



A Guide To Being Stylish: The Art Style of Stardew Valley

Welcome to the Sundrop City art department! As a faux-DLC for Stardew Valley, we strive to match the concepts and style of the base game as much as we can. To this end, we've created a guide to help our artists learn the art style of Stardew Valley. This isn't necessarily a "how-to" guide on how to make every asset you can imagine, but it's our hope that this guide will help you better understand the concepts behind ConcernedApe's art style, and how it differs from styles you may be familiar with. If you ever run into a design that just feels "off" somehow, don't hesitate to refer to this guide! It might be just the thing to help get you past that roadblock.

Table of contents:

Introduction and history	2
Color choice	3 - 4
Shading and dithering	5 - 8
Perspective	9
NPC portraits	10

A foreword and forewarning: How an Ape learned to art



Before getting into the finer details of the game's art style, it should be mentioned that when ConcernedApe began developing Stardew Valley he was something of a novice artist. Starting from a minimal background, he taught himself how to design pixel art. His early designs for the game were unrefined and inconsistent, and the quality was often questionable. Case-in-point:

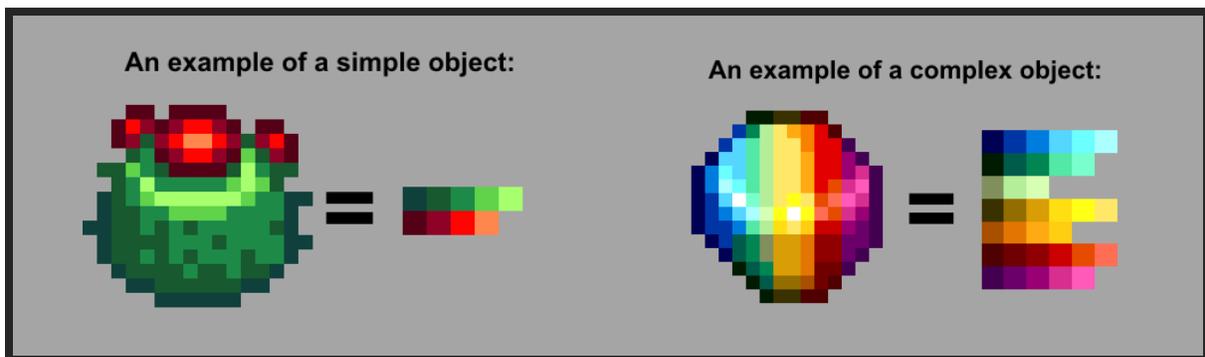


To remedy this, CA set out a list of “rules” he would use in all assets he created for the game. Taking inspiration from classic titles like the Legend of Zelda series and the older Harvest Moon games, the resulting style is a mish-mash of existing media and his own principles of design, and sometimes differs greatly from traditional techniques. With this in mind, it's important not to be discouraged if much of this guide seems unfamiliar or unintuitive. Stardew Valley has a very unique art style, and it takes some time to become fluent with.

Color choice: Everything you need in eight shades or less!



One of the first things you'll notice about the sprites of Stardew Valley is how surprisingly limited the palette is for each item. A given sprite will typically use six or eight different colors at most, and re-uses certain shades to represent different parts of an object. Only the most complex assets (such as the Prismatic Shard pictured above) break this “rule of eight,” and on closer inspection are usually the result of simple gradient filters or similar tools.



An important part of mastering the art style of Stardew Valley is learning how to break the habit of freely switching colors, and how this affects shading and outlines. When selecting your palette, try to keep the following in mind:

- **Never use pure black or white** – Stardew Valley is a colorful game, so everything should have a hue of some sort! If you look at existing sprites, even the darkest and lightest portions are colored in some way, though it may be hard to tell.
- **Outlines are your darkest color** – Everything else should be lighter than an object's outline, including the shading. This helps define the object against its backdrop, or other parts of the object itself.
- **Give yourself a limit** – Make eight to ten “slots” for your palette that you'll fill as you go, and see where you can re-use colors you already have to stay within that limit.
- **Saturation is your friend** – Everything in Stardew Valley tends to be colorful, bright, and almost *too* saturated. If you're thinking about making something dull or faded, make sure there's a reason!

