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LEISURE OR LABOUR

AN AESTHETIC READING OF PLAYING STARDEW VALLEY

CASSANDRA BARKMAN

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, during my PhD candidature and while I worked casually in retail, my dentist advised I get all four of my wisdom teeth removed. While a mundane procedure, it nonetheless required me to go under anaesthetic and recover at home for over a week alongside a limited diet and painkillers. Like others, I tend to see these medically enforced periods of rest as an opportunity to catch up on media, and prior to my surgery I decided this recovery week was the ideal time to start *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016). *Stardew Valley* is a ‘cozy’ top-down pixel art farming simulator game developed by Eric Barone under the developer moniker ConcernedApe that sees the player arrive in the titular valley to tend to their deceased grandfather’s dilapidated farm. Many friends and colleagues had praised and recommended *Stardew Valley* to me, but I had not yet found the meaningful time commitment to play it properly. A week off to enjoy its cozy rhythms and simulated farm management felt appropriate, particularly given I would be returning to my family home out in the country to recover.

Drawing on Fullerton and Farber's (2025) "well-read" interpretive framework, this paper offers a reflection on the emotional and aesthetic responses evoked while playing *Stardew Valley* during this specific moment in time. Over the course of one week, as the swelling and pain settled, I put over 50 hours into my virtual farm before abruptly concluding when the anxiety of hyper-optimising my in-game time became too intense. This ephemeral play experience was fleeting and individual, and transitioned from all-consuming and pleasurable to anxiety-inducing in a way that forced me to reflect on my own relationship to labour and productivity both within and outside of games. Despite its potential as a stress-relieving game (Cahill, 2025), *Stardew Valley* became my source of stress, and I argue that my experience in these distinct circumstances is a lens through which to consider the tension between leisure and labour found in both *Stardew Valley's* work-oriented mechanics and the cozy management game genre generally.

In focusing on my own experience, I also inevitably bring in my own subjectivity as both a player and a game scholar whose career now orients around the analysis of playful experiences. It is easy to see my personal experience with *Stardew Valley* as a reflection of the relationship between labour and leisure in my wider life and approach to games. Playtime for me is inexplicably intertwined with work, publications and ultimately productivity; an intertwining this article invariably perpetuates. In turning my private, quiet, individual recovery play into a professional publication I both scrutinise the way I play games – as focused on checklists, productivity and time management – and the blurring of work and play that studying games elicits.

I begin by describing the context and emotion I experienced in *Stardew Valley's* opening hours. My reflection is inevitably elliptical in places given the breadth of playtime and years that have since passed. I detail how my approach to the game shifted over time in response to learning its various systems, as well as how my experience in other games like *Minecraft* and open world RPGs informed how I played. From there, I describe how my awareness of *Stardew Valley* as labour slowly crept up on me and how it began to evoke feelings of stress and

anxiety as the quantity of tasks I had to do increased day by day. I reflect on the idea of playbour and how games can ask players to perform work (Kunzelman, 2022, p. 56), as well as how the overt intentions of *Stardew Valley*'s story and mood are at odds with its mechanical inability to reckon with complex neoliberal systems of labour and time (Crowley, 2023). Finally, I conclude by returning briefly to my farm in *Stardew Valley* years later and reflecting on the association with work and anxiety it evokes. Overall, my aesthetic reading of *Stardew Valley* reflects the game's internal tensions between being both a stress reliever and stress instigator; as both a balm and poison.

TO THE VIRTUAL (AND ACTUAL) COUNTRYSIDE

I first booted up *Stardew Valley*, in a fit of impatience, in the waiting room of the hospital. Laptop awkwardly propped in my lap and under the fluorescent lights, I'm first greeted by an old bearded man resting quietly in bed, giving their grandchild (me) a letter. A gentle fire crackles alongside and stars glint out the window. I'm told not to open the letter just yet and instead wait for the day I feel "crushed by the burden of modern life". It cuts to years later and my character is working at a company called 'Joja' heavily inspired by Amazon. The camera pans over near identical grey cubicles and concrete walls and my character sighs. She opens her desk to see her grandfather's letter. The letter describes a time where he too lost sight of "real connections with other people and nature" and in response moved to a farm in a place called Stardew Valley. It then cuts to a bus driving by rolling green hills, a clear visual contrast with the Joja office spaces moments ago. I am greeted at the bus stop by a local resident called Robin, who brings me to my farm which, while overgrown, is also steeped in greens and dry browns.

