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Beyond Aesthetics: Players, Player-Characters and Interactivity-as-Demand in Cozy Games

Abstract

Cozy games are often defined by their soft visual design, ambient audio, and low risk gameplay that addresses a range of themes from casual to meaningful. Typically, they also center on simple gameplay in terms of control schema and the ability to disconnect, as a safe, relaxing play space, and with its easy exits points to quit the game. While these aspects have been discussed in both scholarly and media entertainment writing, the demands (or lack thereof) have yet to be explored from a theoretical perspective. Through the lens of interactivity-as-demand theory, this paper aims to explore the connection between the gameplay experience as it relates to cognitive, physical, social, and emotional demands and the in-game representations of the player-character. Through this analytical lens, it is possible to understand the consistency and disconnect of demands as experienced by the player compared to how they are (re)presented on screen which has potential implications related to the player's expectations and design principles of cozy games.

Keywords: cozy games, interactivity-as-demand, player experience, representation, game design

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Introduction

As the genre of cozy games continues to expand both in diversity and popularity, further exploration of defining elements is necessary. Typically defined by their soft aesthetics, low barriers of entry, and simple, low-risk gameplay, cozy games are designed to be inclusive, relaxing, and to deliver positive play experiences (Short et al., 2018). As motivations for playing cozy games center on low demand on behalf of the player, whether it is at the cognitive level in understanding in-game tasks or at the physical level of control input, the representation of the demands on the screen are equally important to the player-experience in fostering a consistent harmony of representation and expectations of cozy game play.

Interactivity-as-demand theory (Bowman, 2021) and the demands of video game play (Bowman, 2018; 2019) focuses on the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional demands that a game requires of a player when engaging in video game play. All games require some level of these four demands, and genres can be defined through the types and levels of demands a game focuses on.

In this paper, I will examine the gameplay choices of the player, the related demands on them, and the in-game actions and representation of demands of the player-characters of two titles: *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020), a social world building sim listed on many 'best' cozy games lists (Strampe, 2023; Tamanaha, 2022) and *Pode* (Henchman & Goon, 2018), a casual cooperative game that adheres to many of the defining elements of cozy games. These two examples were selected based on their diverse gameplay, focus on different aspects of the definition of cozy games, the range of demands each game requires of the player, and finally how these four demands are represented in each through the player-characters' actions. The aim is not to conduct a comparative analysis, but to explore different ends of the spectrum of what is considered a cozy game by current definitions. Nor is the aim to explore the interactions or relationships between the player and player-characters, but rather to consider how cozy gameplay is both experienced by the player and how it is represented on the screen through the actions of the player-character and in-game avatars, therefore potentially expanding the definition and experience of cozy games for both players and designers.

Defining cozy games

As the genre continues to grow, so does the work of codifying a definition. In games media, cozy games are often defined by players and designers as being focused on the feeling of coziness. Hope Bellingham, in *Games Radar* online states that "Typically, a cozy game will be laid back, have minimal, if any, combat, an endearing art style, and will wrap its action around a wholesome story" (2022).

Fundamentally, at their core, cozy games as a genre are defined by their soft aesthetics, slow pacing, and limited challenge.

More formally, industry facing game design research and academic scholarship have concentrated on defining the core characteristics of cozy games. Considered one of the first formal industry definitions that describe design elements of the genre was created by Project Horseshoe (2017), and the group of workshop participants led by Tanya X. Short (2018). Their definition focuses on three aspects that a cozy game design aims to evoke: safety, abundance, and softness. Safety refers to "an absence of danger and risk" with no "impending loss or threat". Abundance describes a situation in which the player's and/or the character's needs are met so that the first one can "work on higher needs (deeper relationships, appreciation of beauty, self-actualization, nurturing, belonging)" but, perhaps most importantly, where "nothing is lacking, pressing, or imminent". Fundamentally, game tasks often have limited to no time-based pressure, which lowers pressure on the player. Finally, softness as it relates to the aesthetic elements of the game and includes "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)" (2018).

To create these conditions for a player, as cozy games are "player-dependent", the report outlines a range of design features that aim to engage the player in being an active part of the experience as well as advice on how to avoid elements that overlap but are not, at their core, cozy and patterns of coziness (2018). The thirty-two-page report, which goes into much more detail than outlined in this article, is a thorough design document that not only addresses cozy game features and mechanics, but also forms an argument concerning 'coziness as a radical philosophy" (2018, p. 31), a call that goes well beyond design for maximum sales profit.

