"Like harvest moon, except I ate a guy:"
Graveyard Keeper's Dark Ecology

Katie Deane

ABSTRACT: This article argues that Lazy Bear Games' *Graveyard Keeper* (2018) engages in a critical dialogue with the farm game genre by reformulating the nostalgic ideal as one mired in exploitation and the grotesque, thereby opening new and uncanny avenues through which to consider the farm game's instrumentalizing premises.

KEYWORDS: Dark Ecology; Video Games; Farm Simulation; Uncanny; *Graveyard Keeper*

Introduction

On an average day, I wake up, equip my watering can, and get to work tending my crops before heading to the barn to check that there's sufficient feed for my animals. I brush my cows, who communicate their appreciation by producing a red heart in the speech bubble that appears over their heads. Before long, I'm out on the road to gather wildflowers, critters, rocks, and logs, which I'll drop into my shipping box before turning in. Overnight, these things will be sold for a few hundred "G"—nothing compared to the payout when my corn is ready to harvest in two days (which is to say, within the hour). But first, another day of work beckons. This is *Harvest Moon: The Tale of Two Towns* (Marvelous Interactive), though it could easily be another game from the *Harvest Moon* series or in the genre of farm management simulation more widely, including the incredibly popular *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe).[1] Clearly, the gameplay I have just described bears little resemblance to the exploitative system of industrial agriculture that produces most of the food U.S. Americans consume or even the maintenance of a backyard garden. These games rather stage the circular pleasures of tending, caretaking, crafting, producing, and engaging with one's neighbors in a close-knit and idealized community setting. They partake in a pastoral fantasy in its most general sense, depicting an "idyllic, temporally removed way of life, rural in nature and ostensibly yielding simpler pleasures" (Chang 163). Despite their nostalgic abstraction from contemporary agricultural production, farming games model multiple relationships for their players—between human and nonhuman, between avatar and surroundings, between player and object—and particular ecologies. This article will argue

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[1] When I refer to *Harvest Moon*, the *Harvest Moon* series, or the *Harvest Moon* "formula" in this article, I am referring to the games created by Yasuhiro Wada and Marvelous Interactive and distributed by Natsume in North America from 1996 until 2014. Natsume holds the right to the *Harvest Moon* name, and since 2014 has developed and published its own titles under this name. Further games in this vein produced by the original creators, Marvelous, are now localized and published by XSeed under the name *Story of Seasons* in North America (Frank).

that the game *Graveyard Keeper*, created by Lazy Bear Games and published by tinyBuild in 2018, engages in a critical dialogue with the farm game genre by reformulating the nostalgic ideal as one mired in exploitation and the grotesque, thereby opening new and uncanny avenues through which to consider the farm game's instrumentalizing premises.

Video games are commonly understood as distanced from the tactile realities of material life and may therefore seem strange companions to thinking through ecological questions. The digital in general, and video games in particular, have largely been overlooked within environmental criticism. Nevertheless, several scholars have tackled precisely this intersection in recent years. As Alenda Chang argues, games can serve as a useful model of interactivity between players and their environments; they are "'richly designed problem spaces' or 'possibility spaces' where we come face to face with our environmental knowledge and impact" (26). Elizabeth Swanstrom concurs that games "are a place where the natural and the digital collide and prompt careful reexamination of our assumptions about nature, realism, and the virtual" (15). They can "provide opportunities for experiencing human-environmental contingency, for demonstrating the human body's coextension with the environment, for aiding in conservation practices, and for expressing the agency of natural spaces" (Swanstrom 5). The genre of farm management and simulation games, premised on resource extraction for the enrichment of one's farm, poses a distinct challenge for modeling diverse ecologies and distributed agencies amongst things. It is exactly because of their "technological effacement of human, animal, and environmental labor" (Chang 164) that these games make useful artifacts through which to assess the relationship between our species and our nonhuman planetary cohabitants. Disentangling the subject-resource relations that characterize farm management role-playing games (RPGs) may help us articulate and foster new practices of coexistence outside of the game world.

In facing the necessity of reevaluating the relationship between the human and the natural—a task that finds new urgency in the ongoing climate crisis—Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller argue that an aesthetics of the Anthropocene must confront "the *becoming uncanny* of the life-world" (101). This emphasis upon the need for an "uncanny—uncontrollable, unimaginable—intimacy with things" speaks to the recuperative work of the shift in consciousness that these scholars see as necessary in order to radically rethink the assumptions, activities, habits, and behaviors that have led us as a species, and as a planet, to this period of climate catastrophe. The adoption of Freud's uncanny—as the strangeness of the familiar—by ecocritical scholarship foregrounds the relational dimension of contemporary ecological thinking in its emphasis on the *process* of recognition that the nonhuman world is "an idiosyncratic, heteroclite, unpredictable and potentially dangerous force" (Bergthaller and Horn 101). In speaking to a strange familiarity, the resurgence of the

past that characterizes Freud's uncanny is productive for a reading of *Graveyard* Keeper, a game which renders the ecologies of its genre and previous gameplay newly strange.[2]

Timothy Morton is one such scholar who closely engages with the strange and uncanny in addressing ecological concerns. His concept of dark ecology, in particular, acknowledges the haunting and disturbing characteristics of thinking an ecological interconnectedness that dissolves the boundaries between beings, including the living and nonliving. However, Morton emphasizes an ambivalence to this experience that is particularly relevant for the study of video games, which is necessarily one of play. He articulates ecological thought as an experience of the weird rather than the strictly horrific; indeed, Morton prefers the goth to the gothic, the former characterized by "an Excluded Middle state of *slightness*" (*Dark Ecology* 145). Goth is "slightly dark but not overloading the system with horror and thus forcing it to give in and be pulled up toward the shallower modalities of ecological awareness" (ibid. 145). Ecological awareness, according to Morton, finds room for comedy and desire below the disgust and horror of its initial uncanny recognition of enmeshed interrelatedness: "Ecology is *all* delicious: delicious guilt, delicious shame, delicious melancholy, delicious horror, delicious sadness, delicious longing, delicious joy" (ibid. 129). This affective multiplicity makes dark ecology an especially fitting companion to a reading of *Graveyard Keeper* in its generic context, as the game turns familiar objects, locations, and characters—including the player's own avatar—into what Morton calls "strange strangers," who denature the idyll of the digital farm and recuperate all that is spooky about raising animals for slaughter with an ironic, almost campy, humor. The world *Graveyard Keeper* constructs forces the genre player to confront uncanny moments that reveal the constructedness of the 'back to the land' fantasies underlying games of the genre, and their foundation on mechanisms of exploitation and instrumentalization, especially of nonhuman others. Reading graveyard-as-farm opens new avenues to consider multiple agencies on the (digital) farm, while pointing to unavoidable issues deeply seated within the genre itself.

