

Success Narratives and the Nuclear Family: *Stardew Valley*'s Neoliberal Ideologies Re-Packaged as a Techno-Utopia

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Abstract

In an age of neoliberal pressures and fast-paced living, the features commonly associated with slow country-living (gardening, foraging, crafting, local festivals, et cetera) have come to be idealised for their therapeutic qualities and community building practices. This desire to 'return to simple pleasures' is evident in the recent upsurge in popularity of contemporary country life video games, such as *Animal Crossing*, *Stardew Valley*, *Apico*, and *Spirittea*. This article focuses on the perceived techno-utopia of *Stardew Valley* and argues that despite presenting itself as an escape from the fast-paced pressures of 'real-life', the game remains heavily informed by neoliberal ideologies. To make this claim, we examine how *Stardew Valley*'s proposed techno-utopia remains subject to the self-improvement and meritocracy narratives that are central to neoliberal thought. Utilising a critical framework of video game theory and neoliberalism, we unpack how *Stardew Valley* sees players experiencing a sense of achievement-induced satisfaction when they are rewarded for the labour of studiously tending to flowerbeds, crops, and animals, and restoring the community centre. Moreover, players are encouraged to build relationships with characters to expand their homestead and be rewarded with a family. In doing so, the game reproduces the neoliberal focus of productivity, success, autonomy, and the commodification of play, while also epitomising the perceived achievability of the community-driven, two children, white picket fence ethos of the American Dream. In short, this article aims to demonstrate the inescapability of neoliberal ideology within virtual spaces by exploring how the escapist, techno-utopian vision *Stardew Valley* presents actually reproduces the very systemic conditions of neoliberalism that the game wants to help users escape from.

Keywords: Stardew Valley, Video Games, Neoliberalism, Meritocracy, Techno-Utopias

Introduction

In an age of neoliberal pressures and fast-paced living, the features commonly associated with slow, country-living (gardening, foraging, crafting, local festivals, et cetera) have come to be idealised for their therapeutic qualities and community building practices. This desire to 'return to simple pleasures' is

evident in the recent upsurge in popularity of contemporary country life video games, such as *Animal Crossing*, *Stardew Valley*, *Apico*, and *Spirittea*. However, rather than offering an escape from the fast-paced pressures of ‘real-life’, we contend that these contemporary country life video games are informed by neoliberal ideologies and thus subscribe to, and reinforce, neoliberal success narratives and the “perfectibility of the individual” (Verhaeghe, 2014b). This article focuses primarily on the perceived techno-utopia of *Stardew Valley* and argues that, despite presenting itself as an escape from ‘real-world’ expectations, the game remains heavily informed by neoliberalism.

To illustrate this point, this article analyses the popular open-ended farming Role-Playing Game (RPG) *Stardew Valley*, which was first released in 2016. As of March 2022, 20 million copies of *Stardew Valley* have been sold across all gaming platforms (Clement, 2023) and the game has been credited as “the *de facto* standard for all farming simulator games” by online gaming communities (Finley, 2021). The in-game narrative of *Stardew Valley* is vastly different to the “first-person shooters” that were causing authorities so much anxiety across the Western world throughout the early twenty-first century (Isbister, 2016, p. 11). Rather, this open-ended country-life RPG creates a story where the gamer plays as the central protagonist who relocates to Stardew Valley after inheriting their grandfather’s somewhat dilapidated farm. As *Stardew Valley*’s official website puts it: “armed with hand-me-down tools and a few coins, you set out to begin your new life!” (<https://www.stardewvalley.net/>). With these tools in hand, players “learn to live off the land” as the game encourages players to grow crops, raise livestock, fish, forage, cook, mine, improve the town, and build relationships with in-game townsfolk (<https://www.stardewvalley.net/>). Completing these tasks allows the player to “become part of the local community”, while restoring the farm, exploring the town’s buildings and finding in-game love (<https://www.stardewvalley.net/>). The entire game progression thus centres on creating a profitable farmstead, solving quests throughout the town, and building relationships with the non-player characters (NPCs) in the game. This paper interrogates how this popular country-life RPG utilises these resource-based quests and success narratives to produce a contemporary techno-utopia that is informed by neoliberal ideologies.