This introduction neatly sets up *Stardew Valley*'s tone and preoccupations. Given the open plan PhD offices of the last year and the drudgery of retail labour that I had been conducting for close to a decade at that point, it was easy to immediately relate to the emotion

of the scenes, even amidst the sterile environment of the hospital. The farm is explicitly framed as a respite from day-to-day life, and the charm, simplicity and pixel art graphics of its cutscenes very neatly establishes the ‘coziness’ that *Stardew Valley* is known for. Cozy games in general are associated with features such as safety, abundance and leisure that directly counter high-paced contemporary lifestyles (Andiloro, 2024, p. 79). Even its position as a farming simulator elicits a sense of comfort and control; as Bódi (2024, p. 59) describes, automated animations of nature are often associated with soothing effects, and farming mechanics offer a power fantasy that “amplifies [a] sense of agency” and authority. All this is present in *Stardew Valley*’s opening, which offered a small and comfortable respite in the hospital waiting room. I was exploring the dishevelled state of my new farm just as I was called in for surgery.



Image 1: Arriving in *Stardew Valley*.

I awoke a few hours later from the anaesthetic groggy and with a mouth that felt full of cotton and glass. My family had offered to house me while I recovered, meaning I was to spend the next week resting in my childhood home out in rural Australia. Leaving Melbourne, it was hard not to draw personal parallels to *Stardew Valley*’s opener, as the hospital and urban sprawl gave way to arid and brown plains. I felt too lethargic and unwell during the four-hour trip to access my laptop and collapsed in a daze when I arrived home, chicken coop outside my bedroom window and cow paddock over the back fence.

Waking up the next morning to soup, I eagerly booted up my laptop in bed. Potentially impacted by my painkiller-addled state,

Stardew Valley initially felt overwhelming. You have an entire farm to clear and a village of almost 30 characters to meet and explore. After the introduction, I was also intimidated by how open it felt. I had the freedom to dedicate myself to whatever task I wanted, whether that be tilling the land and growing crops, exploration, foraging or fishing. There are two key mechanical restrictions to this freedom, however. *Stardew Valley* is played in real-time, meaning its days are always slowly but surely ticking forward by 10 minutes every few seconds. This means each day, from 6am-2am, takes about 14 real-time minutes. The other restriction is an energy bar that begins the day full but depletes whenever I perform a task that requires a tool, like my pickaxe or fishing rod. I found these restrictions frustrating initially – there was so much to do but the game nonetheless forced me to limit myself, even go to bed early when I had no energy left to continue to work my farm.

After this emotional reaction, however, I learned quickly why *Stardew Valley* is considered by many a calming game; at least initially. It offered me a gentle, time intensive and slowly but surely addicting respite from the throbbing in my mouth. While I continued to find its perpetual time countdown a little stressful, the energy system required me to pace myself and vary my activities. I began to settle into a rhythm of spending my mornings vigorously clearing my farm of unwanted trees, sticks and rocks before my energy got low, at which point I would venture into town to explore and meet the locals.

At this point, the literacies and habits learned from playing other games began to kick in, especially as I became increasingly familiar with *Stardew Valley's* quest list. The quests are an ever-present list of tasks represented in the UI as an exclamation point, which both visually and habitually demanded my attention. Farming simulators are not a genre of game I have robust experience with, but the presence of a quest list gently pushed me towards thinking about my behaviour akin to an open world RPG ala *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011) or *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Bioware, 2014). In such games, my list of tasks and ticking them off one by one was often the structure that oriented my playtime, a process that I regularly found

pleasure from via the quiet satisfaction derived from the sense I am making progress.