In their article *Towards the Aesthetics of Cozy Video Games*, Agata Waszkiewicz and Martyna Bakun (2020) provide a detailed overview of the history and definitional evolution of the genre that includes research and references on elements of exploration, the use of slow pacing, and aspects of nostalgia. Importantly, they provide a review of the literature on the 'aesthetics of inclusivity' that outline how cozy game design is a response to "the changing sociopolitical climate" where "the discourse around feminist, gender and queer issues has never been taken seriously" (2020, p. 230). And so, at their core they push against the narrative of what Mia Consalvo and Christopher Paul define as 'real games' (2019).

As a design practice, cozy games counter everything that is often attributed to 'real games'. According to Consalvo and Paul's definition, they are "… expected to be long, typically on a singular platform, the argument here being due to its complexity in development, and the control schemes are complex (and

complicated) with the aim of being difficult with a high barrier of entry." (2019, p. 61). Individuals who argue that 'real games are meant to be hard' and cater to a specific male demographic in themes and gameplay (Ćwil & Howe, 2020; Paaßen, Morgenroth, & Stratemeyer, 2017), value these elements as legitimate features that enable boundary-keeping (Boudreau, 2019). For them, exclusivity is a feature, not a bug.

While for many video games the design intention is to create a space for gameplay flow (Cowley et al., 2008), which typically emerges through a balance of skill and challenge, and boredom and anxiety (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), cozy games follow a different formula towards engagement and gameplay flow. Here, challenge and difficulty are low to absent by design, as such, the potential for gameplay flow, or even immersion, would arguably stem from a different set of design elements based on the balance of calmness, soothing aesthetics, and low demand from players. The length of the game, platform, control scheme, and its perceived difficulty are also considered in definitions of coziness, but in quite the opposite way. Cozy games are often playable in short increments, and they tend to be smaller and shorter, with easy and accessible control scheme and low difficulty levels ensuring inclusivity. As a result, they can be seen in opposition to the 'real games', aiming to reach the widest audience possible rather than remain exclusive to highly skilled players who value difficulty as a key marker.

Waszkiewicz and Bakun's presents 'three applications of cozy aesthetics': coherent, dissonant, and situational. These can "either be a dominant quality of a game or be implemented as part of it" as they relate to the "relationship between cozy aesthetics and its narrative function or impact". Coherent "describes a situation in which cozy aesthetics accompany a cozy message". Dissonant is where a game "use[s] selected elements of cozy aesthetics […] in order to create gripping, often uncomfortable narratives of difficult topics" (2020, p. 233). And finally, situational, which "refers to the individual scenes and locations in games that are not otherwise cozy" (2020, p. 235).

Methods, games and theoretical frame

In combining formal gameplay analysis of the two games, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and *Pode*, that adhere to a range of cozy game design features and a theoretical analysis through the lens of demand theory (Bowman, 2018; 2019; 2021), it is possible to understand the demands as experienced by the player in relation to how they are (re)presented on screen.

Data was collected through two play-throughs per title by the author, the first was to get a sense of the game, and the second with the aim of conducting a formal gameplay analysis (Laskowski & Björk, 2015), which focused specifically

on cozy game elements as outlined in the Project Horseshoe report (2018) and in Waszkiewicz and Bakun's article (2020). Player experience and on-screen player-character actions were classified within the four areas of demand (Bowman, 2018) outlined below. Both games were played on the Nintendo Switch for controller consistency.

Animal Crossing: New Horizons is often touted as a 'classic' cozy game in both its aesthetics and gameplay (Strampe, 2023; Tamanaha, 2022). It is a world-building social simulation game with soft colors and ambient music. There is no real narrative to the game beyond a handful of seasonal events and very light character building for some of the island's, and world's permanent residents. Gameplay focuses on developing the island and attracting other inhabitants. The player is given access to the island's natural resources to build tools, furniture, and make food, though apart from the tools, none of the items the player creates are necessary for survival in the game. Instead, they act as decorative items, can be sold at the only store on the island to accrue Bells (the in-game currency), or gifted to other villagers. Over time, six non-player characters inhabit the island and players can develop light social relationships with them through daily greetings, gifting of objects, and helping them with small tasks. While it is a cozy game in that the pace is slow, resources are not unlimited, they are depleted and replenished within a 24-hour, real-world time frame.

Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 1 Relaxing on a sunset beach in Animal Crossing New Horizons

Pode is a casual, two-player cooperative game that follows many of the defining elements of cozy games in terms of aesthetics and themes, with linear narrative and gameplay focused on completing levels towards a finite ending. The game allows players to control two humanoid characters: a rock helping a fallen star get back to their home.

Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 3 Rock and Star characters in completed zone in Pode

Depending on the mode, either one player controls both characters (single-player mode) or two players control one character each (couch coop). In each level, the players must walk through the level and develop the landscape (the star creates flowers and greenery, while the rock creates geological formations) through simply pressing a button and walking through each zone. In doing so, players must work cooperatively to reach certain areas and to collect gems from specific flowers. Some moves require higher levels of coordination and timing, and new mechanics (and controls) are introduced as the game progresses. Visually, it bears a much darker color palette than many titles categorized as cozy, but the imagery is lush and visually stunning, and the audio track is soothing and calm. With strong themes of cooperation and friendship, *Pode* offers a serene and contemplative game-space with no/low risk gameplay (characters can fail by falling, but they instantly respawn) and easily achievable goals.

Interactivity-as-demand theory

'Interactivity-as-demand" is a framework developed by Bowman (2019; 2021), to understand the ways players experience different demands – cognitive, physical, social, and emotional, during videogame play. These are experienced during gameplay and vary in presence and intensity based on play contexts, game genres, and hardware. The different levels of each, as they are experienced by a player during (and even sometimes after) gameplay, shape how they engage, understand, and ultimately enjoy a videogame (Bowman, 2021).

More specifically, cognitive demand is "associated with understanding in-game challenges" (Bowman, 2019, p. 145) and encompasses the ways players make sense of game content, including narrative elements, navigation and solving challenges. During gameplay, players pause to think and process some information, sometimes easily and seemingly subconsciously, and other times with much greater difficulty, as players try to remember things such as control schemas in the urgency of combat. Over time, intense cognitive demand can cause frustration and mental fatigue, often leading to disengagement.

Physical demands are "associated with fine and gross motor control of the games controls" (Bowman, 2019, p. 145) and are "associated with the tactile or haptic inputs required to operate a system" (Phelps et al., 2021, p. 2864). It typically concerns the ways players engage and interact with controllers, in-game controls and devices that take physical effort. Like cognitive demands, when game controls and devices require high levels of effort and physical demand, it can lead to fatigue and disengagement, whereas lower levels of physical demand can contribute to high levels of flow and immersion (Calleja, 2011) as the player does not experience discomfort during gameplay.

Emotional demands encompass the ways players process basic and complex emotional states as they are instigated during, and even after gameplay. Emotional demands occur when players are "invested into the game's unfolding narrative" (Bowman, 2019, p. 145) whether that is emotional investment into a character, or the connection to a game's environment, atmosphere, or theme. However, it could be argued that it can also occur in response to frustration (cognitive or physical).

Finally, social demands are "related to variable social relations with in-game characters and other players" (Bowman, 2019, p. 145). While cooperative and multiplayer games are dependent on varying levels of social demand between players, single-player games also bear it as many games require the player to interact with in-game characters to some capacity. Some titles have social mechanics that require the player to develop relationships and good standing with non-playing characters such as shopkeepers and villagers. This is most seen in role-playing games but can be found in a range of genres to varying degrees.

The four aspects of interactivity-as-demand theory, as presented above, can be applied as a framework to understand the varying demands videogames impose on the player. By doing so, it is possible to design titles that embrace, challenge, or minimize them to create different gameplay experiences. While cozy games are designed to be low demand for the player, can the same be said for the characters? How are they presented and contextualized within the game so that they are consistent with the overall aesthetic of the genre while still communicating the action to the player? By looking at how they are experienced by players and are represented through the in-game player-characters, it can give insight into the coherence and dissonance of demands in cozy games as represented in-game and experienced by the player.

The demands on players and player-characters in cozy games

The following section will look at each demand of the in-game characters to consider how they connect to the player's experiences within the context of cozy games. In applying interactivity-as-demand framework focused on the player- and non-player characters, and specifically how the demands are represented in the games, it is possible to observe the signals of what actions and values the games privilege (Belman, 2014), the type of gameplay that can be expected, and how the in-game demands are aimed to communicate coziness over realistic representation and consequences.

