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Untitled. Illustration by Mika Edström



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# Counterspace Game Elements for This Pansexual Pilipina American Player’s Joy, Rest, and Healing: An Autoethnographic Case Study of Playing *Stardew Valley*

Erica Principe Cruz

**Abstract:** Single player digital games can be safe environments for players; e.g., *Lost in a Good Game* discusses *Blake Stone* (1993) as a safe place that satisfied intrinsic needs and offered respite from external troubles (Etchells 2019, 67). However, research on games like *Grand Theft Auto III* (2001) discusses them as environments that perpetuate stereotypes and justify white supremacy (Leonard 2003, 6). As a pansexual Pilipina American player, I turned to single player digital games as safe environments for my personal joy, rest, and healing. Too many times, they became unsafe places where I felt sad, angry, tired, and hurt. Counterplay, or player tactics for subverting game developers’ original intentions, like resisting capitalism and colonialism in *Minecraft* (2011) (Huuhka 2019, 220), is one admirable form of recourse. Complementary to counterplay, I propose digital games can be counterspaces, or safe spaces (often at the periphery though they can be at the center of a dominant culture) for supporting marginalized individuals (Ong, Smith and Ko 2018, 206). I offer a preliminary set of counterspace game design principles by analyzing elements of *Stardew Valley* (2016) through an autoethnographic play lens. I synthesize key aspects that support this pansexual Pilipina American player’s joy, rest, and healing. Specifically, I focus on single player game elements that enable joyful belonging of my intersectional identities, offer restful alternatives to othering realities, and provide healing narratives of hope and strength in the face of entrenched systems of oppression. While this work is centered on my own play of a single player game in relation to my lived experiences, it aims to spur more work around games that uplift marginalized individuals by centering their joy, rest, and healing.

**Keywords:** Counterspace Games, Joy, Rest, Healing, Pansexual, Pilipina American, Filipino, Stardew Valley, Decolonization, Single Player Games, gameenvironments

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One admirable strategy to address this is counterplay, or player tactics for subverting game developers' original intentions, like resisting capitalism and colonialism in *Minecraft* (2011) (Huuhka 2019, 220) and the disruptive *griefing* practices of women of color gamers in games like *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009) (Gray 2013). Counterplay is a great way for marginalized players to reclaim space in games that were essentially not made for their enjoyment because of their difference from the imagined archetype of a player – and any player can choose to engage in counterplay in any game to do so. Related to this is another strategy of advocating for broader representation in games, not only in terms of character design but also in terms of the creators behind the games and the imagined player. For example, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color designing digital games where the imagined player is also a BIPOC and studying at a predominantly white higher education institution (Brooks et al. 2021). Compared to counterplay, this asks game designers and developers to operate more inclusively as opposed to making the work required for a better play experience rely only on a player who is already marginalized.

In this paper, I propose a complementary approach: designing games to function as counterspaces, where a counterspace is a safe space at the periphery (with the potential to be at the center) of a dominant culture for supporting marginalized individuals (Ong, Smith and Ko 2018, 206). This approach shifts the labor of making play more inclusive from the marginalized players themselves to game designers and developers who can proactively design games with marginalized players as the imagined player archetype while attending especially to how the game could support them. Beyond character and avatar diversity, a counterspace game would entail designing play to center the joy, rest, and healing of marginalized players. In this paper, I build from autoethnography of my own intersectional identities as a pansexual Pilipina American player to explore how elements of a single player game





oppression while existing as forgotten parts of communities that are already marginalized. For queer Filipino Americans who are also bisexual, pansexual, or asexual, there is an additional layer of invisibility, in that many people who identify as any of these are typically met with invalidation from various sources in society and with negative effects on their well-being (Hayfield 2020, 9-17).

The lack of disaggregated data aside, Filipino Americans are also deeply affected by colonial mentality as a result of colonization. The Philippines endured nearly five centuries of colonization at the hands of Spain and the United States of America (Francia 2010, 49-96, 135-186, David 2013, 55). Beginning in 1521, Spanish colonization destroyed many aspects of the indigenous peoples' cultures, including imposing new gender role norms and Catholicism (Nadal 2021, 28). American colonialism in the Philippines began in 1899 (as Filipino sovereignty was not recognized in the Treaty of Paris) and brought about a culture of seeing Filipinos as inferior children compared to Americans (David 2013, 25-31). So much violence was inflicted upon the indigenous peoples of the Philippines, and that violence bleeds across generations as result of centuries of oppression under two colonizing forces. This includes colonial mentality: "a specific form of internalized oppression wherein individuals regard anything of their heritage as inferior to anything of their colonizers or oppressors" (David 2013, 303), the negative effects of which many Filipinos and Filipino Americans experience in their everyday lives.

