

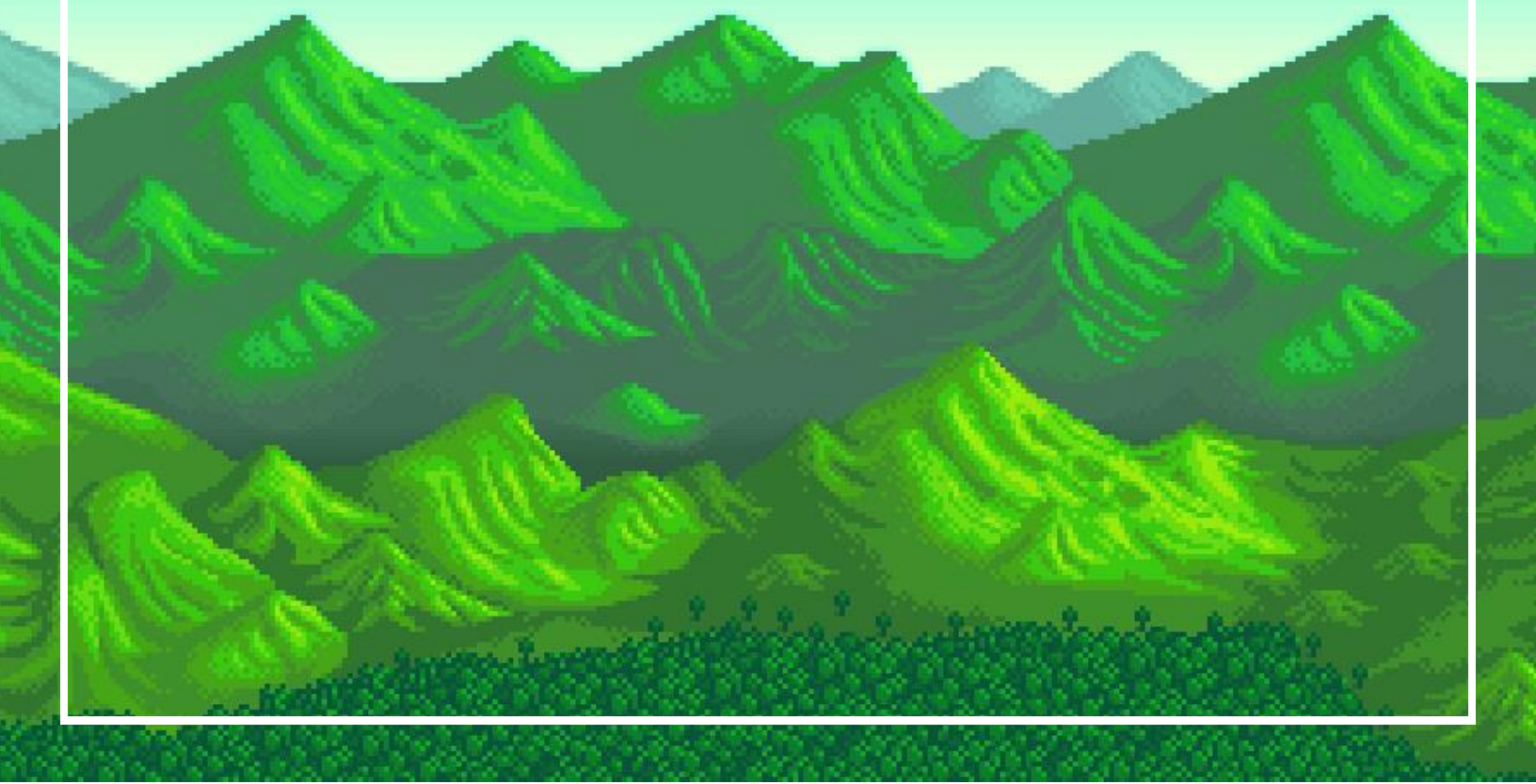
The background of the entire page is a pixelated night sky from the game Stardew Valley. It features a dark blue gradient with numerous white stars of varying sizes and brightness. Some stars have a soft, glowing aura. The sky transitions from a deep blue at the top to a lighter, cyan-like blue near the horizon.

Stardew Valley Reddit Users:

A Virtual Ethnographic Report

IAD 3300 – 12/02/21

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Executive Summary

Over the course of roughly 3.5 months spanning from September to December of this year, our team was tasked with studying a virtual field of interest to learn more about a given topic and the users who interact with it. Our team chose to complete our study on the popular farming-sim game, Stardew Valley, with our main field of interest being the official Stardew Valley Reddit page, r/Stardew Valley. Our team consisted of 3 team members, Alaina Chapple, Erinn McKine, and Samantha McPherson, with each of us holding a personal interest in the game. Some of us have had a lot of experience playing the game, while others are hoping to learn more about the game through this experience. This ethnographic report will set out to explain our research process throughout the semester, as we observed interactions, interviewed participants, and discovered answers to our main research question of, “What does the game Stardew Valley mean to you?”

Through this process, our research methods consisted of:

- Thorough observation of user interactions on the Reddit page (12+ hours per team member)
- Participant screening and messaging through Reddit
- Virtual interviews conducted through Discord
- Note-taking through jottings and fieldnotes
- Playing and interacting with the game ourselves

This process allowed our team to learn a lot about the different types of users that play the game, as well as what keeps them interested in playing since the game’s initial release in 2016. Based on our findings, we discovered that most users play Stardew Valley to relieve stress and relax. Due to the peaceful and calm nature of the game, users feel as if they can find ease and peace of mind from the stresses of their day when they sit down in front of their PC, Switch, or XBOX to enter the world of Stardew Valley. Therefore, our cohering metaphor is Stardew Valley as a stress reliever.

