

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Stardew Valley

Platform: Windows, MacOS, Linux, PS4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch, PS Vita, iOS, Android

Genre: Farm life sim, Roleplaying

Release Date: February 26, 2016

Developer: ConcernedApe

Publisher: ConcernedApe

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: ConcernedApe

Overview

Exhausted by corporate life under JojaMart—a profit-driven conglomerate unconcerned with the well-being of communities and employees—you remember the letter given to you by your grandfather in his will. On his deathbed, he told you:

“There will come a day when you feel crushed by the burden of modern life.

... and your bright spirit will fade before a growing emptiness.

When that happens, you’ll be ready for this gift.”

Upon opening the letter, you discover the true nature of his gift. You have inherited your grandfather’s farm in Stardew Valley, specifically in the small village of Pelican Town. In *Stardew Valley*, the player restores the old farm to its former glory while reestablishing their connection to the “*things that truly matter*”, as Grandpa’s letter suggested: “*real connections with other people and nature*”. Through planting crops, caring for animals, and exploring, you discover more about yourself and the community that you, as the farmer, have joined.

At the heart of the game's main quest lies the neglected Community Center, which has been inhabited by the Junimos, benevolent nature spirits. The Center's restoration, achieved by completing Bundles representing various aspects of farm life, triggers the Junimos' magical repair of both the Center and the town. The completion of the Community Center symbolizes not only a physical restoration but also the revival of Pelican Town's spirit, emphasizing the importance of cooperation and community.

Characters

- **The Farmer** - The farmer is the player character in *Stardew Valley*. Starting as a disillusioned individual seeking an escape from the pressures and monotony of modern life, the player's actions will shape the farmer's destiny. Every individual player's experience will be different, and even one person over multiple playthroughs can live many different lives in Pelican Town as the Farmer. The player character's identity is a reflection of the player's role-playing choices, creating an oftentimes deeply personal and unique experience for each player.
- **The Townsfolk** - *Stardew Valley* has a massive cast of characters within Pelican Town and beyond (or below, in the case of the sewer-dwelling Krobus), all with unique personalities, schedules, and stories. Interacting with the townsfolk is a key aspect of the gameplay and building these relationships is integral for immersing oneself in the community.

There are 32 residents of Pelican Town, 12 of whom are marriage candidates for players interested in pursuing romance within their game. The progression of the farmer's relationship with the townsfolk relies on speaking to them regularly and giving them gifts they enjoy—this information can be gleaned through trial and error or conversations with other townsfolk.
- **The Junimos** - The Junimos are mystical forest spirits living in the Community Center. Through their magical repairs, the Junimos embody the essence of unity and cooperation. Taking on the form of small leaflike creatures, the Junimos represent the intrinsic link between the natural world and the well-being of its inhabitants.
- **Joja Corp** - Acting as the antagonist for *Stardew Valley*, the corporate conglomerate *Joja* stands in direct contrast to the player's journey. Representing corporate greed, detachment from community values, and the adverse effects of industrialization on rural life, Joja Corp maintains a constant presence in the narrative. The farmer's story begins as an employee in-office at Joja Corp and a JojaMart in Pelican Town actively works to drive out the local businesses in the Valley.

The player has the option to pay Joja a fee to convert the Community Center into a warehouse, replacing the traditional requirement of completing Bundles. This choice symbolizes the player

aligning with Joja's corporate values, resulting in a more transactional, impersonal approach to the game's objectives. This is referred to as the "Joja Route" and is antithetical to the premise of the game—most townsfolk react negatively to this decision.

Breakdown

In an era defined by dead-end corporate jobs and the consequent rise in statistics regarding career dissatisfaction, *Stardew Valley* stands as a digital respite—a testament to the yearning for something more meaningful than the mundane everyday. Beyond the allure of the game's charming aesthetics and engaging gameplay lies a profound narrative that resonates with a generation longing to escape corporate detachment by delving deep into the essence of community amidst a world often dominated by isolation. As players till pixelated soil, befriend townsfolk, and maintain their homestead, they embark on a journey that emphasizes the significance of establishing communal bonds to counter the pervasive disconnect in contemporary society. Through an analysis of its narrative elements, *Stardew Valley's* poignant commentary on the intrinsic human need for genuine connection and community amidst the impersonal forces of modernity emerges.

