The Problem with Maru from Stardew Valley (2016): Black Women's Hair in Visual Media

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Stardew Valley is a 2016 life simulation video game solo-developed by independent designer Eric Barone, who goes under the alias ConcernedApe. In this game, the player finds themselves in a fictional world where they leave their corporate job in the city to begin life anew in Stardew Valley, a magical, rural farming land and community. Stardew Valley (2016) is renowned for its nostalgic, 16-bit art style and cozy farming mechanics, where players can become a profitable farmer amongst other roles and even make friends and find love.[1]

Pelican Town is the main community in Stardew Valley and is where most of the characters live. Of 28 villagers, there are twelve people available to date and marry, including bachelors Sebastian, Alex, Harvey, Shane, Sam, and Elliot, and bachelorettes Penny, Abigail, Leah, Emily, Hayley, and Maru. Each bachelor and bachelorette has a unique personality and storyline that players experience with that character as they interact more and grow closer to them.[2] Maru is one of the original five bachelorettes from the game's early development[3] and is described as the, "friendly, outgoing, and ambitious" daughter of the town carpenter (Robin) and local scientist (Demetrius), who "has a passion for creating gadgets."[4] She is also the only black female character in the entire game.

Each marriable

character has a distinct look and outfit, with Maru's being her reddish-tan skin, purple shirt, denim overalls, pink glasses, and pin-straight hair. Non-black communities may view Maru and never do a double take; as a black woman myself, it is hard to ignore the blatant issues regarding Maru's character design and the overall lack of diversity and proper BIPOC representation in Stardew Valley (2016).

Maru from Stardew Valley (2016) reflects the desire to white-wash black women found in western film, television, video games, and other visual media. As the only black woman in Stardew Valley, her heightened proximity to whiteness relays the message that Maru, with light skin and pin-straight hair, represents the preferred image of a black woman. Maru's character design

is harmful as it connotes that other forms of black femininity that do not have such proximity to whiteness as Maru are undesirable or flat-out unwanted within the world of Stardew Valley. The implications of Maru's design pushes away a potentially larger black female player base from this game and reinforces harmful sentiments purported by mainstream media that are damaging to black women's self-esteem.

In this essay, I will discuss the issues regarding black representations in a variety of visual media and how that connects to a game like Stardew Valley (2016). Through a discussion of Maru's straight hair, I aim to illustrate how Maru's character design reflects a broader trend of white-coding black female characters to present them as more palatable to white audiences. This is particularly important to discuss in relation to a game like Stardew Valley (2016), which was principally developed by a white man without the consultation of black female players or game designers. I will conclude this paper by discussing the role of the online gaming and modding communities of Stardew Valley in bringing diverse representations to this game and how these efforts should be incorporated into the base game.
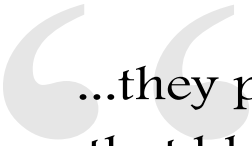
Hair has always been an important aspect of black history and identity and has impacted the identity-formation of men and women differently. Originating from the Atlantic slave trade, curly and kinky hair textures were used by colonizers as a vehicle to subordinate people of African-descent.[5] For women, hair connotes several meanings of beauty, sex appeal, and desirability.[6] In the West, where the beauty standard is based on white

feminine features of long, straight, typically blonde hair, black women's desirability has been gauged on their own proximity to these standards, especially in relation to hair texture.[7] Put simply, the straighter and more white-appearing a black woman's hair is, the more desirable she is deemed.

In the late 19th century, film became accessible to mass audiences and soon thereafter, visual media projected via a screen became a mainstream of society. As the 20th century Hollywood culture, television, and video games developed, white beauty standards and black women's necessity to adhere to them carried over into these media. Black female characters in film, television, and other media have been presented with "pin-straight, relaxed hair" in producers' efforts to make them more pal-atable to target white audiences.[8] Alternatively, black hair styles such as braids and locs have been used to create "rowdy" or criminal characters with natural hair typically being reserved for black women playing house slaves.[9] These representations are harmful to black women as they present the message that black hair and styles must be connected to racist stereotypes or slavery, while also implying that an adherence to white beauty standards is necessary to be considered desirable. This negatively affects the self-esteem of black girls and women, who through such discriminatory practices are made to feel physically inferior to white celebrities or peers.