Of course, these color concepts aren't a hard and fast set of rules, and you may well want to deviate from them for a specific claim. After all, a run-down tavern on a salty wharf won't be terribly colorful. But when it comes to your work in Sundrop City, remember that it's a tourist hot-spot. Most of the city is purpose-built to be gaudy, bright, and over-the-top. Some things are supposed to look bad! And if you're ever in doubt about your palette choice, you can always speak to your fellow team members. This is a group effort through-and-through, and we intend to make sure it feels that way.



Dithering And You

or

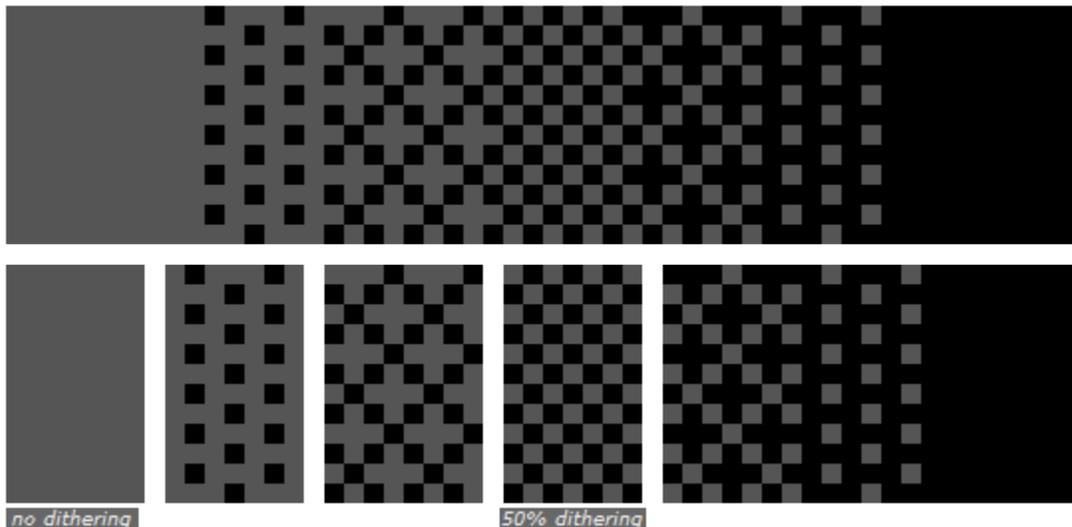
How CA Throws Shade



While shading would traditionally be part of the explanation of color choice, as we should know well by now, the Stardew Valley's art is far from traditional, and the shading is no exception. There are two main principles to keep in mind when working on the shading of your art, each of them rooted in the technical limitations of the games from which CA drew his stylings. These are: Dithering vs Solid Shading and Color-shifted Shading

Dithering on about dithering:

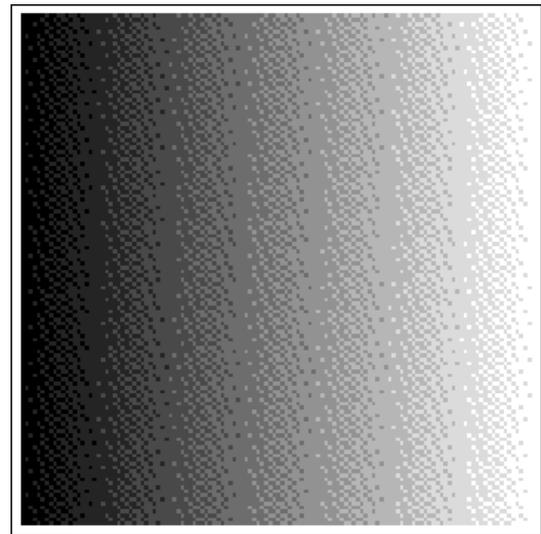
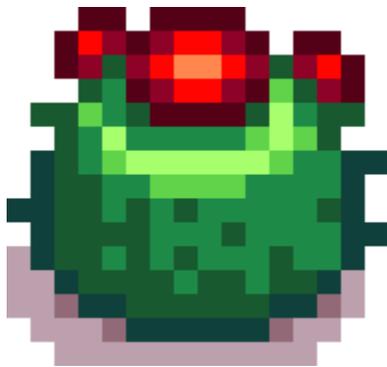
First, you may be asking what “dithering” is, exactly. Dithering is a technique developed in the early days of pixel art, during the era of Atari and Nintendo's debuts, as a “shortcut” to portray smoother gradients of shading than what their limited color palette would allow.