This article begins by first laying out the theoretical underpinnings of techno-utopias and neoliberalism that inform our research by situating our research within the broader study of politics within video games and postmillennial game theory. While much research on videogames, politics, and neoliberalism to date has focused on top-selling video games, the breadth and ever-evolving nature of the field means that many video games currently remain underdiscussed (Oliva, Perez-Latorre & Besalu, 2018). Our research thus contributes to current academic discussions surrounding videogames and digital culture under neoliberalism. We begin our analysis of *Stardew Valley* by focusing on the logic of the game to illuminate how the narrative progression and in-game

quests reflect and recreate neoliberal ideologies and conditions. Our neoliberal reading of *Stardew Valley* centres on three main points: the gentrification narrative of the Community Centre, the success narrative, and the incentive to develop in-game friendships and a family within the game. Our analysis of these primary examples demonstrates how *Stardew Valley* adopts the pretence of a techno-utopia whilst simultaneously subscribing to, and perpetuating, the particular neoliberal ideologies of productivity, autonomy, the family, and the commodification of play. In doing so, our research sheds light on how popular culture and everyday engagements with technology create spaces for neoliberal conditions to cement themselves as inescapable, integral ideologies of our twenty-first-century world – even within supposed moments of ‘escape’.

Techno-Utopias, Neoliberalism, and The Politics of Video Games

Our argument rests on the underlying premise that all artifacts, digital or not, have politics (Winner, 1986). In other words, video games, just like any other technology, artifact or social practice, are not just shaped by the social and political climates in which they are produced and experienced, but are politically significant in their own right (Winner, 1986); video games are inherently political technologies that both require particular kinds of political relationships in order to exist, *and* are compatible with these political values. Indeed, as Ian Bogost (2010) argues, video games can be understood as expressive and persuasive mediums, insofar as they express existing socio-cultural and political positions, while also holding the power to disrupt or change these positions. As such, this paper explores *Stardew Valley* as a technological, aesthetic, and narrative-driven artifact that: 1) is demonstrative of the political values of its cultural origins, its designers, and its presumed target audience; 2) requires these same political values to thrive in order for it to exist; and 3) reproduces these values through its game design, aesthetic choices, narrative decisions and technological affordances. In doing so, we acknowledge that the political values that we see as embedded in the game are not experienced or understood in the same way by everyone. Rather, we offer an analysis shaped by our own political context and values, that does not strive for universality, but instead aims to examine the various ways in which these values are “at play” in *Stardew Valley* (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014).

Existing cultural criticism on politics and games typically understands video games as the technological means through which collective, cultural memory of historical and political events is mediated (Matei, 2023; Pötzsch & Šisler, 2019). Similarly, post-colonial video game scholars are interrogating games as sites of hyper-capitalist globalization, militarism, and economic inequality (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2013; Dooghan, 2019). Indeed, there is a whole school of video criticism that applies post-Marxist and/or anti-colonial per-

spectives to in-game narratives and the material conditions of video game culture (see, for example: Bonenfant, 2021; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2021; Kerr, 2017; Whitson, 2019). However, too little attention has been paid to the political values embedded in the technological architecture and mechanics of games themselves (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014), or on how the contemporary political landscape of neoliberalism has impacted game narratives and aesthetics. Although there is an emerging body of work that examines the neoliberal logics of gameplay metrics (Brock, 2021) and competitive success models (Vorhees, 2015) within the e-sports industry, the focus on neoliberal ideologies as interwoven with gameplay narratives, specifically, remains absent in these discussions. As such, our work contributes to the understanding of video games as political objects, by interrogating how, despite presenting itself as an escape from the fast-paced pressures of ‘real-life’, *Stardew Valley* narratology remains heavily informed by neoliberal ideologies.

