

Persisting Dualisms in Contemporary Digital Environments: Ethics and Aesthetics in *Minecraft*'s Pastoral Landscape

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines contemporary digital environments, specifically focusing on video games, to analyze enduring dualistic conceptual biases in the representations of the natural world. It emphasizes the ethical questions and the dualistic and anthropocentric implications prompted by—and entrenched in—a traditional understanding of pastoral imagery surfacing in contemporary video games' landscape construction, particularly in light of the human–nonhuman relational urges presented by the Anthropocene. The study adopts a transdisciplinary approach, encompassing literary and cultural studies, posthuman philosophy, and media studies, to investigate the challenges and opportunities presented by the pastoral aesthetics in the landscape design of *Minecraft*, especially as exhibited in the opening sequence of the video game. The research also encourages a critical perspective towards long-standing dichotomies underlying pastoral narratives and their paradoxes, which, beneath an apparent reliance on environmentalist values, often carry latent implications associated with issues such as resource exploitation and nonhuman objectification. (SR)

KEYWORDS: video games, pastoral, digital environments, *Minecraft*, landscape



Introduction: digital ethics and ethics in the digital

Taken the popularity and extensive scholarly interest in the Anthropocene in the past few decades, both within and outside academia, it is not surprising that attention towards the topic shows no signs of waning. On the contrary, ever-new frameworks and studies emerge to delve into the complexity of this notion, as well as its different material manifestations, in response to ongoing planetary changes.

Constant technological advancement is among the most apparent processes prompting these transformations, and its impact on current ecological crises offers at least two primary consequences in research. First, it introduces new ways of relating to the planet while raising new ethical

questions on the impact of (digital) technology on culture. Consider, for instance, Sean Cubitt's investigation of the environmental implications of digital technologies (2016) or Muhammad Zaffar Hashmi and Ajit Varma's discourse on electronic waste (2019), which illuminate the drawbacks of techno-progress in the present-day world. Or, one can think of Thomas Osburg and Christiane Lohrmann's observations (2020) that processes of digitalization offer "new possibilities and pathways of how to shape the future of living together" (3) in the context of sustainability. Secondly, technological development equips researchers with original conceptual and material tools to implement established scholarly practices in the field of Environmental Humanities. In this sense, the rise of Digital Environmental Humanities (DEH) stands as evidence of the evolving pattern of studies on current ecological emergencies, involving the blending of digital methodologies and ethical inquiries into human–nonhuman relationships.

Although still in its early stages, this field has already established itself as a prolific framework capable of encompassing different study trajectories, methodologies, and theoretical stances—even those traditionally considered distant from each other or idiosyncratic. Regarding the long-standing cultural separation between humanists' and scientists' work, Charles Travis, et al., and Arlene Crampsie underscore how, alternatively, "DEH provides a common, dialectical space to create an ascending methodological helix to synthesize both approaches in order to interpret, question, catalogue, address, formulate, and provide avenues and networks for practical solutions to the wicked problem of global warming beyond the limited imagination of the Western *Homo economicus*" (Travis et al. 6). This perspective underlines the updated approach that DEH embraces as a burgeoning, transdisciplinary field of studies, aiming to exceed long-standing, limiting, and sectoral theoretical frameworks that appear inadequate for exploring the complexity of the current time and its overlapping, intertwining crises. In addition, DEH appears to be characterized by a broad methodological creativity and intellectual freedom favoring the simultaneous tackling of an array of topics with a multi-perspective glance capable of reaching a critical evaluation of rooted cultural axioms.

This paper embraces this pluralism and research possibilities by adopting—and acknowledging the relevance of—a critical perspective that maintains a focus on human–nonhuman relational ethics raised in the Anthropocene while investigating the aesthetic of digital environment in one of the most popular video games of the last two decades, *Minecraft*. This observation will be conducted through a transdisciplinary dialogue between

literary and cultural studies, philosophy, and media studies. The research examines representations of the natural landscape in the game that reveal enduring dualistic conceptual biases rooted in the aesthetics of the traditional pastoral, where the natural world is framed through dichotomies underpinning current environmental crises (Ferrando 2019). This paper therefore scrutinizes how pastoral themes in *Minecraft*'s landscape raise ethical questions concerning the gaming experiences, especially for what concerns human-nonhuman relationality, given the widely discussed need to respond to the urgencies brought up by the Anthropocene. Specifically, it aims to do so by refiguring traditional, dichotomic, and anthropocentric understandings of the environment through alternative, non-hierarchical, non-dualistic possibilities.¹ As an enduring literary and cultural trope, the pastoral in fact remains problematic when one considers present-day concerns and ecological discourses since it perpetuates dichotomies like nature/culture, human/nature, country/city, and rural/urban (Williams; Gifford). The core theoretical background supporting this reflection is offered by critical posthumanism (Braidotti), which advocates for a renegotiation among (these and other) entrenched dualisms in western thought as a way to challenge the exclusivity and discriminatory patterns they sustain. Along this line, this paper highlights the importance of adopting a more critical view on digital pastoral narratives as a means of developing a more complex, ethical stance towards representations of environment in the digital age.

This study places a special emphasis on the opening sequence of *Minecraft*, a choice driven by both its pivotal role as the entry point of the game experience, as well as its significance in the dynamics of the demo version (where it serves as a gateway for potential players to consider purchasing the full product). Furthermore, the sequence under examination provides an especially useful opportunity to analyze the pastoral as visually constructed through traditional aesthetic traits, including the idealization of the countryside and *locus amoenus*.