Overall, this experience was a great way for us to work together as a team and compile our findings to answer our research question. Through this experience, we were able to compare our unique experiences of observation and moderation, as well as learn more about Stardew Valley and its users who interact on the Reddit page. This whole process has given us some better insight on how loyal fans are to the game, as well as how the game brings users comfort in their day-to-day lives.



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Introduction

Stardew Valley is a simulation role-playing, farming sim in which you inherit your grandfather's old farm and are tasked with fixing it up. You start off with a small farmhouse and a large front garden that is overrun by weeds and trees. Once you manage to clear away the overgrowth from the farm, you're able to start planting some crops. Since you're new to town, it would also be a good idea for you to familiarize yourself with the area. So, you decide to explore Pelican Town. Through your meeting of the town residents, you start to explore the area, simultaneously making progress on your farm, pulling weeds, chopping trees, and planting parsnips. You also decide to go fishing, mine in the caves, craft items, cook food, and even find love through dating one of the NPCs (non-playable characters). As you continue to explore the land, you come across an abandoned Community Center. What magic secrets could be lurking within this quaint town? It is up to you to decide what comes next!



Figure 1: A photo of an in-game farm and farmhouse.

Stardew Valley has continued to be a popular video game since its initial release in 2016, with its unique and calming 8-bit style and enticing storyline. The game was created by an “American indie game designer [named] Eric Barone, under the alias of Concerned Ape,” with it becoming, “a commercial success, selling over 15 million copies by 2021,” (Wikipedia). Today, the game continues to be played and enjoyed by thousands of players across the globe due to its endless adventures, frequent game updates, co-op abilities, and more! As a Checkpoint article on mental health describes it, “*Stardew Valley* is mostly about comforting routines. The player is allowed to choose their own focus, and there is never any pressure to make the choice that the game considers to be correct.” (Checkpoint).

This ethnographic report will serve to lay out each of the steps that our team took to conduct research on *Stardew Valley* and the accompanying Reddit page. In this report, we will discuss our methodology for conducting our virtual ethnography, as well as go in depth in explaining our observation and interview processes. Finally, we will wrap everything up in a conclusion containing our final thoughts, as well as include an appendix at the end where we will share our interview questions and references. To reiterate, our goal for this ethnography was to find the answer to the question of, “What does the game *Stardew Valley* mean to you?”

Wikimedia Foundation. (2021, November 25). *Stardew Valley*. Wikipedia. Retrieved December 2, 2021, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stardew_Valley.

Guest feature. (2020, June 11). *One Day At A Time- How Stardew Valley Can Help Mental Health*. CheckPoint. Retrieved December 2, 2021, from <https://checkpointorg.com/one-day-time-stardew-valley-can-help-mental-health/>.

Methodology

What is Virtual Ethnography?

A Virtual Applied Ethnography is a qualitative research process based in mixed methods, with the goal of cultural interpretation conducted through a virtual median. In our case, our field of interest was the Stardew Valley Reddit page, known as r/StardewValley, in which we conducted a game study of Stardew Valley and its users who interact on the Reddit forum. Before we could declare ourselves within the field, we first needed to get consent from the moderators of the forum to let us observe. Luckily for us, there was a list of moderators for us to get in contact with on the homepage of the forum, so it wasn't too hard to get in touch with someone to gain consent. One of the moderators of the forum is actually ConcernedApe, the creator of the game. Though we didn't get a chance to speak with him one-on-one, it was interesting to see that even the game's creator was a moderator of the Stardew Valley Reddit forum. After our team had been given consent in the field, we were ready to begin our observations.

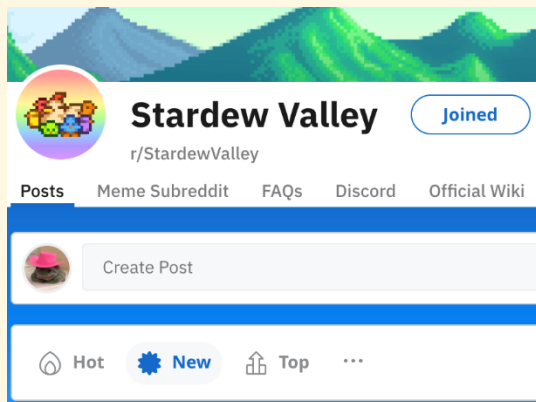


Figure 2: A photo of the Stardew Valley Reddit page

Gaining Field Consent

Each member of our team spent a total of 12+ hours each observing the Stardew Valley Reddit forum and taking jottings and field notes of interactions that stood out to us. Jottings were used to quickly make note of any spur of the moment interactions that we observed, and field notes were used as a way to more thoroughly summarize and recap the key moments of our observations. During this note-taking process, we had to practice being reflexively aware when observing our participants. This meant holding back our judgement and keeping an open mind to what users were saying. We will go more in depth about our observation process in the Observations section of this report.



In addition to our observations, we also conducted 4 virtual structured interviews in which participants were required to sign a consent form prior to the interview to consent to being recorded. All participants were screened prior to their interviews and were all confirmed to be at least 18 years of age or older. Each interview took place in our personally created Discord server in the 'Interviews' voice channel, with each interview lasting roughly 20-30 minutes total. Each member of our team took turns moderating and taking notes during the interviews, so we had to practice listening without interrupting, as

well as viewing each participant with an emic perspective. When an ethnographer uses an emic perspective, this means that they are staying out of judgement while in the field. The whole interview process for each of our participants will be discussed in more detail in the Interviews section of this report.