As you can see, by overlaying a cross-hatch of a darker color on top of a lighter color, you can achieve a similar effect as a proper gradient of light to dark, while still only using two colors! Of course, this becomes more effective as the

scale of the object in question increases, giving more room for the pattern to increase in density. With particularly large objects, the results can be quite impressive, but even smaller objects benefit from this technique! The cactus used in our earlier example is an excellent demonstration of this. The shading on the bottom-left is achieved through proper use of dithering.

(Example of dithering on a larger object)



Unfortunately, a full explanation of the proper techniques for dithering is far beyond the scope of this guide. As with all new skills, this is something that you may need to practice with before you can start putting it to use on a larger scale. If you're having trouble learning this technique, there's a wealth of online tutorials available, and our own team artists will gladly offer any pointers they may have.

The where and the when:

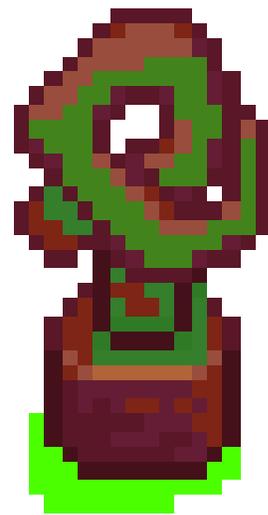
Now that you understand what dithering is, it's important to know where to use it, or where you should switch to typical solid shading. Generally speaking, Stardew Valley's assets have some simple rules as to where each is used, which makes this part of the process much easier to understand.

- If it's a drop shadow (an object above casting a shadow onto something below) use solid shading
- If an entire side is in the shadows, use solid shading
- If the shadow is part of a curve in the object, use dithering
- If only part of an object is shaded, use dithering

This is all handily demonstrated throughout the game, and some objects even demonstrate all these rules at once! Leah's wooden sculpture is a prime example of this.



Curved shadow uses dithering



Entire back side is shaded, so solid shading is used (highlighted in green)

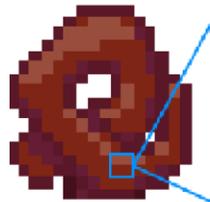
Drop shadow is solid shading, regardless of shape

Of course, there are many more examples of all of these rules shown off in CA's work. Take a look through the tilesheets some time and see what you can find!



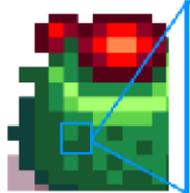
Shading isn't black and white:

As mentioned previously, Stardew Valley rarely makes use of pure black or white in its art, and this is taken a step further when it comes to shading. Rather than using the same color with a different value (lightness) setting, CA tends to use an *entirely different color* to represent shadows! You may notice this yourself if you were to scroll back up and look at all of our previous examples.



