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Comfortably Numb: An Ideological Analysis of Coziness in Videogames

Abstract

This essay analyses the concept of coziness in videogames, focusing on their role as a stress-relieving diversion in modern capitalist societies. The article emphasizes the genre's features of safety, abundance, and softness, which create an atmosphere that soothes players amidst high-paced, contemporary lifestyles. While often framed as a type of resistant design, it is argued that cozy games uphold capitalist principles, by encouraging players to replicate them within the game. The discussion extends to the idea of coziness in interior design within these games, which is shown to reproduce ideologies of class, status, and consumerism. Drawing from atmosphere theory as well as the works of Jean Baudrillard, Slavoj Žižek, and Richard Dyer, the author argues that even the act of designing cozy spaces in these games serves as a continuation of capitalism and that cozy games may be thought of as utopian entertainment attempting to answer societal shortcomings through capitalist solutions. Thus, the essay posits that while cozy games offer a respite, they reproduce the conditions sustaining capitalist modernity.

Keywords: cozy games, atmosphere, animal crossing, utopia, a Little to the Left, Baudrillard, Žižek, capitalism

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Introduction

This article explores the affect of coziness which defines the genre of cozy games. Short et al. (2018) write that cozy games feature a triad of elements manifest through mechanics, narrative and aesthetics, namely 1) safety (stakes are low and there are no significant dangers in the game); 2) abundance (resources are not lacking, and no task is pressing or imminent); 3) softness (the aesthetics favours relaxation through displays of authenticity, sincerity and humanity). The authors explain that, from a psychological perspective, cozy games satisfy higher human needs such as mastery, self-reflection, and connectedness, rather than, e.g., survival, a typical need addressed by majoritarian game design. According to Agata Waszkiewicz and Martyna Bakun (2020), cozy games create digital spaces where the need for safety can be fulfilled and where players engage in mindful and reflexive gameplay, veering on the nostalgic.

Because of such qualities, cozy games are typically characterized – together with similar, overlapping labels such as *zen games*, *slow games*, *friendship games*, and *ambient games* – as an alternative to majoritarian designs emphasizing competition, speed, and violent and misogynistic themes. Additionally, cozy games are sometimes framed as reactions to broader political and environmental issues, and therefore discussed as coping, or even resistant mechanisms for life under capitalism as a socioeconomic structure responsible for those issues, providing alternatives to core capitalist tenets revolving around profit accumulation, constant growth, competition, and individualism. Sonia Fizek (2022) talks about “slow” design qualities as a remedy to a constantly accelerating capitalist overstimulation (p. 46). Similarly, Waszkiewicz and Bakun (2020) write that “the changing political situation of the last few years and the climate catastrophe discourses that prevail in the media created a need for the soothing, low-stakes, slow-paced, heart-warming games” found under the cozy umbrella, providing “a fantasy of stability and safety” (p. 228). Rainforest Scully-Blaker (2019) also discusses modes of play identifiable as “radical slowness” (pp. 102–104), countering capitalist logics of accumulation and consumption procedurally encoded within games, even those presenting soft aesthetics. Seunghyun Shin (2018) writes about ‘cottagecore’ games in similar terms, theorizing them as media enabling players to imagine a better world and shift cultural attitudes in a politically progressive fashion. Short et al. (2018) go as far as claiming that coziness is a “radical philosophy” antithetical to capitalism insofar as it supports the comfort and care of all people.

This essay builds on top of these authors by providing an alternative, perhaps less sympathetic analysis. While not discounting individual experiences of coziness and the value it may have as a coping mechanism, I speculate that cozy games do not challenge the capitalist *status quo*, but rather act as an ideological *pressure relief valve* for life under capitalism. Cozy games can thus be encompassed in what

Richard Dyer (2005) calls “utopian entertainment”, those escapist media forms deploying specific affective codes to respond to societal inadequacies, from within the same capitalist matrix responsible for those inadequacies in the first place.

