

The Pastoralization of Gambling: Historical Ideologies and the Casino in Stardew Valley

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INTRODUCTION

The convergence of video gaming and gambling has become a pressing concern for researchers and policymakers alike. Existing scholarship has predominantly examined gambling-related game mechanics such as loot boxes and other random reward mechanisms, with particular attention to their psychological effects, monetization practices, regulatory challenges, and potential for harm (Nielsen and Grabarczyk, 2019; Spicer et al., 2022). This literature has established important distinctions between gambling and gambling-like mechanics, particularly according to their relationship to real-world economies and randomized rewards. Yet gambling in games has often been approached primarily as a problem of risk, monetization, or player welfare. This paper takes a different approach. Rather than asking whether a given game mechanic constitutes gambling or causes harm, it asks: what cultural work does gambling perform within a specific game's narrative, spatial, and ideological context?¹

Stardew Valley (ConcernedApe, 2016) provides a particularly revealing case. A single-player farming and life-simulation game presented in pixel-art style, it centers on agricultural labor, community life, and the restoration of a neglected farm. Although set in a fictional contemporary world rather than a historical period, its emphasis on land, self-sufficient labor, and rural community resonates with the pastoral ideal and, more specifically, with Thomas Jefferson's vision of the yeoman republic, in which independent landownership and agricultural labor were associated with civic virtue and economic independence (Jefferson, 1972; McCoy, 1980). The game is rated E10+ by the ESRB and PEGI 12. In its later progression, players can gain access to the Calico Desert, where a casino offers slot machines and blackjack under the supervision of the mysterious Mr. Qi. The casino therefore appears to introduce a strikingly different economic logic into a game otherwise structured around agricultural production and community building.

This paper argues that the casino in *Stardew Valley* is neither a meaningless addition nor simply a concession to player demand. Rather, it constitutes a digital re-enactment and resolution of a longstanding tension in American cultural history: the conflict between Jeffersonian agrarianism, which idealizes independent landholding and productive labor, and a gambling and speculative ethos associated with the

American frontier and the Gilded Age, in which risk-taking, chance, and the pursuit of wealth without direct labor became culturally significant (Lears, 2003; Fabian, 1990). The specifically American historical framework is important because the game's pastoralism is not merely a generic celebration of rural life. Its emphasis on land, agricultural independence, and escape from alienating forms of work can be read alongside a longer American cultural tradition in which agrarian virtue and speculative capitalism have repeatedly existed in tension. I argue that *Stardew Valley* does not allow speculative desire to overturn its agrarian social order. Instead, through spatial segregation, the quantification of luck, and a closed economic loop, it performs what I call a "pastoralization of gambling": the game domesticates speculative desire and reincorporates it into a broader logic of agricultural production.

The analysis proceeds in three parts. First, it examines the spatial logic of the desert casino. Located outside Pelican Town, the casino is physically separated from the game's principal community and agricultural spaces. I argue that this spatial arrangement can be read through Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, in which the frontier functions as a zone of risk, mobility, and opportunity positioned beyond established social order (Turner, 1893). The casino thus provides a contained space in which players can engage with speculative practices without allowing them to become the organizing principle of the town.

Second, the paper analyzes Mr. Qi as a figure through whom gambling becomes subject to observation, quantification, and control. His surveillance of player behavior and the casino's numerical representation of chance connect gambling to the broader logic of modern managerial and data-driven systems. Rather than presenting chance as entirely unpredictable, the game renders it calculable and operational within a rule-bound system. This transforms gambling from an external threat to the agrarian order into a controlled form of play.

Third, the paper examines the game's random-number-generation mechanics and closed currency system. I argue that these mechanics transform gambling from an open-ended pursuit of speculative wealth into a contained cycle of risk, repetition, and delayed reward. Because casino winnings remain within the game's internal economy rather than being convertible into real-world money, and because progress within the casino is structured through repeated player activity, gambling becomes functionally closer to grinding for rewards than to unlimited speculation. The speculative impulse is consequently subordinated to the game's broader labor economy. This distinction also places the casino outside the primary concern of scholarship on monetized gambling-like mechanics, which has focused heavily on random reward systems connected to real-world expenditure and potential harm (Nielsen and Grabarczyk, 2019; Spicer et al., 2022).

The paper ultimately argues that *Stardew Valley* offers a digital reconciliation of two historically opposed American traditions. By subjecting the casino to the logic of the farm, the game constructs a space in which the speculative desire for "something for nothing" is disciplined, laborized, and redirected toward productive ends. This case demonstrates how game mechanics can operate not merely as technical systems but as forms of procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007): they can reproduce, negotiate, and potentially resolve cultural contradictions through rules and player action. In *Stardew Valley*, gambling does not simply interrupt the pastoral fantasy. Instead, the game pastoralizes gambling itself, transforming an unruly capitalist impulse into a contained and ultimately productive form of play.

BIO

The author is a second-year MA student specializing in American intellectual history. Their research interests include Jeffersonian agrarianism, pastoralism, and the cultural analysis of game mechanics. They have presented related work on *Stardew Valley* at an international conference.

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Any errors remain my own.

¹ This paper is based on a close reading of game mechanics and does not rely on developer interviews or player survey data. As such, it adopts the methodological position that game rules themselves constitute a form of cultural text amenable to interpretive analysis.

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