Broadly speaking, neoliberalism is a political system that harkens back to free-market libertarians, and glorifies individual self-interest, economic efficiency, and unbridled entrepreneurship. Michael R. Glass (2016) outlines neoliberalism as a “pervading hegemonic discourse that shapes the economic, social, and political world” (p. 352). Neoliberalism positions the individual at the centre and focuses on maximising profits to such an extent that concepts like “work-life balance” and “micro-wardrobes” have become pervasive guiding principles that help maximise efficient use of time. However, as Glass states, while these motivations shape the world, neoliberalism cannot be enacted by itself; it requires so-called “agents” that help it “develop into such a significant ideological feature on the landscape of late capitalism” (p. 352). In short, our quotidian behaviours and choices are shaped by our neoliberal motivations, which, in turn, continue to mould the political structure and practices we enact to perpetuate the regime – a regime from which *Stardew Valley* is far from exempt.

Video games, especially those offering idyllic slow-country living narratives such as *Stardew Valley*, are typically touted as providing ways to escape the fast-paced “9-to-5 daily grind” of neoliberalism that Glass outlines above. Players are turning to these sorts of games to relieve the pressures of life under neoliberalism. Indeed, the stress-relieving pull of *Stardew Valley* forms part of the game’s brand identity, with popular gaming technology magazines such as *Wired* asking if “Video Games Can Be a Healthy Outlet for Stress Relief”. Notably, this article outlines how “people who play to burn off stress [...] are joining the gamer ranks in droves”, using *Stardew Valley* as the cover image to demonstrate this point (Krishna, 2023). Similarly, online therapy platforms such as *Hero Journey Club* have begun using games such as *Animal Crossing*, *Final Fantasy* and *Stardew Valley* for group therapy sessions to combat stress, loneliness and help mental health (*Hero Journey Club*, 2024). In short, players are turning to games like *Stardew Valley* to escape the pressures of their lives under neoliberalism.

These games offer this escape by creating what Caroline Edwards (2019) terms “utopian moments” that allow the players to temporarily “step outside” of neo-liberal ideologies (p. 50). Edwards (2019) argues that we must “disambiguate the utopian impulse and, in particular, liberate it from fixed notions of utopia-as-totally” because, in contemporary representations of utopias, “there is no journey to the utopian island” (p.50). Rather, she posits that, while utopian narratives are “traditionally located at the edges of the known world, of capitalist circuits of trade and exchange”, a utopian narrative can also include texts that “are set in mimetic and recognisable worlds, but which also contain non-contemporaneous moments [...] that punctuate what is otherwise a relatively realist straightforward sort of narrative” (Edwards, 2020). What is important about Edwards’ clarification (2020) that contemporary utopian narratives are often set within recognisable worlds is that they offer moments of escape from material life but are crucially depicted as “the best of all possible worlds”.

Applying Edwards’ categorisation of the contemporary utopian genre to *Stardew Valley*, with its American small-town aesthetic, evocation of “simpler times” and anachronistic farming details, it becomes clear that the game presents “utopian moments” which offer moments of technological escape from the material life of neoliberalism and the “discreet disconnected trap of individual subjectivity” (Edwards, 2020). As players meander through the land, fishing, planting, and tending to their crops, they not only spend time “unproductively” away from their “real life”, but they are also able to temporarily step outside into a digital universe in which neoliberal ideologies do not appear to be the guiding ideological principles. However, despite *Stardew Valley*’s initial appearances as an idyllic, techno-utopia, the ideologies governing the ludic dimensions of the game do not align with this. As such, this article focuses specifically on the narratology of *Stardew Valley*, and the game play mechanics that have a direct impact on the in-game narrative (such as restoring the town, completing object collections and building relationships through ‘hearts’), to demonstrate how *Stardew Valley* contains strong evidence of the neoliberal ideologies that surround the context of its creation.

