrated into gameplay without disturbing the sense of nothing 'bad' happening in a way that the deaths of nonhuman animals cannot. This is most strikingly illustrated in the 'fishing' section of Hay Day. By contrast with the harvesting of 'livestock' in the 'farm' section, the fishes' flesh is obtained either with the use of automatic nets to catch several at once, or, in a rare example of a modicum of gameplay skill, through catching them individually using 'lures', in which the player must manoeuvre a fishing line to prevent their prey escaping once they have been lured. Basic lures feature a worm on a hook, notable as the only animals who remain unanimated and devoid of anthropomorphic features, only appearing as an indistinct red squiggle on the hook. The fishing section of Hay Day does not represent a 'fish farm', but another aspect of the rural idyll – a lakeside shoreline with picturesque waterfall and a series of 'fishing areas' in the lake itself, from which implicitly 'wild' rather than 'farmed' fish may be caught. This suggests that the 'wildness' of fishes and other aquatic animals makes it difficult to fit their 'farming' into an idyllic utopian setting. Supercell write that, "Many of the changes and features added have come from the player community. The Fishing feature, for example, was not in Hay Day's original design, but had been in high



demand since launch in 2012.” (<http://supercell.com/en/games/hayday/>). While using representations of ‘wild’ (albeit still cute style) fishes allows a continuity with a utopian representation of ‘nature’ in Hay Day, as opposed to ‘fish farming’, the problem of their death remains. This is ‘solved’ as follows: a fish caught with a lure leaps from the water, fully alive, but with the line and hook/lure being invisible. The fish is ‘captured’ by a polaroid style photo, before diving back into the water, alive. Simultaneously, a ‘fish fillet’ appears, which is whisked into the barn. This elision of killing has a further step, in an afterlife for the caught fishes. Hay Day differentiates fish species in ‘My Fishing Book’, a tome that appears when a player touches their shack by the lakeside. This opens a scrapbook of different fish species, who only appear therein *after* they have been caught at least once. Images are in a familiar anthropomorphized cute style, accompanied by brief blurbs that grant the fish some measure of subjectivity. For example, the ‘Copper Redhorse’ is described thus: “This friendly, relaxed and long-living fish has found a permanent home in your lake.” The player rewards their friendliness by luring them to a paradoxical deathless execution, before discovering who they are (a peculiar example of shoot first, ask questions later, or in more sociological terms, of a Foucauldian relationship between power being productive of new forms of knowledge).

### **The constructed necessity of Western norms of animal use**

For any player who might be disturbed by the integral place of violence within Hay Day, or rather the coy allusions to real-world violence towards nonhuman animals that masquerade as a peaceable rural utopia, there is little opportunity to avoid it. ‘farming’ simulation games in general and Hay Day in particular do not allow for the possibility of progressing very far without the exploitation and killing of other animals. Although crop growing is a central part of game-playing, it is heavily linked to the production of

‘feed’ for ‘livestock’. In an echo of ‘real world’ agribusiness, crops which could be used to feed humans directly are converted into ‘feed’ for ‘livestock’ – this is nutritionally and environmentally wasteful (for example see Baroni, Cenci, Tettamanti & Berati’s 2007 comparison of the impacts of vegan and ‘livestock’ dependent food systems), but economically profitable both within and outside the games. For instance, in Hay Day, goats’ ‘feed’ is made by combining wheat, corn and carrots, while pig’s ‘feed’ is made from soybeans and carrots. Only after a modicum of success with core, basic stages of the game (such as expropriating milk and eggs, in the case of Hay Day), do players have an opportunity to manufacture other items using machines such as bakeries. However, the products available often require the inclusion of animal-derived ingredients. For example, in Family Farm, there is eventually the possibility of producing plant ‘milk’, but goat’s milk is stipulated as an essential ingredient, while bread cannot be baked without the inclusion of cow’s milk and hen’s eggs. In Hay Day, it is possible to bake a loaf of bread made purely from wheat, but this is the lowest status (cheapest) baked product, while others include hen’s eggs, cow’s milk, goat’s cheese and so on. Likewise, a pie oven is available but all the pie recipes appear to include hen’s eggs (we cannot claim to have exhausted all the possibilities of game play, as the genre depends on encouraging repeated play by only slowly making new machines, products and so on available as a reward for longevity as a player).