Of primary interest is the aesthetics of the landscape utilizing the concept of "landscape-as-dwelling" (Ingold) to examine the relationship and mutual influence between the digital environment and the player, both within and beyond the dynamics of the game. The first section of this paper, in particular, offers a comprehensive overview of the concept of the pastoral and its evolution as both a literary and a cultural phenomenon, including its manifestation in video games. This discussion is approached critically by examining its traditional development within a dichotomous framework—an interpretation that this paper seeks to challenge by engaging with recent

ecocritical perspectives on the pastoral and posthumanist philosophy. The second part of this study focuses on the paradoxes inherent in the dualistic nature of the pastoral in *Minecraft*, particularly regarding the complexities of human–nonhuman interaction that the game presents. This exploration unfolds along three primary trajectories. The first examines the tension between environmental exploitation and the harmonious human–nonhuman coexistence traditionally evoked by the pastoral aesthetic of the *locus amoenus*. The second trajectory investigates the link between the pastoral and the notion of leisure, to which this aesthetics is also conventionally associated, but reinterpreted in relation to the survival mechanics embedded in the gameplay dynamics. The third and final trajectory discusses *Minecraft* as a distinctive digital environment that enables players to exercise different degrees of “free will” in their interactions with the virtual natural world. By examining the players’ agency in adopting more or less ethical approaches toward nonhuman entities within the game’s landscape, this paper argues that the critical engagement fostered by gameplay can potentially extend beyond the virtual realm, promoting a reflective approach to real-world ethical challenges of human–nonhuman relationships in the Anthropocene.

Long-standing pastoral dualisms through a posthumanist lens: from literature to video games

Terry Gifford has delineated the pastoral through four primary definitions, of which the first sees it as “an historical form with a long tradition which began in poetry . . . deriving from certain early Greek and Roman poems about life in the country, and about the life of the shepherd in particular” (Gifford 2). This long-standing aesthetic inclination towards the pastoral, which continues today, was in fact already evident in Theocritus’s *Idylls* (3rd century BCE), a collection of poems featuring, among others, dialogues between shepherds, sheep and other nonhuman characters, which become iconic and clichéd elements of the pastoral landscape generally conceived as pristine, untouched natural settings.² The propagation of these motifs initially began in the Roman world, due to the popularity of Virgil’s *Eclogues*,³ a seminal poetry collection which subsequently permeated European culture and imagery starting with its neoclassical revival in the Renaissance. The success of his work paved the way for the establishment of the pastoral as “a species of cultural equipment that western thought has for more than two millennia been unable to do without” (Buell 32), manifesting across literature and the arts throughout centuries through core, recognizable tropes that have remained largely consistent.

However, the aesthetics of the pastoral is not immune to change, evolving in response to the cultural and historical contexts in which specific pastoral works are created. On this point, William Empson famously illustrated the existence of “some versions of pastoral” (1935), highlighting its adaptability in different cultural and aesthetic expressions. Gifford has further encapsulated these evolutions, identifying various manifestations of the pastoral, such as the “‘Freudian pastoral’ (Lawrence Lerner), ‘the pastoral of childhood’ (Peter Marinelli), ‘revolutionary pastoralisms . . . like the lesbian-ecofeminist vision of Susan Griffin’ (Lawrence Buell), and even ‘proletarian pastoral’ (William Empson)” (4), among others.

Regarding the persistence of certain pastoral motifs in spite of the transformations characterizing the pastoral aesthetics across centuries, as Leo Marx famously stated, “no shepherd, no pastoral” (45), emphasizing the importance of distinctive imagery such as shepherding and pastoral herding, in defining the genre. However, rather than focusing solely on the presence of specific entities or characters—which can vary widely across different pastoral versions (for instance, aquatic settings in the “pastoral piscatorial” or, as Gifford notes, “‘urban pastoral’ [Marshall Berman], where no sheep are in sight for miles,” 4)—this study emphasizes the dualistic essence of the human–nonhuman relationship as a(nother) defining and persistent trait of traditional pastoral. This dualism is particularly relevant to the research question of this paper, especially in light of the Anthropocene, as it reflects long-standing conceptual frameworks that continue to shape perceptions of the environment and contribute to the crises arising from these enduring perspectives (Ferrando).

The topic of dualities in and around the pastoral is well-established in scholarly discussion. On this subject, Gifford provides another useful perspective defining the pastoral as “any literature that describes the country as providing an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban” (2). Gifford thus frames the pastoral not merely as an aesthetic form but as a broader cultural narrative reflecting representational modes of the environment, which are frequently shaped by the dualistic tension between rural and urban dynamics. This dichotomy, however, extends beyond the mere notions of country and city ways of life since it reveals deeper ontological assumptions about human–nonhuman relationships, often structured along dichotomous and anthropocentric parameters.

Raymond Williams’s seminal work, *The Country and the City* (1973), further elucidates this point. Williams highlights the pastoral tendency to ascribe distinct, often opposing, values to the countryside and the city. To

him, the countryside symbolizes “the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue,” while the city represents “a place of noise, worldliness, and ambition” (1). Following this logic, Williams also identifies these dichotomous representations across a variety of historical narratives, revealing their persistence in Western thought insomuch that they can be traced back to ancient times. For example, one can think of the *Golden Age*, originating in Greek mythology, which portrays a mythical time when humans and the nonhuman world coexisted in harmony, later disrupted by the corruption brought by civilization’s advancement.

Similarly, the concept of *locus amoenus*—an archetype of an idealized landscape modeled on the Golden Age typical Edenic landscape in the Latin tradition—remains a cornerstone of pastoral aesthetics built on the same logic. Defined by three essential elements—“trees, grass, and water” (Ruff 92)—or as a setting featuring “trees and shade, a grassy meadow, running water, songbirds, and cool breezes” (Spawforth et al. 854), the notion originates with the Latin author Marcus Terentius Varro, who first described *loci amoenus* as “pleasant places [which] promote love only and draw to themselves things that ought to be loved,” devoid of business or profit (Isidore 299).