Cognitive demand

As defined above, cognitive demands encompass the conscious mental activities related to remembering, reasoning, and conceptualizing solutions which all make up the ways a player makes sense of the game's content and challenges. Both analyzed examples display information differently, presenting the player with relatively low levels of cognitive demand. Yet, there is more to the cognitive loads experienced by the players, as well as represented by the in-game characters.

In *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, the information which the player is expected to remember and call upon is saved in an inventory shown as the interface of a mobile phone. Each icon presents the player with different game content including, but not limited to, the camera, DYI recipes, Critterpedia (an inventory of all the creatures that can be collected during gameplay), and an island designer app that enables players to terraform the land. There is no need to remember any of the information required to play, design, and navigate the game world: it is presented to the player in simple, easy to understand images and texts, readily available only a few clicks away.

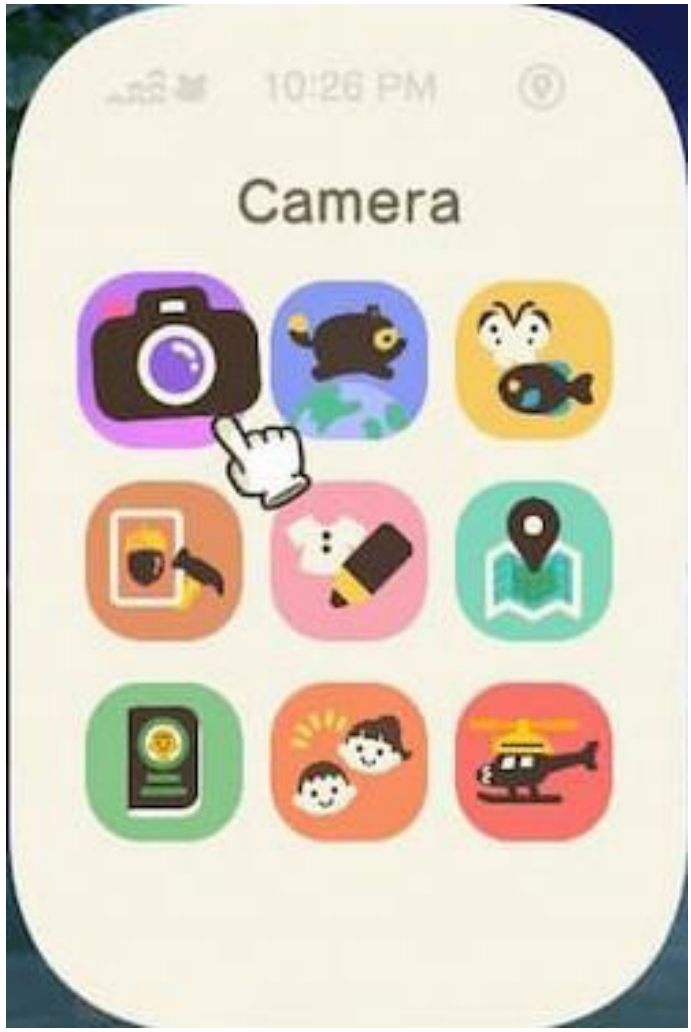

Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 4 Nook Phone Applications

Similarly, within the game, the player-character demonstrates equal ease of access to information as they perform the action of taking out their phone mimicking what a person would

do in the real world. There is no extra layer of cognitive demand on character. The player and player-character actions are in harmony. As such, the low cognitive demand expected of the player is the same as it is represented in-game, confirming their expectations, and supporting low cognitive demand as an element of cozy game design.

