



How Stardew Valley put me through a mid-life crisis

Features

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by Harry Mackin

Farming simulators are often called 'relaxing,' but that's only if you let them.

I met Abigail on my ninth day in the Valley. It was the first rainy day. I decided that I wouldn't spend today clearing my

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STARDEW VALLEY



overgrown fields. Instead, I headed into town. I wanted to meet a few new neighbors and maybe buy some seeds.

Abigail was in the store when I arrived. She had purple hair. When I introduced myself, Abigail said, "I heard someone was moving into that old farm. It's kind of a shame, really. I always enjoyed exploring those overgrown fields by myself." It was a strange thing to say, but it made me laugh. I'd been enjoying the fields, too. The next day, I went back to the store. I went the day after that, too.

Spring

The common refrain about farming simulators is that they're "meditative." I've never found this to be the case. I have fond memories of playing *Harvest Moon 64* with my sister, but they're not meditative. I remember struggling to figure out how to make enough money to afford a greenhouse by winter. Or how we could convince Ellie to marry us and not her coworker. Or how the hell fishing worked. *Dark Souls* is "meditative;" farming simulators are *stressful*.

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I brought this baggage with me to *Stardew Valley*. Sure, the opening -- where your avatar quits their job to revive their grandfather's farm -- got me charged up to stick it to materialism. But when I got to the farm, I quickly went from inspired to frantic.

I don't usually do much roleplaying, but in *Stardew Valley* I found myself diving into it, for some reason. When I spent my day a certain way, it wasn't only because that was the best move; it was also because that's what I thought the character would do.

I decided I was going to do with *Stardew* what I never had with *Harvest Moon*: master it.

Stardew Valley's early hours do a great job of making you feel like a fish out of water. Everything -- from the size of the world to the deadline I was so sure awaited me -- felt overwhelming.

I decided I was going to do with *Stardew* what I never had with *Harvest Moon*: master it. I wrote out a two-year plan. I was going to get married by the end of the first year. I was going to rebuild the community center by my second summer. I was going to fill up the museum. By the time spring was halfway over, I had acclimated to the game's systems. I had my process in place. I got to work.

One day, during an early expedition into the mines, I found an amethyst that was the exact purple color of Abigail's hair.

I didn't know how she'd react when I brought it to her. Her favorite gifts had been difficult to figure out. When I presented it she made a face I'd never seen before and said, "I seriously love this! You're the best!" I started going to the mine more often.



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Summer

I decided I wanted to marry Abigail after I ran into her one day in the forest. It was raining again, and she was playing her flute under a tree. When she asked what I was doing, I told her I was enjoying the weather. Then my character pulled out a harp I'd never seen before, and we played together.

My romance with Abigail moved me more than most videogame romances have, with much less. Abigail wasn't always confident or happy. She didn't have an important job like some people in town. She played videogames, liked taking naps, and wanted to swordfight. She didn't choose to move to the Valley; she grew up there. She felt like a fraud, like she didn't *really* possess the "weirdness" she wanted. She was afraid she was just as "boring" as everyone else. At least, that was how I interpreted her.