The Field

In order to understand the critical dialogue in which *Graveyard Keeper* engages, it is necessary to establish the field in which it intervenes: the farming games with which it is associated and the corresponding expectations genre players bring to the game. Most farming games can be considered manifestations of the "popular and sentimental" category of the American pastoral as defined by Leo Marx, which, as Chang summarizes, attends to a

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[2] Recent investigations of the ecogothic mode shed further light on the implications of the uncanny for eco-critical scholarship, and would be an interesting area to explore with relation to *Graveyard Keeper* and its intervention in the genre of (pastoral) farming games. For several reasons, including distinctions between the American and European gothic's relation to the past, the significance of a fearful affect, and the complications raised by examining the loss of control in the context of a management game, the complexity of this intersection exceeds the scope of this article.

desire to "withdraw from civilization's growing power and complexity" (162). Games in this genre rely not only on the erasure of waste, degradation, and death but an explicit fantasy of escape from urban life. In *Harvest Moon* games, taking over a neglected farm is framed as a pathway to self-actualization, community acceptance, and general fulfillment. Neighbors vocally appreciate the avatar's contribution to the local economy, and storylines usually involve the possibility of marrying select non-player characters and starting a family. *Graveyard Keeper*'s explicitly gothic elements place it in sharp contrast to this formula; indeed, when player {TeamScootch} writes in their review of the game that, "[i]t's like harvest moon, except I ate a guy," the humor of the remark relies not only on the dissonant register of "I ate a guy" but on the distance between the two clauses. How could a game that casually incorporates cannibalism be like the purposefully cute, family-friendly games from the *Harvest Moon* series? *Graveyard Keeper* itself works to close this distance by minimizing the contradiction from both directions: not only is playing *Graveyard Keeper* at times disturbingly similar to playing a game like *Harvest Moon*, but the idyllic setting of the country farm is revealed to be far more like the graveyard than it would at first appear.

On the video game distribution platform Steam, *Graveyard Keeper* is described as "the most inaccurate medieval cemetery sim[ulation] of all time" ("Graveyard Keeper"). Its premise is simple: after being hit by a car, the player's avatar wakes up in a medieval village where he is expected to take over the duties of the long-absent graveyard keeper. As players progress, they become more deeply enmeshed in this strange community through new roles and responsibilities, including tasks and quests that may prompt "ethical dilemmas" ("Graveyard Keeper"). Assignments require advancement along a technology tree to unlock new skills and crafting possibilities, as well as the careful tending of the graveyard, church, kitchen garden, vineyard, apiary, etc.

Upon its release in 2018, *Graveyard Keeper* was immediately compared to the indie game *Stardew Valley*, a successful farm management simulation (sim) in the sub-genre of farm-life RPGs emphasizing pastoral fantasy and community-building, popularized by the *Harvest Moon* series. Most initial reviews of *Graveyard Keeper* mention *Stardew Valley* in the first paragraph, if not in the title, emphasizing the thematic contrast between the games while underlining their basic similarity.[3] *Graveyard Keeper* has thus been referred to as "Stardeath Valley" (Lang), "Stardew Valley for goths" (H. Price), "Stardew Cemetery" (Chalk), and "a macabre version of Stardew Valley" (W. Price) among numerous other similar characterizations. That *Stardew Valley*, and especially *Harvest Moon*, served as inspiration for *Graveyard Keeper* has been acknowledged by the game's producer and the CEO of tinyBuild, Alex Nichiporchik (Wilde). He emphasizes that both *Stardew Valley* and *Graveyard Keeper* draw from the *Harvest Moon* formula, a fact heavily reported in the media coverage

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[3]　One aspect of this is to help a game find its audience: players of one game may be interested in another that shares significant aspects of gameplay. This can lead to unmet expectations and frustrations for the referenced game's fans (as can be seen in many of the Steam reviews for *Graveyard Keeper*).

of the former and its creator, Eric Barone. An extensive profile of Barone describes *Stardew Valley*'s almost mythical origins as the following: "It all started with a modest idea: a renaissance for *Harvest Moon*, the long-running Japanese farming simulation series that, in Eric's eyes, had lost its way. He kept wishing a better version existed. So he made it himself" (White). Engaging directly with an online community of fellow *Harvest Moon* fans over the course of the game's development, Barone created a title that makes critical departures from its inherited formula. Highly anticipated was the flexibility *Stardew Valley* would give players to customize their avatar and define their own experience of the game, making it possible for players to pursue same-sex romantic relationships, for example, which had not been possible in *Harvest Moon* titles.[4]
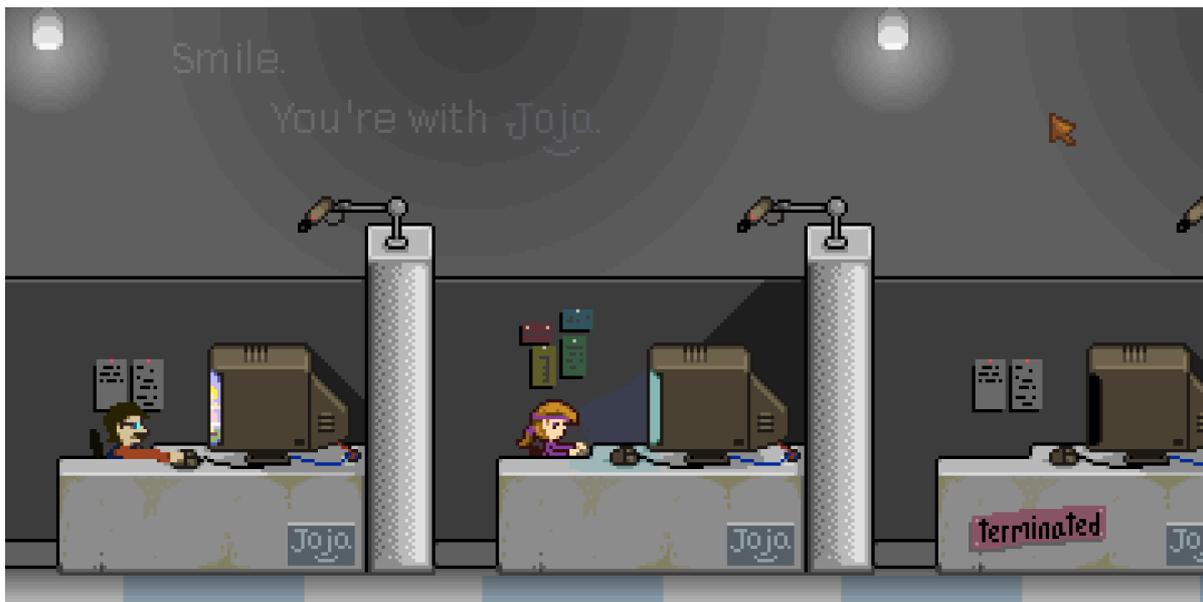
Fig. 1. *Stardew Valley*: Office of the Joja Corporation. ConcernedApe, 2016.