These critical frameworks resonate with the environmental imagination inherent in pastoral representation, as well as enduring dualisms, which continue to surface in contemporary literature and culture, as ecocritics have largely assessed. This persistence underscores the relevance of reexamining these paradigms in light of contemporary environmental concerns and evolving human–nonhuman relationships. Gifford has reinforced the possibility to interpret the pastoral through a similar environmental perspective, particularly in his theorization of the concept of the “post-pastoral,” which he describes as a “discourse that can both celebrate *and* take responsibility for nature without false consciousness” (148, emphasis in original). This concept is exemplified, according to Gifford, in numerous contemporary and historical literary and cultural works where, despite the dichotomous nature of the trope, a more ethical reflection on the interactions between humans and nature emerges. Following this line of thought, recent years have seen the emergence of multiple iterations of the pastoral informed by ecological perspectives, such as the *toxic pastoral* (Farrier), the *necro-pastoral* (McSweeney), and the *dark pastoral* (Sullivan). These variations, among others, reflect an increasing awareness of environmental concerns within artistic and cultural expressions that lead to the possibility of refiguring or reinterpreting traditional aesthetics in new, alternative, and

(eco)critical ways. However, simultaneously, the persistence of traditional dualistic traits within these new expressions of the pastoral—such as digital environments—raises pressing ethical questions, particularly in light of the challenges posed by the Anthropocene.

While this discussion has been made visible in the academic world since the rise of ecocriticism in the 1990s, especially in the study of literature and culture, a wider, philosophical perspective of this topic was offered by (critical) posthumanism: revolving around rethinking the axioms of dualism embedded in cultural representations, it advocates for a more integrated understanding of ontological and material interconnectedness. Such a shift is well summarized by Stefan Sorgner, who observes that critical posthumanism “is about thinking and acting in a non-dualistic, non-essentialist, non-anthropocentric, and non-hierarchical manner” (21). Rosi Braidotti exemplifies this approach, advocating the rethinking of human and nonhuman subjectivities through a posthuman logic that fundamentally reconfigures entrenched dualistic assumptions associated with anthropocentrism. She argues that these dualisms, which underpin binaries such as human/nature and nature/culture, have shaped cultural narratives and influenced socio-political and economic systems, ultimately contributing to the crises of the Anthropocene. By proposing alternative frameworks for narrating and conceptualizing these dynamics, Braidotti thereby highlights the potential of posthumanist thought as a response to the very crises created by such dichotomous thinking and its pervasive influence on multiple cultural dimensions.

Reflecting on the effects of this framework on culture, posthumanist philosopher Francesca Ferrando also notes how “[the Anthropocene] marks the extent of the impact of human activities on a planetary level [and thus] stresses the urgency for humans to become aware of pertaining to an ecosystem which, when damaged, negatively affects the human condition as well” (22). Consequently, negotiating dualistic conceptual binaries in comprehending the pastoral, both within literature and broader culture, represents a crucial critical operation for addressing the core of the ideological assumptions motivating an array of actions determining significant anthropogenic, biospherical alterations of Earth, such as resource depletion, intensive farming and agriculture, and toxic emissions.

These processes inherently entail the construction and reiteration of the “naturalizations”⁴ of the nonhuman along conceptual dualisms manifested in many cultural texts, even in contemporary times, through a series of narratives among which the pastoral remains pivotal. And in light of

the pastoral's evolutionary trajectory, traversing multiple artistic expressions, including poetry, sculpture, cinema, until contemporary digital media, its aesthetics has come to represent a privileged case study for exploring the ramifications of these assumptions in contemporary, digital representations of the environment.

The pastoral in video games: an emerging topic and its trajectories

The exploration of the pastoral in contemporary digital environments, particularly in video game landscapes, is complicated by the implications tied to the depictions of the natural world within technologically mediated textualities. When discussing landscapes, I do not refer to a generalist understanding, such as “the background of scenery in a portrait or figure-painting” or as the setting for video game action, nor as simply “a view or prospect of natural inland scenery” (OED). Instead, I engage with a more dynamic conception that traces its etymological roots to the notion of *land-shaping*. This perspective emphasizes the constructed and performative dimensions of environmental representations and highlights their latent ethical implications, inviting a critical perspective on them.

Central to this approach is Tim Ingold's discussion, rooted in the phenomenological tradition of “landscape-as-dwelling,” a framework which prioritizes the perception of one's being-in-the-world and challenges the understanding of the pastoral as a mere background for (human) activity. As Ingold explains, there is a “fundamental *indissolubility* of the connection between persons and landscape” (55, emphasis in original), referring to the overlapping of people's experiences, their practices, and the spaces they inhabit. This conceptualization is further enriched by scholars such as John Wylie, who clarifies how Ingold's description of landscape points to “a milieu of involvement: it is neither a known and represented environment in or upon which meaningful human practice takes place, nor simply that practice itself. Landscape is both—*both* performative sensorium *and* site and source of cultural meaning and symbolism” (161, emphasis in original). Such a perspective is particularly productive when applied to video games, where landscapes should not be considered as mere static backdrops but, rather, dynamic spaces of interaction, cultural engagement, and meaning making. In this context, the pastoral in video games can be analyzed as a performative element, actively shaping and being shaped by the player's interactions with the digital environment and thus serving as a lens through which to explore the ethical dimensions of human-nonhuman relationships in the Anthropocene.

In line with this approach is that of Sidney I. Dobrin, who highlights how digital environments exceed the representational since they are “themselves natures and environments in and with which humans and nonhumans forge relationships” (205). This emphasizes the connection between aesthetics and ethics, representation, and material embodiments of digital environments, as well as their capacity to influence understandings, behaviors, and attitudes of humans towards nonhumans in real life. On a similar note, Susanna Lindberg and Hanna-Riikka Roine observe how exploring the ethos of digital environments—conceived here as a virtual space shaped by technology for interactions and other activities—offers ever-new dilemmas that require critical approaches. Alternatively, one can consider Alenda Y. Chang’s advocacy for a more nature-cultural, mature perspective on the study of environmental video games, “where maturity is defined not only by aesthetic development but also the capacity for sociopolitical relevance” (7), ingrained in the ethical relational dynamics that these games present. All these observations underscore the significance of seriously considering the traditionally dualistic heritage in video game representation of the natural world and their effects on real life.

