Visual Perception of Countryside Home Aesthetics Based on Stardew Valley Video Game Mods

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Abstract. Stardew Valley is a farming simulation game which allowed visual and gameplay alteration by the player by installing modification (“mod”). This paper will be focused on interior design-based visual mods by utilizing samples from topmost downloaded Stardew Valley mods in Nexusmods.com using compositional interpretation approach to perceive their common visual tendencies and analyzed to find the discourse regarding countryside interior design perceived by the player. Research results show that players preferred a combination of modern aesthetics through Industrial style and nostalgic visual using Victorian aesthetics.

1 Introduction

Stardew Valley is a 2016 farming simulation game developed by Eric “ConcernedApe” Barone for several platforms such as PC and mobile phone. Set in a fictional counterpart of North American-esque countryside, the player is encouraged to revive their late grandfather’s farm while also building relations with people around them. It is among top sellers for its genre in Steam, a video game digital distribution service, with “overwhelmingly positive” 476.021 reviews and received Steam Awards in 2017[1]. 2018 research also showed that among the 15-24 years old demographic, Stardew Valley has positive impact in encouraging prosocial behavior indicated by tendency to share, help, collaborate, and being fair [2].

The game also allowed visual and gameplay alteration by the player by installing modification (“mod”) which can be downloaded from game mods websites such as Nexusmods.com or Moddrop.com. Visual mod categories typically consisted of character and game objects appearances, such as buildings, furniture, and interior. This paper will be focused on interior design-based visual mods by utilizing samples from topmost downloaded Stardew Valley mods on Nexusmods.com using compositional interpretation approach to perceive their common visual tendencies.

In this paper, common visual elements found in sampled mods by their compositionality will be analyzed to find the discourse regarding countryside interior design perceived by the player. Research samples will be taken from Stardew Valley mods on Nexusmods.com, a community-based website where players can download unofficial mods, made by player-for-player, for several games.

Research results may be used to determine player’s taste in countryside home aesthetic for future farming simulation or other type of games where countryside aesthetics would be relevant. It is also possible to apply the results for interior design in real life by scrutinizing the player demographic and their common aesthetic taste.

2 Visual Analysis

Compositionality scrutinizes the specific material qualities of an image or visual object, focusing on the formal aspects such as colors, spatial arrangement, expressive content, and production of the image. As a visual method, it has disadvantage in its uninterest in the social practices of visual imagery. To assist with further study on visual perception, this paper will also apply discourse analysis [3].

Discourse as visual method refers to groups of statements or knowledge which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it [3]. There are two types of discourse analysis: Discourse Analysis I which examines the effects of compositional modalities and social practices on visual images, especially related to social differences and Power-Knowledge relations; and Discourse Analysis II which examines how various institutions (such as museums and art galleries) or power holders use images to produce certain discourses.
As shown in Figure 1, samples used in this research are based on Mod Categories of Stardew Valley in Nexusmods.com:

1. Audio
2. Buildings
3. Characters
4. Cheats
5. Clothing
6. Crafting
7. Crops
8. Dialogue
9. Events
10. Expansions
11. Fishing
12. Furniture
13. Gameplay Mechanics
14. Interiors
15. Items
16. Livestock and Animals
17. Locations
18. Maps
19. Miscellaneous
20. Modding Tools
21. Pets/Horses
22. Player
23. Portraits
24. User Interface
25. Visual and Graphics

Of these 25 mods, the most relevant categories for this research are Furniture and Interiors. There are overlapping mods in each category, but samples are determined by visual modification instead of change in gameplay and belong to top 10 of most endorsed or downloaded mods [4]. By these criteria, the samples chosen are:

1. Industrial Furniture Set (± 423,100 download) created by user Hesper.
2. Rustic Country Town (± 372,000 download) created by user Hesper.
3. Industrial Kitchen and Interior (± 322,600 download) created by user Hesper.
4. Elegant Victorian Interior (± 215,400 download) created by user Miouwdew.
5. Rustic Country Walls and Floors (± 232,000 download) created by user Hesper.
6. Mi’s Elegant Victorian Furniture Pack for Custom Furniture (± 49,000 download) created by user Miouwdew.

There are several recurring keywords found in these samples, which are “industrial”, “rustic”, “elegant”, and “Victorian”. In interior design history, those keywords also point to several design trends, in which each have their distinct visual characteristics based on compositionality.

“Industrial” refers to design and architecture aesthetics which emerged during World War II when British government established Council of Industrial Design in 1945 to produce “simple, of good proportions, and without dust-collecting features” items to evoke modern and utilitarian design and can be mass-produced [5]. Visually, industrial design is characterized by simplicity in form, minimal decoration, and utilization of
prefabricated elements of construction within the building as an aesthetic feature.