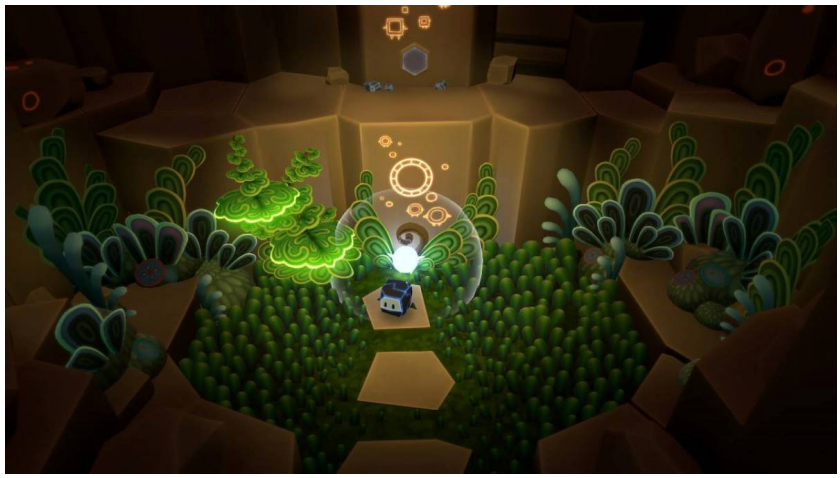

Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 6 Level with gameplay hints as diegetic hieroglyphics.

Pode, on the other hand, requires a higher level of cognitive demand on the player, while minimizing any representation of it on either of the player-characters. As a cooperative game, the cognitive load is shared between players during gameplay. By solving the light puzzles, players must figure out how to work together to access different parts of each level. While the game does provide visual hints, they are at times difficult to decipher due to their visual similarity to the levels' visual design. Figure 6. shows an example of such visual ambiguity: there are illuminated images in the shape of both player-characters on the stone, but it is unclear what they mean in terms of player-actions. As such, it takes communication between the players and some trial-and-error to understand what it is they are supposed to do.

Unlike other games that use challenge and difficulty to maintain engagement (Hunicke, 2005), cozy games aim to engage players through play that fosters a sense of calmness and relaxation. They are designed for the player to explore the game world with low levels of cognitive load which can, at times, be played almost absentmindedly (Hunicke, Leblanc, & Zubek, 2004). Considering this design element, the use of visual hints without clearer instructions creates a slight disconnect between the challenge or difficulty level the player may expect based on the audio-visual aesthetics and pacing of *Pode*.

Physical demand

The physical demand on the player is similar across both games with low levels of control-input unlike titles that require dexterity and quick response time (Jiang, Kundu, & Claypool, 2020). Yet what those simple control schemas represent on

the screen varies widely in terms of the physical demands placed on the player-characters.

In both *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and *Pode*, the player-characters engage in a range of physical demands that would be exhausting in real life. From digging up fossils, building furniture, and terraforming in *Animal Crossing,* to jumping and standing on top of one-another to boost each other up to a high area in a level in *Pode,* the player-characters engage in physically challenging activities, but they do not visibly show exhaustion nor any other signs of being affected by the work. Furthermore, there are no in-game indicators, such as fatigue meters or energy bars that these actions take any physical demand at all. One exception would be in *Animal Crossing* when the player-character must eat up to ten fruits to gain strength to cut down a tree, dig up a tree stump, or smash a boulder. The energy given by the fruit depletes with each physically challenging task such as mentioned above.

Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 7 Power up fruit meter

This is represented in the user interface in the upper left-hand corner. If a player eats five apples, they can do five physically exerting action. With each action, the number of apples shown on the interface decreases. It is like other fruits found in the game, such as peaches, cherries, and oranges.

This way, the representation of physical demands without any impact in the game world clearly communicates to the player that these normally taxing physical activities have no demand on the in-game characters. There are no physical hardships in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and *Pode*. There are no penalties for extended periods of physical exertion. This further contributes to the sense of fantasy and escape from real world physical demands which supports the player's expectations for low effort engagement often attributed to cozy gameplay and fundamentally aligns with the aims of its design. This is counter to titles where physical demand is a gameplay mechanic where the player must perform a physically demanding controller input which is also represented through the player-character and/or a stamina or exhaustion meter in the user interface. In Team Ico's *Shadow of Colossus* (2005), to climb a colossus in order to defeat it, the player must hold down the R1 button and repeatedly push the triangle button on the Sony controller while the colossus attempts to shake the player-character off. At the same time, the longer it takes to climb the colossus, the player-character gets tired which often requires the player to find a resting spot, giving both the player and the player-character time to recuperate from the physically demanding task.