The revisions and critiques of the genre made by *Stardew Valley* provide useful context for understanding the generic referentiality of *Graveyard Keeper*. *Stardew Valley* partakes in what Chang calls the "Ginger v. Goliath" (167) narrative of farm game, emphasizing a critique of neoliberalism in the game's central antagonism between community development (restoring the community center, befriending the town's inhabitants, and patronizing the local general store) and corporate takeover (represented by the fictitious Joja corporation). It opens with a cut-scene of the avatar's dying Grandfather, who warns, "[t]here will come a day when you feel crushed by the burden of modern life … and your bright spirit will fade before a growing emptiness." On this day, the avatar should open the sealed letter from him, a notice of the farm he has bequeathed to us. The player is then shown the conditions that prompt the opening of his letter: a nightmare of surveillance

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[4]   Kevin Rutherford describes in greater detail this complex network of human and nonhuman actors, which in his view accounts for the game's success (127). In particular, he attends to how the game's independent development, embedded in fan discourse, made such changes more possible for *Stardew Valley* than for major, mainstream titles (136).

capitalism at the Joja corporation, the avatar's employer, with dingy rows of cubicles contrasted by the upbeat corporate messaging written on the walls (see fig. 1). Grandfather's letter begins: "If you're reading this, you must be in dire need of a change." Here, *Stardew Valley* explicitly cites the opening gesture of many a *Harvest Moon* game in which the avatar arrives on a farm they have just inherited, and must begin again away from their urban life, revitalizing the overgrown farm. Unlike the less fraught opening tone of *Harvest Moon* games, *Stardew Valley* is explicit about what the game's protagonist is escaping from, not just what they are escaping to.[5] However, as Laura Op de Beke argues, rather than maintaining a strict delineation between the "retreat and return" of traditional pastoral narratives, the game "features antipastoral elements that problematize the player's indulgence in what is essentially a rural fantasy" (62). In the case of *Stardew Valley*, the player 'escapes' Joja as an employer, only to find the same corporation—in the form of the mega-store Jojamart—encroaching upon the town that is ostensibly a retreat.

Still, *Stardew Valley* maintains many of the genre's core difficulties, contradictions, and narrativized exploitations. As Jordan Pruett articulates, *Stardew Valley*'s "fantasy return to a world of 'good work'" (411) is one which

> returns the game to American capitalism's settler-colonial origins, a period in which white farmers could escape proletarianization via land ownership. (Needless to say, absent from the game's nostalgic fantasy is any mention of the genocidal dispossession of indigenous peoples that historically made this arrangement possible). (410)

While sharply critiquing corporate takeover and the concentration of wealth, *Stardew Valley* glosses over the politics of the serendipitous inheritance—a plot of land nearly the size of the neighboring town—that enables the fantasy's realization in the first place. The game's fantasy of nonviolence has also been called sharply into question by Erik van Ooijen, who interrogates the common understanding of 'nonviolent' or 'friendly' games by reframing the perspective away from killing and to killability, or "what classes of objects are open to violence in the first place" (174). Barone decided against the inclusion of livestock slaughter in *Stardew Valley* ("I didn't want to have that sort of violence. … It just felt wrong" [Signal, qtd. in van Ooijen 178]) and has been described as adoring how *Harvest Moon* "eschewed violence in favor of domestic normality" (White).[6] Despite Barone's claim of nonviolence, van Ooijen identifies in *Stardew Valley* a clear hierarchy of species: while the player is encouraged to develop caring relationships to the farm's cows, sheep, chicken, and rabbits,

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[5]   Compare, for example, the opening of *Harvest Moon: A Wonderful Life*. Referring to the player's character, the game's first on-screen text reads: "He wasn't unhappy. But he didn't seem to have a direction in life" (Marvelous Interactive).

[6]   Slaughter is conspicuously absent from most farm games, including *Harvest Moon* and *Stardew Valley*: animal products may be harvested from animals, but the animals themselves cannot be killed for meat or eaten. This has led Chang to comment that "virtual farm animals are more like fruiting trees than livestock" (266).

fish (and the game's monsters) are excluded from the realm of moral concern, thereby "[constructing] classes of certain animal species as open to killing" (179).

