

Daily Rituals and Player Belonging in Video Games: The "Sacrifice System(Xianji Liu)" in *Stardew Valley* Community Center Reconstruction

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

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Daily Ritual, Sense of Ritual, Player's Belonging, *Stardew Valley*, Sacrifice System

INTRODUCTION

How do scholars study games and rituals side by side? Ever since Lévi-Strauss saw them as opposites and Huizinga as similar things, games and rituals have been closely connected in academic discussions. Unlike Lévi-Strauss, who viewed their relationship as both competing and complementary (Lévi-Strauss, 1997:41), For Huizinga, the affinities between game and ritual are far more significant than their differences. Both create and inhabit a "magic circle"—a self-contained realm governed by unique rules and delimited in time and space—of which the most atmospheric festive rituals, Carnival above all, are the typical expression (Huizinga,2017:17). Electronic games first appeared in the 1960s, became widely available in the 1980s and 1990s, and entered ordinary homes around the world after 2000. Even though they are purely virtual products, these classic ideas still hold true and apply to them.

In terms of their similarities, both games and rituals are concrete forms of action with "crystallised" qualities (meaning they follow regular patterns and have distinct material structures) and both involve specific intentional actions. The separation of their goals and rules means that both games and rituals are seen as existing outside of ordinary daily life (Kyriakidis et al., 2018: 302-303).

Just like what we find in traditional ritual studies, the ritual logic of games also includes all aspects of symbol recognition and creation. It is a system made up of symbols and their symbolic meanings. Most importantly, the key role of ritual in games is the "transformation" of game actions into performances and representations. And players set the ritual in motion simply by performing the act of "play" (Gazzard & Peacock, 2011).

In the past decade, studies on ritualized behaviors in electronic games have become very common. Ritualized actions already play an important role in helping players build

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emotional connections and form community identity, and this phenomenon is particularly noticeable in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). Studies have found that paying attention to social networks (both new and existing) in these games makes players more invested in the game community (Simpson et al., 2018). For example, many players participate in the "GOOD WINE DAY" in the fantasy world of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004); In the martial arts online game *Jianxia Qingyuan Online Version 3* (Xishanju, 2009), the game holds events tied to many traditional Chinese festivals (e.g. Mid-Autumn Festival and Winter Solstice) to encourage players to gather and celebrate online. These festivals are not only large-scale group ritual activities, but also emotional connections and acts of solidarity that players initiate voluntarily.

However, most studies on in-game rituals focus on special ritual events in MMORPGs. Far fewer studies examine other game genres, especially single-player simulation and management games, and their light, daily and long-term in-game actions. These actions are clearly repetitive and cyclical, which creates a direct contrast with the "non-daily rituals" discussed earlier. But it is important to note that the line between daily and non-daily activities is not whether they involve repetition. In fact, repeatability is one of the core elements of rituals (Gazzard & Peacock, 2011). Especially in video games, player actions inevitably rely on various repeated movements, and repetition is also a key dimension of game playability (Lozano, 2018: 61). Some scholars have elevated this enjoyable play experience to the level of an "aesthetic of repetition", arguing that it shares aesthetic features with everyday life (Handson, 2014). But clearly, not every repeated game action is a ritual act (Tosca, 2023: 50). So which repeated actions can truly be considered as ritual acts? This remains an open question for future research.

If we take religious practices as an analogy: whether in Western Christianity or Eastern Buddhism, monks/clergy recite prayers in temples/churches every day and regard this act as a daily ritual. Can we then extend this idea to regular personal activities in simulation games and also see them as rituals? Just like Deleuze quoted Hume (2019:129), repetition does not change the thing itself, but it changes the observer's mental state. To what extent are these small daily in-game actions connected to players' inner sense of belonging and pleasure? Based on this thinking, this paper aims to explore and explain the rationality of this view. It hopes to add to existing MMORPG ritual studies by examining more mechanisms behind player experiences and possible socio-cultural impacts in other game genres.