Maru is a fictional black woman whose hair naturally grows straight. What is interesting about her character design is that during the beta stages of Stardew Valley

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Figure 1. A Timeline of Maru's development from beta to final publishing, top left is oldest design, bottom right is final design. (Image by Eric Barone (ConcernedApe), Maru Timeline.png, February 23, 2016, Retrieved from Stardew Valley Wiki, https://stardewvalleywiki.com/

(2016), Maru was designed with curly hair. Figure 1 is a timeline of Maru's character design from the beta version to final publishing; I will regard the top left image as design 1, the bottom right image as the final design or design 11, and all others in between with their respective numbers going in ascending order from left to right, top to bottom. Out of the eleven preliminary designs, seven of them had some form of wavy or curly hair. In designs 2, 4, and 5 there is a considerable amount of attention paid to her hair texture, seen in her small, abun-

dant curls with detailed highlights and shadows decorating each individual curl. There is a noticeable difference between her hair texture in designs 2, 4, and 5 versus designs 1, 3, 6, and 7, where her hair presents a looser wave shape closer to typical white hair.

Between designs 1 and 7, Barone dances between curly and wavy hair for Maru. However, in design 8 and onward, Barone takes a turn and completely straightens Maru's hair, and settles with this design in the published game. Little information is available as

to why Barone originally designed Maru with curly hair, but then conceded for straight. Whatever his intentions were, Barone's choice to ultimately design Maru with straight hair cannot be cast aside or regarded as purely innocent. Black women have far too often in film, television, and more recently, video games, been represented with straight hair. Natural hair, locs, braids, and other black hairstyles have been underrepresented or used for stereotypical representations of black people.

Barone's apparent hesitation to curl Maru's hair reflects the styling choices often employed in television and film with black female characters. Barone, a white man, cannot be assumed to be free from white bias or that of Western media and culture. Though he is generally renowned for solo developing this game (including the code, art, music, and all game elements), it also makes

him entirely responsible for what I argue is a hazardous representation of a black woman in his game. Maru's design, especially when given the fact that she is the only black female character in which players can interact with, implies that natural black hair or styles is not a desirable feature; it implies that black women's hair is merely suited for the beta version, but rarely the final product. Is black hair not worthy of publishing? Should black women not be able to see themselves and their hair in films, television shows, and video games? Barone's design choices suggest the answer is no.

Luckily, there is hope for Stardew Valley (2016). In the game's six years of being, there have been active conversations in the community about Maru's design where users ask critical questions about her design not unlike the ones I pose in this essay. Additionally, Stardew Valley's modding community has been dili-