These contradictions notwithstanding, *Stardew Valley* has been read as opening new dialogues around environmental engagement in the farming game. As mentioned above, Op de Beke argues that *Stardew Valley* engages critically with its inherited formula by looking at the game via discourses of critical pastoralism. The ironic dissonance of the exaggerated opening, in which the inheritance of a farm saves the game's avatar from a life of highly-surveilled corporate drudgery, with the promise that the player will instead experience "real connections with other people and nature," is read as "part and parcel of [Leo Marx's] complex pastoralism," a productive alternative to the "sentimental" form (Op de Beke 59). Anti-pastoral elements throughout—themes of poverty, mental illness, alcoholism, and social exile—further problematize a straightforward narrative of escapism (Op de Beke 61). Chang also reads *Stardew Valley* as participating in an encouraging trend in farming games to account for waste and degradation, which she refers to as a "dark ludology," after Morton's dark ecology (179). She emphasizes that while enjoyment of these games usually "depends on the conscious erasure of labor, waste, and failure" (163), *Stardew Valley's* dark ludology begins to realize a game ecology that, like Morton's dark ecology, looks beyond the moment of acquisition or consumption to the lifecycle of things on a greater scale. *Stardew Valley* allows its players to not only rifle through the trash but also recycle the few types of waste products found there (and while fishing); at the same time, the game's "meticulously self-aware design makes the quixotic aspirations of its genre plain," (Chang 181). Both Op de Beke and Chang address *Stardew Valley*'s self-reflexive attentiveness to the formula it inherits, opening new means of engaging with the genre's pleasures. In the following sections, I will argue that *Graveyard Keeper* pushes the genre to its limits by abandoning the pastoral setting, taking *Stardew Valley*'s critiques to new extremes, and embracing the contradictions of the latter's fantasies by precluding straightforward escapism in its gameplay.

Uncanny Graveyard

Graveyard Keeper presents the player with an uncanny world that is as absurdly familiar as it is strange. The task remains to 'revitalize' a 'farm' and the community of which it is a part, but in a new setting governed by atypical rules and which demands peculiar actions of the player. This is not a dream pastoral, but a nightmare, and one from which it is the object of the game to escape. From the opening sequence, the motivations and desires of the game's protagonist are called into question. Reminiscent of the desaturated, decrepit Joja office that opens *Stardew Valley*, the player first sees a noir-inflected and rainy nighttime city scene as the avatar stops for groceries on his way home to his "love" (see fig. 2). The scene is eerie, dark, and stripped of most color with the exception of select accents highlighted in bright red. The on-screen text contradicts the tonality of what would be expected from the

visuals, as the avatar happily muses on his partner awaiting him at home. Crossing a dark intersection, the screen goes black and the sounds of screeching of wheels and a crash can be heard. Transported to a foggy, abstract space, a mysterious figure tells the player's avatar to "relax"—he has "merely turned a page" in his life. His new home is a graveyard, and if he really wants to return to his old home, he must prove himself a good graveyard keeper.

The avatar's aversion to the world that players have paid to play seems to contradict the in-game fantasy of "good work" while complicating the player's relationship to work-as-play. Games within the genre usually frame work on the farm as a desirable and voluntary pathway to self-actualization; the avatar is escaping *to* the farm. Here, it is the game world itself that the avatar desires to escape. The player is thus in a position of reveling in that to which their avatar fundamentally does not consent, framing gameplay as an exploitative gesture and infusing what is expected to be a relaxing gaming experience with an uncanny dissonance. At the same time, the coded ambivalence of the desaturated opening immediately calls the (non-traditional) framing device of the game into question: it is clear that the avatar insists upon his desire to return home, but it is not quite as clear to the player that returning to the avatar's home world—coded as it is as one of drudgery—is actually desirable. Creating an aversion to the avatar's 'real world' underscores both the player's generic expectations and their stake in playing the game in the first place, further confusing the narrative as it is articulated, and emphasizing the strangeness of the initiating event within the context of the genre overall. As both player and avatar are introduced to the medieval village that is their playground and purgatory, respectively, the avatar remarks: "Everything is so strange… None of this makes sense."[7]

It is an ordinary day. And our hero is hurrying home, where someone very important is waiting for him.

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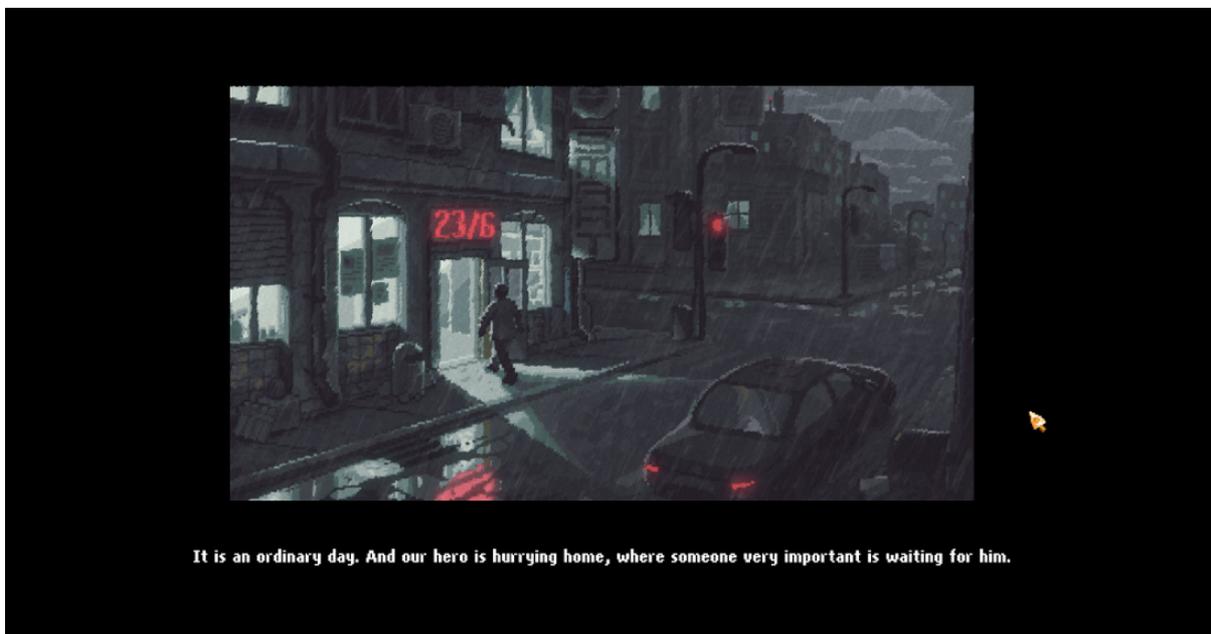
[7] One could argue that the medieval setting is the genre's nostalgia taken to a playful extreme that satirizes nostalgia itself. If other rural fantasies deliver to a nonexistent, idealized past, Graveyard Keeper presents history—however inaccurate—with a fair share of horrors.

Fig. 2. *Graveyard Keeper*: The opening scene. Lazy Bear Games, 2018.