Research Methods

When conducting research for this virtual ethnography, we implemented various virtual qualitative research methods to understand different cultures, which Sam Ladner defines as, “an organization's ideal state,” (Ladner) in the realm of people's behaviors, interactions, and opinions on our field of interest. It was through our continued observation and data collection that we were able to also uncover patterns that

emerged from participant to participant. As ethnographers, it's important for us to make note of these patterns and understand the daily habits and rituals of our users. We chose to conduct a virtual applied ethnography for a few reasons. One reason was for the safety of both the researchers and participants in this study due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Another reason was to explore the social interactions that happened through a virtual environment, which in this case was the Stardew Valley Reddit forum, r/StardewValley. If you're unfamiliar with Reddit, it is a website comprised of various forums on topics such as video games and movie franchises, as well as everyday topics such as pets and coffee, in which people can discuss these topics with other users. For our ethnographic study, we focused explicitly on the Stardew Valley forum.

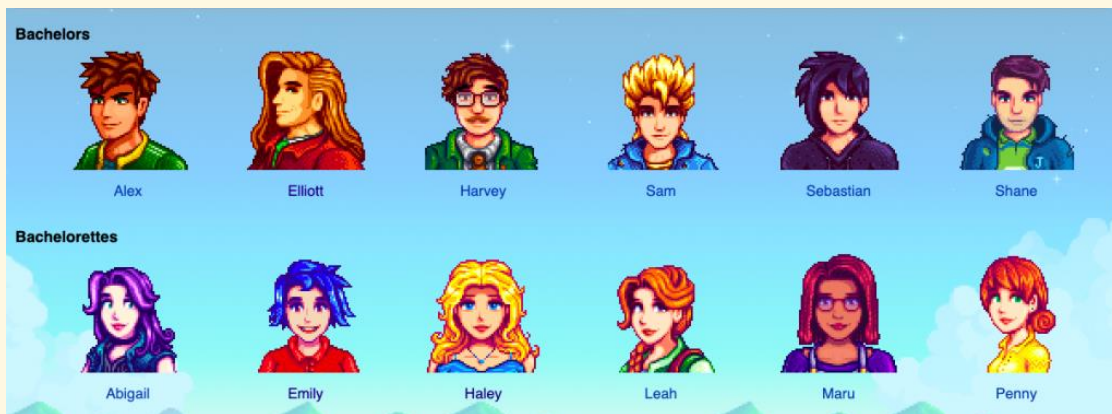


Figure 3: Some of the bachelors and bachelorettes that you can date in-game.

Observations

To better understand the Stardew Valley community and what the game itself means to its players; each team member was tasked with completing a journal. This journal would consist of jottings and field notes over the course of 12+ observation hours to discern and comprehend some of the social interactions that take place between Stardew Valley players. We decided to use the Stardew Valley Reddit community as the main source of our observations. We chose this web community in particular, because the site is constantly being updated with posts including interactions between players as well as information regarding the game and its players. Each jotting consisted of relatively spontaneous, detailed, train-of-thought writing meant to capture whatever came to mind whilst observing the community. After a jotting was completed, each member created a field note which went further in depth on analyzing each observation.

Understanding the setting, tones of interactions, social norms, goals of interactions between users, participants included, and lastly, an analysis to further understand what was happening and the purpose behind the interactions. As our observations continued, certain ideas and ways of thinking might be shifted as more information was continuously being learned about the social interactions in the community.

Challenges

Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, our team was faced with certain challenges regarding how we completed certain parts of this ethnographic study. All of

our work was completed virtually, not including the few times team members met in person.

Limited Perspective

Because we completed this project virtually, it was hard to not develop a limited perspective while observing the Stardew Reddit community. The main challenge with this was not being able to fully understand social interactions between others. This was difficult because, since the observations were completed virtually, we were not able to physically see how people interacted with each other. Through physical interactions, you can get a full scope of a person's facial expressions, hand movements, vocal tone, body language, etc. Through virtual interactions, these elements are all taken away. The interaction is stripped down simply to what they type, and from there you interpret based on your own assumptions and context clues.

Recruiting Participants

Another challenge we faced through this virtual ethnographic study was recruiting participants for interviews. We wanted to conduct interviews to get the perspective of real players in real time while receiving honest answers about the game and the Reddit community. To start recruitment, each team member created several posts over the course of two weeks asking for volunteers to be interviewed, while also explaining our study and what information we wanted to get from conducting the interviews. It was extremely difficult to get replies on these posts, which is why several posts were made over the course of the two

weeks. Most of the posts made by our team received no replies, which was a frustrating experience. However, we did manage to find 3 participants after making several posts, despite the challenge of recruiting Stardew Valley players through the online forum.

Online Vulnerability

When completing any study, such as the one our team has done, it is important to ensure the safety and privacy of all participants. Another challenge with doing an online ethnographic study, is making sure we did not include any personal information, as well as being cautious of the content we chose to include in our journals. Some comments on the online forum did include personal information and stories that people may not be comfortable with sharing outside of the community. It is much easier to share something anonymously when you know the space you are commenting on is seen as a safe-haven or a place of comfort, believing that the topics discussed will not reach outside of the community. Therefore, it was important for our team to discern what was okay to include and what was not. Our journals included a frequent number of direct quotes, so ensuring that the quotes used were not a violation of the user's privacy was very crucial in the study. Another difficulty with this, was not being able to include personal information such as stories shared on the forum, names, ages, faces; these things all add to what that user represents and who they are as a person. It separates them from the crowd of anonymous users, but also allows us to understand a wide range of demographics on the forum that are

likely to have some similarities (or even some differences). Being able to see the variety of similarities and differences in each user with this information could have been a valuable experience in understanding who these players are, where they come from, and so on.



Figure 4: A photo of a post we made to look for interview participants on the Reddit forum.

What is the Stardew Valley Reddit Community?

On the surface, the Stardew Valley Reddit community is an online subreddit community that is focused entirely on the stress-relieving, farming simulator game known as Stardew Valley. It is a place where people can post anything related to the game and make interactions with others on these posts. Through our observations, we've encountered posts that were made about Stardew Valley fanart, villager cosplaying, pumpkin carving, users asking for help on how to do certain tasks in game, users sharing how they met their significant other through playing Stardew Valley, users sharing how Stardew Valley helps them cope with their stress after going through a harsh break up, and much more! One

thing is clear about the Stardew Valley Reddit community, however, and it's that it is a very friendly and wholesome place when compared to other subreddits on the site. For example, one user made a post about how much they appreciate the people on the Stardew Valley Reddit page, stating:

"There's always so much love from other players. There isn't hate, just love and help. It's so refreshing."

-u/Nera325

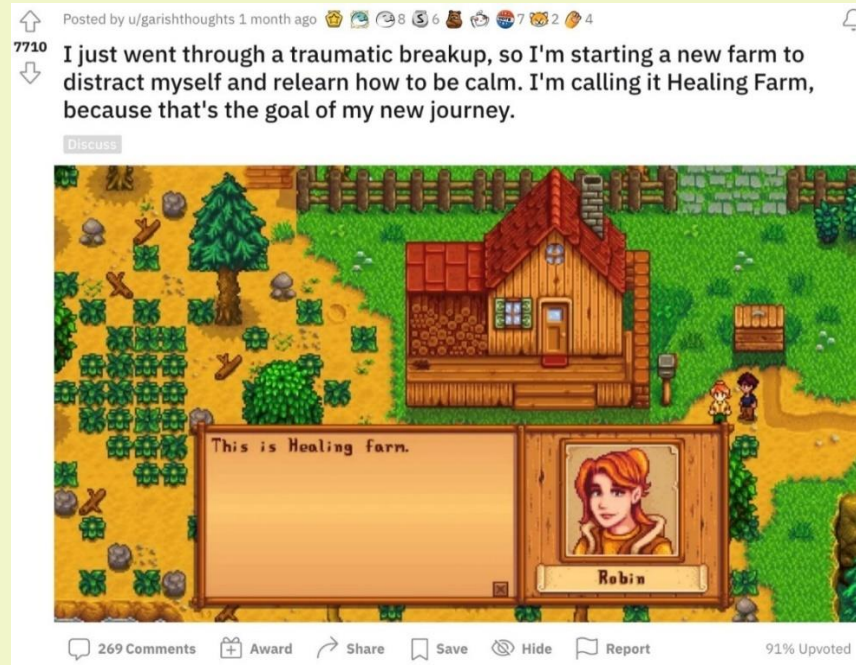


Figure 5: A popular photo from Reddit of a user sharing how they've created a farm in Stardew Valley to help them cope with their breakup called, "Healing Farm"

R/stardewvalley. Reddit. Retrieved December 2, 2021, from <https://www.reddit.com/r/StardewValley/>.

Patterns in Our Observations

After completing our observations on the online Reddit community, we came together as a team to compile our ideas and organize them into separate groupings. Through a method called affinity mapping, we were able to find several patterns in our data in order to help answer our research question:

"What does the game Stardew Valley mean to you?" But before coming to this answer, it was important for us to understand the major themes and patterns found in our journals. After completing our affinity mapping, we noticed that there were a good number of patterns that stood out from the rest of our findings.

Personal Connections

One common pattern that we found on the Stardew Valley Reddit forum, was that people used the forum as a place to create or form better personal connections. Whether it be romantic or platonic, the Stardew Reddit forum has been a place for many people to bond and share their experiences inside and outside of the game. One user, u/newyorkstreet made a post on how they love using Stardew Valley as a means to connect with their girlfriend. Whilst being in a long-distance relationship, the game was a great way to interact with each other and feel like they were together.

Another user, u/swordssappo, stated in a post that their girlfriend proposed to them in real life by giving them a mermaid pendant, which is an item that can be found in-game. In the comments section of the post, you can even see other users congratulating them on this life event. Observations like these showed our team how vital the community and the game are to some people. It has been a way for those in long-distance relationships to form a connection and bond through the game. It should also be noted that people who have found a common interest in the game have formed romantic or platonic relationships with one another. If they're not using Reddit to form new relationships, people are able to further strengthen their current relationships through talking and playing together.

Community

Another commonality that we found in the forum, was that simply being a part

of the forum creates a strong sense of community and family for many users. In many of the posts that we observed on the forum, people's interactions could be described as very friendly, helpful, and kind towards one another.

One Reddit user noted that, "Something cool about this subreddit is that, generally, everyone is really nice to each other. It's a pretty refreshing place on the internet actually." Through our observations of a multitude of posts, it can be found that people find comfort in using the forum as a creative outlet, a means to interact and have fun with other players, a place to share jokes and memories, and so on. The Stardew Valley Reddit community is seen by many users as a safe space to share their experiences and interactions as well as relate to others as they share their love for Stardew Valley.

Guidance

Another theme that we found through our study, was about how many people use the Reddit community as a means to ask questions and receive guidance on in-game tasks. In these types of posts, users will ask questions related to the game, inquiring about certain challenges that they may be having during their gameplay. Every interaction like this that our team had observed, usually had the same result: People reply to these posts with helpful information and tips that could further assist these users with the issues that they're facing. Many users go above and beyond by giving more than just simple solutions, but by also sharing similar experiences so that other users can relate to them and not feel alone if they have made mistakes. Users also

give preventative tips and additional information regarding the topics at hand.

One user, u/Swazey, asked in the Reddit, “I’ve just started this game, it’s pretty smooth. Are there any tips you guys can give me?” In response, one user commented for them to, “Check the weather every day and when it is going to rain the next day water your crops, then go upgrade your watering can.”

Another user noticed that while they were fishing, the ocean randomly turned a dark green color in a certain spot. So, they looked to their fellow Reddit users for an explanation. People in the comments explained that this was something that occurred during the summer season, in which the items that you can forage from the ocean will appear in higher quantities. Another user who also hadn’t known about this phenomenon replied, “[There’s] always something new to learn in Stardew Valley. Thanks!”

Another example, which is different in the sense that it was a real-life experience shared by one user, focuses on gardening. The user, u/ThaNanoAnno, showed off their real-life garden based off of their in-game Stardew Valley farm, and users commented on their post to help them by recommending certain recipes that they could try, as well as helping them plant a potato seed in the ground step by step (u/victor326).

Stress Relief

Lastly, the pattern we found that became our main focus to answer our research question, was people who use the game (and even the Reddit forum)

as a way to relieve stress. During our observations, we found that many users view the game as a way to provide them with a calm, relaxing experience, as well as act as a temporary escape from their problems that they face in the real world.

In an online article titled, “Can Video Games Be a Healthy Outlet for Stress Relief,” by Swapna Krishna, the author states, “As video games are becoming more mainstream, it’s likely that we’ll see more and more scholarships investigating the ties between gaming and mental health.” The author continues to state that, “The peer-reviewed journal, Games for Health, focuses closely on these topics, and in a recent paper collected the findings of several reports focusing on the effects of “simple, easy-to-use, casual video games,” (think Plants vs. Zombies, Bejeweled 2, and Sushi Cat 2) on stress, anxiety, and overall mental health.” The author states that, “Of the 13 studies reviewed, 12 showed positive outcomes for those playing games.” She adds that, “All studies that examined mood and stress noted significant improvements when compared with a passive break, surfing the web, or a relaxation activity,” this portion of the paper concludes (Krishna).

The article goes on to discuss that, “There are many benefits for adults in playing video games,” says Megan Connell, a psychologist who specializes in gaming. “They can be a way for us to relax, engage in stories, to connect with friends and family, or to just have fun.” Her words were encouraging. So were her thoughts on my beloved Switch

pastime: “For many adults I work with, I recommend games such as Stardew Valley as a good game to play for self-care. I find this game helpful as there are goals, yet there isn’t stress or pressure to get to all of the goals.”



Figure 6: A photo of character fishing.

On the Stardew Valley Reddit forum, one user, u/GourdHourder stated in a post that, “This game has given me many hours of uninterrupted solace. Slowing my mind enough to avoid panic attacks has managed to leave me little to no time to ponder self-harm for hours at a time.” It is evident that for some of those that struggle with their mental health, whether it be depression, anxiety, etc. Stardew Valley offers them a chance to not only clear their mind of negative thoughts, but to instead focus on something positive and rewarding. It gives them something they can be in control of when they cannot necessarily control their thoughts or emotions outside of the game.

Another user, u/Walkingfurball on Reddit mentioned, “I’ve been in a bad place and used Stardew Valley to escape. We know it isn’t forever. But it’s just that break from the constant cacophony of your mind that’s needed, not more improvement on an overloaded self. Welcome to the club of

one more day and congrats on finding a little section of peace.” (Krishna).

Reddit user u/happy_chicken states, “When I feel overwhelmed, this game gives me a sense of control and accomplishment, [and] when I’m depressed it gives me peace. So happy [that] I tried it.”

With observations like these, it is clear to see that Stardew Valley has brought many people a sense of comfort and escapism. As the game helps users relieve their stress, it also serves as a getaway from the troubles of their daily lives. Since Stardew Valley doesn’t have a rushed feeling with hard deadlines and extremely difficult or time-consuming tasks, users feel content playing the game at their own pace. In a sense, Stardew Valley is a game that can be picked up easily as you get to choose your own journey. You get to decide what to do, and what not to do. There is no pressure!



Figure 7: The quaint farmhouse interior where you live when you first start the game.

Krishna, Swapna. "Can Video Games Be a Healthy Outlet for Stress Relief?" Wired. February 24, 2021. Accessed December 02, 2021. <https://www.wired.com/story/casual-games-mental-health/>.

Interviews

During the interview phase, our team came up with an early interview introduction script, game-specific interview questions, and Reddit-specific interview questions. The first task our team did, was create an early interview introduction script. Our goal with this script was to make sure that our interview participants felt comfortable answering our questions, as well as to explain to them that we were here to gain more insight on Stardew Valley users who interact through the Reddit page, r/StardewValley. Our other goal was to try and find an answer to the question of, “What does the game Stardew Valley mean to you?” Our team was also interested to learn what kept users still active and playing the game, since its initial release in 2016. Our team ended up interviewing four participants that we found on the official Stardew Valley Reddit page, and we used Discord voice call and video chat to conduct our interviews with each participant.



Emotional Effect

Our team interviewed two people in the same day who just so happened to be a married couple who play Stardew Valley together. We first interviewed Lbroil, and we asked her about her experiences with the game and how she felt about it. In getting to know our first participant, we found out that Lbroil has been playing Stardew Valley since 2017. She told us that she grew up playing games

like Animal Crossing, as well as a variety of different puzzle and mystery games that all had a relaxing narrative. Lbroil told us that she typically spends several hours per gaming session playing Stardew Valley with her minimum usually being four hours at a time. She also told us that she finds Stardew Valley’s soundtrack to be very peaceful and she even listens to it when she isn’t playing the game. Since Lbroil has very high levels of stress and anxiety, for her, Stardew Valley helps relieve that stress because she finds the game to be very calming and fun. She views the game as a cute distraction, like Animal Crossing, where she is able to just enjoy the different game mechanics.

Eqles is her partner who also finds Stardew Valley to be quite enjoyable. Unlike Lbroil, Eqles didn’t start playing Stardew Valley until several years after its initial release. During our interview, he told us that he loves playing strategy games with friends and plays Stardew Valley more casually. In a single gaming session, he told us that he plays a minimum of four hours and maximum of twelve hours total. He finds Stardew Valley to be achievable without having to do a lot of work, which he likes since he wants to play a game in peace rather than have to stress over maximum productivity. When he plays in co-op mode, he makes other people do the tasks in-game that he would stress over. When describing the game to other people, he states that the in-game elements such as getting married, having children, interacting with NPCs, and decorating the house and farm, are relaxing because players are able to play the game at any pace that they would like. Our team proceeded to ask

him what the game meant to him and told us that he finds Stardew Valley to be a relaxing game with no stress. Stardew Valley is a means for him to spend time with people he enjoys spending time with. He describes the game as “low-intensity,” and has a good time relaxing while playing. Stardew Valley is a stress reliever for these two participants, as they both take their time to play the game, though in different ways.

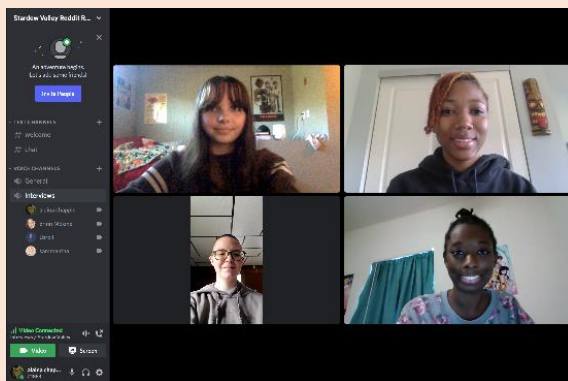


Figure 8: A screenshot from our interview with Lbroil on Discord.

Serene Feelings

Our team interviewed Nutshikas as our third participant. We asked her about her feelings towards Stardew Valley and got a similar response to the other participants answers. Nutshikas finds Stardew Valley to be one of her favorite games, and she describes it as an easy-going farm simulator game, like Harvest Moon. Nutshikas told us that she was actually recommended by a friend who plays Harvest Moon to try out Stardew Valley, so she decided to give it a try due to the two games similarities. Nutshikas has now been playing Stardew Valley since it was released on the Switch in 2017, and she would consider it to be one of her favorite games. During our interview, she told us

that she finds Stardew Valley to be very encompassing with all the features that it has. She plays Stardew Valley when she is super stressed and finds the game to be nice and repetitive. Stardew Valley, to her, is something that she can always come back to because she always knows what to expect.

The fourth participant that we interviewed was Lorien. Lorien told us that they find Stardew Valley to be a very peaceful game. Since they consider themselves to be a very social person, they find it relaxing to interact with the in-game NPCs. Unlike the other participants we interviewed, Lorien is a more recent player to the game and wouldn't consider themselves to be a gamer. During our interview with them, they told us that they probably spend one to two hours at a time playing Stardew Valley, though they could probably play for longer if they knew more about the game. When Lorien was asked if they play any other games, they responded that they play Spirit Farer and find that it has a similar vibe to Stardew Valley. Lorien told us that they love playing story-based games the most, which they find to be very calm and peaceful.



Figure 9: Emily's crystal garden in Stardew Valley

Activities and Interest

There are many factors that play a role in why Stardew Valley is used as a stress reliever for many players. From the four participants that we interviewed, we found that they each play the game in different and similar ways that make them feel less stress and anxiety. For example, Lbroil enjoys exploring the mines and engaging in combat which is a good mixture of challenge and excitement for her. She also enjoys playing with her partner and is much more focused when spending time in the mines. Eqlles, on the other hand, loves to process various artisan goods, put things into machines, sort goods, maintain organization, chop and plant trees, and make tree farms. He also finds that every task to do in the game, such as chopping down trees, is accompanied by an auditory reward. He takes pleasure in listening to the sound design of Stardew Valley because he finds it gets a pleasant response out of people. When he hears things like the trees crackling and falling with detail, he really feels like he achieves something. The soundtrack for him is a major factor of what makes the game so peaceful for him. During our interview with him, he went in detail about the specific sounds that cause him to feel relaxed. The echoing quality of the water drops, and the ringing sounds in the cave create a tranquil ambience for him. While playing, he finds that he also enjoys and appreciates the interface of the game such as the automatic sorting and organization buttons.

Like Lbroil, Nutshikas also loves mining, especially when it's a rainy day in-game and she would consider it to be one of her favorite elements in the game. During our interview with her, she

walked us through her daily in-game routine, telling us how she starts her day by checking on her animals and tending to her plants. She also told us that she enjoys using mods during her gameplay, and she uses these modification enhancements in her farm in order to make things easier for her when farming. Like the other participants, she, too, enjoys organizing and decorating her farm to make it look pretty. Nutshikas told us that she plays Stardew Valley in a certain way that makes it feel reassuring to come back to even when she hasn't played the game in a while. When she plays, she has a repetitive cycle in which she will go through multiple saved games and create new ones over and over. She told us that she has made over thirty farms and likes to binge play the game, lose track of time, and then de-stress by restarting her farm and making a new one over and over in a cycle. Each time she restarts, she tests out the different farm layouts and tries out new decorating styles. She then decides what element she wants to focus on for each playthrough of her new game, choosing whether it will be development, animals, or farming. When she finds an idea that she likes for her farm, such as a specific task, goal, or challenge she savors that moment and has a lot of fun doing it.

As for Lorien, they focus more on the social aspect of the game and enjoy interacting with the NPCs as much as possible. Doing simple things like saying hello to their in-game spouse and giving them a gift makes them feel delighted. During our interview on Discord with Lorien, they had an excited and enthusiastic tone in their voice when they were talking about their favorite

features of the game. In particular, they enjoy character interactions the most, as well as being able to restart their game whenever they make a mistake. There are a lot of fun activities in the game that have motivated Stardew Valley players to continue playing the game after all these years.



Figure 10: A player mining in the caves

Reddit Interactions

When we were interviewing each of our four participants, we asked them a series of Reddit-specific questions in addition to Stardew Valley-specific questions. In each of our interviews, there was a commonality shown in how each participant felt about the Stardew Valley Reddit forum. Overall, the participants seemed to agree that users of the Stardew Valley Reddit were very supportive and wholesome, and that there was little toxicity.

Though Lbroil would consider herself to be a more private person, she still visits the Stardew Valley Reddit page frequently. Lbroil told us that she loves seeing people be supportive of one another on Reddit whenever there are issues. She also likes seeing people's creative ideas for their farms, and she has noticed how the forum is, overall, a very positive place.

Eqles is also a private person and doesn't necessarily consider himself to be a part of the community. Though he is private, he still likes the environment of the Stardew Valley Reddit forum, stating that he would even consider playing a co-op game with someone that he met on Reddit. He also told us that he finds the help guides on Reddit to be extremely useful, and he thinks that it's easier to refer to external resources that can explain how to unlock and do certain things, than having to figure it out on his own.

As for Nutshikas, she finds that she can navigate playing Stardew Valley without using any external sources. But she still loves the Stardew Valley Reddit community and finds it to be a very positive space. She told us that people on the Stardew Valley Reddit are nice and helpful toward new players of the game. Most of the time, she uses the Reddit forum whenever there is a new update, such as when the Ginger Island feature came out, which was released in the 1.5 update.

Lorien would also agree with the other participants in stating that the Stardew Valley Reddit forum has a positive atmosphere. Lorien told us that they love seeing the way people support each other on the forum, and they like to scroll through user questions to look at the different feedback provided in the comments. Like Eqles, Lorien also uses external sources, like Reddit and Wikipedia, to help themselves progress in Stardew Valley. With that in mind, our team was able to better understand our four participants' opinions of the Stardew Valley Reddit page. Though

they may use it differently, they each see the forum as something positive and wholesome to be a part of. Both the game *Stardew Valley*, and the official *Stardew Valley* Reddit forum act as a way for users to relieve their stress as they enter a positive, relaxing, and welcoming environment.



Figure 11: Two characters sharing a warm embrace.

Conclusion

After spending time observing, interviewing, and researching Stardew Valley and the Stardew Valley Reddit page, our team has learned a lot about its users. Since ethnography is the study of people and their unique customs and cultures, we've been able to find many answers to our research question of, "What does the game Stardew Valley mean to you?" from the users that we've observed and interviewed. Through jottings and fieldnotes, we learned that people see Stardew Valley as a way to relax and ease their worries with one user stating:

"It's weird, and it's probably been said before, but this game makes me feel good because it reflects some of my real-life anxieties, but everything turns out okay." -u/lucSurMontaine

We also learned that users feel motivated to continue to play the game because of frequent game updates that add exciting new features to the game. Our interview participants Nutshikas and LBroil also mentioned these updates as motivators for them in their interviews.

"Stardew Valley really [is] a stress reliever. A lot of times I have high levels of anxiety, and Stardew Valley [is] a pretty calm game." -LBroil

Therefore, the answer to our research question of, "What does the game Stardew Valley mean to you?" has been answered as the following:

- It's a great way to lose track of time when you're feeling super stressed.

- It's a stress reliever because it's a very calming game.
- It's a means for me to spend time with people who I enjoy spending time with doing something that is low intensity.
- It's a nice repetitive thing to come back to [because] you always know what to expect.
- It's one of my favorite games, even though I wouldn't consider myself to be a gamer, [but] it's okay to suck at it.

In conclusion, Stardew Valley is a farming sim, role-playing game in which players can grow a farm, mine in caves, raise farm animals, socialize with villagers, fish, cook, craft and more. The game helps users relieve their stress by allowing them to engage in calm and wholesome gaming by themselves or with their friends. Fans of the game can also build connections with other fans by interacting with them on the official Stardew Valley Reddit forum, r/StardewValley. Here, users are free to share photos and comments related to the game, receiving feedback and kind comments from others who share a common interest in Stardew Valley. Overall, Stardew Valley is a stress reliever for a lot of its players, as it brings them happiness and relaxation when they are feeling stressed. This virtual ethnographic study has allowed our team to better understand why fans are so loyal to the game, because it means so much to them and brings them comfort. Our team has learned a lot from studying the users of the Stardew Valley Reddit page.

Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Script

Introduction:

Hello, can you hear me alright? If we could all please turn our cameras on for this part of the interview, that would be great! Ok great, well first of all, I wanted to thank you for agreeing to this interview, it really means a lot that you volunteered to take time out of your day to help us!

My name is _____, I was the one who spoke with you on Reddit, and I will be the one moderating this interview. So, your name is _____, is that correct? Ok great! So, my team members _____ and _____ will be taking notes and observing the interview while I moderate, just so you're aware.

Pause

Ok, so just to recap on why we're here, our goal is to gain insight on Stardew Valley users who interact through the Reddit page, r/StardewValley, as well as seek to answer the question of, "What does the game Stardew Valley mean to you," as well as to try and understand what keeps users still active and playing the game, since its initial release in 2016. ... So essentially, we're trying to better understand Stardew players, Reddit users, and the community of people who continue to support the game. And full disclosure, this is also part of a project for our Ethnography class at our university. Does that all make sense?

Let the participant answer.

Ok great! I see that you've also sent the Consent form back to me, so thank you for getting that filled out! I've planned for an hour timeframe for us to complete this interview, but depending on how quickly the questioning goes, we may not use up the whole hour, just so you're aware.

Pause

Ok now before we start, would you mind if my team took a quick screenshot of the call so that we could use it in our Research Report and Portfolios?

Let the participant answer.

Ok thank you!

Take the screenshot

And would you also allow us to take an audio recording of this call so we may listen back to it when we are making our notes? (The recording will be deleted after the note-taking process is complete.)

Let the participant answer.

Ok great, thank you so much! My teammate will start the recording now.

Start recording.

So just to break the ice a bit, I was wondering if you could just tell me a little bit about yourself. (Only what you're comfortable with sharing of course). This may include your level of education, your profession, your preferred pronouns, interests, whatever you want! (Take your time)

Give the participant time to answer...

Ok cool! Now we can go ahead and move on to the main questioning. I'll probably ask around ~20 or so questions that pertain to the game itself, as well as some that focus more on Reddit, and it shouldn't take longer than 30-45 minutes. Is that okay with you?

Let the participant answer.

Ok cool, let's get started!

Start asking them the questions (located in Appendix C)

Conclusion:

Ok great that's all of our questions. We wanted to thank you again for taking the time to be here. Before we end, though, was there anything else that you wanted to add that we maybe didn't touch on with these questions? Anything that you think is important to mention about Stardew Valley or the Reddit page? (If nothing comes to mind, that's totally okay.)

Ok well thank you again for participating, ____! Your answers will help us with our research. Thank you again for taking the time out of your day to answer our questions! I hope you have a great rest of your day! Goodbye!

Note: All interviews were conducted via video chat on a discord server and were recorded using Otter.ai (<https://otter.ai/>) and Voice Memos on Mac.

Appendix B: References

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Appendix C: Interview Questions

Stardew Valley Game-Specific Questions

1. How long have you been playing Stardew Valley?
2. How did you find the game, did someone introduce you to it, or did you find it on your own?
3. Walk me through what you might accomplish in an in-game day of playing Stardew Valley? (daily routine/to-do list?)
4. Would you say that Stardew Valley is one of your favorite games? Why or why not?
5. Do you mostly play games with similar vibes as Stardew Valley, or would you say you play a variety of different games?
 - a. **If yes:** Why do you think you gravitate toward this style of, what some people would like to call 'cozy gaming'?
 - b. **If variety:** What other games do you play? PC games? Console games? Mobile games?
 - c. How much time per gaming session do you usually spend on Stardew Valley?
6. What version of Stardew Valley do you play on? (PC, Switch, PS4, etc.)
7. Do you enjoy playing on that system? (I know you can add mods on PC but not on switch and I know that mods can enhance the gameplay for some people)
8. What gameplay features do you appreciate most in Stardew Valley?
9. What's your favorite thing to do in Stardew Valley?
10. What's your least favorite thing to do in Stardew Valley?
11. If someone asked you what Stardew Valley was or what it was about, how would you describe it to them?
12. Do you find that you enjoy the Stardew Valley soundtrack?
 - a. **If yes:** Do you listen to it often?
 - b. **If no:** Why do you prefer to play with the sound off?
13. Would you recommend Stardew Valley to a friend? And can you explain why or why not?
14. Do you have a lot of friends/people you know that already play the game?
15. Do you play in Co-op mode or Single Player mode most frequently?
 - a. **If both:** Do you find that you can get more things done in single-player, or co-op?
16. What does the game Stardew Valley mean to you?
17. Have you made multiple saved games in Stardew Valley, or do you just play on one game profile?

Reddit-Specific Questions

1. Are you able to navigate through the game without the use of forums from external sources? (help guides)
 - a. **If yes:** Can you give me an example of something that you were stuck on in-game but were able to get help with thanks to some people on Reddit?

- b. **If no:** Do you think that the story and in-game mechanics/puzzles are easy enough to work out on your own?
2. How active would you say you are on the Stardew Valley Reddit page? Do you consider yourself to be an active member, or do you use it more sparingly? (daily, a few times a week, once a month, only when you need help, etc.)
 3. Do you find yourself making posts more or responding to posts more? (Do you ask your own questions to receive feedback/help from others, or do you scroll through other user's questions and provide feedback/help to them?)
 4. What do you enjoy the most about being a part of the Stardew Valley community on Reddit?
 5. Is there anything you dislike about the Stardew Valley Reddit community? (Have you had negative experiences?)
 6. Have you been able to make a lot of friends through the Stardew Valley Reddit?
 7. Have you ever played in Co-op with someone that you met on Reddit?
 8. Do you watch YouTube videos or streams of people who play Stardew Valley?
 - a. **If yes:** Who do you watch? Would you say they're a good source and are knowledgeable of the game? Do they keep you entertained and make you excited to play?