During one of these early days, I stumbled across a ‘help wanted’ quest pinned to the front of the general store from a character asking for delivery of a specific item. For my first daily quest, from memory, I was asked to catch a specific type of fish and deliver it to Willy the fisherman. Being completely unfamiliar with where to catch what fish, I followed an instinct developed from other similarly open games like *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2012) (see Barkman, 2024, p. 213) and booted up the *Stardew Valley* Wiki (n.d.), a paratextual extension of the game maintained by fans that details all *Stardew Valley*’s systems and items. Wikis are mundane orienting supplements in many games when it comes to developing literacies (Duncan, 2011, p. 5; Gee, 2008, p. 47), and a resource that felt desperately needed to me while playing *Stardew Valley* given how surprisingly elaborate its systems could be and how little they are explained in-game. The wiki immediately clarified where to find the type of fish needed and, as I delivered it to Willy and marked it off the quest list with a small jingle of collected gold, I felt a small sense of satisfaction.

The daily quests became embedded into my routine – clean my farm in the morning, explore the town in the afternoon, check the daily quest and peruse the *Stardew Valley* Wiki for small details to complete quests. Slowly but surely, as I got deeper into *Stardew Valley* and its range of systems, my use of the wiki shifted from a trickle to a deluge as I increasingly discovered the benefits of the clarifying details it provided. This reliance became even more pronounced when, on my fifth in-game day, I gained access to the community centre, a run-down building in the north of the township that you can improve by providing specific items such as crops, foraged and artisanal items. The community centre is the main source of ‘progression’ in *Stardew Valley* in how it is required to unlock meaningful upgrades like new areas of the town and items. What the community centre needs is always viewable in your inventory at the push of a button. The UI also tells you what items can be donated to the community centre by hovering over them with the mouse, making the item wriggle as if eager to be donated.

Despite the open-ended gameplay that *Stardew Valley* provides, the quest list and community centre became my central goal and the lens through which my playtime became focussed. The wiki especially allowed me to optimise my time, knowing where and when I could collect every item required for each bundle. At this point in play, I began to adopt what Andiloro (2023, p. 139) would characterise as a techno-instrumental attunement, a mode of play hyper-focused on accumulation, productivity and a perception of the landscape as resource to conquer and control. I began planning seasons of crops in advance – *Stardew Valley* has a four-season calendar with each season lasting 28 in-game days – both to optimise the most profitable types of crops and ensuring I would not miss a single required item for bundles each season. *Stardew Valley's* seasonal cycle made me fastidious; the prospect of missing a single foraged item or crop one season instilled a pang of anxiety over the prospect of waiting an entire in-game year before having the opportunity to claim it again. As the days of recovery went on, I became a ruthless time manager, too, planning out each day's goal and researching all the best money-making methods for my farm. I found an online resource that allowed me to plan my farm in advance (Stardew Planner V3, n.d.) and began to research sprinklers and other ways to cut down my in-game tasks so I could focus more on mining, daily quests or collecting all the fish each season.

Within a few days of recovery, and near constant play sessions, my farming operation had expanded massively. I had a planned location for each crop each season, had recently purchased a chicken coop and had begun to plant different types of trees to tap them for resources like maple syrup, oak resin and pine tar. I was obsessed. My checklist fell rapidly before me like grass underfoot. It should be worth noting that this time was highly pleasurable – not only from the satisfaction of steady progression, but also in how absorbing it became and how easily it distracted from the discomfort I was in. I scarcely left my bed and became immersed in spreadsheets both online and provided by friends. My farmer was so committed to her plot of land that she worked 6am to midnight, poured over spreadsheets, neatly arranged crops in rows, kept the animals fed, all day every day with no break.

Much like my farmer, *Stardew Valley* also became my life – over the course of my five-day recovery, I sank over 50 hours in-game, making for about 10 hours a day.