The Western cultural norm of a diet heavily dependent on ‘animal products’ is thereby reproduced within ‘farming’ simulation games. This norm is heavily dependent on agribusiness efforts, often with state support, to promote it, not least through numerous successful advertising campaigns that have driven up and normalized the consumption of ‘animal products’ throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (for example see Molloy, 2011; Nibert, 2016; Stanescu, 2016). Although the reach of

social media connected games is global, the gameplay and representations reproduce dominant *Western* practices and utopian rural tropes regarding ‘farming’ and nature. As such, they arguably, whether intentionally or not, provide a cultural support to the efforts of Western food corporations to expand their markets in ‘developing’ nations, a process which may be argued to constitute cultural imperialism as well as capitalist expansionism. Writing about the ‘uncle’ figure whose ‘farm’ the player-‘farmer’ has taken over and who is mentioned but never seen, Supercell comment, “He pops in and out of the story, but players never actually see him. There are traces of him here and there, but the ambiguity here is intentional. With players from all over the world, the perception of “your uncle” can be different if you live in India, China or Finland.” (<http://supercell.com/en/games/hayday/>). Hay Day permits players to use languages and alphabets other than English, but the design of the game also facilitates the participation in ‘neighbourhoods’ (groups of up to 30 players collaborating on set tasks), trading and other forms of interaction between players without the need for a common language.

We have noted elsewhere (Cole & Stewart, 2014) the gendered nature of representations of ‘farm’ personnel in digital media. In Hay Day, the male ‘visitor’ characters who call at the ‘farm’ to buy produce are introduced with roles (Mike is from the local mill, Greg is a fictional neighbouring ‘farmer’, both dressed in labourer attire), but the female visitors are introduced in much more circumspect ways: Joan is a young woman who merely introduces herself by name, and displays meek and coquettish behaviour when requesting items, Tilly is a young girl whose requests are always on behalf of her mother or grandmother, and who was not even given a name until 2013 (<http://hayday.wikia.com/wiki/Visitors>), and Mary is an older woman with an appearance similar to Mary Poppins. They have neither apparel nor additional textual or visual cues to suggest that they are also farmers, or workers of any kind. Unlike the

male visitor characters, their identities are thereby truncated to shoppers/consumers only, while Mike and Greg enjoy the additional status as producers as well as consumers. Joan and Tilly appear slightly darker skinned and have an appearance consistent with Asian heritage, but the other visitors are white. Other non-player characters (NPCs) appear when player-farmers reach a level where they can access the local town (another addition to the game since its original launch). Here the NPCs reflect yet more ethnic and gendered stereotypes – ‘The Grand Master’ is an elderly white haired man, and the only black characters are ‘The Mechanic’ and ‘The Cowboy’, the latter bearing a resemblance to the human actor who plays the cowboy/musician character of the TV advert previously discussed. These narrow cultural stereotypes are at odds with the diversity of the player community of Hay Day. As mentioned above, the game’s producers are based in Europe, North America and the Far East and the game can be played in 19 different languages. Non-Latin alphabets are supported, and so players’ interaction and trading is not reliant on being able to communicate verbally: ‘farming’ communities are built through the common languages and processes of capitalist exploitation.

The normative Western hierarchies between nonhuman species in Hay Day are also reinforced through gameplay. The game uses assorted means of virtual currency to buy and sell items and individuals. Primarily, exchange is facilitated through monetary ‘coins’, with some enhanced ‘actions’ being purchased by diamonds which can either be earned through gameplay or purchased through micro-transactions. Other ‘items’ are paid for by ‘gift vouchers’, again earned through gameplay often associated with more social activities such as offering assistance to another player’s ‘farm’. The purchasing of ‘livestock’ for production purposes is effected by in-game coins, with different species becoming available to buy (at increasing cost) as players’ game level progresses.

Player-’farmers’ can also purchase ‘pets’ after reaching particular game levels. In order of availability, these comprise a variety of dogs, cats, horses, rabbits and donkeys. The housing required for these animals is purchased using coins, but ‘pets’ can only be purchased with gift vouchers, often earned through co-operative play. A level of sociality is therefore built into the acquiring of ‘pets’ that is absent from the acquiring of ‘livestock’. These animals differ too in the extent of possible interaction with players. While the limited interactional activities available with ‘livestock’ animals (purchasing, feeding and harvesting) can only be performed by the ‘farm’ ‘owner’, any player can cause a response from a dog, cat or horse on anyone else’s ‘farm’ by touching them on-screen. Those responses are typically ‘playful’, for instance a dog will scamper excitedly on being touched. This category of animals is not ‘productive’ in the same sense as ‘livestock’, although they do provide rewards of experience points (required to level-up in the game) or occasionally non-monetary items and they still require regular feeding to remain responsive.