Specifically I highlight the link between coziness and consumerism, understood here as an ideological formation where individuals understand themselves first and foremost as consumers, finding meaning within their consumption and possessions, and exercising freedom within the marketplace. Consumerism, understood as such, is a meta-ideology of contemporary capitalism, where wasteful consumption is required to sustain production and capitalist expansion (Murdock, 2014). Consumerism has been observed as a key contributor to the replication of capitalist exploitation since the production boom of the post-WWII period (Sklair, 2012), with the product market saturation crisis in the 1970s requiring ever-increasing levels of consumption (Streeck, 2012), a condition that has exacerbated within the global marketplace (Sklair, 2002). Higher levels of consumption have been accepted by workers as compensation for capitalist exploitation (Wolff, 2005). Consumerism, however, is not defined only by higher level of consumption, but also by its relation to the categories of status and class, expressed by objects of possession (Baudrillard, 1996; Jameson, 1991; Streeck, 2012). I argue that coziness can be framed as a consumerist practice, and that certain cozy videogames replicate these dynamics.

This essay will proceed by identifying coziness as an *atmosphere* originating from material assemblages of objects possessing specific tactile and sensorial qualities. It will do so by drawing connections between atmosphere theory and writings on the Danish concept of *hygge*. This article is broadly aligned with a phenomenological perspective with regard to objects, and with theories of digital materiality (Leonardi, 2010). Materiality is not understood here in the narrow sense of physical substance, and digital objects found within videogames are not immaterial simply because they are made from data instead of wood, textile, or ceramic. Materiality is understood in terms of practical engagement and meaning. The basis for such engagement is *necessarily* the body, not as a biological entity, but as a lived medium of access to the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2005). The body is the basis for any type of experience of, and engagement with, objects, either physical or digital, including videogame objects (Keogh, 2018). Following the explanation of coziness as atmosphere, I will illustrate how this operates as to replicate consumerist ideologies related to matters of class and status.

Cozy objects and cozy atmospheres

According to theorist Gernot Böhme (2017) atmospheres are spatially extended feelings, experienced subjectively, yet perceived as objective qualities of places and events, carrying specific bodily resonances. For example, the festive atmosphere

of a gathering amongst friends, or the sombre atmosphere of a cathedral, are subjectively felt, yet shared amongst individuals recognizing them as not originating from themselves. Atmospheres furthermore come with specific bodily attunements (e.g., we may feel jittery, relaxed, on edge, aroused, heavy, and so on). Böhme writes that atmospheres originate out of constellations of *ecstatic* objects. What he means by this is that things and people display a spatial *going-forth*, an ontological quality of objects sensed by a perceiver in the form of colours, smell, shapes, and so on (Böhme, 2017, p. 22). It is because objects are ecstatic and go forth into space, that we can perceive them in different modes, including affective modes. Ecstasies are perceived as spatially outpoured feelings radiating from things and people, together composing the atmosphere experienced by a subject. Following an atmospheric genre approach (Andiloro, 2023), I suggest it is a cozy atmosphere, originating from ecstatic objects, that defines the genre of cozy games.

Atmosphere theory may be used to better understand coziness. Mikkel Bille (2020) deploys it in his exploration of the concept *hygge*, a Danish word often translated as coziness, although the term also includes aspects of sociality, authenticity and unpretentiousness (Linnet, 2011).¹ Bille (2020) focuses on lighting's contribution to a *hyggelig*, or cozy, atmosphere within private Danish homes, through the staging of a warm, dimmed and diffused lightscape encouraging slowness and gathering together with friends and family within the safety and comfort of one's home, felt in a deeply embodied way. Bille also highlights *hygge*'s strong material component that goes beyond light sources, including a material infrastructure of objects constructing a *hyggelig* atmosphere (pp. 82–84). The objects, materials, surfaces, and textures contributing to *hygge* have been extensively discussed in the popular press (Altman, 2016; Brits, 2016; Søderberg & Lynggaard, 2016; Wiking, 2017). Objects and materials discussed as cozy include “toys, clothes, kitchenware, drying racks, books and pictures” (Bille, 2020, p. 84), but also “candles, nubby woolens, shearling slippers, woven textiles, pastries, blond wood, sheepskin rugs, lattes with milk-foam hearts, and a warm fireplace” (Altman, 2016, n.p.). Other authors mention plants, heirlooms, recycled pallets, souvenirs (Søderberg & Lynggaard, 2016), and generally all types of haptically appealing textures and surfaces (Brits, 2016), such as wood, ceramic, and soft textile. Approaching *hygge* as an atmosphere means, to follow Bille (2020), describing “the feeling of a space, emerging between the (temporary) affective properties of material phenomena and the goals of social interaction” (p. 94).