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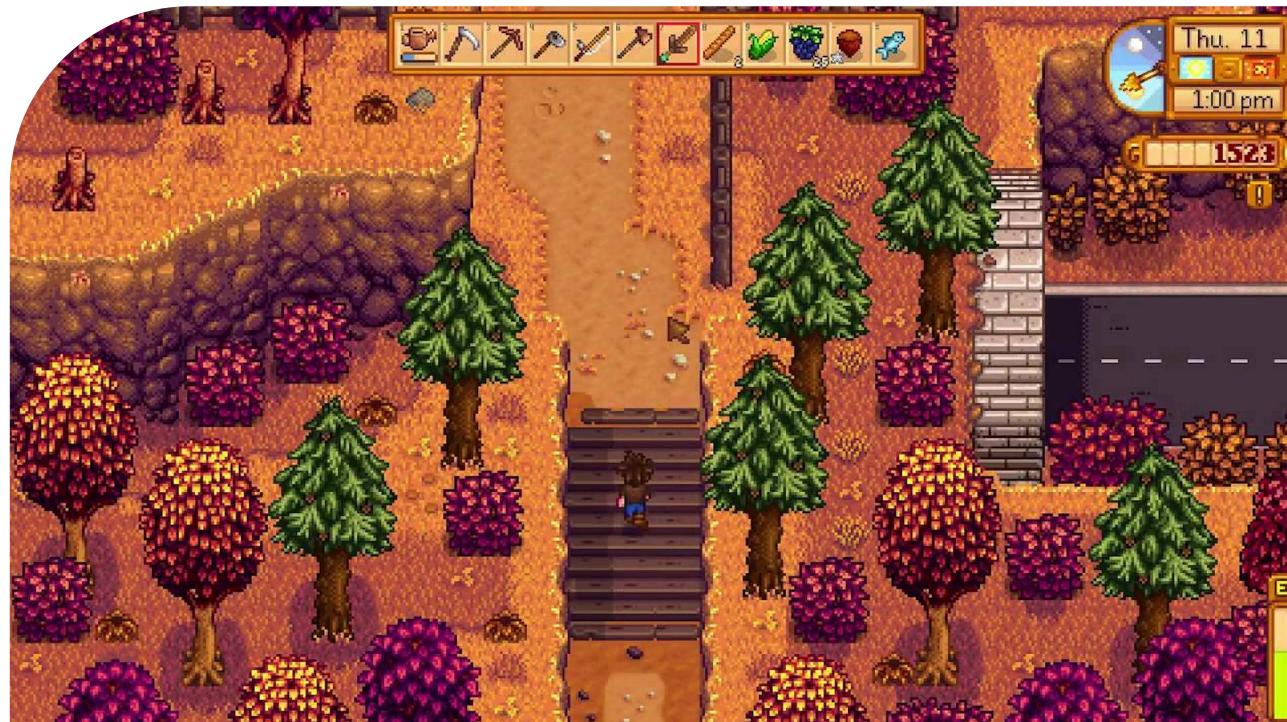
We were married on the 14th day of Fall, a day after Abigail's birthday. Everyone in town attended.

She set up her own room in a new wing of the house. She brought her drum set, her SNES, her hamster "David Jr." (No word on what happened to David Sr.) Every night when I got home, she was waiting by the bed. She talked about getting used to farm life. I wanted very badly for her to be happy there.

Fall and Winter

In subtle but important ways, *Stardew Valley* becomes a different game after you're married. Your spouse gets a whole new suite of dialogue and routines, and comments frequently on how their lives have changed since meeting you.

Then, without much fanfare, life keeps... happening. Now that I wasn't rushing back and forth to court Abigail, I had a vacuum to fill. I finished what I could in the community center, and then settled in for something I'd never done in *Stardew* before: waiting.



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Winter can be a peaceful time in *Stardew*, but it can also feel restless. I thought about all the things I could've done more efficiently, especially in Spring. I started to worry that I wasn't doing enough, that I wouldn't "win."

Videogame relationships are inexorably one-sided.

I also began to feel like Abigail wasn't happy. Some of her dialogue about feeling bored and directionless started to worry me. She used to love going to festivals, but when we went now, she seemed distant. I had loved Abigail's melancholy when I was pursuing her, but now it made me anxious.

Videogame relationships are inexorably one-sided. Abigail is a character: she has no free will of her own, only the behaviors the game has written for her. Despite this, I found I was starting to resent Abigail's perceived unhappiness. I read far more into her actions than was warranted. She started going out, which I hadn't noticed before. We lost a "heart" of relationship points. I exhausted Abigail's unique dialogue; we literally couldn't have a new conversation. I couldn't help feeling there was some goal I'd forgotten, some mechanic I'd never learned. I must've been doing *something* wrong.



One night, in the middle of Winter, Abigail asked me if I wanted to have a child. I hadn't thought about it before. I didn't know if I wanted children, which bothered me. I didn't know if I wanted children with Abigail, which bothered me more.