Industrial style gave way to Minimalism. Based on Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s “Less is More” principle, Minimalism has several characteristics:

1) Simplicity in form and function, basic geometry shapes
2) Simple or limited color palettes; usually based on neutral colors
3) Clean, open light-filled spaces
4) Emphasis on materials for decorative purposes
5) Decorative elements as room accents

Minimalism is tightly entangled with modern urban lifestyle since it can accommodate the fast-paced, less cluttered life; high mobility; sustainable design. The minimal, industrialized interior showed itself as a sign of enhanced social status by merging art with everyday life instead of displaying social status through accumulation of objects [6].

It is contrary to “Victorian”, which refers to an era of British history during Queen Victoria’s reign from 1837-1901. Victorian aesthetics were characterized by elaborate design based on eclectic revival of historic styles such as Neoclassicism, Baroque, Gothic, et cetera. The main criticism of this style was the excessive visuals, often regarded as “degrading” and “tasteless” [7], especially compared to Industrial style, and in the early 20th century died out and gave way to Modernism.

Victorian style also stood as a reminder of British Empire’s hegemony, and although traces of colonialism is frowned upon nowadays, this style is sometimes used for nostalgia to the “good old days” in Britain. During the 1960s, as a reaction to the austere and cold Modernist style, Victorian made its way back in interior design by combining its furniture styles with modern building and vice versa [8].

Notably, of this two opposite aesthetics, the Stardew Valley mods used similar earth-tone color palettes (observe Fig.4 and Fig.5). Victorian excessive embellishment is hard to translate visually in pixelated 2D style of the game, so the mod used simplified visual. This resulted in visual similarity between Industrial and Victorian.

The next keywords from the samples, “rustic” and “elegant”, acted as a visual bridge for Industrial and Victorian originally opposing aesthetics in the Stardew Valley mods. The term “rustic” refers to countryside, or things made in a plain and simple fashion, while “elegant” means graceful and stylish in appearance and manner.

At a glance, these two terms are as opposing as Industrial and Victorian are, but as a discourse among players and modders of Stardew Valley where the visual had to be simplified to fit the game 16-bit (up to 64-bit with mods) aesthetics, it is possible to discern their taste in what an ideal countryside home is.
Stardew Valley was launched in 2016, and in 2018 there was an emerging internet term called “Cottagecore” on social networking website Tumblr. It refers to an aesthetic based on nostalgia and idealization of countryside life, hence the word “cottage”, usually based on rural western. The 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic also helped reinforce the longing for simple, cozy countryside [9].

During the quarantine, the fast-paced urban life was suddenly being replaced by free time inside home, isolation from the usual social life, and disruption of everyday schedule. The rise of Cottagecore content creators during the Pandemic gave accessibility to people for realizing their fantasy outside the limitations of quarantine restrictions by watching and/or reading about living “back to nature” as a form of escapism. Cottagecore pastoralism invoked the pre-industrial past while ironically utilizing the latest technology, namely the social media and digital audio visual, to spread the trend [10].

Like how the trend in Britain during the 1960s was swayed between modernity and nostalgia, 2020s that was defined by before-and-after Pandemic enabled the rise of Cottagecore aesthetics which accommodate the modern sensibility of Industrial design and Victorian nostalgia. As a modification-friendly game, players could realize their Cottagecore aesthetics in Stardew Valley without the real-life labor needed to realize it, and still within the safety of their own home especially during the Pandemic.

3 Conclusions

Based on the visual, the preferred countryside home aesthetics for mod-using players of Stardew Valley are:

1. Simple and rustic, but with a touch of elegance, preferably referring to aesthetics of Victorian era without the excessive decoration and embellishment.
2. Utilizing earthy tone color palette such as brown, beige, and dark green.
3. “Countryside” and Cottagecore aesthetics do not always mean disregarding modernity. Industrial aesthetics, although based on urban needs for simplicity and mass-production, could also fit with simple rustic sensibility in an ideal countryside home.

Historically, Industrial and Victorian were contrasting aesthetic conceptually and visually; similarly with terms “rustic” and “elegant”. Yet through the graphic limitations of Stardew Valley, players managed to produce a new visual style which could accommodate their perception of what is an ideal countryside home.

There are several things for future research consideration:

1. The age demographic of players utilizing the mods sampled in this research. The data may be used to gauge interior design taste for those in productive age and/or in search of living space.
2. Similar games with gameplay and/or modding capabilities related to interior design. The data may be used to analyze the players’ aesthetic tendency and creativity in interior design, which in turn would open possibilities of alternative taste in interior design outside of the established trend.

References