LABORIOUS LEISURE

By the time I was ready to return to my job and thesis in Melbourne, my farmhouse had reached the largest size possible, with both a second story and basement (the latter of which I used to store dozens of preserve jars), and my farm contained a warehouse, greenhouse, slime hutch, a barnyard, chicken coop, a fish pond, a mill, half a dozen silos, some fruit trees, a stable and a wealth of cows, goats, sheep, pigs, chickens, ducks and rabbits. I had completed the community centre early into my second year and even married one of the villagers, with the wiki giving me the tools to optimise my relationship growth with them through regular gifts.

While I couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction looking at my evolving farm arrangement, the pleasure I originally derived from my optimisation had quietly, and almost without my awareness, begun to give way to stress. Central to this was how much my routine and to-do list had exploded. While I had progressed far enough to optimise some systems, such as watering the plants, my mornings still required me to check my preserve jars, greenhouse, the slime hutch, feed the animals, collect their produce, harvest the grass, check the fish farm, collect the honey and repair the endlessly degrading fences on top of my ongoing quests to mine deeper and collect more iridium to upgrade all my equipment. What had originally started as a fun box-ticking exercise while recovering had started to shift into a time intensive obligation; a form of work, even.

One might argue that, through my wiki use and focus on productivity and time optimisation, I was playing against the intentions of the game set up in its opening minutes. While *Stardew Valley* the town is framed as an escape from the challenges and stress of the daily grind – as a soothing alternative to “high-paced, contemporary lifestyles” (Andiloro, 2024, p. 79) – I had instead brought the high-paced lifestyle with me to the point where my time in *Stardew Valley* had begun to

look like labour. In hyperfocusing on productivity and the ticking clock, I had inadvertently brought the acceleration of time found in our increasingly digital society into this digital world (see Hassan, 2020; Wajcman, 2015). However, I was still functioning within the play practices and systems afforded by *Stardew Valley* itself; the exclamation point of the quest list and the constant presence of the community centre had invariably directed my behaviour towards this point. This means I disagree that I was completely playing against *Stardew Valley's* intentions. Instead, I believe my experience exists within a slippage between two competing elements – *Stardew Valley's* framing and its actual mechanical systems.

Crowley (2023) describes the tension at the core of *Stardew Valley* as a difference between Barone's intentions and the difficulty of grappling with complex neoliberal systems that the game invariably ends up perpetuating. Barone in interviews has described *Stardew Valley* as anti-capitalist and "a plea for individuals and communities to empower themselves" (Leack, 2016), an intention that inevitably contrasts with Crowley's (2023, p. 23) argument that the game simulates a neoliberal reality and various capitalistic behaviours (see also Bódi, 2024). Its use of checklist progression, upgrades, accumulated resources, intensification of agriculture and wealth accumulation invariably replicated the exact logics in me Barone aspires to critique. My time playing *Stardew Valley* may have begun by leaving my labour and obligations behind to briefly focus on leisure and recovery, but I ended by inadvertently being sucked back into the addictive feedback loop of its recreated capitalist systems. My time evokes comparisons to Kücklich's (2005) 'playbour', behaviours that blur work and play together. *Stardew Valley*, during my recovery, allowed me to feel productive while supposedly 'playing', compelling me to, paraphrasing Goggin (2011, p. 361), "amuse myself in[to] [stress]".

In *Stardew Valley*, I adopted the role and performance of a dedicated worker as farmer. *Stardew Valley* had asked me to perform the same actions as a farm labourer, and I had readily complied (Kunzelman, 2022, p. 56). While a lot of *Stardew Valley's* work is invariably abstracted – pressing buttons on a laptop in bed is far removed from actual manual labour – what I was performing nonetheless embodied the role