Because of the above, queer Filipino Americans endure invisibility, cope with colonial mentality, and must manage the expression of their intersectional racial and sexual/gender identities for their safety and well-being. This research aims to explore how queer Filipino Americans could be uplifted via play by centering their joy, rest, and healing in single player digital game design. In doing so, this work aims to



### **This Pansexual Pilipina American Player**

I am a second generation Pilipina American, proudly and joyfully. My earliest memories reveal that as a pre-schooler, my sense of identity was uncomplicated and certain – I remember thinking *I am Pilipina American and that's magical*. However, once I started school, my proud and joyful sense of identity as a Pilipina American was steadily chipped away at, and that uncomplicated certainty about who I am, where I belong, and what I value became muddled and distressing. It started when I was six years old with *Why does your lunch look like worms? That's so gross!* from my classmates who critically eyed the (delicious) *pancit* I brought before shoving it off the table to spill on the floor. It continued with *Scram!* followed by a slur used against Chinese people when I was seven years old and merely standing in a room. It dragged on into *You're so dark and ugly* and *Your accent is so funny* and variations of all of these over and over again, both within my Filipino community and outside of it. By the time I was eleven, my internalized cheat sheet for getting through a day in the world without being attacked for being Pilipina American was to stay out of people's way in general, never bring home-cooked food to school, mask my accent as best as I could, and do my best to not look like me.

Complicating my sense of identity, belonging, and safety even more, that same year I finally understood I was attracted to men *and* women. My crushes included Sean Connery *and* all the women in the *James Bond* movie series (the first one being *Dr. No* 1962) and my love of *Star Wars* (1977) grew actually just my love for Han Solo *and* Princess Leia. From there, I let heteronormative compulsivity swallow me up, specifically because I was raised Roman Catholic and I was convinced I was a sinner destined for hell. When I was nineteen, I met a nonbinary researcher at a writing tutoring conference and it felt like I would be heartbroken forever because there was no way I could actually date them (let alone muster up the courage to ask them out).

I stuck with my long-time private resolution to be very quiet about anything that made me different, referring back to my eleven-year-old cheat sheet for survival. Of course, doing all of this to survive and assimilate ultimately meant hurting myself daily – but I did it because I thought that all those terrible people were right, that I was inferior because I was Pilipina American and that I was a deviant sinner for loving regardless of gender.

They are wrong of course, but it has taken me years to do a lot of internal identity development work cultivating and reclaiming my intersectional identities (some through playing video games!), and it is an ongoing process I expect will last my entire life. Still, my experiences with oppression as a pansexual Pilipina American have left lasting damage. Three forms of hurt manifest as resurgent aches tied to my intersectional identities as a pansexual Pilipina American: 1) sadness born from feeling as if I do not belong anywhere, 2) exhaustion fed by attacks and extraction, and 3) scarring rising from hopelessness in the face of entrenched systems of oppression. All of these pains manifest in my life in different ways, but single player digital games like *Stardew Valley* have counterspace elements that support my pansexual Pilipina American joy, rest, and healing.

***Stardew Valley* and my Joy, Rest, and Healing**

*Stardew Valley* is an open-ended farming life role-playing game. Players start out by inheriting their in-game character’s grandfather’s farm in Stardew Valley, and they leave their joy-sucking Joja Corporation job and life in the city to start fresh on their new farm. Players build up their lives by tending to their farm, building platonic and romantic bonds with the villagers in the nearby Pelican Town, and exploring surrounding areas to gather resources (see Figure 1). But Joja Corporation tries to

sink its teeth into Stardew Valley all the while, and the player's actions can determine what becomes of their new home and community.



Figure 1: A map of Stardew Valley, including some areas players get to explore. Image from [stardewvalley.fandom.com](http://stardewvalley.fandom.com). *Stardew Valley* © ConcernedApe.

This game is beloved by many, and since its initial release, its creator Eric Barone (also known as ConcernedApe) has rolled out updates that have expanded and improved play. On top of this, *Stardew Valley* can be enjoyed across many platforms and features a multiplayer mode. The game also has a vibrant mod community, and many mods of varying nature and purpose are available for even more play. In the context of this paper, I discuss playing *Stardew Valley* as a single player on the Nintendo Switch and from hindsight after playing the game for a few years (2019 onward). It is important to note that in the game, I created my avatar to be a tiny, pixelated reflection of myself (see Figure 2): not just physically but also in terms of my intersectional identities. Like me, my avatar is pansexual and Pilipina American, and her tiny pixelated dog even looks a lot like my dog. I did this when I first created my







anywhere at all as a pansexual Pilipina American. So growing up and even now, it is like the warmth of my communities never truly reaches me. This reality feeds the quiet sadness of knowing that I do not feel safe enough to share about who and how I love with all the Filipinos and Filipino Americans in my life, that they do not know about a huge part of my life: my happiness, heartbreaks, and relationships. I am extremely fortunate to have found family with whom I can share these parts of my life with, but I feel a heavy sadness in keeping quiet as a tradeoff for not risking losing my relationships with my fellow Filipinos and Filipino Americans.