Joja and the Contemporary

Joja Corp stands in complete opposition to Pelican Town, both visually and symbolically. The aesthetics of the JojaMart in the valley are cold and hypnotizingly sterile when compared to the warm, inviting palette that encompasses all of Pelican Town. Joja stands as a striking parallel to real-world corporate entities, from the minimalistic cool-toned interior to the slogans adorning the Mart's exterior:

"Join us. Thrive"
"Life's Better with Joja"

These expressions echo capitalist sentiments that appeal to the individual consumer's desires in a cloying manner; there is an allure, promising some superior life through affiliation with the massive and impersonal corporation. These slogans encapsulate the capitalist appeal, focusing on personal advancement while overlooking the communal aspects, reflecting a corporate ideology that prioritizes individualistic gains over community well-being. Beyond the marketing, what makes Joja a direct competitor to Pierre's General Goods—the small business in town? They sell the same items, but JojaMart is open far later and on Pierre's day off. This small change provides convenience for players who need seeds when Pierre's is not open, and through the game's dialogue, the player observes how JojaMart is taking customers from Pierre. Jodi, a single mother of two with a husband away in the military, mentions, *"The food at JojaMart might not be the*

healthiest for my family, but with such low prices you'd be crazy to shop anywhere else!" Her struggle is palpable, given the difficult nature of her situation. Predatory marketing schemes employed by large corporations directly target low-income families by offering low costs (potentially at the detriment of their long-term health) and promising a better life. JojaMart in Pelican Town is simply a digital microcosm representative of a much, much larger problem in modern society.

Beyond steamrolling local businesses, Joja as a corporation does not treat its office workers well at all. There is an abundance of information to gather about the Farmer's previous life working under Joja in the opening cutscene. A quick overhead shot illustrates the bleak scene: monotonous rows of cubicles packed claustrophobically in a windowless room, resembling a warehouse more than an office. The workers are no more than machines in this steel-constructed factory, directed between work and rest by a blinking light like an on-and-off switch, not warranted even the ability to observe the passage of time through clocks or glimpses of the outside world. The superficial cleanliness hides the grim reality, with every desk covered in grime, indicative of neglect. Surveillance is ubiquitous at Joja; managers watch over from full-body glass windows while cameras loom above every cubicle, recording. The workers, clearly exhausted, are contrasted by the ominous "*Smile, You're with Joja*" slogan, residing as more of a threat than a reminder. A red sign reading "*Terminated*" placed beside an empty desk hints at frequent layoffs or punishment for non-compliance. In this bleak environment, the only smiling employee is surrounded by energy drink cans and pill bottles: the commentary of this workplace is obvious, stating that the only way to thrive in this environment is through synthetic, detrimental means.

This Joja Corporate office is a Panopticon: the perfect prison of nineteenth-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham, structured in such a way that allows complete isolation and surveillance of the captive prisoners. Those within the cells (in this case, cubicles) cannot see when they are being watched, so "the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at any one moment, but he must be sure that he may always be so" (Foucault, *Discipline* 201). Michel Foucault, a 20th-century French philosopher, critiqued Bentham's Panopticon. The once novel (now fully actualized) concept of a surveillance state resulted in a disturbing erosion of individual power. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, his most influential work, explores how the government claimed greater control over the more private aspects of lives (Perdue). *Stardew Valley* dips its toes into the horrors of modern surveillance through this brief portrayal of life beneath Joja, an Orwellian corporation where the panoptic view held by those in power is nigh inescapable; however, the Farmer has a way out.

An Escape

A compelling narrative has long been a refuge for the reader. Across literature, film, and various forms of media, stories that weave captivating tales transport audiences to distant lands. Video games, particularly immersive role-playing experiences like *Stardew Valley*, embody this narrative escapism in a unique and interactive form. Amidst the constant push and pull of profit margins and societal expectations, individuals grapple with the consequences of their association. Even those meant to benefit from these systems contend with the mental toll involved with participating directly in the capitalist machine, but this struggle to find balance and solace amid the pressures of daily life is an intrinsic part of our existence.

As the farmer flees their grim corporate reality by leaving for Pelican Town, the player sits down and opens the game to do just the same. Their experiences are mirrored, as the player immerses in the perspective offered by *Stardew Valley* to participate in a utopian farmland where chopping down trees takes 10 fell swoops. The game's narrative efforts to be deeply relatable, emblematic of these too-familiar struggles, and provide an escape.