METHODS

This study takes Xiaohongshu, a major Chinese social media platform, as an online public space with international perspectives and cultural openness. The main advantages of recruiting research participants via Xiaohongshu are as follows: First, Xiaohongshu is one of the most popular social media platforms in contemporary China. In 2025, its monthly active users have consistently exceeded 300 million, making it a primary channel for users to obtain lifestyle and service information. The most frequently used features among its users are following and interaction (64.59%), content creation and engagement (43.20%), and private messaging (39.94%), indicating strong user stickiness (iiMedia Research, 2025); Second, as a high-quality UGC community, Xiaohongshu enables users to share daily life and form interest-based groups. Statistics show that over 100 million users create content on the platform, which features an active, diverse community with a well-educated user base spanning multiple professions (Qian-Gua Data, 2025).

This study employs a qualitative research approach using in-depth interviews.

Stardew Valley players with over 30 hours of gameplay experience were recruited on Xiaohongshu through a combination of random recruitment and purposive sampling. Prior to formal data collection, pilot interviews were conducted with 3 to 4 participants to refine the interview guide, which was subsequently revised 4 to 5 times based on feedback obtained. The final interview guide was formalized after the completion of interviews with the 18th to 19th participants. A total of 27 participants were ultimately included in the formal study, consisting of 16 females and 11 males. To ensure sample balance, screening was implemented across key dimensions including gameplay duration, occupation, geographical location and MBTI personality type. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 40 years old, resulting in a highly diverse sample overall (see Table 1). Interviews were conducted between April 14 and April 27, 2026. All interviews were delivered via online voice calls on Tencent Meeting with the full informed consent of participants, lasting an average of approximately 1.5 hours per person and yielding approximately 940,000 words of verbatim transcripts.

Table 1 Basic characteristics of interviewees

ID	Gender	Age	Occupation	Region	Game Duration (Hours)	MBTI
T1W1	Female	25	Unemployed	East China	210-240	INFP
T2W2	Female	22	Undergraduate/Secondary Student	Southwest China	270-300	ENTP
T3W3	Female	23	Government & Enterprise Civil Service	North China	>1200	ENFJ
T4M1	Male	23	Undergraduate/Secondary Student	Central China	270-300	INFP
T5W4	Female	27	Government & Enterprise Civil Service	East China	240-270	ENTP
T6W5	Female	29	Government & Enterprise Civil Service	Southwest China	600-630	INFP
T7M2	Male	26	Business & Service Industry	East China	510-540	ISTP
T8M3	Male	23	Professional & Technical Staff	East China	120-150	INTJ
T9W6	Female	24	Undergraduate/Secondary Student	East China	480-510	ENTJ
T10W7	Female	18	Undergraduate/Secondary Student	East China	300-330	INFP
T11M4	Male	21	Business & Service Industry	East China	420-450	ENFP
T12W8	Female	26	Business & Service Industry	North China	90-120	ENFP
T13W9	Female	23	Business & Service Industry	East China	60-90	INTP
T14W10	Female	19	Undergraduate/Secondary Student	East China	30-60	INFJ
T15W11	Female	30	Government & Enterprise Civil Service	East China	60-90	INFJ
T16W12	Female	36	Unemployed	North China	210-240	INTP
T17W13	Female	23	Undergraduate/Secondary Student	East China	150-180	INFP
T18W14	Female	24	Government & Enterprise Civil Service	Central China	210-240	INFP
T19M5	Male	22	Undergraduate/Secondary Student	Southwest China	810-840	INFP
T20M6	Male	26	Professional & Technical Staff	East China	60-90	INTJ
T21M7	Male	30	Business & Service Industry	North China	210-240	ENTJ
T22W15	Female	38	Unemployed	East China	90-120	INFP
T23M8	Male	24	Business & Service Industry	North China	150-180	INFP
T24W16	Female	28	Professional & Technical Staff	Southwest China	30-60	INFP
T25M9	Male	30	Professional & Technical Staff	East China	960-990	INTP
T26M10	Male	26	Professional & Technical Staff	East China	210-240	INTJ
T27M11	Male	31	Government & Enterprise Civil Service	South China	330-360	ISFJ

For the collected interview transcripts, this study employs grounded theory methodology and uses NVivo 15 to conduct line-by-line coding and in-depth analysis on 15 of the 27 samples. A total of 1,277 initial codes and 23 axial codes have been generated, then, through three-level coding, a total of 7 core categories are summarized, forming a preliminary category system(see Table 2). To ensure theoretical rigor and adhere to the core principles of grounded theory, this study plan to reserve 7 samples for theoretical saturation testing to further verify the stability of the established category system.