The Neoliberal Success Narrative

The goal of *Stardew Valley* is for players to expand their farm and acquire assets. Self-improvement and success narratives are therefore central to the logic of game progression. Paul Verhaeghe (2014a, 2014b) discusses the ways that capitalism and neoliberal politics encourage and manage particular goals and narratives surrounding success. Verhaeghe argues that “thirty years of neoliberalism, free-market forces and privatisation have taken their toll, as relentless pressure to achieve has become normative” (2014a). Under a neoliberal system, such as the one in the US, people are increasingly encouraged to achieve higher and higher grades, to be well paid, to marry and reproduce, to own property,

and so on (Verhaeghe, 2014b). The neoliberal need to succeed, then, motivates and manipulates our choices. With this cultural context in mind, we will now discuss how this neoliberal ideology of success and constant improvement is evident in one of *Stardew Valley*'s core overarching game narratives which centres on the repair, or gentrification, of the town's community centre.

Early in the game, players must decide whether they would like to repair the town's dilapidated community centre building by acquiring and then donating, game resources, or whether they would like the building (and indeed the rest of the town) to be sold to the Joja corporation who will turn it into a warehouse. The Joja corporation is not only the owner of the town's chain grocery store, JojaMart (which players discover is draining profit and customers away from the town's locally-owned store), but is also the protagonist's former employer. If the player agrees to pursue the JojaMart gentrification narrative, the community centre becomes a metallic warehouse with industrial pipes; an eyesore against the warm autumnal aesthetic of the town. A fleet of homogenous workers wearing uniforms somewhat reminiscent of police or prison guards become the "custodians" of the warehouse, and, upon its official opening, brandish a banner declaring "SUCCESS" (fig. 1). The exaggeration of the metallic dystopian warehouse with its army of de-individualised labourers and "evil" overseers is certainly not subtle – and nor is the allusion to the neoliberal success narrative. By choosing to gentrify the community centre, players are made aware that they are subscribing to an overtly capitalist ideology which prioritises the success and expansion of large business enterprises over locally-owned "community" ones and compromise the town's status as an idyllic country escape from the protagonist's corporate past.



Fig. 1 – An image of the community centre transformed into the Joja warehouse. Image found on - How To - Stardew Valley - Guide about Morris | Tom's Hardware Forum (tomshardware.com)

This thinly-veiled game design intentionally encourages players to “step outside” of the neoliberal, capitalist success plot; players are instead steered to pursue the community centre restoration narrative, as a perceived form of rebellion against the real-world and in-game capitalist society that they’ve come to escape. If players choose this alternate narrative, they restore the community centre by growing, crafting, mining, and foraging for goods to donate to the center in ‘bundles’. Once all the bundles are complete, the centre is restored back to an idyllic purple building, complete with charming awnings, window shutters, and happy Pelican Town residents (fig. 2). Moreover, upon restoration of the community centre, the JojaMart supermarket closes permanently and is subsequently struck by lightning and turned into a community movie theatre at which players can congregate to advance their in-game relationships. Although it is possible to acquire the cinema under the JojaMart gentrification narrative, it must be purchased using gold (the game currency). Similarly, all the other assets that players receive as rewards for completing bundles when restoring the community center must also be purchased, if players choose to instead pursue the JojaMart gentrification narrative. In other words, restoring the community center allows players to be reliant on foraged and hand-grown/-crafted goods, explore their town, make friends, and support their community, while choosing the JojaMart gentrification narrative makes all future in-game relationships, experiences, and assets more reliant on financial transactions.



Fig. 2 – An image of the restored community centre. Image found on Tips for Restoring Stardew Valley’s Community Center Within One Year (thegamescabin.com)

The juxtaposed utopian/dystopian imagery of the two narratives is clear, and suggests that players are able to actively step away from overt capitalism towards a more tranquil community-led game, if they choose the community

centre restoration narrative. However, while this community centre narrative superficially appears to allow players to step outside of neoliberal ideologies by distancing themselves from the dystopian capitalist agenda of the workplace and the Joja narrative, it nevertheless promotes the neoliberal idea of success (Verhaeghe, 2014b). The acquisition of goods is necessary for the restoration of the community centre; namely players must acquire items such as special fish, flowers or gems, that can only be found or made once certain thresholds have been met in the game (fig. 3). As such, players must consistently strive towards expanding their resources and skill-set in order to progress, thus demonstrating the ideologies of consumerism and meritocracy that are central to the internal logics of the game.