gent in creating mods that combat Maru's whitened depiction and the lack of diversity in the game's world. On the Reddit thread "r/StardewValley", a post by u/maplevines asks the gaming community for their thoughts on Maru's hair as they "always thought straight hair doesn't really suit [Maru]."[10] The post, now archived, has received an overwhelming 7.2 thousand upvotes and 224 comments. Several users agreed that straight hair did not suit Maru and that she should have curly hair,[11] locs, or braids."[12] Petitions have even been created to re-texture Maru's hair, such as community member Naye Rose's Change.org petition, where she calls for ConcernedApe to update the game with Maru's curly hair from the beta version.[13] As shown, there are many conversations going on in the community about this topic, where thousands of players are interested in seeing Maru's hair more true to styles used and favored by black women and without being tied to whiteness. Modifications or mods are downloadable files that alter a variety of mechanical or aesthetic features of a game. Since Stardew Valley's release, modders have used their creativity and coding knowledge to tackle the issues of diversity and representation within this game. Perhaps the most popular mod is Airyn's "Diverse Stardew Valley" mod (DSV), available for download on Nexus or Moddrop. In DSV, players are able to, "[add] ethnic, cultural, gender identity and body diversity to Pelican Town and a full set of seasonal & festival outfits for every character's vanilla [non-modded] design or the DSV design."[14] Not only are various non-white options added for each character, allowing a player to potentially have a completely-diverse Pelican Town, but Maru's options include three
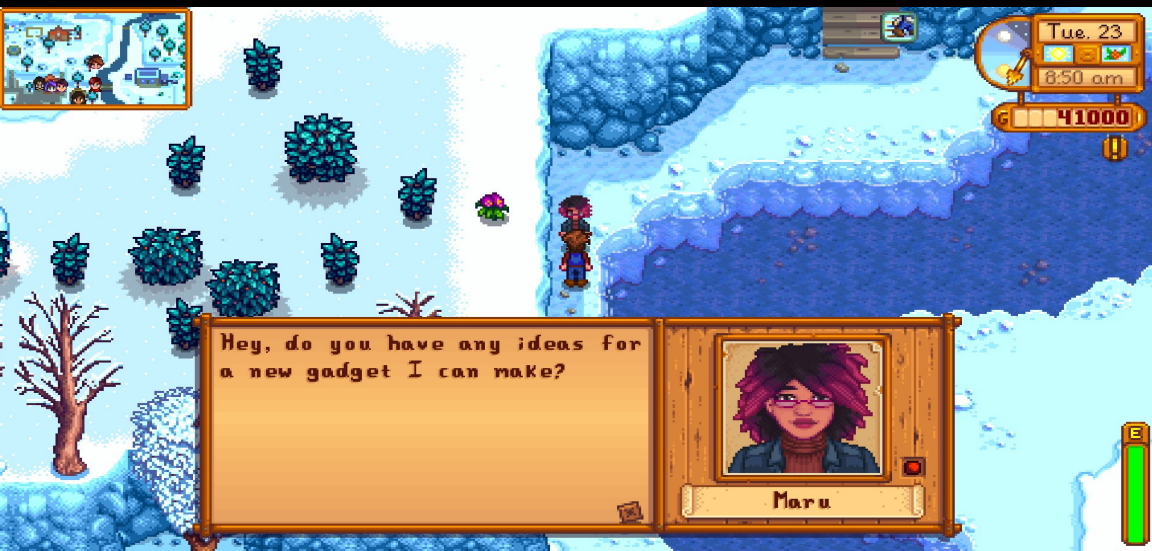
Figure 2. Maru's type 4, modded hair in Airyn's "Diverse Stardew Valley" (Art by Airyn and Eric Barone (ConcernedApe), Untitled, September 4th, 2022, Retrieved from Moddrop.com, https://moddropstorage.blob.core.windows.net/images/media/08d9c85e817061921cc94fac/source).

hair textures including a type 4 hair pattern (see fig 2). This is a vastly different presentation of a black female character than the current Maru, and a positive one at that. Other mods also include vampirestrinity's "Alter-nate Maru" mod,[15] which offers a short curly bob style for Maru, cjbeukema's "Maru Re-placement Portrait"[16], another hair re-texture for Maru, amongst oth-ers. These are only a few options available that can bring not only a better depiction for Maru as a black woman, but also for all BIPOC players and players with marginalized identities. Community efforts are incredibly important, but they do not minimize the necessity for these representations to be implemented into the base game. Though DSV is available for Android download, nearly all mods are only available

for PC-play and through the Steam game engine. This means that players on Nintendo Switch, phone, and other non-PC platforms only have what is available in the base game. Additionally, modding can be difficult to learn, as it can take multiple online tutorials, modding forums, and general troubleshooting to have mods appear and function properly in one's game. Mods usually need to be updated with each game patch (update) and sometimes may no longer work if the game's code is adjusted too drastically for the mod to handle. There is also the occasional weariness about mods loading viruses into one's computer or otherwise destroying the game files and code.

It's clear mods are not immediately accessible to all players. This only further illustrates the necessity for these changes to be made in the base game, a change which requires Barone's direct involvement. The Stardew Valley community has been active in already; I urge the community to utilize the affordances of platforms like Twitter, Reddit, or even the official game email, contact@stardewvalley.net, to combine their passion for the game with their personal abilities to grab Barone's attention and demand these necessary changes. Through Barone teaming up with modders like Airyn and others from the modding community, the game can become a more equitableand inviting space, where positive depictions of black women exist and get to be created through the guidance of black women themselves. With these changes, Stardew Valley can act as a guide for how other visual media can reform their representations for black women and other marginalized identities, and set an example for new films, shows, and games to come.