We may observe how coziness is constructed as an atmosphere in videogames through the example of *A Little to the Left* [ALTTL] (Max Inferno, 2022). ALTTL is a puzzle game centring around organizing household objects into satisfying

¹ While not sharing the exact same meaning, similar concepts appear in other Nordic languages such as *mys* (Swedish), *kos* (Norwegian) and *notalegheit* (Icelandic).

arrangements. It challenges players to find order in everyday chaos, offering a relaxing and meditative gameplay experience. This game is a useful example to look at since digital objects and their manipulation are a key part of its experience. *ALLTL* has been described as a ‘tidy puzzler’ or ‘sort-‘em-up’ game (Kerr, 2022), in which players must place objects in specific orders or in specific spots to solve spatial puzzles. The tasks, which include rearranging books or aligning pictures, are small-scale puzzles with no time pressure or scoring. The lack of danger and soft aesthetics, featuring a pastel colour palette and a calming soundtrack, align with the principles of cozy design.

ALLTL encapsulates *hygge*, going beyond simple mechanical and aesthetic attributes of coziness. As Bille (2020) explains, *hygge* is not merely a “thing” or an aggregation thereof. Instead, it is an ambiguous term referring to an “affective condition – an atmosphere” (p. 94) that materializes in between objects, subjects, and their practices. *ALLTL*, with its cozy design promoting casual and episodic gameplay, fosters *hygge*, allowing it to permeate the interstitial moments of domestic life. One reviewer comments:

One of my favorite things to do, especially as the weather gets colder, is to just sit on my couch with my animals and my human in silence. My husband is looking up sports scores, my cat is begging for food, and my dog is sleeping and farting himself awake while I play something simple just to wind down from the day. A Little to the Left is the perfect little puzzle game for those quiet, peaceful hours between dinner and bedtime (Parrish, 2022, n.p.).

The description epitomizes a quintessential *hyggelig* moment. These words also underscore that digital objects in videogame spaces are experienced within the immediate living spaces of players. The coziness they radiate is not lessened by a supposed ontological gap between physical and videogame spaces. Within experience digital objects *are* material, and the ludic engagements we have with them happen within immediate places of dwelling (Vella, 2019). *ALLTL* further embodies *hygge* through its hapticity and tactility, accentuated by how players engage with objects. The audio design, mimicking sounds from daily life like sliding paper, ticking dials, and the sounds of glass, metal, and wood interacting is integral in synaesthetically enhancing this sense of tactility (Keogh, 2018). As another reviewer notes:

Putting pins in a pinboard has a satisfying push, placing cutlery in a draw has a brilliant rattle, and there’s even a bit in the game where you’re peeling those tiny sticker-labels off pieces of fruit. It’s not even a puzzle of any sort, but the satisfaction of each peel still feels just as good (Watts, 2022, n.p.).

What is referred here is a pleasurable feeling reminiscing the sensation of tactile and embodied familiarity and intimacy one has with everyday objects, associated with coziness and *hygge*. The sound design conveys the tactility of objects within the game, displaying their own materiality and spatiality, ecstatically coalescing into a cozy atmosphere.

The complacency of coziness

The concept of *hyggelig* objects, commonly found in homes and contributing to a cozy atmosphere through their ecstasies, is aligned with classist and consumerist ideals which may be replicated in cozy games. A valuable framework to scrutinize the ideological facets of *hygge* is found within Jean Baudrillard's early work. In *The System of Objects*, Baudrillard (1996) critiques industrial and interior design from a Marxist and material semiotic perspective, positing that our domestic objects express an ideology centred on consumption rather than production, and that these objects' constellations signify class and social status.

