



How to Live Under Capitalism, According to 'Stardew Valley'

'Stardew Valley' doesn't challenge capitalism by trying to escape from it, but by teaching a lesson on generosity.

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This is [Controller](#), a column by Chris Karnadi on looking at the world and its discontents through the lens of video games.

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The default of many games is capitalist. Money, and the accumulation of it, is often core to a game's mechanic.

Pokémon games give you money when you win battles. Wins in FIFA's Ultimate Team reward you with coins, which are used to buy more players to build a better team—which you can do more quickly if you spend real money via microtransactions. Post-apocalyptic games like *Horizon Zero Dawn* don't break away from currency either; metal shards act as cash traded for weapons, armor, and supplies.

Even the most community-centered games can default to using currency as a way to measure value and success—like the farming simulator *Stardew Valley*.

The game pits a community living in the eponymous Stardew Valley against Joja Mart, a massive corporation with a logo reminiscent of Amazon's. As the protagonist, you begin as a corporate cog at the brink of burning out, before escaping city life and moving to your deceased grandfather's farm. When you arrive in the quaint town, you meet a cast of villagers, learn to fish and farm, uncover the town's history, and maybe find a romantic partner.

The main narrative fork that you face as a player revolves around restoring the town's tattered community center. To restore it, you have two choices: either offer an oddball list of produce and crafted goods from your farm to otherworldly sprites named Junimos who, in return, magically revive the center; or simply pay Joja Mart lots of cold hard cash to do the renovation for you.

Both are viable options, but the game will shame you if you pick one path over the other. Guess which one.

I first played *Stardew Valley* with my partner when we were long-distance. During one visit, I spontaneously bought a Nintendo Switch; by the end of the weekend, she bought one too. After she flew back home, we started looking for games to play together, and my coworker suggested we, figuratively, start a farm.

We worked together to design our farmland, to water and harvest our crops through the four seasons. We spent the mornings at the farm taking care of our vegetables and animals, and then split off to do whatever we wanted for the rest of the day. I mostly went fishing and mining, while she built relationships with the villagers. It was a relaxing way to spend time together online—to share a virtual home—while living apart.

While she wooed her soon-to-be wife and gave gifts to the local carpenter, I worked my way down the one hundred twenty floors of the nearby mine, getting knocked out many times in the process by the monsters roaming the shafts. While searching for rare ore with a pickaxe in one hand and a sword in the other, I forgot about a quest the mayor gave me: meet all of the villagers. I only obliged when I realized that fulfilling the quest would reward me with money.

When I decided to start my own save file, I saw that my fearless charge into the mines to find gold reflected a larger pattern in how I play video games. I obsess over making money, regardless of how much I need. In *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, I had tens of millions of bells, the in-game currency, by the end of my first weekend of playing the game. In *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, I played a minigame over and over for hours until I had over a hundred thousand rupees. I've never fully used my money in either game.

In my new farm on *Stardew Valley*, the same pattern emerged. I couldn't stop earning money. I looked up guides on 'min-maxing' to make as much money in the game in as little time as possible. I ignored crops with bad profit margins. I focused on farm animals which netted me more cash. I wound up with three barns filled with pigs that hunted for truffles.

After buying those three dozen pigs, I bought the most expensive items in the game—one of which was the Return Scepter, which transports you back home with a click; a statue that produces gold or diamonds every day. I didn't need the items. I'm not sure I ever used the scepter.

As I spent extravagantly on my own farm, I ignored the story's option of building a house for Pam and Penny, a mother and daughter living in a trailer by the town's river, as an act of charity. Building the house offered no benefits to me, I reasoned to myself. I chose to keep my money for myself instead of sharing it. *Stardew Valley* wanted me to challenge capitalism, but I turned it into a money-centered, selfish grind.

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I try to be anti-capitalist in my life. Once, I paid the rest of my roommate's tuition for a semester in college when a lingering student bill threatened to make him drop out. I avoid delivery apps; I bike or walk to the restaurants around me to pick up my food. I haven't ordered anything from Amazon in almost two years, even as my parents used my university email for the Prime student pricing. It's not much, but I try to back up my hatred of large corporations with my actual spending practices.

However, in *Stardew Valley*, my goal for the anti-capitalist game quickly became making the most money possible. The result is that I, according to my partner, "made money meaningless." I made millions and couldn't fully use what I had. I accumulated more money alone than my partner and I had made the entire time we played together.

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On March 8, 2020, I woke with a start in the middle of the night, crawled to my computer, and paused my first Roth IRA investment. I had a sinking feeling that something in the world would break, so I canceled the \$1,000 dollars directed toward a target 2050 retirement fund.

The next day, stocks tumbled over fears of Covid-19. The Dow Jones industrial average dropped 1,300 points that morning and triggered a fifteen-minute "circuit breaker" to prevent selling and a further freefall, before finally finishing at a 2,000 point loss over the day.

My midnight premonition led to a sigh of relief and a sigh of guilt. On one hand, I didn't lose ten percent or more of my scheduled \$1,000 investment. On the other, I felt sheepish when my friends began applying for unemployment benefits as the pandemic shut down their jobs. While some of them moved back in with their parents, I began funneling thousands into future security, even profiting from the global fear that carried over into that precipitous drop.

Over the past year, I've been revising my narrative of privilege. As a child of immigrants, I've gotten a lot of questions about where my parents came from, if I've been there, and how they succeeded here in the United States. As a teenager, I had to fill in the gaps I had between my vague ideas of their early years in the US and their transition from Indonesia to Cleveland, Ohio. It's hard to delineate between what they've actually told me and what I assumed was true.

