

# Exploring Waste and Garbage through a Digital Game: The Case of *Stardew Valley*

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As an extraordinarily influential title among life simulators and cozy games, *Stardew Valley* has been an object of diverse reflections, from considerations of the game's relation with neoliberalism (Bódi, 2024) to the relevance of its sound effects (Galloway, 2020). Ecologically driven criticism seems to be particularly prominent in the *Stardew-Valley*-focused research, whether exploring the game's economy and politics (Crowley, 2023), its take on pastoralism (op de Beke, 2021), or treatment of animals (van Ooijen, 2018).

Environmental concerns constitute an unquestionably relevant context for the subject of this presentation, namely, the functions of waste and its management in the game. Still, by stepping beyond the ecocritical framework to consider the ontological complexity of waste and garbage, as well as their work in the constitution of gameplay and the gameworld, I hope to address the need for positivity both in game studies at a time of crisis (Janik & Vella, 2022) and in theorizations of waste (Hawkins & Muecke, 2003).

Despite the game's focus on farming simulation, waste production is disconnected from the player character's (PC's) main activities. While waste disposal is sometimes included in the management tasks of simulator games, e. g. *Endzone A World Apart* (2020), in *Stardew Valley* garbage comes from external and mostly marginal sources such as NPCs' trash cans, seasonal processes in nature, bodies of water, or ruins that can gradually be restored. The PC's farming routine includes caring for animals, watering plants, picking the crops and cultivating the land, but all those actions are basically wasteless.

Even though the processes of defining and managing waste can constitute a significant regulatory force in the society (Douglas, 1966; Liboiron, 2022), it is only marginally employed in the game's biopolitical regime, which positions the PC as both an agent of biopower (Foucault, 2008) – the farm life manager – and its object, conditioned by health and energy markers, as well as day-night cycles. The most spectacular disciplinary mechanism connected with garbage is social ostracism caused by the act of scavenging, which, however, is optional for the PC. While the presence of playable garbage has been acknowledged as a sign of the game's reflective potential (Chang, 2019), the erasure of waste production and management from the main gameplay seems to resonate with what Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke call “the dominant scientific/environmentalist discourse on waste, where the highest values *tend*

to lie in pious and unrealistic assumptions about purity” (2003, p. xvi, original emphasis). Therefore, the “zero-waste” paradigm constitutes a prominent source of gameplay pleasure.

Still, a similar kind of game pleasure can be drawn from the experience of cleaning, that is disposing of randomly encountered objects in ways that reduce the clutter in the PC’s surroundings or recycle trash into something useful. In terms of gameplay, such practice is usually connected with relocating particular items, which corresponds with the spatial definition of garbage as “matter out of place” (Douglas, 1966; Liboiron, 2022). In terms of gameplay, an important aspect of that definition are the implied affordances (Gibson, 2015) of the given object that promise a transformation of its functional status: useful things can be retrieved from trash cans; boulders and logs can be broken into construction materials and stored at the farm; and the trash fished out of a river or a stream can be put and transformed in a “recycling machine.” Thus, that category of garbage is functional and extends from actual trash to a variety of items placed in a dumpster, to elements of the natural environment.

Finally, *Stardew Valley* also employs waste temporality (Allon, Barcan & Eddison-Cogan, 2021) as a source of pleasure generated by gameplay progress and gameworld constitution. Various devastated objects and places are scattered around the setting, and while the PC does not restore them personally, they can indirectly contribute to it with sufficient offerings for the local spirits. The shifts of particular locations between “waste time” and “use time” (Viney, 2014) expand the gameworld and enhance the PC’s mobility.

To conclude, this presentation demonstrates the two-way productivity of investigating waste and garbage in digital games. With regard to game exploration, tracking down the waste management scheme, or lack thereof, is helpful in the identification of the game’s biopolitical logic and environmental paradigm. With regard to waste-oriented research, games bring out the factor of functionality and affordances in waste and garbage definitions. They also illustrate the ontological fluidity of those categories, indicating how easily various objects fall into and out of them. Brought together, those reflections highlight the relativity of the concept of waste and map out its creative potential.

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