This game's narrative is not just about crop yields or mine expeditions; it is about empathy and the pursuit of connection to Grandpa's all-encompassing "*things that truly matter*". Digital escapism is commonplace, but the lessons delivered through the narrative allow the player to embark on a journey of personal discovery and meaningful connections. The player contends with Pam and Shane's alcoholism, Alex's mourning, and Elliot's romantic career pursuits. There is a hard-hitting story for anyone open to embracing the warm, pixelated escape in Pelican Town.

*"The city used to draw me in...
but now I'm finding myself happier at home in the valley."
(Sebastian)*

Embracing Community

Stardew Valley offers diverse gameplay experiences, allowing players to shape the narrative through individual choices. There is no predefined "right" way to navigate the story, even if that includes traversing the contentious Joja route. However, within the freedom the game offers, the narrative's core lies in the relationships developed with the inhabitants of Pelican Town.

From the onset, players are urged to immerse themselves in the town by embarking on a simple yet significant quest: speaking to each resident of Pelican Town. This introductory task can be the impetus for a

new player's journey, emphasizing the importance of interpersonal connections and community engagement within the game's central story. Whether with the mysterious wizard in a remote tower or the town's two small children, a friendship can begin with anyone in the Valley. Although the player can easily go through the whole game without once regarding their neighbors, the emphasis on community at the forefront of the gameplay lays the foundation for profound interactions and meaningful relationships that become pivotal in shaping the player's experience. The player's value in the community is highlighted as they forge relationships with townsfolk through daily interactions, gift-giving, completing favors, and participating in festivals.

*"It's a little lonely out here on the beach...
so I apologize if I was ever a little too forward with you when we first met.
I was just eager to have a friend.
It feels good to have a close friend like you."*
(Elliot)

*"I've never felt such an overwhelming pride in our community.
You've done Pelican Town a great service."*
(Mayor Lewis, after finishing the Community Center quest)

The narrative focus on the player's growing role within *Stardew Valley's* community places significant symbolic weight on the renovation of the Community Center. This quest extends far beyond a gameplay objective; it serves as a profound illustration of community revitalization and empowerment, echoing principles of community philosophy that advocate for active citizenship and collective decision-making. Each completed Bundle showcases the player's self-sufficiency, distinct from the superficial conveniences offered by Joja and all the corporate conglomerates it represents. The bulletin board Bundle stands as a testament to the unity and shared purpose of community members. By completing this task, the player transcends individual pursuits, instead seeking out authentic relationships with their neighbors—the reward offered by this Bundle is increased friendship with every member of the town. Restoring the community center, although completely solely by the Farmer and the magic of the Junimos, signifies a convergence of ideas to rejuvenate Pelican Town's small but vibrant community.

Moreover, the transformation of the once desolate Community Center represents a shift in power dynamics. Joja's ousting from the valley, predominantly led by Pierre (who stands up to the store manager Morris by assaulting him, which is a controversial choice), eradicates the blight of corporate greed from the valley. With JojaMart's closure, Pierre opens the store seven days a week, benefitting from JojaMart's former income. The Community Center's revival from a dilapidated, abandoned space into a bustling hub of community

activity, and the once pristine JojaMart has now met the same fate as the once neglected Center. This reclamation represents a shift from a disjointed community to an empowered collective shaping its future, independent of Joja's guileful values.

Classical and Digital Utopias

There are striking similarities between *Stardew Valley's* escapist fantasy town and utopias created in the 20th century. Ebenezer Howard's 1902 book *Garden Cities Of To-Morrow* was written in a period reeling from rapid industrialization and urban expansion. Amid this era of tumultuous growth and technological advancement, Howard sought to redefine urban living paradigms. The Garden Cities he depicted embodied an idealized, sustainable urban living—a compelling response to the various challenges posed by urbanity. The Garden City is a realized utopia of harmonious communities coexisting with nature. The overcrowding, environmental degradation, and socioeconomic disparities typical of the 20th century resulted in an ever-increasing ambivalence within communities that Howard aimed to heal. The Garden City concept was predicated upon the idea of decentralization, wherein a network of small, planned cities surrounded by green spaces would offer an alternative to the polluted metropolis. Residents were intended to cultivate a strong sense of self-governing community, encouraging social interaction, collective engagement, and shared responsibilities. Garden Cities were environments bridging the gap between the city and the country, and parks were placed within the cities as a strategy to improve the inhabitants' health and well-being. Moreover, society as a whole would benefit from the union, as best explained by Howard:

"Human society and the beauty of nature are meant to be enjoyed together [...] As man and woman by their varied gifts and faculties supplement each other, so should town and country... The town is the symbol of society—of mutual help and friendly co-operation [...] of broad, expanding sympathies—of science, art, culture, religion. And the country! [...] All that we are and all that we have comes from it. Our bodies are formed of it; to it they return. We are fed by it, clothed by it, and by it are we warmed and sheltered. [...] Its beauty is the inspiration of art, of music, of poetry. Its forces propel all the wheels of industry. It is the source of all health, all wealth, all knowledge. But its joy and wisdom has not revealed itself to man. Nor can it ever, so long as [the] separation of society and nature endures."

(Howard, 18)

The modern digital utopia of Pelican Town features notable similarities to the concepts discussed in Howard's writing. *Stardew Valley's* insistence on community bonds and self-sustainability echoes the sentiments of a Garden City—a strong sense of belonging and connection to supplement selfish desires that may forsake the community's wellbeing. Furthermore, both *Stardew Valley* and the Garden Cities prioritize harmony with nature. The intentional incorporation of parks and green spaces in Howard's cities is seen as even more

natural in the case of Pelican Town. The constructed beauty is, like an Olmsted garden, elaborated planted to be hospitable to its residents. But who, in this instance, did the planting? The developer's intentionality that features meandering rivers and the unconventional beauties of nature exists to comfort the player through meticulous design, similar to urban planners and landscape architects. There is a shared ethos in these concepts, prioritizing communal ties, nature-centric living, and a departure from the alienation associated with conventional urban settings.

The vision of utopian societies and the pursuit of idyllic communities depicted in both the Garden City and *Stardew Valley* reflect a cyclical yearning for an alternative to prevalent urban disconnects. 20th-century visionaries and architects conceptualized their utopian societies, like Garden Cities, as responses to the negative aspects of industrialized living. In the contemporary digital age, games like *Stardew Valley* emerge as modern-day counterparts, presenting players with a virtual escape to a simpler, more communal way of life. This enduring desire across generations—prioritizing human connections, sustainable living, and harmony—rebels against the distressing realities of modern life, reflecting an eternal quest for environments that prioritize shared values and community.

Not Quite Anti-Capitalism

In discussions surrounding *Stardew Valley*, there is a prevalent misconception labeling the game as staunchly anti-capitalist. While critical of corporate greed and industrialization through the vehicle of Joja Corp, it is essential to recognize the core gameplay loop is dependent on capitalist mechanics. Although profit-driven entities are lambasted thoroughly as exploitative of local communities, the game pushes the player to establish a monopoly in the small town. The relationship *Stardew Valley* has with capitalism is complex. On one hand, the game critiques the pitfalls of corporate influence and industrial expansion, highlighting the negative consequences. On the other, it necessitates players to actively engage in capitalist activities. Players typically engage in farming, mining, and crafting not to subvert capitalism but to thrive in its framework. The game prompts a reflection on the tension between its anti-corporate narrative and the unavoidable reliance on capitalist structures for progression.

Strongest Element

The strongest element present in *Stardew Valley* is undoubtedly the characters. Each character boasts a unique background and personality, often dealing with relatable struggles or challenges. Interacting with these characters, unraveling their narratives, and building relationships elevate immersion, lending incredible depth to the storyline and fostering a sense of community involvement. To be accepted by Linus for digging in the trash is essential role-playing that deepens your bond with the game. The opportunity to form meaningful connections, including the possibility of marrying one of the 12 diverse bachelors/bachelorettes, further amplifies the potential for complete immersion within this digital world. The characters themselves, with their diverse personalities and unique stories, leave an enduring impression on players, anchoring them deeper into the idealized community of Stardew Valley.

Unsuccessful Element

The gift-giving mechanic in *Stardew Valley* serves as a cornerstone for building relationships, yet it carries inherent limitations and simplistic nuances. It makes sense that offering items tailored to individual preferences would expedite the progression of friendship, but the approach oversimplifies the intricacies of genuine human connection. The system can reduce interactions to transactional exchanges, especially at points in the game when the player can reliably farm materials that are guaranteed to be universally loved gifts, like diamonds. Although a useful system, it has its pitfalls and can be exploited to oversimplify friendships with townsfolk for the sheer purpose of completion.

