

Research Portfolio

by Ellie Saunders

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Research Portfolio

Module Code: ACCA4041	Module Title: Games for Positive Impact
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Stardew Valley

Stardew Valley [1] is an indie country life RPG game made in 2016 by Eric "ConcernedApe" Barone. The game begins with the player inheriting their grandfather's old farm which they must build from the ground up while exploring the town and getting to know the residents. The game's biggest appeal is that it is open ended with no winning goals or particular method of progression, so the player is encouraged to do what they please, whether that's focusing on gathering materials, generating revenue, getting to know the townsfolk or exploring. This feature of the game greatly benefits the players as each playthrough feels different depending on how they go about it.

The most significant way the game has a positive impact is through pacing and how each day plays out. The game progresses through days, each day lasts around 13 and a half minutes which the players must utilise to the best of their ability. This encourages its players to develop their time management and planning skills through trial and error. The game also punishes players who are unsuccessful with their planning, for example the player has an energy bar which dictates how much manual labor they can do a day, if the player exhausts their character they will pass out which not only ends the day but makes runs the risk of the player losing items depending on where they are at the time. In the same way the player must be in bed before it hits 2am, if not the player's character will fall unconscious no matter what they are doing or where they are, this results in items being taken from their inventory or loss of money as well as only regaining half their energy bar the next day.



Stardew Valley Energy Bar



Stardew Valley Exhaustion

The game also encourages the player to plan ahead with the use of the TV which tells players the weather for the next day so the player can create a plan for what to do, as an example if it is raining they don't have to water the crops and therefore can go to the mines instead. The TV also tells the player their luck which impacts things such as the probability of finding ladders in the mines or the size of fish the player catches [2]. Another feature the player must

think about is inventory space, since there are limited slots the player must carefully choose what they wish to leave and take each day as there is no easy and quick place to drop off items. In the same way as the TV, the game also features a calendar which dates events during the year such as the birthday of towns' people, events like the Stardew Valley fair, and when the season changes. Each of these events has something to offer the player whether that's unique cutscenes, increased friendship, limited goods, and the beginning of a new season. The player must navigate these events carefully, especially the ending of a season as all crops will die and be rendered useless the next day unless they are inside or can live through that season. This forces the players to think ahead and take into consideration how much seeds are and how long they take to grow to ensure they get the most out of what they buy. For events like the Fairs, players must ensure they have enough money to buy limited goods such as strawberry seeds which generate a large amount of revenue but need a long time to grow despite how late into the season the player gets them. This encourages the player to think ahead to the next year as having these seeds would be very beneficial to have early next spring.



Stardew Valley Spring Calendar

The game also covers issues which can be mirrored to real life. One of the main goals of the game is to build up the community center as it is one of the most demanding tasks throughout the game. At the very least it takes one full in-game year to complete if the player manages to gather everything needed from each season and requires the player to give up a lot of their money and materials. However, there is a way you can avoid this which is through the Joja Mart. The player at the start of the game is given the choice between salvaging the community center or becoming a Joja member which turns the community center into a Joja warehouse, and the original warehouse becomes a movie theatre. This represents the debate of community vs convenience [3]. It tests the player's patience and whether they are willing to give up their time and effort in favour of the community with the possibility of not being recognised for all the work and effort that went into it, or if they would chose the convenient route of paying a fee and embracing cooperate convenience. Steam actually shows that 22.5%

of players have gone and completed the community center while only 6.6% of players have completed the Joja Mart route [4], which allows us to see that a lot of people are willing to work for their communities and shows the values of most players.