of a time-optimised worker. I planned every day's schedule, rarely took breaks, and become oriented entirely around my prescribed tasks in a manner entirely at odds with the initial coziness and flexibility of *Stardew's* presentation and gameplay. Andiloro (2024, p. 80) describes the aesthetic of cozy games as often being seen as anti-capitalist and a means of slowing down and resisting hegemonic game design practices that emphasise competition, speed and violence. Despite this, both Andiloro (2024, p. 81) and Bódi (2024, p. 60) also argue that cozy games regularly perpetuate these same pressures of capitalism through their focus on consumerism, individualism and productivity. My experience with *Stardew Valley* reflects this exact dichotomy; the game was both a soothing balm to help my recovery process and a poisonous intrusion of the real-world systems of labour and exploitation that I had temporarily fled from. It draws comparisons to Steigler's (2013) definition of the pharmakon as both cure and poison, though elaborating on that relationship remains a productive area of future analysis.

Returning home to both my PhD and casual retail work waiting for me, I found my time playing *Stardew Valley* waned rapidly. My sudden loss of leisure time allowed me to slowly but surely ween myself off the obsessive addiction to its gameplay loops I had gotten lost in a week prior. It was at this point that I became more conscious of the affective impact *Stardew* was having on me, too. Despite feeling compelled to regularly play, each in-game workday began to evoke spikes of anxiety as the clock ticked down while I hurriedly tended to everything in my farm, rushed into town to deliver gifts and buy more seeds. Yee (2006, p. 70), in an article describing how MMORPGs also blur the distinction between work and fun, quotes a participant who says "the problem is that [the game] goes from enjoyable to just work so gradually that unless you step back for a while and evaluate you do not even realise you are working". The irony that what forced me to step back from *Stardew Valley* was my real-world work and obligations is not lost on me.

My final in-game day was a weekday morning prior to a retail shift in the afternoon. It is the 16th day of Autumn, which *Stardew Valley* fans will recognise as the day of the Stardew Valley Fair, during which I can enter the Grange Display Contest to show off produce from my farm

and gain tokens that can be exchanged for prizes. While I looked over the various spreadsheets and wiki pages explaining how to win the contest and maximise my tokens, a wave of fatigue settled over me. Suddenly it did not feel worth all the planning and optimisation just to win the contest, or even continue playing the game. I shut it down and started preparing for work, not conscious of the fact it would be the last time I played *Stardew Valley* in years.



Image 2: Returning to the farm in 2026.

Even now years later, reopening my old save file to refresh my memory for this article, stepping onto my farm gives me the same quiet sense of anxiety that opening my work email does. The befuddlement of having to remember what does what and having the animals roam across my farm due to degraded fences makes the game feel too insurmountable to start again. Given I was working on a thesis about videogame narratives at the time, it is also interesting to reflect on the inevitable interweaving of labour and leisure that being a (now salaried) games academic affords. Writing and teaching about play and games has become my career, meaning all my leisure time, even if it is not directed towards games I need to play for review or research, comes tinged with an awareness that it remains an extension of my work. Even this article highlights how previous private and reflective game experiences can become the fodder of research outputs. *Stardew Valley*, irrespective of its cozy atmosphere and supposed anti-capitalist intentions, therefore forced me to reflect on the inextricable interweaving of labour and leisure I continue to grapple with daily. *Stardew Valley* helped me recognised the dual positionality of games in my life – as both an escape, and an obligation.

CONCLUSION

Drawing from Fullerton and Farber's (2025) "well-read" interpretive framework, this paper has offered a reflection on the emotional and aesthetic responses *Stardew Valley* evoked in me over the course of a week of playtime. Beginning absorbing and pleasurable before slowly but irrevocably become a source of stress and anxiety, *Stardew Valley* is a helpful game to think through the impact cozy games have had on me and other players, and the exploitative labour systems they can inadvertently recreate. My response reflects the habits and expectations I not only bring to games but also the interweaving of leisure and labour that studying and writing about games can embody. Both Fullerton and Farber's (2025) framework and *Stardew Valley* shows how deeply individual, personal and affecting play can be, and how such play is rarely neutral or detached from the systems of power and labour around us.

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