Baudrillard (1996) promotes the idea that analyzing the objects that individuals choose to surround themselves with can reveal much about their social and cultural roles. In traditional bourgeois homes, according to Baudrillard, essential pieces such as tables or beds are central to defining the function of each room and the familial structure, embodying values of patriarchy, tradition, and authority (pp. 15–17). These objects carry a 'moral dimension' and are given life through their embedded symbolism. In contrast, modern interiors often feature more versatile and functional items like coffee tables and built-in storage, which are not permanent but appear as needed. This shift to modularity and practicality in household objects indicates a transformation in societal values, moving away from the fixed and symbolic to the flexible and utilitarian (p. 21). Baudrillard recognizes modern interiors' break from tradition as liberating but laments the diminished emotional connection between people and their possessions. This shift to an "externalized atmosphere" (p. 24) in design focuses on novelty and control rather than personal attachment. He suggests that while individuals may believe they are personalizing their space with unique objects, these are actually part of a semiotic system that conveys cultural messages and status, deeply influencing interior design choices.

Drawing on the above ideas, I propose that *hygge* and coziness stem from objects within interiors that carry cultural connotations aligned with middle-class sensibilities. Looking at *hygge* more critically, we notice that, while it is often associated with unpretentiousness and authenticity, it reflects Scandinavian middle-class values. Jeppe Trolle Linnet (2011) suggests that in expressing these values, *hygge* serves to enact social control and uphold a normative lifestyle centred around family and egalitarianism, thus creating temporary shelters against social stratification

and competition. *Hygge* would thus seem to serve a similar function to the coziness of cozy games, namely providing a coping mechanism for life under capitalism. However, this may foster an exclusionary mindset, privileging traditional norms and values, which may be conservative or even regressive, and is reflected in the ideas of what constitutes a cozy object, or a cozy material as opposed to a non-cozy one. Wood is considered a cozy material possessing pleasurable haptic qualities derived from texture, warmth, sturdiness, and conveying an overall organic multisensory feel encompassing also smell, sight and sound, as opposed to, for example, plastic, which conveys a synthetic feel. Wood is therefore generally a preferred choice for creating a cozy atmosphere. Yet we should also reflect on whether this is a function solely of aesthetics or whether there are other cultural, social, and economic factors that cause us to label something as cozy. For example, plastic is typically cheaper than wood. We might then speculate on whether individuals who cannot afford items made of wood (or wool, ceramic, or other cozy materials) are inherently unable to create a cozy atmosphere and point to the classist component of coziness.

I suggest that coziness is a function of class and expresses consumerist values. Not only has *hygge* been increasingly commercialized and co-opted by marketing strategies to sell products ranging from home décor to fashion, resulting in the conflation of cozy affects with objects and their subsequent commodification, but coziness itself may be considered as ideological (Higgins, 2016). Coziness comes to embody a desire for a simpler, more authentic, and more fulfilling way of life, in opposition to the fast-paced, competitive ethos of contemporary capitalist societies. It favours comfort, relaxation, and intimacy as opposed to hardship, discomfort, and estrangement. A preference for the former may be understandable, yet we must question to what extent the 'non-cozy' is determined by matters of class, race, gender, religion, and so on. When difference breaks into middle-class, white, patriarchal, secular societies, for example through foreign immigration or through the rise in prominence of feminist movements, discomfort amongst privileged groups may arise. When this is added to the discomfort experienced due to the stressors of life under capitalism, a regressive and insular retreat into one's cozy private sphere may take place. In other words, cozy denotes safety and the dominant formations may opt for safety when their dominant position is threatened. This is why many commenters of *hygge* frame it as fundamentally conservative, if not outright reactionary. Writing on *hygge*, Michael Booth (2014) suggests that it epitomizes the popular Danish saying 'what was lost without will be found within' (p. 67). This within is a nostalgic, apolitical, uncontroversial, culturally familiar domain hijacked by consumerism where coziness is found within objects associated with certain backgrounds and tastes, as well as class.

Tempting as it may be then to frame the pursuit of coziness and its associated acts, such as playing cozy games, as conscious resistance to, or rejection of, capitalism

(Bille, 2020; Linnet, 2011), it would be more appropriate to categorize them as *breaks* rather than *rejections*. This perspective interprets coziness as what Slavoj Žižek (2006) describes as the obscene supplement of capitalist ideology, a space for acts that seem resistant or transgressive, yet do not genuinely disrupt the prevailing order, instead rendering us even more subservient to its logic of accumulation, growth and consumption. *Hygge* and coziness are instances of ‘relaxing’ transgressions: small, consumptive pockets of time within life under capitalism that serve to ‘recharge one’s batteries’ and re-enter the production requirements of capital. These interludes do not represent resistance but are instead an expected, even welcomed, part of capitalist ideology, which encourages individuals to take pleasure in these harmless transgressions (Žižek, 2006).