At the same time, I have received signals from many sources that I cannot be comfortable as a Pilipina American in all Filipino spaces *and* that I will not be received as a Pilipina in American spaces (and from people who do not even know I am pansexual). Elders in my family and those I would meet out in the world scold me because I do not speak Tagalog fluently (I am working on it) or laugh at my *white girl accent* when I try (again, I am working on it). Scrolling through internet forums presents many young Filipinos berating Filipino Americans for not *truly* being Filipino because they believe we do not live Filipino values in our daily lives. From these instances in my life, the space I can occupy as a Pilipina American is shrunk down to those in which I will not be essentially tested for *true* Filipino-ness as defined by people who grew up in the Philippines. This means I do not actually have space where I can exist without having to prove anything. Similarly, when I want to talk about the Philippines, Filipinos, or my lived experience as a Pilipina American among American people, I am met with invalidation (as a byproduct of buy-in to the model minority myth) or clear disinterest in the form of being cut off with requests for insider information about how to visit the Philippines as a tourist (while I myself have been unable to return there since I was an infant). Sometimes, American people will interrupt what I am trying to share about Filipino culture to tell me they already know



midday in the summer after watering my melons and tomatoes, determined to acquire a chicken coop (I wanted eggs for many reasons), foraging fiddlehead fern and common mushrooms along the way. Entering the shop and commissioning the chicken coop was unremarkable, but when I turned to leave, I realized someone was in the lab across the hall, and I decided to snoop. It was Maru, and she was cute as hell (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Maru, the first NPC in *Stardew Valley* with whom I was able to cultivate *kapwa* and play through a joyful, wholesome queer love narrative. Image from [stardewvalleywiki.com](http://stardewvalleywiki.com). *Stardew Valley* © ConcernedApe.

Even though I was a stranger in the valley at that point, I remember Maru greeted me warmly, saying she had been looking forward to meeting me. While other villagers I had interacted with were also warm at first meeting, this interaction with Maru meant a bit more, and not just because I thought she was cute. She was also the only other woman of color in Stardew aside from my character, and even if her first meeting line was scripted, it still felt like a small but effective affirmation of my presence as a woman of color in the valley – it felt like *kapwa*. I left that first meeting knowing I definitely wanted to try being Maru’s friend, already thinking about how I could cultivate our friendship through gift giving. It turns out she loves cauliflower, pepper poppers, and rhubarb pie. She sees much of the world as exciting and grand, and her birthday is the tenth day of summer. Through gift giving I was able to trigger



with people with whom I could be my whole self, *and* without having to prove anything or provide something they could consume to feel that sense of togetherness and belonging. In this way, NPCs like Maru made *Stardew Valley* a space in which I could nurture my *kapwa* and feel like I belong in a community just as I am.

We continued to grow closer, and then she accidentally shocked me while showing me part of a machine she made. While she apologized and applied burn cream to my little pixelated hand, I knew I wanted to ask her to be my girlfriend. In-game, this translated to giving her enough gifts and triggering friendship cutscenes until our relationship representation reached eight hearts (and since I had been spending so much time with her, we were there already), at which point I bought a special bouquet to offer her as a formal way of asking her to be my girlfriend. When Maru accepted and officially became my girlfriend in-game (so official that her social status was updated to *girlfriend* in my file), I was happy not only because she is probably the coolest NPC in the game, but also because this marked the first time I did not feel like I needed to be quiet and careful about having a romantic relationship with a woman (even if it was only in-game). Perhaps because of the predictability of the game and its NPCs, I knew that being in a relationship with Maru would not complicate any of my existing relationships with other NPCs (except maybe her dad, but he had always kind of not liked me – but that seemed more about dating his daughter and less about being a woman and dating his daughter).

*Stardew Valley* treated my romantic relationship with Maru as an update that meant more time and care with Maru and nothing else, a stark contrast with what a romantic relationship with a woman outside of play would be: a point of tension that could mean alienating my Filipino and Filipino American communities. Even if Maru and I

did not end up together in the end, being able to play through a queer love narrative with her was one of the best expressions of pansexual Pilipina American love and belonging I have had. As a space for cultivating *kapwa* and safely playing through queer love narratives, *Stardew Valley* facilitates my joyful belonging as a pansexual Pilipina American.