I told her I wanted to think about it. She didn't respond. The next morning, when I gave her a goodbye kiss, she made no mention of the previous night's discussion.

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A New Year

By the time my second spring came around, I spent more time online looking up *Stardew* info than I did playing, even though one of my goals had been not to "cheat."

I wondered if I made a mistake marrying Abigail. Would my experience with the game have been different if I had married Leah or Sebastian? Why did I want to "master" *Stardew Valley* so badly? Why did my idea of "mastery" require an idealized domestic life with an NPC? By min-maxing, was I missing the whole point? Why had I chosen the trapping fishing skills and not the treasure hunting ones?



If you had told me a videogame was going to make me understand (on any level) extramarital affairs, I would've called bullshit. And yet, I started giving wine to Leah. In midsummer, we had a romantic encounter. I helped her gain the confidence to display her art in public. She made me feel like I was helping. Like I was someone who knows something.

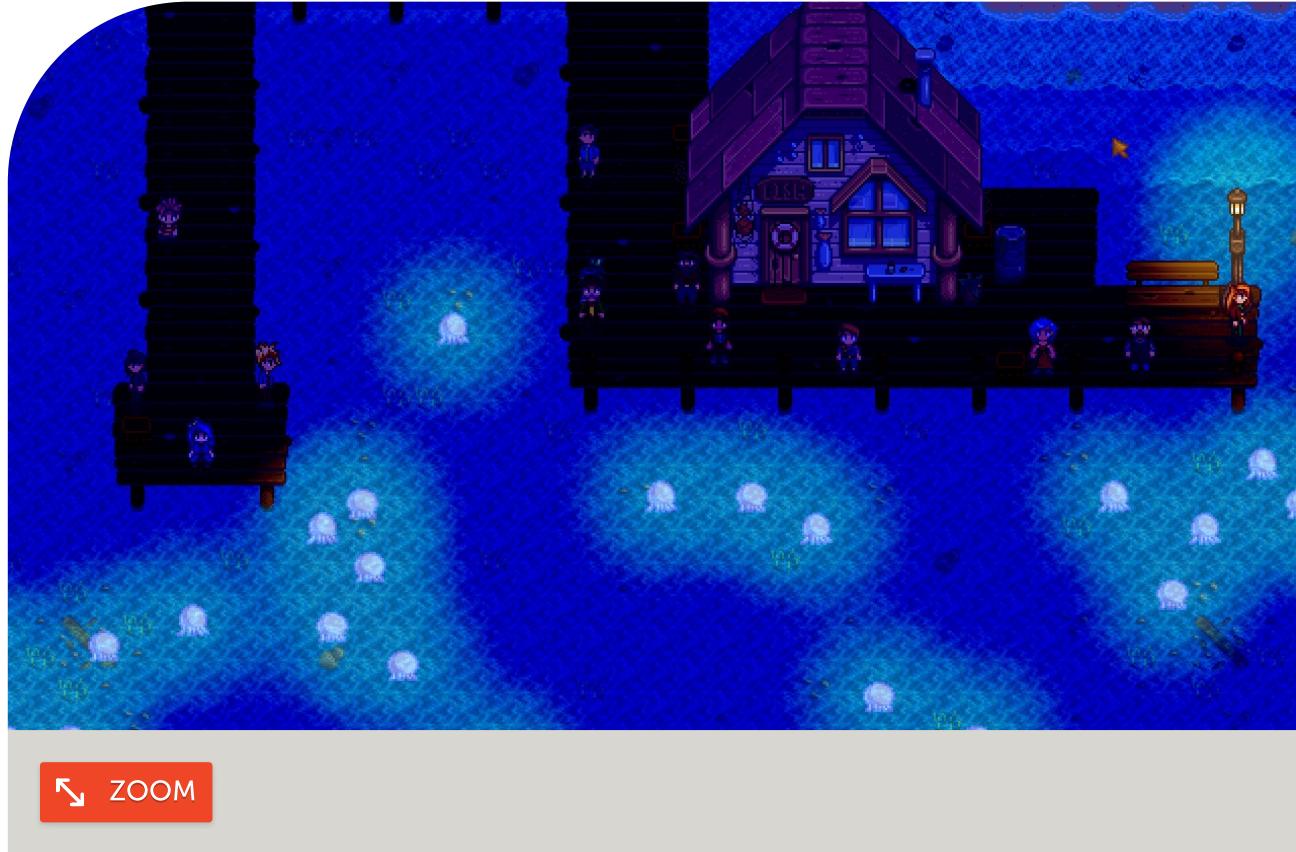
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Abigail confronted me about it, and we lost *three* hearts. I was heartbroken, resentful, confused. I thought about divorcing Abigail. I thought about uninstalling the game and playing some god damn *Dark Souls*.