Certainly, cozy games are not unique in their function as breaks. Leisure activities in general may be interpreted as such (Rojek, 2014), and while the blurring of lines between labour and leisure operated by videogames has been observed previously (Wark, 2007), I am here referring to videogames as technologies of leisure and to videogame play as a leisurely activity. Cozy games are not unique in their function of a pressure release valve. Highlighting this function of cozy games, however, is significant insofar as they do seem to explicitly respond to certain perceived social issues (e.g., precarity, scarcity, alienation, hyper-acceleration, careerism, and grind culture, to name a few) (Fizek, 2022; Shin, 2022; Short et al., 2018; Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020). Short et al. (2018) argue that this is not achieved through an enforcement of an ideal utopian state, but by facilitating coziness as an affect keeping in mind the wide range of player motivations and emotional states. Yet, coziness itself as an affect might be considered utopian. I suggest cozy games are an example of utopian entertainment (see Dyer, 2005), an escapist form of media deploying specific affective codes – in our case coziness – to address societal shortcomings, while remaining entrenched within the capitalist system contributing to those same issues. Utopian entertainment points “to gaps or inadequacies in capitalism, but only those gaps or inadequacies that capitalism proposes itself to deal with” (Dyer, 2005, p. 27). For example, if the utopian solution to scarcity is abundance, within utopian entertainment this becomes consumerism.

Likewise, alienation is responded to not through collective endeavour, but individually. I suggest that cozy games function in a similar fashion. They help soothe anxieties induced by contemporary, high-paced urban lifestyles by offering low-stakes, relaxed gameplay, often within nature-centric spaces, all coalescing into a utopian feeling of coziness aligned with consumerist practices. I turn to *Animal Crossing: New Horizons (AC:NH)* (Nintendo EPD, 2020), as a case study to illustrate this point. While I limit my analysis to this title, as a particularly popular cozy game, much of the following points may be applicable to other games

where resource collection and crafting are key mechanics (sometimes also referred to as *life sims*), such as *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016), *Story of Seasons: A Wonderful Life* (Marvelous Inc., 2023), *My Time at Portia* (Pathea Games, 2019), *Potion Permit* (MassHive Media, 2022), *Dinkum* (Bendon, 2022), and *Cat Cafe Manager* (Roost Games, 2022).

Cozy consumption in *Animal Crossing*

Animal Crossing (*AC*) is a series of life simulation games where players reside in small villages alongside anthropomorphic animals. The games are renowned for their real-time mechanics, with the gameworld's internal clock and calendar synchronised to the social world, reflecting the same day-night cycles, seasons, and festivities. As such, in-game stores and resources are accessible or available only at specific real-world times. Like other *AC* games, *AC:NH* lacks a specific goal, allowing players to engage in activities like bug catching, fossil hunting, gardening, and befriending other village inhabitants instead. If we were to locate *AC:NH* on the well-known spectrum of play activities featuring *ludus* (regulated, structured, and competitive play) on one pole and *paidia* (free-form, unstructured, and expressive play) on the other (Jensen, 2013), this would firmly sit on the latter end of the spectrum. *AC:NH* emphasizes consumerist self-expression unfolding through unstructured, free-form play rather than competition. One significant way through which players achieve this is by interior designing their in-game homes through objects, either crafted from collected resources or purchased using in-game currency.

Designing interior (but also exterior) in-game spaces is a popular activity among the player community. Online forums such as the *r/horizondesigns* or the *r/animalcrossingdesign* subreddits serve as hubs where players share their design screenshots. A quick search for “cozy” designs unveils a wealth of posts. One example is from user *u/Joliz22*, who shares a post titled *Friga's cozy vacation home* (*u/Joliz22*, 2021). The design features various items such as a projector, screen, couch, plants, stacks of books, wooden drawers, and a bed with a thick duvet. The room includes wooden and brick walls, with windows showcasing a snowy landscape outside, contributing to the cozy atmosphere. Similarly, user *u/candlesandcloth* shares a post titled *Cozy blue vibes for my sweet old man Dobie!* (*u/candlesandcloth*, 2022), showcasing a design replete with cozy objects such as lamps, plants, a warm cup of tea, a typewriter, a vintage phone, and a rocking chair. The use of wood in the design further enhances the room's cozy atmosphere.