**Living with Exhaustion but Reinscribing Restful Alternatives to Attacks and Extraction in Play**

I have been mostly lucky in that my exhaustion is due less to people becoming belligerent or violent in reaction to me disclosing my pansexual Pilipina American identity, but I have been mostly disgusted by how many people have reacted to my disclosure with fetishization, sexual harassment, or invalidation. Somewhere in the mix of variations of *Oh you mean you're bi, babe? So we can have threesomes?* and *You just haven't been with a real man. I can show you if you let me* or *You're just saying that to make guys like you* or *You look straight though* and *You're not gay enough* or even the critical interrogations which aimed to prove to me I was chasing a trend (this is not the curiosity that comes out of genuine warmth and care, but rather a critical line of inquiry with the goal of somehow proving that I am confused or faking), I figured out pretty quickly that people have no shortage of terrible things to say in response to me sharing about my whole self, which feels like being trampled on after I have made myself vulnerable in good faith. I have dated heterosexual men and had friends who are heterosexual women who did not react this way (thanks, y'all!), but keeping my pansexual identity less visible is still more feasible than risking repeats of the above and enduring what I consider to be incredibly tiring. However, even if I manage that, it is not as easy to avoid other exhausting and extractive aspects of living as a Pilipina American.

There is a lot about Filipino culture that I feel I have missed out on because of needing to assimilate as a form of survival. I have been very belatedly learning about the history of the Philippines and only recently have been able to articulate certain aspects of Filipino culture that have played large roles in my lived experience. In being able to name them, I have been able to better understand what I need during my ongoing personal process of decolonization. An example is how I came to understand the presence and reach in my life of *utang na loob*, or the norm of reciprocity in which generosity to others is accompanied by the implied expectation of the favor being returned (Nadal 2021, 30), and how that revealed my need for a lot more *bayanihan*, or the practice of aiding others without expectation of reciprocity (David 2013, 111). Recognizing this stems from looking back on how I have tried to live my life as a dutiful daughter to my Filipino parents. *Utang na loob* manifests often as children feeling the need to not only respect their parents but also care for them and put their needs before their own in gratitude for raising and nurturing them (Nadal 2021, 30). I find nothing wrong with respecting and caring for my parents, but *utang na loob* extends into the exhausting experience of feeling bound and obligated to make my parents happy at the cost of my own well-being. Just one example of when *utang na loob* made me deprioritize my own needs is the several years in which I wanted to leave the Roman Catholic church (for many reasons but primarily because I was not coping well with being told queer people were going to hell) but stayed anyway. I continuously put myself in spaces in which it was not safe to be queer because I did not want to bring *hiya*, or shame (Nadal 2021, 30), on my parents who are not only devout Roman Catholics as many Filipinos are but were also both working for the local parish at that time. For seven years, my thoughts centered on the debt I owed my parents for caring for me as their child, and I felt the least I could do was not ruin their reputations at church by leaving (and of course coming out as

pansexual was out of the question entirely), even if it meant I was exhausted and miserable.

I have since left and my family has since survived the ensuing drama, but I still have a strong aversion to transactional care that I personally understand to characterize *utang na loob* and find myself looking for opportunities for *bayanihan* – for communal care without expectation. These various attacks and extractions that I have experienced as a pansexual Pilipina American (and all the ways I try to avoid them) are exhausting, and for me it is taxing mentally, emotionally, and even physically. But *Stardew Valley* offers a space in which fetishization, sexual harassment, invalidation, and extractive expectations do not automatically arise when I express and act upon my pansexual Pilipina American intersectional identity through play. The game provides restful alternatives to my prior experiences in the form of never needing to defend or explain how my queerness manifests and facilitating practicing *bayanihan*.

As previously described, *Stardew Valley* made it possible for me to play through wholesome queer love narratives with men *and* women. It started with gorgeous genius Maru, but I eventually dated and married another NPC, Sebastian. Being able to date both of these NPCs made *Stardew Valley* a space in which I could play through my pansexual love without needing to explain or defend why I chose to date and marry a man against attacks on the validity of my identity, which was so restful. On top of that, dating different people in the game also made it possible for me to experiment with how I wanted to practice *bayanihan* as a form of my pansexual Pilipina American affection, providing additional rest from extractive *utang na loob* that typically dominates my experiences of care. Beyond that, not having to give in to heterosexual compulsivity to date only men meant a lot to me. Being able to choose to be with a man as opposed to needing to default to heterosexuality *and* being fully



able to date women and other folks is not something I am able to experience outside of gameplay, and *Stardew Valley* made that possible through my *still* queer love narrative with Sebastian, with whom I developed my personal practice of *bayanihan*.

On an evening of the same in-game summer when I met Maru, I emerged from the mines of the mountains, planning to use the rest of the night to fish for carp in the lake close by (before returning to my bed and my dog). Heading down to the lake to fish, I was startled to see Sebastian standing there in the dark by the water, actually smoking a little pixelated cigarette. After I had a little laugh about that, I figured it was finally my chance to snoop into Maru’s mysterious half-brother, and approached him. Starting a conversation with him also meant seeing his character portrait for the first time (see Figure 6).