Throughout *Graveyard Keeper*'s scripted interactions, the world's strangeness and the avatar's unfamiliarity with and incredulity at his surroundings are emphasized, serving to distance players from the game world as they navigate it. Strangeness is a hallmark of Timothy Morton's writing on ecology, which emphasizes the strangeness of ecological interconnection: the mesh. The more familiar we become with things, ourselves, and their interrelation, the stranger the totality becomes (Morton, *Ecological Thought* 40). But the modeling of strange ecological interrelationships and complex or nonhuman agencies remains a particular challenge for farming games, which operate according to logics of instrumentalization rather than partnership. Pointing to the limitations of the genre, Chang reads farming games as "modified manifestations" of real-time strategy (RTS) games, whose own origins lie in military simulation (183). Farming games and RTS games both "clearly model the extractive logics of resource use and development, as well as cartographic logics of mapping and terraforming" (Chang 184). While these premises underlie games in the *Harvest Moon* series, *Stardew Valley*, and *Graveyard Keeper* alike, *Graveyard Keeper* addresses these logics in new ways. By reformulating the position of the 'resource' and engendering new and unexpected agencies on the 'farm,' *Graveyard Keeper* rejigs ecological awareness within the farm-life game. The production and management of corpses is not only more complex than the agriculture of a farming game, it raises the uncanny agency of the corpse-products themselves, new participants in the farm's simplified web of actors. This is accomplished in two ways: firstly, in that the quality of the corpse—which directly affects the quality of the graveyard, and therefore progress within the game—is determined by the sinfulness of the corpse's soul during life; and secondly, in that the desires of these bodies make demands upon the player's actions and determine progression within the game.

The Unusual Business of Juicy Corpses

Product "quality" is not a new metric within farm-life simulation games; in many *Harvest Moon* games and *Stardew Valley*, foraged, farmed, or crafted items will carry a designated value denoting the quality of the item, and affecting the item's sale price or its value at an event such as a crop or cooking festival. In the case of animal products, such as milk or wool, the quality of the item will depend on the relationship the player's avatar has to the animal, which can be improved through interactions such as greeting or brushing the animal. While this encourages a relationship of care, it does not begin to account for the animals' subjectivity.[8] The posthumous accounting of *Graveyard Keeper*'s corpses identifies the independent decisions and actions of persons, events that carry consequences beyond the moment of the body's expiration. Each corpse is delivered with a given number of white and red skulls, representing the corpse's good deeds and sins, respectively. The number of white

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[8]   The farm-life game as pet-care game is addressed briefly by Chang (184); van Ooijen's article looks at pet-care mechanics (in *The Sims 3: Pets*) alongside farm-life mechanics (in *Stardew Valley*).

skulls translates to the maximum quality value that can be achieved through decoration of the corpse's grave, while the number of red skulls is the value automatically detracted from the overall quality score of the player's graveyard once they have been interred. In order to maintain a high-quality graveyard, the player must reckon with a corpse's past choices on the autopsy table, removing as many of its sins as possible without accidentally cutting away its good deeds or allowing the corpse to rot. This mechanic therefore emphasizes the legacy of the 'resource's' past actions, leaving the responsibility of reckoning with that legacy to the player.

In some *Harvest Moon* games and *Stardew Valley*, other villagers will request certain items in return for a small reward, monetary or otherwise; during these interactions, the exchanged products are distinctly separate from the characters making the exchange, i.e. the player and the non-player character. This relation is collapsed by the request made by the ghost Yorick at the start of *Graveyard Keeper*, namely that players evict a "mean" corpse causing trouble, so a "new neighbor" can be brought in. Yorick expresses the "terrible" conditions of the graveyard and sets the player on the path of improving the graveyard's quality, an overarching goal of the game. Critically, this goal is not defined as an end in itself but a means of improving the living conditions (or rather, death conditions) of the graveyard's inhabitants. As Yorick insists, "[w]e're dead, but we still deserve some respect!" Yorick's essential personhood sits alongside alternate positionings of the corpse within the game, where the body is more explicitly subject to objectifying and instrumentalizing logics: the player is asked to befriend and respond to the needs of ghosts alongside prompts to cut flesh from their bodies for material gain, as will be discussed below. Tidy divisions of character and object are abandoned as the player discovers that operating the graveyard is to be subject to agencies beyond one's own. These new relationships raise the question of the difficulty of living-with that affects us on a species level: being responsible to Yorick is to disregard the unnamed rabble-rouser whose corpse players have been asked to defile. Being asked to throw the corpse into the river introduces the strangeness of the mesh and its entwined, and strangely contradicting, responsibilities.[9] In Morton's words, we can either be nice to "bunny rabbits" or "bunny rabbit parasites" (*Dark Ecology* 126); the player can either be nice to Yorick or the ghost down the road.

As it turns out, these specters are not the only new agency of the production process to whom players are responsible. The donkey that delivers the game's corpses is an advocate for workers' rights—that is to say, his own—and goes on strike later in the game. When players first encounter the donkey, he expresses surprise that they can understand what he's saying, as the "capitalist bastard" who owns the cart he pulls "pretends" not to. This

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[9]   These responsibilities could certainly be expanded and made more explicit, a possibility considered by *Graveyard Keeper*'s developers. As the player learns throughout the game, the river is the sole functioning water source for the nearby town, which is already plagued by starvation; the game's developers discussed including consequences for dumping bodies into the river (White), though this does not appear to have made it into the game.

lack of understanding is characterized as an offense, one that is part and parcel of the various forms of exploitation the donkey experiences. He describes his situation, working as "cheap labor" for the cart owner on a salary of just five carrots a day, as deeply humiliating. Later on in the game, the donkey remarks that even the player is "benefitting from [his] cheap labor… I fear I cannot call you comrade any longer," and goes on strike until the player does their part to improve his working conditions and pay: the wheels of his cart must be oiled and an additional five carrots per day must be provided as payment for his labor.