In the context of creating a cozy atmosphere, objects in *AC:NH* are appreciated for their perceived tactility and semblance of authenticity. Certain unique objects require specific resources to craft, or they may be available for purchase in the in-game shop. These items rotate daily, which encourages players to purchase

appealing objects without certainty of their future availability, fostering a sense of their exclusivity and uniqueness. However, these digital objects are intrinsically replicable across every instance of the game played by different individuals, aligning with Baudrillard's (1996) concept of serialized modern objects. Thus, the cozy atmosphere evoked through objects of interior design in *AC:NH* is in tune with the paradigm of consumerist modernity rather than standing in opposition to it.

At the end of each week the interiors of players are evaluated by the Happy Home Academy (HHA), which gives them a score ranging from C (lowest) to S (highest). High scores are obtained through the disposition of matching items, colour coordination, use of space, style, and theme. Players who score low are offered tips on how to improve one's interior. High scores are rewarded with exclusive furniture or decorative items.

In addition to this, coziness is not just a consequence of the disposition of objects resulting in a cozy atmosphere but originates also from the practice of interior design itself. In other words, designing a cozy atmosphere is in itself cozy. Indeed, players describe this as a relaxing activity, acting as a break from the stressors of daily life (Splechta, 2020). This practice may be interpreted as a harmless transgression, rather than a radical refusal of the capitalist injunction to be productive. Rather than constituting a break from it, cozy design, and the designing of coziness, are best understood as a continuation, an obscene supplement of capitalism where the harmless transgression is defined by a consumerist retreat into coziness. From this perspective, engaging in cozy play represents a temporary break allowing individuals to decompress before re-entering the cycle of production and consumption.

Importantly, pointing out that players engage in consumerist practices when playing *AC:NH*, or other cozy games presenting similar mechanics, is not to argue for a magic bullet theory suggesting that they are mindlessly interpellated and transformed into consumers. As Scully-Blaker (2019) points out, players are not necessarily passive victims of the game's capitalist logics. Players may engage in acts of radical slowness, refusing to engage in the cycle of accumulation and consumption. Such position indicates players are not uncritical 'ideological vessels', waiting to be filled by whatever ideology they may be exposed to. However, it is noteworthy that the act of resistance requires a conscious effort on part of the player, who is otherwise encouraged by the design to adopt the role of consumer.

Conclusion

This essay set out to identify the relation of cozy games and consumer capitalism. It was argued that digital objects construct a cozy atmosphere associated with middle-class values. Coziness was framed by referring to the Danish concept of

hygge, which frames coziness not only as an end result, but as a practice creating a temporary shelter for individuals to retreat to and take cover from the pace, stress and speed of contemporary life. This retreat, however, may often be nostalgic, or even regressive.

By referring to the early writing of Baudrillard (1996), it was argued that the objects contributing to an atmosphere are ideological, and that cozy objects serve a purpose within the capitalist matrix of modernity, replicating, rather than contrasting, its values. Creating coziness through interior design, then, is best understood not as a resistant practice, but rather as the obscene supplement to capitalism (Žižek, 2000), a space to apparently transgress the rules set out by the system, while still remaining firmly enframed within it through consumerist practices.

Atmosphere theory is useful to explain how digital objects contribute to a sense of coziness. At the same time, it allows us to move beyond ideological critiques of videogames, which often focus on either mechanics or aesthetics, and instead analyse those affects and practices that unfold in-between. A central point made in this article is that cozy atmospheres reproduce ideologies of class, status, and consumerism. This ideological underpinning enables us to further interrogate and elucidate cozy games' relation to capitalism, allowing us to critique them as both a coping mechanism and a reproducer of ideology. From this perspective cozy games constitute an example of what Dyer (2005) labels as utopian entertainment, an escapist form of media deploying coziness to address societal shortcomings, while remaining entrenched within the capitalist system contributing to those shortcomings.

While cozy games may provide an escape and an opportunity for relaxation from the demands of capitalist modernity, it is important to critically evaluate how they may also serve an ideological function replicating the conditions sustaining the *status quo*. Conducting this critique, we may better understand the cultural role and impact of cozy games.

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