The third category of nonhuman animals represented in Hay Day are free-living, including birds other than hens, insects (excepting bees, who are used to produce honey at a relatively advanced level in the game), frogs and foxes, who cannot be purchased directly. The presence of birds, insects and frogs can be manipulated by purchasing relevant decorative features, such as flower beds or ponds (despite all ‘farms’ having a river boundary) in order to attract them, where they remain free-living. Foxes’ presence on the ‘farms’, echoing the ambiguously constructed status of foxes discussed by us elsewhere (Stewart & Cole, 2016), is not controlled either directly or indirectly by the player. An animated fox will occasionally cross the ‘farm’ apparently without cause or effect. Free-living nonhumans are therefore merely decorative distractions rather than full participants within the Hay Day utopia. Big really is ‘beautiful’, as higher levels

give access to ever more ways for players to adorn their ‘farms’ with plants, ornaments and features to attract ‘wildlife’, at the same time as they are able to exploit larger numbers of ‘livestock’ at an increasing pace. This is an inversion of the trend towards progressive immiseration that accompanies the intensification of real-world ‘animal farming’, perhaps reaching its nadir in the battery-hen system of egg expropriation, or the Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation (CAFO) system that confines animals en masse, prior to their slaughter. Such developments are elided in ‘farming’ simulation games by the representation of permanently happy nonhuman animals, who nevertheless depend on humans to feed them and to relieve them of the burden of their ‘products’. The latter are the only traces of suffering that are detectable within the game world, which likewise remove any reference to the control of female animals’ reproductive systems inherent to the expropriation of milk or eggs. Finally, the rural idyll of the games is firmly Western, and their cosy familiarity is bolstered by similarly Western patriarchal and racist stereotypes. Hay Day and its ilk are therefore participants not only in the cultural reproduction of existing problematic forms of inter-species and intra-human patterns of oppression, but also of their globalization.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have argued that Hay Day provides an exemplary illustration of the playful recapitulation of childhood socialization processes, by which humans learn to conceptually differentiate other animals in ways which normalize and legitimate the different uses that we make of them. As such, it adds to the growing body of critical literature documenting the cultural reproduction of speciesist oppression (see for instance Cole & Stewart, 2014; Cudworth, 2011; Nibert, 2013; Potts, 2016; Taylor & Twine, 2014). Firstly, we critiqued the representation of a naïve rural utopia where

“nothing bad ever happens” on ‘farms’. Secondly, we discussed how this utopia is bolstered by the anthropomorphic representation of nonhuman animals who are happy with their own subjection. That happiness is in turn made possible by the denial of suffering among the ‘farmed’ animals represented in Hay Day. Finally, we discussed the promotion of idealised Western norms of nonhuman animal use in Hay Day, contributing to a neo-colonial dissemination of oppression, ideologically disguised as innocent fun.

Insofar as children can access ‘farming’ simulation games, they may form part of the socialization process in themselves, or facilitate the reproduction of that process insofar as players are also parents or other caregivers for children. The example of the EU educational game Farmland shows how speciesist education already enrolls affective iconography alongside ‘rational’ messages about ‘farming’, weaving an intertextual web between education and recreation. This presents a difficult educational problem in light of the oppressive systems within which real nonhuman animals are enmeshed, especially, but not only, ‘farmed’ animals. Viewed in light of previous research (Cole & Stewart, 2014), Hay Day therefore cements an affective commitment to exploitation that makes it difficult to counter with rational education alone. Counter-discourses that seek to educate about the realities of nonhuman animal use are operating on a highly emotive discursive terrain: players are encouraged to make an emotional investment in ‘their’ animals, even as they make (real or virtual) financial investments in their exploitation (disguised as care). This suggests that a critical education about human-nonhuman animal relations needs to facilitate the unpicking of the ideological deployment of affectivity, alongside the revelation of oppressive realities and their consequences.

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