As summer wound to a close, the town gathered at the beach to watch the jellyfish go out to sea and remember, just as we had the year before. As the scene unfolded, I reflected on what had become of my "two-year plan."

My first year in Stardew Valley had been productive but lonely. I worked on the farm alone, explored the mountains alone, and attended festivals alone. I didn't have a partner at the spring dance. I watched the jellyfish go out to sea alone.

My second year in Stardew Valley was less productive. I fulfilled some goals, failed to fulfill others. I never filled up the museum or crafted the ultimate sword. But I did have a partner at the spring dance. I did have someone to watch the jellyfish with, in the dark. When I woke up early the next morning to prepare for a long winter, my wife was sleeping beside me.



Life Goes On

Having Abigail by my side for that contemplative summer sendoff made me reexamine my whole journey.

My problem wasn't my obsession with "mastering" the game, but that I was so convinced that I *had* to be doing something wrong; that there was a reason my avatar's life hadn't measured up to my expectations. If my NPC wife wasn't happy, it must be because I failed to game the system the "right" way. I was the problem.

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I started recalling my early-game interactions with Abigail, where she told me she felt like a fraud. She was sure she was doing something wrong, too. I realized I had read into Abigail's character the same insecurities I saw in myself. I had projected my own expectations onto her, too. When her character arc didn't take the path I planned for us, I felt let down, even scared.

Now, I was able to see the game in a new light. I planted new crops I had never tried before. I spent whole days just remodeling my house. Sometimes, I'd choose a character and just follow them around. I discovered characters would greet one another if they passed on the street; I had, somehow, missed this.

Mostly, I reconnected with Abigail. I looked for new dialogue and found it. I tried giving her a different present every day and got a kick out of her responses. I realized she still played her flute, in a quiet corner of the barn while I did my morning chores.

One day, Abigail gave me a starfruit: the rarest and most valuable item in the game. She said it was a symbol of how much she loved our lives together. Another night, she asked me if I'd like to adopt a child. I said yes without hesitating. A few days later, we had a daughter.

The "final evaluation," *Stardew Valley*'s soft ending, came and went. I got the "best" result, but nothing else changed. There are no secret cutscenes for doing "well," no extra congratulations or recognition. It didn't matter.

I didn't stop playing *Stardew Valley*. I still go back almost once a week. I check on my friends, plant crops, try a new crafting recipe. I look for museum artifacts, but I don't go out of my way. I give Abigail her favorite presents and listen to her play her flute. I watch our daughter grow.

Stardew Valley relaxes me now, the way I've never allowed another game to. I understand what I had misunderstood in my rush to extract a "perfect" narrative, about the game, and myself. I've finally figured out what "meditative" actually means.



ZOOM

One quiet summer night, I found Abigail standing alone in the graveyard. "What do you think happens to us when we die?" she asked. There were several choices, including "we go to heaven," "we come back as spooky ghosts," or "nothing. We just cease to exist."

I debated if I should answer truthfully, or if I should try to give the answer that Abigail would like. I wondered if those answers would really be different. I decided they wouldn't be, so I answered honestly.

She smiled. "You know, that wouldn't be so bad."

Harry Mackin is a freelance writer from Minneapolis. You can make fun of him on Twitter @Shiitakeharry.

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