This interaction defies player expectations by revising the relationship between the player's avatar-self and the animal who makes their operation run. The dissonance and surprise—and the reframing of human-animal relations—that the donkey's strike prompts is heightened by the fact that this scene does not take place immediately but rather a good way into the game. Players are therefore left to initially assume a relation in line with previous games in the genre: that the donkey provides corpses, from which the player materially benefits, without any remuneration. The donkey's strike forces the player to reckon with the fact that they have been actively participating in the exploitation of the donkey's labor. This is certainly a moment of nature demanding recognition (Horn and Bergthaller 101), if within a human-generated political framework. Still, one might consider Morton's proposition that "for the specter of communism to haunt earth sufficiently, the specter of the nonhuman would need to be embraced by the specter of communism" (*Dark Ecology* 27). Farming games' extension of the conventional pastoral obfuscation of labor provides another dimension of Raymond Williams' reading of the pastoral genre as predicated "on a studied inattention to the discomforts and dislocations of the laboring class" (Chang 165). Insofar as "it might be argued that 'livestock' are as much the proletariat as human workers" (Morton, *Dark Ecology* 27), *Graveyard Keeper* here engages in what Williams calls a "counter-pastoral" impulse, an impulse which prevents the laboring class from "[fading] into insignificance or local color" (Chang 165). The communist donkey is not simply "local color" for the strange world in which the player and avatar have been deposited, but a character who advocates for his rights and whose inner life has significant, ongoing material consequences on gameplay, extending an understanding of the laboring class beyond species boundaries.

With the donkey part of the player's operation, corpses are produced on an unwavering schedule without cost—one need only pay for delivery. The unlimited font of corpses raises the specter of the farm game's classical economic model critiqued by Chang in *Playing Nature*. Natural resources are here designated as "free gifts," whether or not they are actually unlimited or come without costs (Chang 170). Farm games tend to reproduce this logic, whether by providing natural resources for free and without consequence or by skirting the need for a resource at all. The strange position of human corpses as an unlimited resource for profit is perhaps never more clear than when the player works at the game's autopsy table (see fig. 3). Autopsies need not be performed to bury a corpse, but they are the only way to adjust the corpse's quality (and therefore improve one's graveyard). In

addition, the first autopsy is a necessary tutorial and is therefore unavoidable without leaving the game. Depending on the technologies the player has unlocked, one is able to remove various parts of the corpse, which can then be used to produce other items—key to the corpse's status as a "natural resource." In particular, the flesh can be prepared and cooked, to be eaten or sold, or it can be officially stamped as "meat" and sold raw.

Fig. 3. *Graveyard Keeper*: Performing an autopsy. Lazy Bear Games, 2018.

At the level of language, the strangeness of this act of flesh-removal is strongly emphasized. Before the player has even carried the corpse into the morgue, the tutorial's guide, a talking skull named Gerry, gives the instruction to bring the "juicy corpse" into the morgue, an immediately repulsive combination of words. Removing parts of the body is called "extracting" during the autopsy, so that the player makes the decision and selects the command to "extract" the flesh. Framing it in these terms writes the action as simultaneously abstracted and yet more repugnant: the callousness of *extracting* flesh from the corpse is associated with industrial resource extraction. The language emphasizes that the action is about an insensitive accounting of resources and performance of work, even as the player may sit uneasily with the macabre task. The player's potential discomfort is mirrored by the avowed discomfort of the avatar, who resists the assignment and exclaims that he "feels like [he's] going to puke." This prevents the player from both being carried away with the operative logic of the game and letting this taboo slip away unaccounted for; instead, the player knowingly pushes the avatar to commit acts he is disgusted by in continuing to play the game. Upon completion of the task, the player is rewarded by the unlocking of three new recipes: "Burger," "Sandwich," and "Baked meat." This dark humor is a brief respite from the tense revulsion of the scene, but only prefigures the taboos that will soon be transgressed.

One aspect of the scene's tension is generated by the game's mechanics. All 'work' performed in *Graveyard Keeper* necessitates the holding down of a computer key for a specified amount of time, rather than the single click required for most actions in *Harvest Moon* and *Stardew Valley*, meaning that the act of flesh extraction is one that must be consciously performed for a few moments. This requirement emphasizes the player's active involvement in the gruesome gameplay, an experience similar to that described by Colin Milburn in the 2006 game *Tasty Planet*. During this game, the player operates a ball of goo as it consumes objects of increasing size, up to the point of consuming the Earth, then the solar system, and eventually, "the fabric of spacetime itself" (Milburn 187). Since all of the goo's moves are made by the player, the player is responsible for each act of consumption. In Milburn's reading, *Tasty Planet* "produces a communal field of affect—a complex of pleasure, humor, and discomfort […]. The game cultivates an ironic sense of accountability for the fate of Earth and its creatures by ludicrously amplifying the pleasures of destruction" (190). The dissonance created by gameplay is productive for a sense of responsibility: the excessive logic of consumption that conducts behavior within *Tasty Planet* becomes an uncanny reminder—a strange stranger—of those logics which drive daily life within a wider culture of consumerism. For Milburn, *Tasty Planet* is a game of environmental responsibility, able to "animate our capacity to respond, to affect and be affected, to engage with others" (186). Such games highlight their own (and the player's) embeddedness in existing practices of consumption that threaten the environment. What Milburn describes is exactly the function of this interaction in *Graveyard Keeper*, which is also a "kind of counter-gaming, gaming turned against itself" (186). Like *Tasty Planet*, the game relies on irony that is intensified by the interactive affordances of video games and is thereby able to "render responsibility *palpable*" (186). *Graveyard Keeper* asks players to engage with the feelings and actions that being instructed to extract a corpse's flesh provoke, prompting an engagement with our own culpability in the framework of resource extraction set up by this game and games similar to it.