Figure 6: Sebastian, the NPC in *Stardew Valley* with whom I was able to play through a restful, wholesome queer love narrative and practice *bayanihan*. I eventually married this man. Figure from [stardewvalleywiki.com](http://stardewvalleywiki.com). *Stardew Valley* © ConcernedApe.

First, I immediately thought *he’s got great emo hair*. Then he very casually acknowledged I was new in the area. Then he very casually implied that Pelican Town sucks and that I suck for actually choosing to move there. Since this was coming from some guy smoking a cigarette in the dark and I was actually having the time of my

life on my farm, I walked away from this figuring he was just one of those folks who needed a little warming up to. From there my interactions with Sebastian were a bit easier, aided by the fact that if I saw him while visiting Maru or while he was out of the house, I would recklessly test gifts on him as an early exploration of practicing *bayanihan*, giving him whatever interesting thing I had in my backpack simply because he was part of my valley community. He really loved the obsidian and frozen tears I found in the mines, and I laughed out loud when he told me he loved the Void Egg that I got from my funky little Void Chicken (it is inedible, so he probably likes that it is edgy).

As a byproduct of my exploratory *bayanihan* practice with Sebastian, I got to learn more about him and triggered friendship cutscenes. He is a freelance programmer, his birthday is on the tenth day of winter, and he plays the keyboard in a band with his friends Abigail and Sam. As time passed, I decided to end my relationship officially with Maru, and I figured given how close we had gotten, I would ask him to dance with me at the annual Flower Festival. Unfortunately, while reckless gift giving tests did help us get closer, I had given him enough things that he hated (which bafflingly included regular eggs, omelets, and all kinds of fruit jelly I ever made) to the point where it significantly reduced our relationship hearts – so he awkwardly rejected me on the spot. I like to think I took that rejection like a champ, but I did start being less reckless with my gift giving, and from there I learned he has a cool motorcycle (see Figure 7) and enjoys pool and tabletop roleplaying games. That last bit made me sure I wanted to ask him to be my official boyfriend by giving him a bouquet, and after a romantic conversation in the rain under a shared umbrella on the docks, we finally started going steady.



Figure 7: Sebastian working on his super cool motorcycle. Image from [stardewvalleywiki.com](http://stardewvalleywiki.com). *Stardew Valley* © ConcernedApe.

The queer love narrative I played through with Sebastian (where it is queer because I am queer, and that is not erased simply because Sebastian is a man) which grew from my practicing *bayanihan* offered rest from my past othering experiences as a pansexual Pilipina American. The fact that I was able to play through a romance narrative with Sebastian *after* I had done the same with Maru without needing to explain or defend my choices *and* that I was able to practice *bayanihan* felt so different and so much better than what I have had to deal with outside of *Stardew Valley*. In hindsight, I am not surprised at all that I ended up choosing Sebastian over everyone else: my in-game relationship with him was built on my being able to exist as a pansexual Pilipina American in peace, and our affection was built upon *bayanihan*, community care without implied obligation. Due to this, *Stardew Valley* became a space to which I returned for rest from exhausting experiences as a pansexual Pilipina American in the form of restful love and affection without debt.

### **Living with Scars but Reinscribing Healing Hope in the Face of Entrenched Oppression through Play**

Intergenerational trauma as a result of colonization manifests in the form of colonial

mentality, a pervasive presence in my own lived experience. Countering these far-reaching effects that stem from extensive systems of oppression can feel insurmountable most days, and I am often left with a sense of hopelessness and feeling scarred. The more I learn about Filipino culture, the more I realize how much was lost and how deeply ingrained the influences of Spanish and American colonization have become. To see how colonial mentality was adopted and passed down under the guise of Filipino culture over the span of generations can make me feel like I can never do enough to change what has been passed down. This is further complicated by my pansexual identity and its intersection with my Pilipina American identity, because anti-queerness, as adopted values of the oppressor, has also made frequent appearances in my experiences of colonial mentality. As part of my personal decolonization journey, I have been using most of my free time to learn about what parts of my current understanding of my pansexual Pilipina American identity came from where, so I can recognize where intergenerational trauma and colonial mentality takes root and sprouts in my life so that I can better understand it towards resisting and combating it. This is certainly an ongoing process and I have so much to learn, but early on I began to feel like even my name is not my own. When Spain colonized the Philippines they also gave the indigenous people Spanish last names as a means of erasure and dominance (Perdon 2011). My first name, middle name (which is also my mother's maiden name) and my last name are all Spanish, and most days this feels like the core of who I am has been deeply scarred by colonization that began centuries ago. This is because many times, people have told me they did not know I was Filipino because of my name, instead thinking I was Latina (which I do not find offensive – in fact there is much Latinx have in common with Filipinos, thanks to a common colonizer (Ocampo 2016, 72-104) – but it still hurts to not be recognized as who I am). When something so central to my identity as my name feels like it belongs more to colonization than to me, it makes me feel wounded, powerless, and hopeless

in the face of centuries-old systems of oppression.