Highlight

There is one character in *Stardew Valley* who stands out with an incredibly raw, hard-hitting narrative arc - Shane. Initially distant and guarded, Shane is challenging to connect with. However, persistent efforts like giving him hot peppers and bothering him daily will eventually wear down his walls, opening up the door for friendship. Getting closer to Shane leads to a storyline that tackles sensitive mental health issues of alcohol and depression. Guiding Shane through his struggles becomes a touching and heartfelt journey, as the player helps him navigate a path toward healing and stability. Shane's battles with addiction have taken a toll on his relationships with family and townsfolk, making the experience of assisting him in rebuilding these connections incredibly fulfilling.

One of the most powerful moments in Shane's storyline occurs during the Six Heart cutscene. Encountering a distraught Shane on the edge of a cliff, he divulges heartbreaking confessions: *"All I do is work, sleep, and drink to dull the feelings of self-hatred... Why should I even go on? Tell me... Tell me why I shouldn't roll off*

this cliff right now..." The player is prompted to respond to him, and the harrowing experience resonates despite the linearity of the story regardless of the player's choice in dialogue. To even have to choose those words is incredibly difficult. It is a challenging moment in the game that showcases the hard realities of mental illness.

Another feature worth noting in Shane's story is the realistic portrayal of his recovery: it is anything but straightforward, as most difficult things are. Should the player choose to marry Shane, he goes through periods of relapse, displaying the complexity of supporting someone through such hardships.

By not shying away from these difficult conversations, the game benefits from a holistic character and representation of painful subjects.

Critical Reception

IGN - Miranda Sanchez, 9.5/10 (2018)

Sanchez explains the story as a *"simple, yet satisfying one"*. She critiques the superficiality of building friendships, especially within the gift-giving system. Despite the drawback of the simplicity, she states that it is *"still rewarding to learn about each person's dreams, passions, and challenges living in Stardew Valley"*. For Sanchez, the building of relationships in town came after the completion of the community center, and she was more interested in the mechanical goalposts than the social.

Polygon - Carli Velocci, 9/10 (2016)

Velocci explores how the game's myriad mechanics aren't the only thing you work to do in the game, instead *"it emphasizes what you do with what you're given: How you choose to build your community and relationships, and the power of a simple hello, said every day."* She found many different paths and personal questions to direct her journey to give herself a sense of accomplishment, often through the narrative. At one point, she struggled with the lack of guidance provided by the game but was charmed by the characters and found herself overcoming that hurdle for the sake of honing in on important details in the narrative, like the complexity of her relationships with Pierre and Joja: *"I could spend all day planting seeds and cutting down trees, but what would I be without the relationship I build with Pierre, the man who runs the local produce shop? In return, how does this impact my feelings toward Joja Corporation [...] whose megamart on the outskirts of town competes with Pierre's business?"*

Lessons

- **Invest in complex character development.**

Creating characters with multifaceted personalities and relatable struggles adds emotional weight and resonance to the narrative. *Stardew Valley* boasts a large cast of interesting characters with much to learn about their stories, personal challenges, and growth.

- **Balance realism and escapism.**

Stardew Valley depicts issues like corporate greed, mental health struggles, and complex interpersonal relationships within the immersive idyllic, simple life of Pelican Town. This equilibrium between realism and escapism ensures the game is engaging and thought-provoking while being enjoyable.

- **Craft realistic relationships.**

The creation of realistic and evolving relationships between the player and characters fosters emotional attachment to the game's world. This includes both romantic and platonic relationships that reflect the complexities of human interaction.

- **Establish narrative arcs that extend beyond the main storyline.**

Narrative arcs that extend beyond the main storyline offer unending content for the player. In the case of *Stardew Valley*, the developer frequently released free content updates that continued to develop the characters and create long-term player engagement.

Summation

Stardew Valley's immersive narrative and compelling gameplay serve as poignant reflections of contemporary societal desires and challenges. It is crucial to have these discussions, draw parallels, and ask questions when engaging with media, and analysis of *Stardew Valley* displays an astute awareness of the importance of communal bonds. Its resonance with classical philosophy draws interesting comparisons between modernity and the not-so-distant past to remind us of *"the things that really matter"* in your pixelated Grandpa's oft-repeated speech: *"real connections with other people and nature."*

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