Graveyard Keeper is quick to refer to its own ethical conundrums or suspension thereof. When the player's avatar expresses that slicing into the corpse's flesh is not right, Gerry insists that "nothing is right here," referring to the absurdity of himself as a talking skull. Addressing both player and avatar, Gerry emphasizes that they have entered this space, and insofar as they engage with it, they are subject to its rules. When the player asks the village milkmaid if she sells meat, she responds, "Oh, no sir. The cows are our friends! We're not like those folks from The Town. I bet they even eat human flesh!" The morally transgressive behaviors of both the player and *Graveyard Keeper*'s non-player characters complicate the "sense of empathy for a virtual ecosystem" that Op de Beke finds in *Stardew Valley*. In this world, the player is confronted with all kinds of characters and their strange requests, like the Inquisitor who insists that the player participate in his witch hunt. Through the familiarity of hours played, initially hostile characters and environments are rendered intimate at a distance: characters have grown familiar, though no less strange. The absurdity

of the world and the behavior it contains precludes the intimate communal feeling of *Stardew Valley*, yet the relationships that develop with these characters nevertheless exist. Morton observes that intimacy heightens strangeness, indeed, that "intimacy itself is strange" (*Ecological Thought* 41). In *Graveyard Keeper*, the coproduction of intimacy and strangeness serves to make legible the intertwining responsibilities of the game, its non-player characters, and the player. It is strange to be immersed with, allied with, actions and individuals with which and whom we do not agree, and *Graveyard Keeper* does not let players off the hook for their actions. Instead, it creates an uncanny experience that is a hallmark of Morton's dark ecology. Regarding his use of "strange strangers" instead of the word "animal," he explains that these strangers "might be living with us right now. They might, indeed, be us. That is what is so strange about them. We can never tell" (*Ecological Thought* 42). The player can no longer sure be sure of their position vis-à-vis the game and its logics: who is an animal, who is a character, who is a resource, and who decides? *Graveyard Keeper* caricatures the logic of the genre and makes conspicuously manifest the agricultural instrumentalization that is distilled into management gameplay.

A Day's Work

That *Graveyard Keeper* is both thematically and procedurally repellent sits uncomfortably with another fact, namely that players continue to play the game. Indeed, what is perhaps most interesting about the game is how quickly the initial strangeness of gameplay abates on an individual level, only to reappear when articulating gameplay to others. The opening of Christopher Livingston's review in PCGamer, entitled "Graveyard Keeper turned me into the most evil character I've ever played," points to the incorporation of dissonance that is produced by the sublation of horror into the grinding activity of a management sim:

> I've just built my first wooden vine press. It's meant for crushing grapes into juice, which can then be aged into wine, but I have no intention (at the moment) of making wine, especially because I haven't grown any grapes yet. I've actually built the vine press to crush human fat into oil, and I've got a lot of human fat because I've carved up a lot of human corpses. I need the oil to craft polishing paste, because I need polishing paste to craft a lens, because I need a lens to craft a writing desk, because I need the writing desk to craft a sermon I'll be giving in church in a couple days.

The initial framing of this sequence of events exudes pastoral reference, with a do-it-yourself element that immediately harkens to the 'back to the farm' fantasies of the genre that are prominently on display in both *Harvest Moon* and *Stardew Valley*. Building a vine press to make one's own juice or wine is immediately evocative of the wish-fulfillment of *Stardew Valley*. Instead, the press is revealed to more closely resemble an inquisition-era torture device—made to "crush human fat into oil"—than an access point to 'the good life.' But Livingston does not dwell on this point, nor on the corpses that supply the fat: this extraction is only a small part of the multi-step process of accessing technologies that will allow him to give a sermon in the game's church.

The gameplay Livingston describes creates a slight hitch in the classification of *Graveyard Keeper* as a game of responsibility: whereas the consequences of consumption in *Tasty Planet* increase over time, players of *Graveyard Keeper* are confronted with an early irony that becomes subsumed into gameplay. In a Let's Play video, one Youtuber remarks as she goes about her business performing an autopsy: "Let's get some flesh. Extract flesh, [clicking] yes. It's funny how, like, nonchalant I am about it now. Like the first time it was like 'ewww oh my gosh' and now it's like 'uh, yeah, extract the flesh' [laughs]" (MsBrittGaming). When the Inquisitor invites MsBrittGaming's avatar to the witch burning, the player tries and fails to avoid the event. Reacting to the individual being burned at the stake in her game, she repeats: "This is terrible. This is terrible … Guys! What am I playing" (MsBrittGaming). MsBrittGaming continues to play, but not every player submits to the strange, often brutal logic of the game. Just as Milburn observes of certain *Tasty Planet* players, some players of *Graveyard Keeper* do respond to the content with a discomfort or disgust that dissuades them from continuing to play—which is to say that for some, the ethical decision might be to quit the game (190).[10] *Graveyard Keeper* models this (ethical) conundrum within the game by articulating the avatar's discomfort in its overarching narrative: he would like to quit the game himself, to 'wake up' from this nightmare, but has been told that his only escape is to succeed within the rules the game has prescribed. Advancement through the game (and the avatar's supposed way "home") is through quests that require both player and avatar to work past (or alongside) the moral discomfort certain aspects of the game may produce.

Given the sheer volume of tasks in the game, it is not surprising that more complex ethical situations may become minimized in the frenzy of getting it all done. Gameplay in *Graveyard Keeper* is far less open-ended than that of *Stardew Valley* or *Harvest Moon*, the latter two being games where the player is explicitly encouraged to engage in relationships and with storylines at their own pace, alongside a steady hum of straightforward, daily operational tasks such as planting and foraging. Requests and other undertakings in *Graveyard Keeper* in contrast present intricate, almost overwhelming, webs of nested tasks, both mundane and grotesque. Individual tasks themselves often require hours of gameplay to build up the necessary technologies (skills) to make their completion possible; they are scaled in such a way that a variety of smaller tasks must be completed first.[11] I had logged nearly 30 hours in the game before I was able to sell flesh I had extracted from corpses, even though the task

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[10] Reacting to the same witch-burning scene, another player writes in a Steam store review, "[i]t isn't funny, it isn't cute. It is in very poor taste. I happen to practice Wicca, think of myself as a witch and as such this offends me on a rather personal level. […] This game is garbage" (FoxMaverick42).

[11] For example, one produces a stone cross for a gravesite at the Stone Cutter II, which must be unlocked through costly progression on the game's technology tree. The object is made from several materials (a piece of stone, a polished piece of stone, and complex iron parts), each of which requires several steps and other materials to produce—even the simplest of the three: Mining stone blocks from the quarry by hand requires wood wedges, meaning that in order to perform this action, the player must first log several trees, cut them into wood billets, cut those into wooden wedges, and then head to the quarry to mine the stone before cutting it into pieces. Polishing another piece of stone, and creating the complex iron parts, are similarly multi-step ordeals.

was assigned at the very start of the game. For some players, this creates frustration. As Heather Alexandra complains in her review for Kotaku, "[o]h my god, *Graveyard Keeper*, will you please let me sell corpse-burgers already?"