I thought my parents were poor when they came to the US. They went on dates at Popeye's with a coupon because that's what they could afford. My mom babysat for a rich family and brought me and my sister along because my dad was at work too. When a fire grew a few floors above their apartment, my parents only realized it when people on the street yelled at them with the news; the building didn't have fire alarms and soon closed because of code violations.

From their stories, I assumed we didn't have money—which was true, but we weren't as poor as I'd assumed.

My grandmother came to visit my family in northeast Ohio and help my mother before and after she gave birth to me. By that time, my parents were well into their immigrant story. They had moved from an apartment tower in East Cleveland to a four-bedroom house in the suburbs. My father had earned his bachelor's and master's degrees, and secured a job in engineering. My mother had my sister, and then me five years later.

In the months that my grandmother helped my mother take care of me, she learned that my parents still owed over five figures on their mortgage. She relayed the news back to my uncle in Indonesia, who owned and ran the family factory and business. He wired the entirety of the remaining amount to my parents in an interest-free loan.

I first heard this story when my parents offered me an interest-free loan for grad school. Over three years and a half years, I worked internships and part-time jobs, got food stamps, and lived dangerously close to an empty bank account to chip away at my tuition. The rest I borrowed from my parents with my own five-figure sum.

After landing my first job after grad school, I began paying my parents back. My parents reprimanded me for aggressively paying back what I owed them instead of saving. So they proposed an idea: Instead of paying the rest of my debt, I should put the balance I owed into a retirement fund.

To have an interest-free loan was a privilege, but this was privilege wrapped in more privilege. I was paying back an interest-free loan to my future self.

At the end of 2019, those who borrowed federal funding for higher education owed [over \\$501 billion](#) in student loans, for an average of over \$30,000 per person. And an increasing number of people fail to finish paying their student loans, even as the average amount that students borrow keeps rising. The number of senior citizens with student loans has grown [over seventy percent](#) in the past five years.

The student debt crisis is swallowing my friends, and I don't know how to help them. As much as I'm grateful to my parents for the gift and support they've offered me, I see the holes in the system that I've escaped, in the ideal of capital-R Retirement that I'm investing in. I can't just try to save myself. What good is a financial future if the whole thing collapses?

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In video games, there's usually a method to 'farm' an infinite amount of money.

I found a well-trodden path to making money in *Stardew Valley*, thanks to Reddit on one screen and a profit calculator on the other. First, I unlocked a greenhouse where I could grow seasonal crops year-round. Next, I gathered rare Ancient Fruit seeds, then filled the greenhouse with one hundred sixteen of them. I bottled the fictional fruit into pricey wine to triple their value.

One hundred sixteen bottles of Ancient Fruit wine every in-game week netted me 267,960g. Eventually, when I fully upgraded my house and built a wine cellar, I aged one week's worth of wine in my cellar to make 873,180g every two seasons—which, according to the game's physics, is equivalent to two in-game months.

Every other month—or, if you played as much as I did, every week in real-life time—I made more than 2,748,900g.

If I'm an anti-capitalist, why did I obsess over making money in *Stardew Valley*?

My obsession was particularly ironic considering the nature of *Stardew Valley* itself. The game focuses on bringing a town together by rebuilding a community center. The climax of the game—should you choose to revitalize the center with the fairy-like Junimos rather than Joja Mart—is the celebration at the shiny, restored center with the entire town, the people that have become your friends and family. The town banishes Joja Mart from the valley, and chooses instead to pay more money at the local general store than the cheap deals of the superstore. The owner of the general store literally punches the Joja Mart manager, and then lightning strikes the abandoned Joja warehouse.

As you rebuild the community center, the Junimos also restore parts of the town overnight. They repair the local shuttle bus to the nearby desert; they fix the mine carts all over the valley, making the whole map more easily navigable; they even restore the broken greenhouse on your farm. To accomplish this, I offered the Junimos produce from my land. In return, they gave me the greenhouse—which gave me my hoarded millions—and then they created a pantry that served the entire community.

With this narrative arc, the game emphasizes how community is slowly revitalized by investment. The investment isn't just throwing money at a problem in an act of corporate charity, but a result of sharing the resources you produce on your farm. *Stardew Valley* doesn't challenge capitalism by trying to escape from it, but by teaching a lesson on generosity.

By focusing so much on how much money I could make in *Stardew Valley*, I was no different from the profit model of Joja Mart. But *Stardew Valley* subtly tried to teach me another way of using resources—not by avoiding money itself, but by showing how freely offering aid to others can rebuild communities.

While working on edits for this essay, I went back to my save file and bought Pam and Penny the house. The “community upgrade,” as it's called, costs 500,000g and 950 bundles of wood. 500,000g is supposed to be a lot of money; the three upgrades to your own house only cost 160,000g in total. But it was less than half of what I had leftover in my old save file.

In the game's story, Pam is an alcoholic who doesn't have many friends in town besides the bartender. She doesn't have a job until she gets one as the driver when the shuttle bus is restored. By simply giving her a house, *Stardew Valley* pushes against the idea of an individual earning their way out of need, and instead envisions a community sharing their way out of need.

I'm still parsing the privilege my parents have offered me by making me pay off my school loans to my future self. But in a way, they're sharing with me the lessons of generosity their families shared with them. In the face of precarity, resource sharing is how families and communities—both real and virtual—survive.

However significant these acts of generosity are to individuals, they are still so small in the societal scheme. *Stardew Valley* can't escape from the capitalist default of currency, and I can't defeat capitalism by buying from local artisans or Venmoing money to friends without health insurance. Our individual acts of uncompensated goodness won't bring the structural change that we need overnight, but they can chip away at the inward arc of capitalism. And perhaps together, with the help of a little Junimo magic and thunder, we can build better communities.