Because that is not the only thing that has made me feel scarred and hopeless in the face of systems of oppression and I've needed to survive somehow, I have strategies for cultivating my own hope and resolve as a part of my personal healing and decolonization as a pansexual Pilipina American. Here, healing refers to my own processes of reclaiming power and strength in my intersectional identities that oppression and colonization seeks to cut from me. The hope and resolve that I draw strength from can be understood as *lakas ng loob*, or inner strength and courage amidst strife and uncertainty (Nadal 2021, 30). Throughout my life, I have been able to cultivate my *lakas ng loob* by playing single player digital games like *Stardew Valley* that include healing narratives of hope and love in the face of entrenched systems of oppression. *Stardew Valley* does not include a system of oppression so deeply rooted and far-reaching as centuries of colonization, but it does feature a corporate evil called Joja Corporation, a name which is literally littered across the landscape of the valley – on Joja Cola cans tossed into the rivers, lakes, and ocean, on the Joja Mart that is threatening to push out the local store, and on the shirts of the overworked and underpaid Joja employees. Joja's logo and look is of particular interest, as it is easy to see early on what *Stardew Valley's* creator ConcernedApe is referencing (see Figure 8).

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Figure 8: Joja Corporation's branding on the JojaMart storefront in Pelican Town. Take a look at the faint Joja logo just above the door, which likely looks a lot like another massive corporation's logo that you may be very familiar with... The entity's slogans are *Life's better with Jojo.* and *Join Us. Thrive.* Joja Corporation is positioned early on in the game narrative as the oppressor. Image from [stardewvalleywiki.com](http://stardewvalleywiki.com). *Stardew Valley* © ConcernedApe.



Figure 9: JojaMart's store manager and essentially the face of the Joja Corporation in *Stardew Valley*, Morris played the role of the villain in the way I played *Stardew Valley*'s narrative. Image from [stardewvalleywiki.com](http://stardewvalleywiki.com). *Stardew Valley* © ConcernedApe.

Putting a face to the abstract system of evil that is Joja Corporation results in the NPC Morris (see Figure 9), who is JojaMart's store manager and the bane of my *Stardew Valley* avatar's existence. Even during my early hermit years in which my interaction with the wholesome NPCs of Pelican Town were rather limited, it became very clear very quickly that while Joja Corporation's presence may have brought goods at

cheaper prices and perhaps employment for a few young adults in the area, it was also slowly crushing the village and its inhabitants. This was evident in Pierre, the local general store owner and operator, worrying over the competitive prices he could not match while enduring Morris's thinly veiled threats on his livelihood and the well-being of his family. It was frustratingly visible in the Joja trash I had to constantly pull from the rivers on my farm. It was in the exhausted face of NPCs like Sam and Shane (see Figure 10 and 11, respectively), who worked long hours for little pay at the JojaMart (and were always miserable). And it was starkly present in Morris's attempts to convince the villagers, including my avatar, to agree to demolishing the town's old Community Center in order to replace it with a Joja Warehouse. In many ways, it seemed like my avatar had barely escaped permanent burnout while working for Joja Corporation in the city (see Figure 12) only to find it sinking its claws into the valley. In that sense, it felt like it might be too late; that there might be too many things already set in motion or already adopted by the villagers to resist the entity.



Figure 10: Sam, an NPC who worked part time at JojaMart and always seemed miserable there. Image via [Whiskey Sandwich/Reddit](#). Stardew Valley © ConcernedApe.



Figure 11: Shane, seen in the upper left side wearing a blue Joja uniform hat, an NPC who worked part time at JojaMart and always seemed miserable there. Image via [lostnoob.com](http://lostnoob.com). Stardew Valley © ConcernedApe.



Figure 12: Stardew Valley's playable character's former workplace introduced in the opening narrative scenes of the game. In this setting, the player is saved from deep burnout by the option to take over their grandfather's farm in Stardew Valley. Image via [screenrant.com](http://screenrant.com). Stardew Valley © ConcernedApe.