This embeddedness of tasks within tasks, and items within items, may itself speak to a more representative relation of extractive economies and the intertwining entanglement of things, in that the frustrating intricacy of labor and production render their processes acutely visible. To be sure, there is little room within the simplifications of the game to model the actual complexity of industrial agriculture and production or the depth of real-world ecology, which Haraway describes as "diverse intra-active relatings in dynamic complex systems" (60).[12] Nonetheless, the very progression of tasks presented in *Graveyard Keeper* prompts its player to closely consider the before- and afterlife of things. This is an extension of the dark ludology Chang reads in *Stardew Valley*: there is an accounting for waste and byproducts that shows each thing as fitting into a larger (instrumental) ecosystem. In this way, *Graveyard Keeper* models a "universe of waste, dirt, shit, and trash that does not disappear, though it may fade or become otherwise as it gets taken up again and again by a sprawling web of organisms and inorganic actors" (Chang 173). In foraging for wildflowers, the player might also pick up a critter that can be used to attract certain species of fish. Removing old church decorations produces metal scrap, which can be turned back into an iron ingot and reused. Harvesting vegetables from the kitchen garden produces crop waste, which, when left in the specially-constructed compost heap, produces peat and maggots; the former is an ingredient in fertilizer and decorative landscaping for your graveyard, while the latter can be used as fishing bait or to construct alchemical resources such as "Life extract." Clearly, no object in the game is an island; each is bound to another by complex threads of interrelation and dependence.

On one level, this makes literal Haraway's formulation of human as compost, which is to say, bodies that furnish the conditions for the creation of other things. At the same time, an ecological contradiction emerges, perhaps most obvious when looking at the role of human remains: the more closely a complex interrelation of things is modeled, the more easily they are incorporated into gameplay for their utility and as items to be checked off a to-do list. Later in his review, Livingston writes that "[i]n Graveyard Keeper, for some reason, selling human meat and using human remains for crafting doesn't feel any different than selling fish to a vendor or using stone to craft a fence." Once the player has settled into the rhythms of gameplay, one very much "gets used to" breaking taboos in the service of some end, just as Gerry promised at the first flesh-extraction. The procedural rhetoric of the game overtakes the strangeness of its assignments. It is as if *Graveyard Keeper* takes Chang up on the proposition of making games' natural environments more complexly interactive, but the genre asserts a primacy to make each interaction more obviously determined by the game's instrumental logics. The contours of this trap, exaggerated in *Graveyard Keeper* by its

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[12]   This simplification is semi-necessary in games, as Chang reminds us (176).

assignments' taboos, also strongly recall Morton's description of the happy nihilism of agrilogistics as "the cheerful manipulation of extensional lumps, manipulation for manipulation's sake. Just for the taste of it" (*Dark Ecology* 107). This is an apt, if harsh, characterization of playing at the work of agricultural management. The game's procedural rhetoric aligns selling human flesh to unsuspecting villagers with selling onions from the kitchen garden—it is all in a day's work. While Pruett notes that *Stardew Valley* privileges the act of doing work over what kind of work is done (410), *Graveyard Keeper* actively pushes at the incongruity between the mechanics of the game and the task being completed. Recognizing tension between these dual positions—the avatar committing strange acts and the player enjoying a game at a keyboard—is the experience of recognizing one's position in the game ecology, namely that "all things considered I'm a pretty fucking evil little graveyard keeper" (Livingston). This is a prime moment of ecological awareness. Harkening back to the aesthetics of the game's opening cut-scene, let me recall that Morton describes the darkness of ecological awareness as "the darkness of noir" (*Dark Ecology* 9). Faced with the reality of anthropogenic climate change, the individual realizes they are both a single person and a force on a planetary scale, much like how the detective of noir fiction is also a criminal: "Ecological awareness is that moment at which these narrators find out that they are the tragic criminal" (*Dark Ecology* 9). In *Graveyard Keeper*, the player watches the game's twisted premises unfold as they remain subject to and participant in those same premises: both detective and tragic criminal.

Conclusion: "I'm a pretty fucking evil little graveyard keeper"

In *Graveyard Keeper*, the player's expectations for a game within the genre are caricatured, questioned, and destabilized. The game does not provide a straightforward 'back to the land' fantasy or a world of fulfillment through good work, but rather makes select hallmarks of the genre and its customary mechanics newly strange, complicating the fantasy farm that maintains divisions between the agentive avatar and the world's 'natural resources.' The game's initially unsettling revelations of the agentive nonhuman, of the unstable humanity of ghosts, of the human becoming animal via its status as animal product, primarily supported in scripted interactions, are overtaken by the mechanics of the management game. Thus, while the more common pastoral fantasy setting of these games is revealed to be limited in its classification of things, it becomes clear that the pleasures and limitations of these games are strangely independent from an idyllic setting: when turning a corpse into a burger for the Inquisitor's witch burning can feel like turning harvested vegetables into pickles to fulfill a neighbor's request—when a meadow can so easily become a parking lot— the pleasures of the management formula itself are called into question. By injecting its weird (and often humorous) strangeness into the pastoral bliss of the farm-life simulation formula, *Graveyard Keeper* asks us to interrogate the instrumentalizing and narrow logics that infuse both agricultural ecologies and their video game counterparts, while implicating both the player and the human more broadly as enmeshed within this dark ecology.

Research on agriculture specifically within a management game framework remains a nascent and under-explored academic field; yet these games importantly raise issues about the intertwining of agriculture, industrialization, and capitalist production processes and model ecological relations in both unsurprising and surprising ways. They may also therefore be capable of modeling new ecological relations that can account for the history of agriculture and the cultivation of the natural environment that largely dictates our relationship to the natural world at a species level. As Morton writes, "[o]ne goal of *Dark Ecology* is to make agrilogistic space speak and so to imagine how we can make programs that speak differently, that would form the substructure of a logic of future coexistence" (*Dark Ecology* 46). *Graveyard Keeper* participates in this work by making the pastoral and capitalist agrilogistics of farming games "speak," in Morton's sense, by twisting their mechanics toward peak absurdity. With the current state of late industrial economies, and trends pointing to increasing urbanization in the coming years, it is increasingly critical to interrogate contemporary fantasies of rural life and subsistence farming. William Cronon encourages such reflection when he urges us to consider the tree in the garden as we consider the tree in the forest (24); so too must we consider the tree on the farm.

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