Table 2 Categories and connotations of three-level coding

Core Category	Subcategory (Axial Coding, Refs)	Open Coding (Initial Concepts)	Connotation
1. Spatial & Symbolic Trigger	Perceptions of Community Sacrifice (137)	Restoration responsibility; ritual recognition; community linkage	Players view sacrifice as community reconstruction, forming initial identity as builders.
	Understanding of Rituals (54)	Sacred feeling; sanctuary imagery; staged ritual process	Sacrifice is interpreted as a meaningful ritual that boosts emotional investment.
	Perceptions of Magic (31)	Non-deity Junimos; friendly magic; emotional feedback	Junimos' de-sacred design provides companionship and reduces loneliness.
	Perceptions of NPCs (80)	NPC personification; emotional bond; daily interaction	Players treat NPCs as companions, building a sense of town membership.
2. Emotional Enchantment in Labor	Sacrifice Practices (39)	Planned collection; rare-item priority; focused sacrifice	Players invest effort, turning tasks into meaningful emotional practice.
	Resource Management (29)	Targeted storage; priority allocation; emotional valuation	Players manage resources for sacrifice, imbuing items with personal meaning.
	Task Habits (78)	Self-paced progress; personalized priority; anti-compulsion	Players maintain autonomy, strengthening ownership of the game world.
3. Identity & Belonging Construction	Self-Role Positioning (44)	Homeland guardian; non-savior; town resident	Players form a gentle daily identity, the core of stable belonging.
	Personality & Values (91)	Patience; social tendency; perfectionism	Individual traits shape behavior and belonging intensity.
	In-game Belonging (47)	Farm attachment; Community Center pride; town integration	Belonging includes space, achievement, and social integration.
	Reality-Game Connection (42)	Social analogy; emotional transfer; virtual affection	In-game bonds echo real social logic, stabilizing virtual belonging.
4. Cross-Context Belonging Reinforcement	Origins of Play (38)	Sacrifice attraction; social recommendation; healing need	Initial motives lay the foundation for later belonging.
	Game-Reality Comparison (103)	Simple relationships; certain rewards; stress relief	The game becomes an ideal refuge, strengthening attachment.
	Positive Impacts (38)	Time management; patience; nature appreciation	The game improves real-life abilities and well-being.
5. Moderating Mechanisms	Diminished Enjoyment (57)	Repetition fatigue; frustration; resistance to forced plots	Negative factors moderate and weaken sustained belonging.
	Narrative Preference (40)	Plot simplicity; storyline demand; plot-sacrifice relevance	Plot quality affects immersion and perceived meaning.
	Participatory Context (40)	Pressure play; fragmented time; solitary preference	Context influences immersion and belonging strength.
6. Gameplay & Mechanism Support	Save Management (13)	Backup awareness; staged saves; loss impact	Save behavior protects progress and emotional continuity.
	Gameplay Perceptions (99)	Mechanic appeal; freedom satisfaction; belonging linkage	Flexible mechanics support the stable formation of belonging.
	Sustained Enjoyment (197)	Goal orientation; restoration achievement; warm interaction	Sacrifice system drives long-term play and attachment.
7. Basic Attributes	Age Traits (Implied)	Youth preference; middle-aged healing; senior nostalgia	Age shapes belonging demands and expressions.
	Gender Traits (Implied)	Female emotional engagement; male strategy focus	Gender leads to different belonging formation paths.
	MBTI Fit (Implied)	Introvert solitude; extravert sociality; judger planning	Personality influences play style and belonging acquisition.

FINDINGS

Based on the grounded theory analysis above, this study finds that the sacrifice system in Stardew Valley is not a simple task mechanism. It generates players' sense of belonging under the dual drivers of symbolic emotion and gameplay mechanics, and through the interactive process of emotional enchantment of labor and active identity construction. Moreover, this experiential belonging extends across contexts and forms a positive cycle.

Symbolism and Gameplay: Two Entry Points for Belonging

Players' participation in the sacrifice system is mainly shaped by emotional symbols and gameplay mechanics, which serve as the prerequisites for belonging formation.

1. Ritual design triggers an initial emotional response

The environment of the abandoned Community Center and the image design of Junimos arouse players' emotional motivation to join the sacrifice. The dilapidated appearance of the Community Center encourages players to restore it and reduces their sense of alienation as outsiders. Junimos are designed in a daily and approachable way, so players tend to treat them as partners that need help, laying the groundwork for later emotional investment.

2. Flexible mechanics let players set their own pace

The sacrifice system has no mandatory rules, so players can complete relevant tasks at their own pace. Players manage in-game resources and arrange task progress according to their own conditions, turning sacrifice tasks into personalized game content. The game's save function preserves sacrifice progress and maintains the continuity of the sense of belonging.

Labor and Identity: A Two-Way Street

The core formation of belonging relies on the mutual promotion of labor investment and identity construction, both of which help players integrate into the game world.

1. Labor investment endows sacrifice items with emotional meaning

Players obtain sacrifice items through planting, gathering and other in-game labor. These items are no longer ordinary resources, but carry players' personal efforts. The process of sacrifice and community reconstruction brings players a sense of participation, making ordinary labor more meaningful.

2. Players come to see themselves as guardians, not heroes

As players continuously take part in the sacrifice, they regard themselves as guardians of the farm and town, rather than world-saving heroes. This identity focuses on daily care. Once established, it encourages players to invest more in sacrifice labor, forming a mutually reinforcing relationship.

Belonging Trans-Travels Beyond the Screen

The sense of belonging formed in the game does not stay in the virtual world. It extends outward via social interaction and real-life connections, further strengthening players' emotions.

1.Social media sharing stories strengthens emotion bond

Players share their sacrifice experiences on social platforms and communicate with other players. Individual belonging is enhanced through group interaction, stabilizing players' emotional attachment to the game.

2.The game and real life feed each other

The game relieves players' real-life pressure and provides a space for emotional comfort. Meanwhile, patience, planning and other qualities developed in the game also affect players' real-life attitudes. The sense of belonging in the game exerts a positive effect on real life.

Belonging Forms a Cycle and Is Regulated by Multiple Factors

The strengthened sense of belonging pushes players to continue participating in the sacrifice, forming a cycle that is affected by various factors.

1.Belonging begets more belonging

The strengthened belonging increases players' willingness to join sacrifice-related activities. They re-experience the process of symbolic perception, labor investment, identity construction and cross-context extension, forming a sustainable cycle that maintains long-term emotional connection to the game.

2.Multiple factors influence the formation and stability of belonging

Some factors weaken players' gaming experience. For example, repetitive sacrifice tasks, high difficulty of some contents and mandatory plots reduce players' emotional investment. Players with different personal characteristics gain belonging in different ways: some acquire it through labor, while others rely more on NPC interaction and social sharing.

CONCLUSION

The findings suggest that daily rituals characterized by low thresholds, mundane symbolism, and full integration into common gameplay can effectively cultivate players' sense of belonging. Such rituals work by triggering emotional resonance through symbolic design, endowing ordinary labor with emotional meaning, shaping the identity of homeland guardians, and extending emotional connection to real-life contexts. These findings fill the research gap concerning the belonging formation mechanism in non-sacred, daily game rituals, especially in single-player games with weak real-time social interaction.

Additionally, these insights can support the emotional design of games and other digital cultural products. Designers may refer to the logic of integrating daily symbolic design, emotional empowerment of labor, flexible autonomous gameplay, and cross-context feedback to strengthen players' emotional attachment.

Future research may verify the universality of lightweight rituals in other simulation or single-player games, particularly virtual scenes where intensive social interaction with NPCs is scarce and players tend to struggle to develop a stable sense of belonging.

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