	
RGB	RGB
R: 153	R: 127
G: 77	G: 37
B: 60	B: 21
Hex: 994D3C	Hex: 7F2515
HSV	HSV
H: 10	H: 9
S: 60	S: 83
V: 60	V: 49

Color becomes much more red



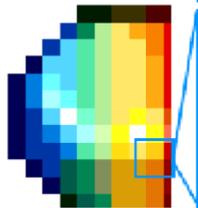
	
RGB	RGB
R: 30	R: 24
G: 138	G: 89
B: 72	B: 47
Hex: 1E8A48	Hex: 18592F
HSV	HSV
H: 143	H: 141
S: 78	S: 73
V: 54	V: 34

Color loses most of its blue



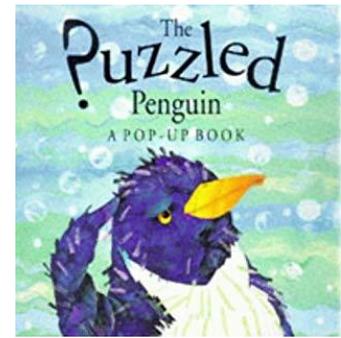
	
RGB	RGB
R: 197	R: 146
G: 99	G: 65
B: 46	B: 43
Hex: C5632E	Hex: 92412B
HSV	HSV
H: 21	H: 12
S: 76	S: 70
V: 77	V: 57

Color shifts towards red



	
RGB	RGB
R: 255	R: 227
G: 205	G: 118
B: 10	B: 2
Hex: FFC012	Hex: E37602
HSV	HSV
H: 47	H: 30
S: 92	S: 99
V: 100	V: 89

...this is just orange instead of yellow.



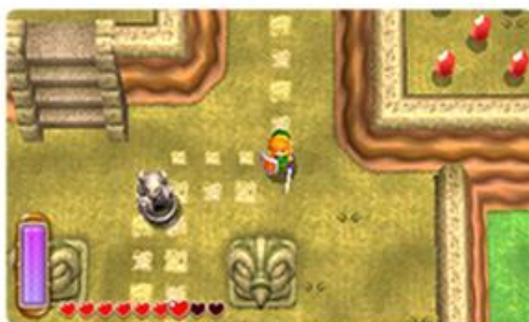
Why perspective is hard in a land of pop-up books

Perhaps the biggest challenge for a new artist to overcome when learning the art style of Stardew Valley is mastering CA's seemingly odd choice of perspective. It's not quite top-down, nor orthographic, nor is it a flat portrait. To understand the perspective of SDV, one must understand the origins of its art style, and take a page from their book.

As mentioned earlier in this guide, ConcernedApe took much of his inspiration for SDV's art style from the early Harvest Moon and Legend of Zelda titles, and it's from these that we can begin to form a picture of how SDV's world is laid out.



Taking a step back and comparing them all side-by-side, a common thread starts to emerge. Anything that portrays height is flattened against the ground, while depth is left alone on the vertical axis. It can almost be compared to a flattened pop-up book, with all the height pressed flat against the pages. This example from a more recent game, *LoZ: A Link Between Worlds*, may provide a better visual of just what this means.

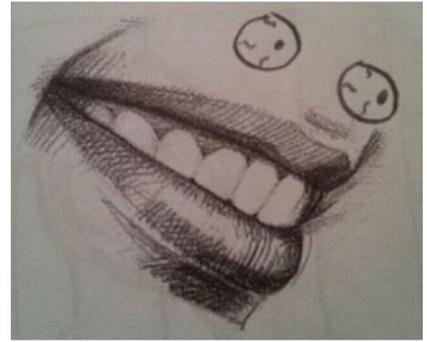


Top-down view



A view from the side
reveals the trick

Properly Portraying a Person's Portrait



Generally speaking, the specifics of NPC portraits will vary pretty widely based on the individual in question. Human faces can be quite diverse, after all! But there are a few tips to keep in mind when designing them that will keep them in line with the portraits of the base game, and may help get you through when something feels “off” that you can’t quite pin down.

- Keep the eyes relatively small. While it’s tempting to create large eyes for the portrait, given the cartoony art style, you’ll notice that CA’s portraits tend to keep the eyes to a conservative “pill” just above the nose.
- Keep the contrast high! CA’s portraits tend to have the contrast between shaded and normal lighting so high that it can seem almost over-exposed. It should evoke the feeling of someone taking a picture with a flash camera.
- Be conservative with your palette. As with all things SDV, portraits tend to use very few colors. Break the portrait up into three distinct sections (hair, skin, clothes) and give yourself four to six colors to use for each of those. Wiggle room is allowed, but don’t go overboard!
- Stay simple! CA’s portraits tend to be light on the fine details. Learn to be okay with large areas being all one color.

As a final example, take this WIP portrait of our own Lady Stardew:

