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Cozy Games and Resistance Through Care

When *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020) came out at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and global lockdowns, it took the world by storm, selling record numbers of copies in the span of a few months (Hernandez, 2020; Khan, 2020). People who had never before considered themselves gamers bought the Nintendo Switch console and devoted countless hours to picking fruit, digging for fossils, decorating their houses and islands, and connecting with friends through the game's world (Fang, 2023; Yee and Sng, 2022; Zhu, 2021). For this reason alone, the pandemic became a crucial moment for digital games. Due to this newfound interest, digital games entered popular discourses not only because of their violence, but as a mature medium that was far more diverse than news would have it. Until then, the focus had primarily been on their violence, their presumed involvement in teenage behavioral issues, and their influence on the shootings in American schools (Kneer and Ward, 2021).

The term *cozy games* was first introduced in the games industry before being adapted by game scholars (Chan et al., 2022; Fang, 2023; Sullivan et al., 2023; Waszkiewicz and Bakun, 2020; Wäppling et al., 2022; Youngblood, 2022), who usually discuss it in relation to ludic, narrative, or aesthetic qualities of games. What is, however, worth emphasizing is that what we understand by *cozy games* refers to an incredibly broad group of titles which, while usually easily recognizable and classifiable as cozy due to how they look, span across many genres and themes. Thus, for example, *Slime Rancher* (Monomi Park, 2017) draws from mechanics of

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the first-person shooter, while *Unpacking* (Witch Beam, 2021) limits the gameplay to, according to the title, unpacking boxes after moving to a new apartment; *Cozynaunts* (NeoNoir Studios, 2024) is a game with a science-fiction setting where the player explores new planets, while *Fae Farm* (Phoenix Labs, 2023) is a farm simulator set in a fantasy world filled with magic, potions, and swords. And yet, we have hardly any problems with recognizing all these titles as cozy, basing our judgement mostly on how they look. Cozy aesthetics are quite unmistakable: the colors are bright and/or pastel, the shapes are round, the characters are adorable (even if they are monsters, ghosts, or other creatures that we traditionally do not associate with cuteness), the music is soft, positive, and upbeat. There are other elements of design too: there are no jump scares, timed events, or competitiveness; and failure, even if it is present, does not sting. These titles allow us to sink hours into activities that are repetitive, mundane, maybe even seemingly boring (Alharthi et al., 2018), to dress up characters and furniture the digital homes to our hearts' content, they are reassuring and positive, and even if the story deals with heavier topics or difficult emotions, the gameplay ensures a safe environment to experience them in.

Although in game studies the attention of the researchers is mostly directed towards ludic and aesthetic elements, it is worth noting that in both psychology and sociology studies on the significance of cuteness brought fascinating results. As authors of *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness* note, usage of the word *cute* in English can be traced to the 1850s with the term being “aligned with children, women, the domestic sphere, and a particular form of [what Lori Merish calls] ‘feminine spectacle’” (Dale et al., 2016, p. 2). Such use is still common in popular discourse, although it is worth noting that the word becomes increasingly used to describe Western and Asian masculinities as well (Baudinette, 2017; DeAngelis, 2016).¹

After researching fixed action patterns and associated singing stimuli in birds, Konrad Lorenz (1970), “a father of modern cuteness research” (Sherman and Haidt, 2011, p. 248), linked the avian and human responses to cuteness and suggested that it serves as an “innate releaser” of the human – and parental in particular – caregiving response. Sherman and Haidt build on that by generalizing the relationship between cuteness and care to the more general trigger of socialization. If cuteness is “an affective mechanism for detecting and responding to the social value of human children... its primary... function is to motivate sociality, triggering an attempt to engage the child in social interaction” (Sherman and Haidt, 2011, p. 248).

¹ This is not without its significance considering the influence of Japanese production contexts on the global game industry.

This has a second, crucial consequence in the form of activating processes that cause people to not only humanize the object perceived as cute but also, by proxy, to perceive cute objects as members of the moral circle. It is for this reason, Sherman and Haidt argue, that cuteness is so prevalent in toymaking and that cute objects tend to be anthropomorphized so often. Emma Reay (2021a, 2021b) looks into exactly this in the context of digital games, analyzing the trope of “the Blithe Child” in such games as *Little Big Planet* (Media Molecule, 2014), *Unravel* (Coldwood Interactive, 2016), and *Fall Guys* (Mediatonic, 2020). She argues that in these games, all of which feature an avatar who resembles a ragdoll, a fabric or a plastic toy, respectively, “the buoyant, giddy, cherubic figure of ‘the Blithe Child’ functions both as an iconic sign as an affective trigger” (Reay, 2021b, p. 132) since the figure both adheres to genre expectations and establishes expectations towards it and structures the player–avatar relationship.

The concept of cuteness remains very close to the meaning enclosed in the Japanese *kawaii* (可愛い, かわい), which for Sharon Kinsella (2015) means that which is “childlike; it celebrates sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced social behavior and physical appearances” (p. 226). The word, now commonly used in the Western context, is often used to describe characters “which are animals or quasi-animals who must be cared for or trained” (Yano, 2004, p. 57), such as Hello Kitty, or characters from the *Pokémon* franchise, or the *Animal Crossing* series (Kinsella, 1995; Kovarovic, 2011).

Definitions of coziness in game studies

Before the term *cozy games* became as widespread as it currently is, game scholars had been already paying attention to the titles this definition encompasses, coining different names for them depending on what qualities they focused on the most, including: *ambient games* (Fizek, 2018; Hjorth and Richardson, 2020), *empathy games* (Boltz et al., 2015; Kors et al., 2016; Pozo, 2018), *friendship games* (Harrington, 2018), *personal games* (Parker, 2013), *small games* (McCrea, 2011), *slow games* (Navarro-Remesal, 2020), *tend-and-befriend games* (Code, 2017; Ruberg and Scully-Blaker, 2021), or *wholesome games* (Knight, 2019).

The definition of coziness that is currently the most commonly referenced comes from a detailed report by Tanya X Short, Chelsea Howe, Daniel Cook, and others (2018).² In the report, coziness is defined as referring to “how strongly

² In the previous literature the report has been cited as “(Cook, 2018).” This has been now modified to reflect the group character of the work done by Tanya X Short, Anthony Ordon, Dan Hurd, Chelsea Howe, Jake Forbes, Squirrel Eiserloh, Joshua Diaz, Ron Meiners, and Daniel

a game evokes the fantasy of safety, abundance, and softness” (2018). The following definitions of the three tenets are offered:

1. Safety: “A cozy game has an *absence* of danger and risk. In a cozy game, nothing is high-risk, and there is no impending *loss* or *threat*. Familiarity, reliability, and one’s ability to be vulnerable and expressive without negative ramification all augment the feeling of safety”.
2. Abundance: “A cozy game has a sense of *abundance*. Lower level Maslow needs (food, shelter) are met or being met, providing space to work on higher needs (deeper relationships, appreciation of beauty, self actualization, nurturing, belonging). Nothing is lacking, pressing or imminent”.
3. Softness: “Cozy games use strong aesthetic *signals* that tell players they are in a *low stress* environment full of abundance and safety. These are gentle and comforting stimulus, where players have a lower state of arousal but can still be highly engaged and present. There’s often an intimacy of space and emotion, with a slower tempo pace and manageable scope (spatially, emotionally, and otherwise). Soft stimuli implies authenticity, sincerity, and humanity”.

(Short et al., 2018, emphasis original).

Drawing heavily from the report, Agata Waszkiewicz and Martyna Bakun (2020) scrutinize coziness as a trait that can be dominant or complementary to a specific game’s theme and genre, emphasizing that moments of coziness can also be found in action-oriented, mainstream titles. Thus, they consider the link between cozy and non-cozy game elements as definable by one of the three types of relationships: 1) coherent, 2) dissonant, and 3) situational.

The coherent relationship seems the most intuitive, as it describes the vast majority of cozy games. It describes a situation in which cozy aesthetics accompanies a cozy message or themes. What is worth emphasizing is the importance of the coziness of gameplay – although, of course, while many games feature a detailed, cozy narrative, like *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016), other titles prioritize the coziness of gameplay with little story. For example, *A Little to the Left* (Max Inferno, 2022) is a puzzle game in which the player is tasked with putting various objects, such as screws, books or leaves, in an aesthetically pleasing and satisfying order.

A dissonant relationship “connects two aesthetics that seem the most contradictory” (Waszkiewicz and Bakun, 2020, p. 233). Such a juxtaposition can be done through contrasting various elements. Most often, arguably, it is cozy gameplay and aesthetics that accompany difficult, emotional narratives, rather than the other way around. For example, *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games,

Cook. Following the order provided in the original blog post, it is now referred to as “(Short et al., 2018).” We thank Samuel Poirier-Poulin for the suggestion.

2016) combines safe, unthreatening gameplay and soft aesthetics with difficult emotions of raising a terminally ill child.

Finally, situational coziness describes moments in which the cozy is present in games that are otherwise not cozy, in order to provide moments of escape from combat and tension, as well as bring closer the characters and players. A recurring way in which that is manifested is “through the imagery of a campfire that in many games serves as either checkpoints or safe zones” (Waszkiewicz and Bakun, 2020, p. 235), for example in *Dark Souls* (From Software, 2011) or *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2013), where fire signifies the safe haven.

A similar effect can be obtained through a cutscene or other game moments the player has no influence over, like the shared moment of tenderness between Nathan Drake and Elena, who share an intimate dinner and evening together in *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* (Naughty Dog, 2016). As an action-adventure game, the gameplay consists of fighting waves of enemies and exploring environments, thus demanding skill and persistence. By giving Nathan a moment of reprise within his own home and with a woman he loves, the game additionally extends that cozy moment of intimacy as shared between the character and the player, bringing them closer together.

Comfort as resistance

Similar to the concepts of care and coziness is that of wholesomeness. When discussing streaming practices, Jordan Youngblood (2022) defines “cozy wholesomeness” as a means to “embrace this potentiality of unity and intimacy and fuse it to a resistant attitude of being that allows for something other than cynicism and sarcasm” (p. 533). Drawing from Mel Campbell (2018) “wholesomeness” can be defined as an idea of almost radical optimism and unity, which resists irony and opposes “a culture dominated by loneliness, cynicism, and posturing over cultural capital”.

For Judith Philips (2007), care can mean several things including “affection, love, duty, well-being, responsibility and reciprocity,” which can be demonstrated through “touch, action, emotion, and bodily expression” (p. 1). Although care is usually associated with interpersonal, intimate relationships – as in Phillips’ quote – it is also an important concept in the philosophical and political discourses. For example, the feminist “Ethics of Care” movement (Robinson, 1999; Hamington, 2004; Held, 2006), initiated by Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, “sought to challenge conceptions of ethics based on justice and rights, with an ethics based on the values central to the way humans care for each other” (Thompson, 2015, p. 433). From philosophical but also sociopolitical points of view, care has always been political considering that, historically, care has been perceived as a feminine trait and a woman’s domain (Thompson, 2015).

The idea that care, slowness, and cuteness can be deeply political tools of resistance and activism is not new in feminist writing. It was first formulated in 1988 by a Black feminist and queer poet Audre Lorde (1988/2017), who, amidst her fight with cancer, said that “[c]aring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (p. 131). Since then, self-care has gained importance in writings of other Black writers, but, as has been acknowledged by André Spicer (2019), the concept has lost its radical feminist meaning through its use and abuse in popular discourses. Abdul Hadi (2017), for example, criticizes the concept of self-care, since “the ones who need to practice self-care the most i.e., those struggling with class and economy based injustices and oppressions, which are usually connected to race and gender based injustices, cannot afford the services of self care” (p. 33).

Finally, it is worth noting how Tricia Hersey (2022), the author of *Rest is Resistance* manifesto and the founder of *The Nap Ministry* project, writes about self-care: “Rest is a form of resistance because it disrupts and pushes back against capitalism and white supremacy”, linking sleep deprivation to white supremacy and the exploitation and racialization of People of Color in the United States. On her website she emphasizes the “liberating power of rest” and stresses that “[p]art of this rest resistance is also reclaiming your imagination and reclaiming hope, reclaiming your intuition of knowing what’s right and knowing there’s always time for you to reclaim your body as yours” (Hersey, 2022).

How do cozy games fit in the narratives of self-care resistance? Considering their emergence as a counter-genre to the mainstream, violent, fast-paced, competitive action and shooter game titles, it is difficult not to see cozy games also as a reflection of the changing needs of the current players. The shifting, unstable political and economic landscape in Europe and the United States in recent years sees a shift towards right-wing ideas, increasing intolerance, economic crises following the Russian military aggression against Ukraine and the long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the looming threat of the climate catastrophe. These have all prompted a change in how and where people seek escape. Gerald Farca, Alexander Lehner, and Víctor Navarro-Remesal (2018) notice an important quality of cozy games, pointing to what they call “regenerative play,” evoking such feelings as affection, curiosity and commitment that not only provide players with rest but also inspire them to be mindful towards natural environments outside of the game context, “changing their habitual dispositions and images of nature, culture and their mutual dependence” (p. 22). With public narratives trying to place responsibility for the climate change on the individual rather than enforcing action on the level of multi-million-dollar companies, people no longer long to play a lone hero bound to save the world, and it is not surprising that so many turn to cozy games, searching for the predictability and stability that they offer.

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