Stardew Valley is not the only game to subscribe to these logics. According to Flanagan and Nissenbaum's work (2014) on community driven RPGs such as *FarmVille*, on the surface, these games' "values appear to involve community, generosity, responsibility, good will, trust, friendship, and gender equity" (p. 28). However, they posit that under the surface, "the game also involves the exploitation of these values, and this exploitation often negates the positive values" (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014, p. 28). This can be seen too in *Stardew Valley*, when players spend hours merrily foraging and planting crops, or patiently fishing to find the specific fish needed to complete a "bundle", just to achieve the sense of satisfaction of unlocking further quests and becoming closer to restoring the community centre. Importantly, Flanagan and Nissenbaum (2014) also recognise the disconnect between game graphics and game values, by acknowledging how *FarmVille* "does not reflect the values that players might expect to encounter in actual farming, such as sustainability, biological knowledge, land stewardship, tradition, and empathy. Indeed, the game actively undermines some of these values" (p. 28). Similarly, while *Stardew Valley*'s game design encourages players to lean into the anti-capitalist narrative of the community centre restoration, successfully completing the restoration simultaneously encourages players to subscribe to the neoliberal need to "achieve" (Verhaeghe, 2014b), and even rewards players with the ultimate neoliberal symbol – a golden trophy for completion.

Significantly, while the game presents the gentrification plot as a choice, repairing the centre through completed "bundles" is in fact *necessary* for players to gain access to particular plots and get the most out of their gameplay (fig. 3) – a fact that does not go unnoticed by the gaming community (see Friend, 2021). This further reinforces the notion that players are manipulated into subscribing to the neoliberal objectives they seemingly escape. Aptly, Verhaeghe's work (2014a) on neoliberalism and success allows us to further interrogate the façade of choice and freedom in the game here. Verhaeghe stresses that "we are forever told that we are freer to choose the course of our lives than ever before, but the freedom to choose outside the success narrative is limited" (2014a). Applying this concept to the game, the façade of choice is evident in *Stardew*



Fig. 3 – An image of the goods required to complete a ‘bundle’ and restore on of the rooms in the community centre. Image found on Stardew Valley Player Calculates Minimum Gold Needed to Complete Community Center (gamerant.com)

Valley when we recognise that choosing to restore the community centre rather than sell it to Joja developers is necessary for players to experience the game to its full potential. As such, while the game presents a superficial sense of tranquillity, its narrative design nevertheless navigates players towards a very specific “acceptable” storyline that subscribes to neoliberal notions of success.

The Neoliberal Family

The complex and multifaceted nature of in-game relationship-building further subscribes to this success model when we consider how players are required to “gift” items they have foraged or harvested to NPCs in order to marry and have children. Each NPC living within the town has favourite items, and “gifting” these favourite items helps increase the number of hearts (used as a visual indicator of relationship level) that the player’s character has with the NPC. These favourite items may include seasonally farmed fruit like strawberries, foraged flowers like daffodils, fish like rainbow trout or crafted artisan products like cheese. The players then react to the gifts, and if they like them, the heart counter increases. The player repeats the process until they reach the maximum number of ten hearts. Successfully reaching the maximum heart level then allows the player’s character to marry the NPC and, upon successfully upgrading the character’s house, have a maximum of two children (fig. 4), (Steam, 2023).



Fig 4 – An image from Google Play advertising the game and showing the family. Found on *Stardew Valley* – Apps on Google Play

What is significant here is how the in-game relationships again centre around the neoliberal self-improvement narrative, whilst also privileging consumerism. According to Oliva et al. (2018), the experience of “freedom” to explore and create your own storyline in videogames “is based on the idea of consumption choices given by the market: acquiring objects, weapons or clothing, accumulating ‘experience points’ and investing them in new abilities for the character, customizing our avatar’s appearance and so on” (p. 615). While Oliva et al.’s research focuses primarily on action games such as *Assassin’s Creed*, their discussion of in-game choices can be clearly extended to *Stardew Valley*’s relationship narrative. In *Stardew Valley*, romantic choices centre on successfully completing tasks, and acquiring objects; rather than “accumulating experience points”, players accumulate hearts and level-up their relationship status. Material possessions thus play an integral role in *Stardew Valley* and the game rewards self-sufficiency. As Oliva et al. (2018) continue, “in neoliberal societies, we are expected to construct, manage and project our identity through our consumption choices, and this identity must give us exchange value” (p. 615). The “exchange value” for items in *Stardew Valley* is love. For example, if the player wishes to pursue the relationship narrative, once a player has *chosen* which NPC they wish to romance, they must acquire/produce specific goods and “gift” them in order to be accepted by their chosen in-game lover. Each correct gift leads to an increase in relationship status, meaning that not only must players literally buy love, but that the capitalist focus on materialism and commodities underpin the very logic of game progression.

After the player has completed the required gift-giving steps and reached a

10-heart relationship with their chosen NPC, they cannot simply cohabit with the character, but must actually marry them in order to progress their relationship. Once married and living together, players must then upgrade their farmhouse twice, by accruing enough gold from the sale of items they have grown, fished or foraged, to make adjustments such as building a nursery with a crib. Only once these stages are complete and the relationship level is maintained, are players able to take the next step and produce or adopt children. Players are only able to have a maximum of two children – one girl and one boy – to perfectly epitomise the imaginary of the nuclear family, living the white-picket fence American Dream (Loewen, 2011). The stability of the suburban nuclear family has long been privileged by Anglophone leaders such as Barack Obama and David Cameron and has been central to their neoliberal policies (Crossley, 2016). Indeed, family has long been associated with neoliberalism and narratives of productivity and success; pregnancy and parenthood are often viewed as “labour” in many forms, whether through the commercialisation of surrogacy that Sophie Lewis discusses in *Full Surrogacy Now* (2019), or the gendered affective labour of stay-at-home motherhood (Fortunati, 1995; Jarrett, 2016). This neoliberal notion of success that accompanies the achievement of having a stable nuclear family, and the labour involved in creating and maintaining it, are also central to *Stardew Valley*. The game privileges neoliberal ideals of materialism and the commodification of the family by encouraging players to overcome the in-game hurdles of acquiring a family. These multiple quantifiable markers of achievement and “success” demonstrate how the relationship-building dynamic of *Stardew Valley* subscribes to the success narrative that we highlighted above, thereby reflecting the complexity of neoliberalism and the way it seeps into postmillennial gameplay.

Conclusion

What is clear then, is that despite *Stardew Valley* being marketed and widely understood as a reprieve from the daily grind of the “real” world, the game simply *appears* as a momentary techno-utopia where players are able to temporarily step outside neoliberal ideologies (Edwards, 2019). The constant cycle of foraging, fishing, and farming that underwrite the successful completion of the community centre, alongside the relationship and family-centricity of the game, creates a player experience that distinctly subscribes to the same neoliberal expectations that motivate our everyday lived experiences. Players are encouraged to build relationships with characters, to expand their homestead and be rewarded with a family. In doing so, the game reproduces the neoliberal focus of productivity, self-sufficiency, self-improvement and the commodification of play, while also epitomising the perceived achievability of the friendly neighbour, two-children nuclear family, white picket fence ethos of the Amer-

ican Dream (Loewen, 2011). Through the crafting of these in-game narratives, *Stardew Valley* players are steered to perform active practices that reflect the political and economic structures of Western neoliberalism, thus blurring the boundaries between in-game and out-game experiences that are indicative of our increasingly digital age.

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