Still, I tried to do what was within my power to combat Joja's encroaching grasp on my new home and community. I shopped exclusively at Pierre's general store despite JojaMart's slightly lower prices (this is of course, much easier to do in-game than to replicate outside of play with actual money), only ever entering the sterile looking clone box interior of the store to see how Sam and Shane were holding up (they were



not doing well) and to try to give them pick-me-up gifts. I also recycled and repurposed all the trash I pulled from the rivers, lakes, and ocean in the valley, and in these ways I was able to support community members that I cared about albeit in small doses. But the biggest form of resistance I was able to enact was to avert the destruction of the Community Center by refusing a Joja membership and ignoring requests for support of the planned Joja warehouse, instead doing a little snooping around the abandoned hub myself. This led to meeting magical creatures indigenous to the area, the Junimo.

Working with these tiny keepers of the forest, through community care in the form of fulfilling long-standing requests of my neighbors presented by the Junimo and their restorative magic, I was able to play through a hopeful narrative of driving back oppressive forces by reviving the Community Center before it could be turned into a Joja warehouse. The Community Center’s reopening and the return of the community to its rooms was a culmination of everyone’s individual efforts to resist Joja Corporation’s invasion of the valley, and it also turned out to be the final collective action that drove Morris and Joja out of town. Even beyond that, the Junimo make it possible (with an additional community care sidequest) to convert the abandoned JojaMart into a cinema (see Figure 13) that unlocks even more ways to express affection and build friendship with the people of *Stardew Valley*.

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Figure 13: The Pelican Town Movie Theater, which the Junimo can build magically overnight after the community of *Stardew Valley* drives Morris and Joja Corporation out of town. Image from [stardewvalleywiki.com](http://stardewvalleywiki.com). *Stardew Valley* © ConcernedApe.

Playing through this narrative of strength and hope in which collective and individual action eventually made a difference in resisting what seemed to be a too-powerful oppressor felt like healing; it fed into the hope and resolve of my *lakas ng loob*. My *lakas ng loob* easily bled beyond play: it made the battles I fight everyday seem worth it, and even fueled some revisiting of my personal strategies of resistance based on what worked for Pelican Town. Even if better values prevailed only in a game, it was still valuable to play that out as a part of how I heal from the hurt I feel often living as a pansexual Pilipina American.

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### Harvesting from *Stardew Valley* and Learning from this Pansexual Pilipina American’s Play

Played as a single player game, *Stardew Valley* has given me one of the safest playful spaces I have ever had as a pansexual Pilipina American player. The game’s relationship system allowed me to date NPCs regardless of gender, and some of its characters’ designs supported my joyful belonging. That the relationship system did

not demand justification nor punish me for the way I played out my avatar’s personal life and the game’s gift giving mechanics supported my restful existence and exploration of practices of care. Its playable narrative steeped in hope despite overpowered oppression supported my personal healing. The ways in which *Stardew Valley* supports my joy, rest, and healing are undoubtedly inextricable from my personal lived experience of sadness, exhaustion, and scarring as a pansexual Pilipina American. However, as previous sections have highlighted, a single player digital game like *Stardew Valley* has key elements that have made my play joyful, restful, and healing. These key elements have the potential to support similar joy, rest, and healing for other marginalized individuals who are similarly sad, exhausted, and scarred. After all, queer Filipino Americans like me are certainly not the only individuals who struggle with feeling like they do not belong, enduring attacks and invalidations of who they are, and feeling powerless and hopeless in the face of deeply ingrained systems of oppression. So many players would benefit from their joy, rest, and healing being centered in single player digital games. My autoethnographic analysis of game elements illuminates what can be possible if games are designed as counterspaces outright, and my hope is that the following can facilitate exploring how that can come to be.

**Seeds from the Valley for Planting Joyful Belonging**

*Stardew Valley’s* relationship system allows players to date eligible NPCs regardless of gender, and some of its characters’ designs supported my joyful belonging as a pansexual Pilipina American. This is in stark contrast to single player games I have played before that locked me and my player character into heterosexual compulsivity by design. In regards to character design, I was able to relate to Maru best, but she is indeed the only woman of color in the cast of villagers of Pelican Town, and there is a distinct absence of nonbinary folk and people of other gender identities. The vibrant





overpowered oppression and its mechanics for practicing non-obligatory communal care supported my healing as a pansexual Pilipina American. Like superficially diverse NPCs, having a narrative of good prevailing over evil is not a panacea that can support positive experiences (including those akin to healing) among marginalized players. In fact, there are plenty of single player (and other) games with classic hero-slays-the-dragon type narratives that technically are filled with hope in the face of very powerful opposing forces, but much of the time, those narratives are inundated with explicit and implicit signals of who is good and who is evil that marginalize many players. As just one example, let us look at one of my all-time favorite video game series ever, *Legend of Zelda* (1986-2021). First and foremost, the games in this series are all amazing to play and very close to my heart (in fact playing *Ocarina of Time* (1998) was the first time I derived hope in the face of oppression via play), but that does not mean that I do not recognize that Link is blonde and blue-eyed in every game, and that when Ganon features as the big baddie he is always dark skinned and has a large nose. These problematic signals tangled poorly with colonial mentality in my own lived experience growing up, so I feel it is important that single player (and other) games are critically examined by asking: Who gets to be good in the game narrative, and who is forced to be evil? What signals do the designs of these entities send to players? What identities and values are championed by the game, and what identities and values are villainized in it? What strategies and tools are available in the game narrative for players to use to combat and resist the oppressive force? Are these limited to things one would use to slay a dragon? Why? *Must* the dragon be slayed? Is the problem really the dragon? Questions like this can support understanding how single player (and other) games can do harm to already marginalized players in order to better approach games as counterspaces that can support marginalized players' personal journeys of healing.