Although the scholarship on the pastoral in video games remains limited, it has already delineated instances of these long-standing representations in several digital gaming environments. For instance, Laura op de Beke has identified the pastoral in different guises and in diverse types of games. While on some occasions this diversity strengthens the genre “with socially and ecologically insightful representations of rural life,” it more often displays “complex pastorals whose ambivalent relationship to technology and industry remains unresolved” (199). Paul Martin, on the other hand, has examined the survival of traditional pastoral aesthetics in video games, such as *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (2006), through the lens of Leo Marx’s concept of a “literary design” (1964, 130), which discusses pastoralism as the contrast between myth and naturalism. Echoing Marx’s observation, Martin explains that in the analyzed video games, the pastoral “depicts an asylum bordered on one side by wilderness and on the other by civilization,” thus prolonging dualistic figurations of the environment in the present-day world.

Interest in the pastoral within video games has also begun to emerge in students’ theses, suggesting its potential as a growing area of study in the coming years. For example, Lucia Rago has conducted a comparative study analyzing Eastern and Western perceptions of pastoral themes in the video games *Stardew Valley* (2016) and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020). Her research highlights the distinct expressions, perceptions, and influences of

the pastoral on players, offering insights into the cultural and emotional dimensions of these themes. Similarly, Marina Janette Gallagher's investigation into pastoral and anti-pastoral landscapes and music in *Final Fantasy X*, *XII*, *XIII*, and *XV* (2001–2016) identifies connections between specific musical and visual elements and the emotional responses they evoke, such as relaxation and apprehension, through an empirical research framework (Gallagher).

As Holly Nielsen noted in *The Guardian*, “sentimental pastoral themes make perfect fodder for video games,” and as we have seen, the topic has pervasive presence in video games of all genres. Hence I suggest a more critical perspective on this phenomenon, particularly to examine its dualistic implications for both cultural narratives and environmental understanding. The following analysis builds on this argument by examining a specific case of the pastoral in *Minecraft*, where the persistence of pastoral dualisms is particularly evident, illustrating how such representations contribute to shaping perceptions of the natural world and actions towards it within the video game digital environment.

***Minecraft* and the pastoral: critical trajectories**

Minecraft,⁵ initially released in 2009 by the independent studio Mojang and later acquired by Microsoft in 2014, is described on the official website as “a game made up of blocks, creatures, and community” where “[b]locks can be used to reshape the world or build fantastical creations” and where “there’s no wrong way to play. Unless you’re digging straight down” (Minecraft.net). This description emphasizes how interacting with the digital environment and the creative freedom it offers to users are central, along the gameplay dynamics of a “sandbox” video game, in which, in general terms, “the player is not constrained to achieving specific goals and has a large degree of freedom to explore, interact with, or modify the game environment” (Merriam-Webster).

Regarding the video game’s distinctive and iconic pixelated aesthetics, Brandon T. L. Smith observes that *Minecraft* “makes no attempt in its aesthetic to realistically mimic a natural environment, choosing instead to construct its landscape entirely out of pixelated cubes of different colours and patterns, each representing a different material” (114). Despite its evidently artificial portrayal of the environment, echoing Dobrin’s earlier discussed assertion, *Minecraft* exhibits several facets prompting a connection between the game’s virtual landscape and real-world environments. In the opening sequence of the game—central in this study—one can consider how trees, animals,

weather conditions mirror actual natural settings. Our attention can be focused on how the relational dynamics between humans and nonhumans parallel those in real life,⁶ such as animal behavior based on the player's interactions. For instance, animals can come closer or escape based on the kind of interactions employed by the player: when the player character approaches them, sheep tend to move away, just as they do when an attempt is made to strike them with a tool. Conversely, if one remains still, they exhibit a tendency to return. Further realistic representation is evident as the environment portrayed lacks abstract or fantastical elements, such as unusual colors in vegetation or unreal entities of flora and fauna. This seemingly paradoxical blend of realism within the artificiality of pixelated aesthetics and the pastoral setting not only exemplifies the complexity of *Minecraft*'s representation of the natural world, but also further highlights the dualistic logic underpinning the game's construction—namely, the coexistence of opposing concepts. This dualistic dynamic is particularly embedded within its pastoral aesthetics, as it will be explored in greater depth in the following paragraphs.

The game boasts various modes that allow for different game mechanics and player strategies—such as the creative mode with no enemies but infinite possibilities to build various items and the survival mode where limited resources must be used, for instance, to effectively fight monsters. This paper specifically focuses on traditional pastoral landscape dynamics that emerge in the survival mode of the game. Within this context, the discussion explores the ethical implications of players' decisions in relation to human–nonhuman interactions.

That *Minecraft*—with all its different game modes—carries environmental implications has already been noted by several ecocritics who examined the game. On the one hand, for instance, Víctor Navarro-Remesal discusses the environmental, ethical potential of *Minecraft* stressing that it can be “played without harming any living being” (15). However, violence towards animals is possible within the sandbox game. On the other hand, Smith sheds light on the utilitarian nature of *Minecraft*, where “nothing in the environment is not a resource to be extracted” (114). Along a similar line, Holmes posits that “resources are perhaps too infinite in *Minecraft* to the point where nature itself doesn't even matter anymore as part of the play space” (38).

In the context of resource management, Alenda Y. Chang observes a dual dimension in the ethical human–nonhuman relationship within *Minecraft*, as she critically examines the extractivist dynamics that underpin its gameplay.

However, Chang also highlights the possibility of pursuing alternative, non-exploitative playing strategies, offering a counterpoint to the dominant resource-extraction model. Building on this discussion, the ecological paradoxes inherent in *Minecraft* become particularly evident, especially when analyzing the pastoral aesthetics in the construction of the game's natural landscapes. This aesthetics, situated at the fault line of paradoxes and contradictions inherent in the dualistic nature of the pastoral, simultaneously evokes a sense of harmony with the natural world while highlighting tensions within human-nonhuman relationality, thereby adding complexity to the ethical dimension of the gameplay.

The exploitative *locus amoenus*

In the context of the demo of the version under examination, the player begins in survival mode with a randomly assigned avatar. By default, the player starts with 10 hearts (20 health points) and full drumsticks (20 hunger points), which allow for health regeneration. The inventory is initially empty. The avatar has 1 hour and 40 minutes of trial time to move and explore the environment, which, as a pop-up window explains, corresponds to 5 in-game days. This suggests that the player has the opportunity to explore not only various environments but also different conditions, including the transition between day and night. The latter, in particular, introduces specific challenges to survival, such as limited visibility and the emergence of hostile creatures (such as skeletons), that can harm the player—conditions that necessitate players to prepare their avatars for nightfall, such as constructing or seeking shelter.

Upon first entering the gameworld, during daytime, *Minecraft* presents players with a tranquil and sunlit landscape, characterized by slopes, verdant meadows adorned with flowers and punctuated by trees amidst which various animals, including white sheep, roam freely (Figure 1).



Figure 1.
Sheep grazing. Courtesy of *Minecraft*

These elements readily align with the quintessential features of pastoral aesthetics, replete with entrenched clichés associated with the realm of pastoralism, including sheep, as well as specific natural elements, also along the principles of the *locus amoenus* (pleasant place), the idealized pastoral landscape systematized by Ancient Roman theorists.

While all these attributes manifest in the opening natural tableau of *Minecraft*, affirming pastoralism as its constitutive aesthetic, this scenic portrayal is not without contention, nor is it devoid of distinctive traits that render it peculiar (and potentially problematic), particularly in relation to contemporary environmental discourse. First, the persistence of the pastoral within a dualistic, traditional framework, as exemplified above, appears outdated and limited in the context of the emphasis of current environmental debates on the material and ontological connectedness among living beings, rather than rigid, confining categorizations. Nevertheless, even within the digital realm, the avatar and nonhuman entities that populate *Minecraft* serve as representatives of the dynamics of human–nonhuman interaction that transpire in the real world. In fact, the relationship between humans and nonhumans assumes a central role in this sequence, as also evident in the game’s nature, where players navigate and relate with the space and the several nonhuman entities dwelling in it.

However, this interaction retains a significant degree of anthropocentrism. First, the user's visual experience caters solely to the human perspective, providing players with the opportunity to see through their avatars' eyes rather than through the viewpoint of other (nonhuman) entities. This condition exceeds the mere mechanics of user engagement with the game, as it becomes an expression of a wider employment of anthropocentrism in *Minecraft*. Secondly, the relationships available with nonhuman entities follow a strict subject-object logic: players determine their gameplay experience by manipulating the environment at their will and interest. For instance, these experiences include collecting resources (such as wood by cutting trees or food by killing animals) or mining. As for the interactions with animals, while they react to the player's movements, for instance by escaping or approaching, their agency in shaping the game's evolution is limited. Contrary to the avatar, the animals present in the game realm—just like human NPCs—do not have the same agency to modify the environment, while some animals, such as wolves may harm the player, affecting its life condition. Therefore, the pastoral essence of *Minecraft*'s world appears engrained in an anthropocentric, dualistic figuration of the environment which, by lacking vibrancy,⁷ as Jane Bennett would observe, primarily functions as elements that contribute to the game experience of the human.

The human–nonhuman relationship portrayed in *Minecraft* is therefore skewed toward human dominance, embodied through the actions of player avatars, while nonhuman entities exist primarily to facilitate the construction of the game world according to human desires, adhering to a logic of “naturalization” (Braidotti), which is characterized by the objectification and exploitation of nonhumans. This dynamic reflects real-world issues such as resource depletion, land degradation, and capitalist practices that, along the same logic, have significantly contributed to the Anthropocene, underscoring the game's alignment with anthropocentric paradigms.

This observation resonates with Alenda Y. Chang's critique, noting that while *Minecraft* has “adopted the language and the structure of natural biomes,” its anthropocentric representation and gameplay dynamics are more accurately described as “anthromes, given that their express purpose is to support player activity, and their complicated, even oxymoronic condition of natural artifice” (8). Engaging with Chang's perspective and extending it through the specific lens of pastoral dynamics, reveals how the pastoral in *Minecraft* serves to sustain, reinforce, and perpetuate entrenched

anthropocentric dualisms, further embedding these paradigms within its digital landscapes and gameplay mechanics.

Minecraft's pastoral qualities align with Raymond Williams's observation that seemingly idyllic and pristine scenarios often conceal underlying principles of exploitation and economic interests. Williams argues that the pastoral serves as a "literary elaboration [that] maintains its contact with the working year and with the real social conditions of country life" (16), revealing hidden narratives of rural labor struggles and the exploitation of peasants by the landed gentry. These narratives, though central, are often overshadowed by romanticized portrayals of the countryside. This dynamic finds a parallel in *Minecraft*, particularly in its depiction of non-player characters (NPCs) such as villagers, who are represented as tending farms and managing crops in a manner reminiscent of peasant labor in other sequences of the game.

However, shifting the focus from human–human to human–nonhuman interactions, at the center of this study, suggests how these exploitative frameworks extend to the game's representation of nonhuman entities within its constructed landscapes. The utilitarian nature of *Minecraft* becomes especially apparent in the pastoral landscape with which new players are greeted, as its virtual biomes are designed to fulfill human-centered objectives, as already discussed. *Minecraft*, therefore, amplifies the tensions inherent in traditional pastoral tropes, by illustrating the natural world as both idealized and objectified. These aspects equally complicate the *locus amoenus* ideal of harmonious coexistence between humans and nonhumans traditionally associated with the pastoral aesthetics, undermining it through the latent logics of nonhuman exploitation and objectification that it simultaneously reveals. The result is a digital environment that juxtaposes idyllic representations with mechanisms that perpetuate anthropocentric hierarchies, further complicating the ethical implications of human–nonhuman relationality in *Minecraft* gameplay.

Otium/negotium and pastoral memento mori

A second problematic aspect of the latent pastoral implications connected to exploitation and economic interests in *Minecraft's* landscape regards the association of the pastoral with the concept of leisure. Leisure is frequently linked to the pastoral as a distinctive dimension, assessing the countryside as a relaxing space of rest in contrast with the stress and toil associated with urban settings. This aspect is expressed by a well-established dichotomy *otium/negotium* developed in the context of ancient Roman times.

As Ruff reminds us, this pastoral dichotomy entails the Roman practice of “*villeggiatura*,” wherein people sought leisure (*otium*) in countryside villas, distinct from urban centers primarily designated for productivity and business, and more in general, labor (*negotium*) (44). This contrast between restful retreats and bustling urban locales laid the groundwork for the enduring connection of the pastoral aesthetics, and the idealization of the countryside, with moments of relaxation—time dedicated to the arts or education, typically as a privilege tied to social status. It is a privilege that is made possible only at the expense of individuals engaged in labor activities, following a mechanism that, in real cultural contexts, manifests as the exploitation of workers and farmers to sustain the leisure of the aristocratic class (Williams). Similar to the Roman concept of *villeggiatura*—which primarily served the interests of the aristocracy—the notion of *otium*, as Stefan L. Sorgner explains, became increasingly associated with (aristocratic) social class privileges across different, later periods (101). In this sense, the unequal distribution of leisure and labor is latently conveyed through the aesthetics of the pastoral, highlighting the extent to which the relaxation of one social group was contingent on the labor of another, thereby perpetuating social hierarchies and economic dependencies.

This expression of leisure can be understood as a form of play and disengagement from labor, alongside a general understanding of it as “exercise or action for enjoyment or recreation, and related senses” (OED 2025): conceived in this sense, leisure appears as following a dynamic that reflects a deliberate detachment of play from work and productivity. This detachment represents a critique that can be directed at video games as well, even though entertainment has been discussed by several scholars as linked to processes of well-being, therapy, and satisfaction (Oliver et al.; Rice). Moreover, studies have examined how games are embedded within systems and logics of productivity, as seen in the case of casual games (Wadhwa). Viewed through this lens, it becomes evident how the social implications of the pastoral intertwining of play and leisure emerged long before the advent of video games. Additionally, in the context of digital environments, ever-new forms of leisure associated with the pastoral develop, which continue to conceal longstanding, complex, and ethically fraught dynamics—not necessarily in terms of direct exploitation of people, but also in fostering a distorted environmental perception that, in turn, enables the exploitation of nonhuman entities.

The pastoral aesthetics presented in *Minecraft*, supported by the affordances of the sandbox game, accentuates pastoral themes along a similar

logic, given that the absence of a specific mission for the player character and their freedom to explore or modify the environment (beyond the very avatar's survival in survival mode).⁸ Roger Caillois in his foundational work identified two approaches to play: *ludus* and *paidia*. *Ludus* is characterized by a tendency to “bind it with arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions” (13), as seen in the dynamics of strategy-based games. In contrast, *paidia* represents a more spontaneous and unstructured form of play, offering “a kind of uncontrolled fantasy” (13) that fosters creativity and improvisation. *Minecraft* integrates both forms of play: in survival mode, for instance, players must collect resources and develop strategies to endure, aligning with *ludus*. Conversely, creative mode corresponds to *paidia*, as it enables unrestricted exploration and interaction with the environment. This discussion is particularly significant for assessing the critical dimension of the pastoral in *Minecraft* considering how the survival mode not only influences gameplay mechanics but also shape associated worldviews and conceptions of the natural environment. This aspect is particularly evident in games such as *Minecraft* where the relationship with the natural environment is central to the possibility of survival.

Before proceeding further, it is crucial to recognize that the theme of death and survival has long been intertwined with the pastoral tradition. From its earliest expressions in literature, the pastoral landscape has in fact been marked by an engagement with mortality: this is evident, for instance, in *Idyll I* by Theocritus, where the shepherd Thyrsis laments the death of Daphnis (whose deep connection to the natural world is also underscored by the shared mourning of animals, shepherds, and nature itself). A similar motif resurfaces in Virgil's *Eclogue 5*, where Daphnis' premature death, once again, is portrayed and honored through the alternating songs of the shepherds Menalcas and Mopsus.

This association between death and the pastoral extends beyond literature into visual art, particularly in the early development of landscape painting. A pivotal example is the phrase “*et in Arcadia ego*,” (“And I [am] in Arcadia”) first appearing as an inscription on a funerary cippus topped with a skull in Giovanni Francesco Barbieri's (Guercino) painting of the same title, realized between 1618 and 1622. One might also consider the popular invocation of this expression in the painting by the French artist Nicolas Poussin, titled *Et in Arcadia Ego* (1637–38), and its significance in the cultural transmission of pastoral aesthetics in the evolution of landscape painting. This phrase (and visual details) has been widely interpreted as a *memento mori*, as assessing the personified presence of death in the pastoral realm,

subverting the idealized vision of the pastoral world as a place of untroubled harmony, often associated with the *locus amoenus* and the Golden Age (Panofsky and Panofsky).

The invocation of Arcadia, another central pastoral trope, is particularly significant: Virgil uses the term to evoke a mythical Greek region inhabited by shepherds, situating it as an archetype of pastoral existence. Yet, this idyllic portrayal is, once again, consistently problematized, reflecting the inherent paradoxes of the pastoral aesthetic discussed in this paper. Arcadia, as depicted in Guercino's work—which serves as a precursor to numerous subsequent artistic and literary interpretations of the celebrated phrase—simultaneously symbolizes an idealized harmony and critiques its own idealization, revealing underlying tensions and contradictions through its emphasis on mortality. The relevance of this expression and perspective has also been discussed in ecocritical terms by Glen A. Love, observing how “the pastoral middle landscape, in contemporary times, finds itself bearing the stigma of a human-caused and increasingly serious despoliation of the physical environment. Bright visions of progress through a humanized and mechanized natural world have been erased by the real” (204), thus assessing the complications, but also the significance, of the intertwining the aesthetics of pastoral and death in light of the challenges of the Anthropocene.

The reemergence of the theme of death within pastoral landscapes in contemporary digital environments—particularly within video games—signals new evolutionary steps of the pastoral in the present-day world. However, this process also invites a critical reflection on the new implications and meanings acquired by death since in these contexts; considering how video game worlds often employ survival among their gameplay dynamics, the player must ensure that the avatar consumes food and gathers resources to maintain sustenance while also protecting itself from potential threats. Failure to do so results in death and the end of the game.