Emotional demand

Within the two games selected for analysis, while the emotional demand on behalf of the player is relatively low, it remains one of the higher demands among the four discussed types. There may be some personal, emotional demand in relation to the connection to the player-characters. It is arguably developed through the time spent in the game which contributes to the player's connection to the player-character (Boudreau, 2012; Klevjer, 2022). However, through characteristics of cozy game design as defined above, both titles appeal to the players' emotions through their audio-visual aesthetics and variations of narrative and thematic elements as expected for the genre.

Although *Animal Crossing* does elicit some low-level emotional demand of the player, it often stems more from the world-building element than any sort of narrative or theme and can range from the pride of the island one created to the enjoyment of the game's cuteness (Guajardo, 2022). While the emotional demand of the game is rarely negative, players may feel guilt when they neglect their island, causing the weeds to grow and the gardens become unruly, or they might feel awkward when a non-player characters asks about their absence from the game

or if they were avoiding them. Guilt and awkwardness may not be represented in the game, beyond aesthetics and an uncomfortable conversation or two, it, nonetheless, contributes to the emotional demand of gameplay on the player.

Thus, while both games facilitate different emotions at the player-character level, these feelings remain mostly positive. Even when a non-playing character takes the player's lack of communication with them, it is done with a lightheartedness. There is no narrative or visual indicators that the player-character experiences negative feelings due to the lack of interaction with their islanders. Similarly, the two characters in *Pode* visibly express their happiness in the cinematic at the end of each level, but the game is devoid of representation of sadness, fear, or frustration which would be natural feelings experienced by a fallen star searching for their way home or in response to the failure during their adventures.

It should be noted that there are cozy games that address more emotionally demanding themes such as mental health, social issues, and death that would warrant a deeper analysis as they pertain to the representation of emotional demand in the game as well as on the player. However, that is outside of the scope of this exploratory research.

Social demand

Social demands, as "relat[ing] to variable social relations with in-game characters and other players" (Bowman, 2019, p. 145), are a strong part of both games and are often central to cozy game design (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020, pp. 226–227; Short et al., 2018). *Animal Crossing* has the most opportunities for social gameplay within the game-world with low social demand. Social mechanics are designed into the game as players are given Nook Points for interacting with three villagers a day – this is an extrinsic reward which fundamentally negates coziness by creating a "pressing, transactional short-term need" (Short et al., 2018, p. 3). However, players are not obliged to complete the task if the reward is of no interest to them. They can interact with the villagers on the island either socially or to complete various tasks and have the possibility to connect with other players and visit their islands through a networked internet connection. However, there is seemingly little impact on the player-character or on progression as the gameplay is not affected if they interact with the villagers or not beyond acquiring a small reward – usually a common object found in the game. Nonetheless, this creates some disconnect between social interactions, the level of demand they require, and the purpose of interactions (beyond building relationships) that could go against player expectations of cozy games.

Pode's social interaction at the level of player-to player occurs during the coop mode. There is no in-game option to chat, nor is there any in-game dialogue between

characters as it relates to tactical communication or narrative development. In this manner one could argue that the social demands are higher for the player as they require them to stay in good social standing with each other to work together effectively and experience the cozy elements of the game in harmony. Yet there is no social demand for the player-characters in-game.

Conclusion

Through the lens of interactivity-as-demand theory, this paper aimed to explore other aspects of cozy game design as it relates to cognitive, physical, social, and emotional demands as they are experienced by the player and as represented by player- and non-player characters in two different cozy games. In doing so, it was demonstrated that while there are varying levels of demand represented in the titles, they are often done so in a lighthearted manner. More importantly, even if there are low-level demands on the player-character, the representations do not increase the demands on the player.

As cozy games provide players with play spaces that are comforting and without need, representing in-game struggles or difficulties would break the flow of gameplay and perhaps cause the player to disengage from play. As such, the elements of interactivity-as-demand theory are demonstrated to be an effective analytical tool to evaluate another characteristic that has the potential to lead to coziness. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, it can be used as a guiding design principle towards establishing another layer of coziness for the player. By representing the various demands put on the player-character or non-playing characters as low-stakes, lighthearted, or non-consequential to overall gameplay, it could be argued that there would be harmony between the gameplay expectations and design intentions.

Further research focusing on cozy games with more challenging or complex subjects is necessary to fully understand how the four demands are experienced by the player and how they are represented through the in-game player-characters. With an increase in demands, would the games be coherent in terms of the characteristics of coziness, or would they simply become games with cozy aesthetics?

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