All of these questions are meant to acknowledge that it is not enough to simply have game elements similar to those that supported my joy, rest, and healing as a pansexual Pilipina American in *Stardew Valley*. What matters more is creating counterspace that is central in single player (and other) games for marginalized players' joy, rest, and healing through communicating key values and welcoming diverse identities in a game. Without intentionally creating counterspace, seemingly diverse NPCs might turn out to be walking, talking stereotype perpetuation machines, a queer inclusive relationship system might still exclude players who want to play through polyamory, and a slay the dragon narrative might tell a story of eradicating the other and saving those deemed inferior. Because game designers and developers (including me) are human, part of approaching games as counterspaces that can uplift marginalized players will be getting things wrong despite our best intentions. An equally important part of this will be acknowledging mistakes and addressing them with grace, listening to our most vulnerable players to continue to center their joy, rest, and healing – particularly by doing this work *with and not for them*. An additionally important part of this includes players and people who enjoy, think about, study, etc. single player (and other) games critically examining games and the way they do or do not uplift marginalized players towards collectively calling for norms in games that at minimum do not perpetuate oppressive aspects of the dominant culture.

**Centering the Joy, Rest, and Healing of Marginalized Players:  
Preliminary Design Principles**

The following are early insights to support game designers and developers in approaching single-player (and other) games as counterspaces that can uplift marginalized players. Beyond this, these preliminary principles are standards by which

players, scholars, etc. can critically examine game elements and to which they can hold game creators accountable towards normalizing games that at the very least disrupt patterns of oppression outside of play.

- *Game designers cannot center the joy, rest, and healing of marginalized players without first understanding their lived and play experiences.* Working with marginalized players as collaborators and acknowledging them as experts in how they want and need their joy, rest, and healing to look, feel, and play like is required.
- *Games can function as spaces that combat negative aspects of dominant culture, so game designers should aim to create game spaces that bleed.* In centering the joy, rest, and healing of marginalized players within the magic circle of a game, attention to how that semipermeable barrier could facilitate the best parts of the game carrying over into the player’s lived experiences outside of play is essential.
- *Small things are impactful (where small is not the same as superficial).* The spaces generated by games communicate a lot to players, and even small design decisions can impact how players might experience joy, rest, and healing in the game. Superficial (limited to surface engagement with a value and/or identity as opposed to thoughtful engagement) game elements are insufficient. E.g., superficial engagement with Filipino culture would be adding Filipino flags to different areas in the game, which has an impact that pales in comparison to the small game element of dialogue with a Filipino NPC who shares how they like to practice *bayanihan* by cooking for their friends.
- *The spaces generated by games should have room for the variation and fluidity of player identities and values.* Games can be low-risk spaces in which players explore practices related to their identities and values, so a game space should



not confine how a person plays by punishing them for changes in their play styles, priorities, and progress.

- *Also, make room for feelings like sadness, exhaustion, and pain.* Centering the joy, rest, and healing of marginalized players does not mean disallowing or trying to design away negative emotions in the game space. Make space for a spectrum of players' feelings and attend to how a game might support players as they experience them.
- *Aim for safer space, not a perfect space created by a perfect game.* No space is perfect and completely safe from the effects of oppression, including those generated by games. Working towards centering joy, rest, and healing of marginalized players means creating a space that does a lot better than the spaces they have to inhabit outside of play.
- *Design game spaces as gardens players can return to.* This is not to say the design goal is for players to continue playing consistently as long as possible over time, but rather that the design goal is to create a space that players can cultivate as they wish and return to when they feel the need, without being punished for extended gaps in play.

## **Call for Counterspace Games: Magic Circle, Magic Shield, and Magic Garden**

I have turned to single-player games as counterspaces for my own joy, rest, and healing, and I have presented this autoethnographic case study unpacking how playing *Stardew Valley* supports this pansexual Pilipina American player through joyful belonging, restful existence and exploration of practices of care, and healing hope in the face of oppression. I did this work in the hopes that my fellow game designers and developers will explore how not just counterspace elements but *entire*



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