Alenda Y. Chang offers useful insights on the topic of survival in video games, including *Minecraft*, illustrating how different game-ending experiences impact player engagement with resources. One such example is the mechanic of “permadeath,” where the player character's death is permanent, and it is no longer possible to continue the game with that character or resume from a prior save point. As Chang observes, “[f]rom an ecological perspective, then there are important differences between games that employ failures as a temporary setback and those that attempt to impose permanent death or otherwise irrevocable material alterations, echoing games' treatment of natural resources as either unbounded or finite” (217).

Chang underlines that permadeath raises the possibility of a gameplay that reflects the reality of individual vulnerability in the Anthropocene, arguing that a parallel can be drawn between the dispassion towards environmental death in video games and the attitude toward player death. This is “either because the game environment is such a trivial veneer for resource distribution that you need not feel any remorse over destroying it, from loot crates to expendable furniture, or because there is no real scarcity” (220).

The contrast between the disregard for environmental destruction and the significance placed on player character death is evident in the hardcore variation of survival mode of *Minecraft*, where survival is founded on resource exploitation, as already observed. Consequently, the pastoral dynamics of leisure reemerges in video games as an experience that can be linked to real-world colonialist extractivism (Brazelton) and settler colonialism, particularly by framing the player’s perspective as that of an individual occupying land and abusing its resources.⁹

However, within Chang’s framework, alternative gameplay experiences that deviate from these exploitative dynamics are also possible, inviting a more affirmative vision of the pastoral in the case under examination. This possibility adds a further layer to the discussion of the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in the pastoral, particularly regarding the player’s agency as a potential resolution to the two contradictory points discussed so far: (a) the possibility of perceiving the pastoral environment in *Minecraft* in a more environmentally “mature” way (Buell) (that is, as an interactive and dynamic dimension based on the awareness that human and nonhuman are ontologically and materially connected, rather than a passive backdrop for human activity); and (b) the possibility of unmasking, negotiation, and rejection of the traditional association of leisure with the pastoral, which often imply dynamics of (resource) exploitation.

While it must be acknowledged that individual agency is constrained by the game’s affordances and varies depending on whether the game is played in creative or survival mode, the emphasis on player choice suggested by Chang introduces an ethical dimension to the conversation on the pastoral in *Minecraft*. Specifically, in games such as *Minecraft*, this theme extends beyond human concerns and includes relationships with the nonhuman as well. Survival, then, is not limited to the avatar’s well-being but also fosters an awareness of the nonhuman entities “dwelling” within the pastoral landscape (Ingold). Players, in fact, can adopt different degrees of environmental awareness in their gameplay. For example, they may choose to avoid killing animals for food and collect fruit instead, or refrain from cutting down trees

in favor of using rocks for construction. While it is important to acknowledge that exploitative and unsustainable practices are encouraged by the game's mechanics—largely due to the abundance of available resources that present themselves naturally as the avatar navigates the digital environment—the possibility of adopting more sustainable behaviors remains. This choice assumes a degree of responsibility for one's actions within the game world, shaping the player's engagement with the landscape as a form of “dwelling” within it. This possibility situates *Minecraft* within a broader framework that extends beyond mere entertainment, highlighting its potential to influence players' attitudes and behaviors, both in the virtual environment and, consequently, in real life.

This stance delineates a possible critical observation of the video game, which allows us to reframe the anthropocentric structure of the pastoral it contains. Echoing what has been articulated by Alenda Y. Chan, this approach to *Minecraft* allows for different interpretations of its spatial dynamics, since environmental considerations (can) become part of the player decision-making. In turn, this decision-making activity mirrors processes ongoing in real-life, which are fundamental to be taken into account to respond to the ethical challenges prompted by the Anthropocene.

A matter of agency: in the fault line of pastoral dichotomies

An instance illustrating the players' capacity to (potentially) engage in their gameplay dynamics pursuing an environmentally ethical logic emerges when considering the relationship between the user/avatar and arguably the most iconic pastoral characters—the sheep—that populate the landscape at the game's outset. It is worth noting that within the interspecies relational opportunities offered by the game, sheep not only interact among themselves or with other animals—they tend to gather while maintaining distance from wolves (also present in the game scenario), which can potentially harm them—but also engage with the player's avatar. The player can choose to approach this situation in a more ecological way, for instance by studying the interactions with other animals, either by getting closer or keeping a distance. Conversely, the player may opt for more aggressive actions, resorting to violence against the sheep. These actions extend, for instance, in the possibilities offered by the game, to both animals and plants: the former can be targeted with appropriate weaponry and transformed into a source of sustenance. In this context, the symbolism of the stake obtained through violent interaction with sheep is striking, reflecting how nonhuman living entities are subject to exploitative treatment along the critical ethical

perspectives advanced by anti-speciesism and vegan movements. Similarly, some plants can be harvested or destroyed, illustrating, once again, the predatory attitude toward natural resources the game is built on, as if they were inexhaustible (because in the game, they are unlimited). These aspects are also enhanced by the fact that, in survival mode, the avatar needs to eat or will have no energy to proceed with its activities; moreover, on hard setting they can even starve to death. “Exploiting” the environment for survival therefore becomes one of the basic goals of the game stressing even more the pastoral dualisms embedded in the landscape of the opening sequence of the game, under examination. This goal further emphasizes *Minecraft*’s nature as entrenched in anthropocentric and objectifying interactions, negating any mature ecological ethical stance.