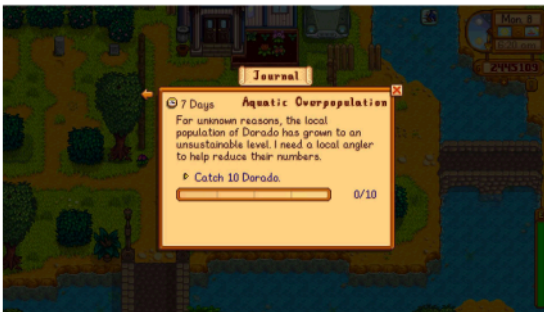


Stardew Valley Community Center [5]



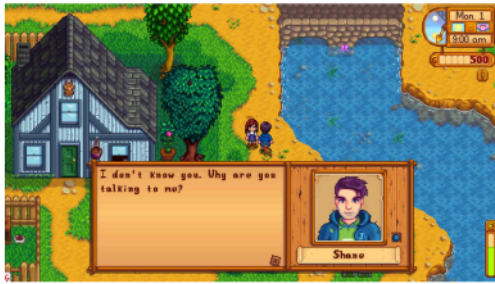
Stardew Valley Joja Warehouse [6]

Stardew Valley also addresses environmental problems and encourages its players to challenge these issues and see after the environment. The game brings up conversations about the environment and issues such as overfishing and endangered species, an NPC named Demetrius who often puts in requests for the player to decrease the population of certain fish to protect the eco system. This encourages the player to also think and take care of the environment outside of the game and think about how their actions may affect the wildlife around them.

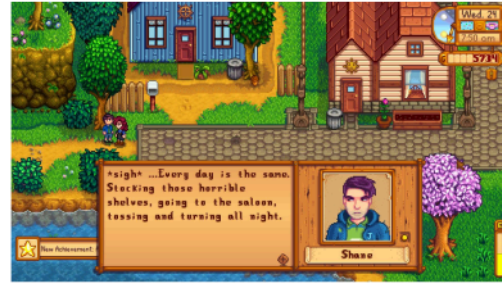


Stardew Valley Aquatic Overpopulation Request [7]

Stardew Valley also has mental health representation. It is important to note that it isn't pivotal to the game, and it can be easily missed by the players. This representation comes in the form of an NPC called Shane [8]. This character when the player first meets him comes off as very cold and grumpy, however given time it comes clear to the player that he struggles with an alcohol addiction and depression. As the player gets closer to Shane, his dialogues change to become more friendly, but also very self-deprecating.



Stardew Valley Shane 0-2 Hearts Dialogue



Stardew Valley Shane 4-6 Hearts Dialogue

In his friendship cutscenes that happen after you earn a specific number of hearts the player sees the guilt and hate he has for feeling the way he does. This mirrors how a lot of people struggling with depression feel and really brings these feelings to light without playing them down or covering them up. The game does a very good job at showing just how much mental health affects not only the person dealing with it but the community; it also highlights how these issues aren't a quick and easy fix. The player will often find Shane in the saloon even after he shares that he is seeing a therapist and plans to stop his unhealthy habits, which accurately shows that even while getting help a person isn't magically fixed and that people will still have bad days and in certain circumstances relapse. Another important note is his room, if the player was to romance him and have him move in his room is still dirty like how it is in the ranch he stayed in before. This is an important feature to note as it shows that despite having a solid support system, a person struggling with mental health may still struggle with basic upkeep such as keeping their room tidy. This again is an accurate yet subtle representation of mental health and how it affects a person and the people around them.



Stardew Valley Shane 6 Heart Event



Stardew Valley 7 Heart Event

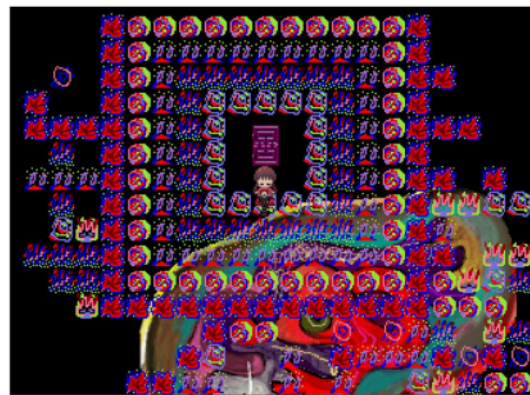
Yume Nikki

Yume Nikki [9] is an indie adventure game created in 2004 by Kikiyama. The game starts with a girl named Madotsuki in her apartment which the player plays throughout the game and the player is expected to explore her dreams and collect objects called effects [10] throughout the game. Unlike a lot of games, Yume Nikki does not follow a story line, nor does it have any dialogue to aid the players where they need to go. As a result, the player is encouraged to make their own path and explore as they please throughout the girl's dreams and make their own assumptions into what is happening and what each one symbolises. This makes the game unique for every person and forces players to create their own take on the game with the only goal of collecting all the effects.