Instead, once again, the player’s freedom (within the game’s limitations) to choose what to do or *how* to interact with nonhumans imbues the game with an ethical dimension revealing its alternative environmental potential: This could occur, for instance, by the possibility of avoiding harm against animals altogether and simply leaving them undisturbed—even if this option is more difficult than hunting for game. Therefore, the player’s capacity for self-reflection and critical evaluation of their environmental impact within the game, based on their choices, cultivates an awareness of potential sustainability and responsible engagement. This awareness may, in turn, extend to broader reflections on both digital and real-world ecosystems. In fact, given the freedom that the video game grants players to explore digital environments and make virtually limitless choices in how they engage with them, players can choose either to reinforce the game’s underlying exploitative tendencies toward nonhuman entities with whom they share the landscape or to foster dynamics of harmonious coexistence between humans and nonhumans. While it is undeniable that the game does encourage exploitative tendencies, it also permits the player to resist them, allowing for more conscientious and sustainable choices in gameplay. This is a possibility that highlights the dynamics of agency and intentionality that gain prominence within the game’s mechanics, particularly when considered in relation to broader discussions about individual and collective behaviors and lifestyles as responses to the ongoing crises highlighted by current environmental discourse. In connection with this, Bettina Bódi highlights the increasing attention that game design and critique pay to players’ actions and freedom of choice. Similarly, Gordon Calleja’s seminal study on immersion emphasizes the importance of critically examining the player’s experience while inhabiting digital spaces within a more intricate understanding of

incorporations. These perspectives, among others, prove instrumental in evaluating the significance of embracing player agency within ethical discussions in digital environments.

Within the context of *Minecraft*, all these aspects assume relevance since the ability to embrace or reject the effects of prolonged dualistic dynamics shaping the environment, rooted in traditional pastoralism, is key to expressing an ecological or anthropocentric direction within the game. Just as the survival of dualistic axioms in Western thought calls for critical engagement and recognition of the need to explore more nuanced perspectives on human (and nonhuman) subjectivity as a response to the Anthropocene, the gameplay dynamics in *Minecraft*, whether aligned or not with the implications of traditional pastoral aesthetics, require a more critical perspective for a potential refiguration along more ethical patterns.

Minecraft, therefore, serves as a valuable pathway for both action and reflection, illustrating the potential to challenge traditional dualistic assumptions inherent in pastoral aesthetics, while simultaneously re-evaluating the ecological possibilities that this very aesthetic offers—particularly in envisioning harmonious coexistence between humans and nonhumans. In this context, and in light of the challenges posed by the Anthropocene, the pastoral becomes visible as much more than simply a *locus amoenus*, but rather, a *locus* for the exploration of novel ethical relationships with the entities that dwell the landscape—with the environment within and beyond the video game. And while *Minecraft* maintains its stance of “there’s no wrong way to play” (Minecraft.net), adopting an ethical perspective towards its human–nonhuman interaction prompts a distinct narrative, fostering inquiry into how people could or *should* engage with the nonhuman.

Conclusion

As this analysis hopes to have demonstrated, applying an ethical lens to pastoral representations in video game landscapes provides a critical framework for examining their complex and often contradictory dimensions, as well as their broader implications for material realities. In the case of the opening sequence of *Minecraft*, the pastoral extends in ways that both constrain and enrich environmental discourse. On the one hand, the traditional understanding of pastoral aesthetics exhibited in the video game—including elements like sheep and verdant meadows—reinforces a dualistic perspective that presents the game mechanics as exploitative, utilitarian, and anthropocentric: in this sense, the game appears to frame the natural world as an inexhaustible resource to be utilized for the player character’s survival.

On the other hand, the interactive nature of the game—which leads to acknowledging the landscape as a context of human–nonhuman dwelling—allows players to engage with a more nuanced and “mature” conception of human–nonhuman relationality, one that moves beyond the environment as a mere idyllic backdrop; instead it fosters an understanding of the material and ontological connectedness of humans and nonhumans, which is also suggested by the traditional evaluation of the *locus amoenus*, in the dynamics of harmonic existence among living beings. This dynamic becomes evident when considering the player’s individual agency within the survival mode, where choices regarding resource use and interaction with nonhuman entities shape the ethical dimensions of the game, allowing possible alternatives to mere exploitative dimensions of the environment.

Given the increasing relevance of digital environments in representing the pastoral, critical engagement with video games is essential for interrogating the ways in which they perpetuate or challenge the entrenched aesthetic and dualistic understandings of nature. By fostering greater attentiveness to possible alternative relational ethics allowed by the gameplay, it becomes possible to illuminate broad cultural attitudes toward ecological crises prompted by the Anthropocene.

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Notes

1. This discussion has been widely addressed by ecocriticism since its inception, focusing on “the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glottfelty and Fromm 1996, xviii) in response to growing debates on environmental crises. One can also consider other disciplinary fields like posthumanism or new materialism, which recognize the importance of reshaping the traditional, dualistic understanding of the human into a more pluralistic framework that acknowledges its ontological and material interconnectedness with the nonhuman (Braidotti 2019).

2. For instance, *Idyll* 1 features a conversation between two shepherds, Thyrsis and the Goatherd, engaging in a friendly competition of song and music, showcasing the idyllic and leisurely life of shepherds. Furthermore, *Idyll* 7 contains the lament for the death of the shepherd Daphnis, set in a rural landscape, portraying the grief and sorrow of the fellow-shepherds over the loss of their friend.

3. Virgil’s *Eclogues*, also known as the *Bucolics*, are a collection of ten pastoral poems composed between 37–30 BCE. These poems, considered foundational to western pastoral literature, drawing inspiration from Greek predecessors and providing an idealized portrayal

of rural life, often feature shepherds engaged in conversations, songs, and contests, while exploring themes of love, loss, politics, and the natural world.

4. On the process of “naturalization,” see Rosi Braidotti’s discussion on how this term refers to processes of othering “animals, insect, plants and the environment” by exposing the dynamics of anthropocentrism, which needs to be rethought in terms of the nature-culture continuum (32–33).

5. The discussion in this paper pertains to Minecraft Java Edition, specifically version 1.20.2 (demo), which was released in 2023.

6. While the version of *Minecraft* under examination generally facilitates reflections on human interactions, including those involving non-player characters (NPCs), this paper will specifically focus on the human-nonhuman relationship for the purposes of its analysis.

7. Through the notion of “vibrant matter,” Bennett acknowledges the proactive engagement of nonhuman entities within occurrences, thereby altering the conventional anthropocentric emphasis within political theory, shifting emphasis from the human perspective of entities to the entities themselves.

9. However, this is not invariably the case, as the dynamics of world-building characterizing the game are integral components that diverge from the experience of leisure time (*otium*).

10. For a further discussion on the engagement between colonial and ecological issues, see Huggan and Tiffin, and Patterson.

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