Yume Nikki is best known for its symbolism and its representation of mental health [11]. Despite the game not having any dialogue or plot to follow the theme is very clear, though what parts of that are up to interpretation. This is shown best within her dreams as most of the rooms are very bland and dark while being unique every time. Each of these rooms has their own themes and uses the scenery to reflect emotions and the state of the character they are playing.



Yume Nikki Eyeball World

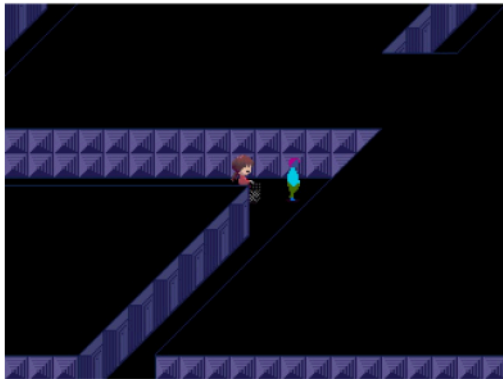


Yume Nikki Graffiti World

The world the player and Madotsuki traverse through are the main sources of story telling the player is exposed to. Each area is unique and provides its own theory as to why they are there. As there is no dialogue or told plot, the player is left to determine what the themes mean and how they are related. The most prominent themes throughout each of these rooms are isolation and loneliness; this is mostly shown through the dark rooms with disturbing imagery, a lack of NPCs in a few rooms, and the lack of interaction the NPCs have with the

player. With there being no real way of direction players often feel very confused and uncertain, paired with the disturbing imagery which is found throughout the game the player is likely to feel rather overwhelmed and lost which is a direct look into how people struggling with mental health on a daily basis feels.

The same feelings are provoked when Madotsuki tries to interact with NPCs [12]. Unlike most games, Yume Nikki doesn't have any aggressive NPCs as such; most will always ignore the player despite interacting with them. Others will either run away making a sound close to screaming, or they will chase the player and teleport them to an inescapable area. This creates an overwhelming sense of loneliness and isolation within the player as it can cause them to feel like they are facing this disturbing area alone. Which again directly mirrors how a person struggling with their mental health may view the world.



Yume Niki Mall Shoppers



Yume Nikki Dave Spector

The ending of the game is also very impactful for the players, even if a person doesn't understand fully what is going on throughout the game, the ending still has weight. Once all 24 effects have been obtained the player puts them all down in a room and a cutscene plays where Madotsuki jumps off the balcony of her apartment with a heavy thud and a pool of blood fading in. This forces the player to acknowledge the weight of the game and reflect on the previous events that occurred during her dreams as well as what it all could have meant.

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Research Portfolio

GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

62/100

GENERAL COMMENTS

Marks Breakdown

1. Engagement With Literature Skills (66%)

2. Knowledge & Understanding Skills (59%)

3. Cognitive & Intellectual Skills (60%)

4. Practical Application Skills (n/a%)

5. Transferrable Skills for Life and Professional Practice (n/a%)

Overall Mark: 61.5%

Tutor's Feedback:

Providing a short introduction as part of the submitted work would be good to see as this will help establish the report's theme and content before moving into the case studies.

Evidence of referencing in the text is good as this indicates that research has been applied. Expanding on this would be good to see, particularly by

bringing in research from real-world sources that your case studies are addressing, such as social interaction and time management.

A bibliography has been included in IEEE format, as specified by the assessment brief. Good work.

Use of images is good to see as this adds context to the written element. In particular, the comparison between certain player actions shows analytical abilities being applied to the work.

The content of the report is largely focused on the contents of each case study - it would be good to see how this would relate more to how this can have a positive impact on players through insight, education, reliability, accessibility, etc. This would enhance the content and allow for more marks to be awarded.

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